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# THE ONE THAT WASN'T: CHILD AND YOUTH LABOUR IN THE POST-STALIN ERA IN THE SOVIET UNION

**Abstract**: This paper examines the phenomenon of child and youth labour in the post-Stalin era in the Soviet Union. The starting point for the consideration constitutes the analysis of the law adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in 1958 titled "On the strengthening of the link between school and life and the further development of people's education in the USSR". This law placed great emphasis on combining education with practice and involving pupils from the earliest grades in various forms of both productive and socially useful labour. Subsequently, four categories of labour to which children and young people in the USSR were systemically forced has been distinguished. These included: occasional labours, work and leisure camps, so-called *subbotniki* and little communal works, as well as compulsory recycling. The paper thoroughly depicts all of them in the light of memoir material.

**Keywords**: the Soviet Union, child labour, youth labour, communal work, education

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## INTRODUCTION: THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF SOCIALISM FOR CHILDREN

The eradication of child labour remained one of the popular slogans of Soviet propaganda. It was highly emphasized that law provisions eliminating the employment of people under the age of 14 were already included in one of the first decrees of Lenin's government. This document also described a number of provisions regulating the labour of young

people (i.e. those aged 14–18). These provisions, among others, shortened the working day to 6 hours and banned night shift work (Декрет Совета… 1942). Exploitative child labour may have only been a relic of the tsarism, the domain of capitalist countries or a criminal act of the Nazi occupiers.

In 1970 the Soviet Union adopted the Fundamental Principles governing the Labour Legislation of the USSR and Union Republics, which replaced the 1922 Labour Code of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (as amended). This was the main document that regulated child and youth employment in the USRR. According to it the employment of persons under the age of 16 was prohibited (in exceptional cases employment of persons who had reached the age of 15 was permitted). The Fundamental Principles also specified in detail the conditions under which minors could work (Yagodkin, 1981: 4–6; see more Clark Brown, 1973). Moreover, both the union constitutions of 1936 and 1977 dealt extensively with the rights to education, the enjoyment of cultural property and the development of interests to which Soviet citizens were entitled. However, the concept of manual labour in relation to children and young people was widely present in official Soviet discourse. Labour was a very important part of both the process of acquiring professional qualifications and being brought up in the spirit of collective values, and was therefore closely linked to education. The press for the youngest, particularly in Khruschev's times, popularized the two systemic (via schools or social organizations) and individual (with parent's initiatives) inclusion of children and youth in adult labour (see e.g.: Некрасов, 1959).

Generally, the topic of child and youth labour in the USSR rather belongs to the under-explored field of research so far. However, there are some areas that have been thoroughly investigated, for example: the fate of children working on the street in the 1920s and the 1930s in the USRR (Goldman, 1993); the phenomenon of forced Soviet child labour in the Third Reich and German-occupied Eastern Europe (Steinert, 2020) or child labour in the USRR as part of the national mobilization to fight against fascism (see e.g.: Сулейманова, 2016).

In this paper, I was mainly interested in child and youth labour in the USRR in late socialism period, which is assumed to have overlapped with the times of Leonid Brezhnev's rule (1964–1982). It was a period of ideological erosion, mass consumption and rising living standards. More often than not, the promotion of welfare was a tool employed by

the authorities for self-legitimisation (more broadly: Chernyshova, 2015). However, the principal assumptions of education that included involving children and young people in the production process were maintained. In this context I aimed at elaborating on the following two issues. Firstly, on what assumptions the engagement of children and young people in manual labour was based on in a country where the notion of welfare organized the entire discourse of domestic politics. And secondly, what place does the experience of child and youth labour in the USSR occupy in the memoir material? I tried to deal with both the legal framework of the issue as well as verifying the content of the official discourse in the light of the memoir material.

In order to do this, I first analysed the documents governing educational law, which were mostly adopted in the Khrushchev's era. Secondly, I studied available testimonies of people who experienced various forms of being forced to work under broadly understood state pressure. The memoir material on the post-Stalinist USSR is not particularly rich. This is due to the fact that people who lived through their youth in the mid-1960s and in the 1970s were able to write their memoirs in the 1990s. It was at that time that the role of the press changed greatly: it ceased to perform an informational intervention function and became more of a platform for advertising. The publishing market was also not interested in publishing testimonies of the passing epoch, and the phenomenon of memoir competitions had completely been discontinued. Some of the people, whose school days fell during the Brezhnev regime, took up the memoir thread in the blogosphere, which provided this text with a source base.

This paper belongs to the exploratory research field. Aware that the image of the past may become blurred in memories, I have deliberately omitted a number of points such as: the size of the payouts (where they occurred) and relating the size of the payout to the prices prevailing at the time. Findings of this kind would require another extensive research with access to archival sources.

# LABOUR AS PROFESSIONAL PRACTISE AND VALUE IN A COLLECTIVIST SOCIETY

In 1958, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted the act "On the strengthening of the link between school and life and the further development of popular education in the USSR" – the key document on the basis of which Khrushchev's educational reform was implemented[1]. The changes introduced by the law to education in the USSR were included in the constitution. The term general labour polytechnic school (Russian: *общеобразовательная трудовая политехническая школа*) began to be used with regard to a general school. The law placed great emphasis on combining education with practice and involving pupils from the earliest grades in socially useful work (Russian: *общественно полезный труд*).

> Teaching and educational work in an eight-year school must be based on a combination of the study of the fundamentals of science, polytechnic training, labour education, and the wide involvement of pupils in forms of socially useful work available to them at their age (Закон СССР от 24 декабря).

To this end, classes devoted to training for a profession were introduced into the curricula. In the younger grades of the primary school (1–4) these included talks on various professions, in the older grades (5–8) practical courses such as wood work, metal work and electronics for boys and domestic work such as sewing or cooking for girls. Pupils in the older grades were also expected to undertake annual 2-week in-

[1] Schooling in the USSR after the Second World War was based on a general school. Immediately after the war, only 4 grades (elementary school) were compulsory, and those who passed a restrictive exam were admitted to further education. Grades 5, 6, 7 were the equivalent of the junior high school, although in the USSR they were already called "incomplete secondary school" (Russian: *неполная средняяя школа*). Subsequently, education could be continued at a vocational school, technical school or grades 8–10 (Russian: *средняя школа*). This level of education corresponded with high (secondary) school and completion of a technical school or grade 10 entitled one to enrol in post-secondary education. Both high school and university were paid. In 1949, the examination after 4th grade was abolished and compulsory education was extended to 7th grade. As a result of the 1958 reform, compulsory education was again extended, this time to 8th grade. Secondary education, on the other hand, comprised either a 3-year technical school or grades 9–11 and was reorganized as described in the main text. In 1956, two years before Khrushchev's educational reform was implemented, the Soviet government abolished secondary school and university fees, which was undoubtedly one of the most important achievements of social policy in the USSR.

ternships in school workshops, the school experimental plot, state and cooperative farms and factories (Składanowski, 2009: 81). Furthermore, unpaid work for the benefit of the local community such as raking leaves in the estate park, cleaning the surrounding streets, etc. took place at the expense of school classes allocated to physical education and field trips (Eaton, 2004: 215–216; Беловинский, 2015: 724). The new law revolutionized secondary schools to the greatest extent. A so-called full secondary education was obtained after three years of education combined with production work in the mode: four days of study plus two days of work. The organization of school classes was to be adapted to the shift system of individual workplaces, and knowledge of general subjects was to be partly acquired by self-studies with a textbook (Kairov, 1963: 60–62; Барабина and Гафурова, 2016: 130; Бездель, 2021: 4). The law also introduced a preferential university enrolment system for those with work experience, for whom 80% of university places were reserved (Беловинский, 2015: 724). At the universities themselves, practical classes were introduced from the first year, often with negative consequences for the entire educational process. The mass integration of students into the rhythm of workplaces gave rise to a number of complications and pathologies: they were relegated to the most difficult physical works that full-time employees did not want to do, there were many abuses in terms of occupational safety standards, and there were additionally problems with remuneration. For enterprises, students represented cheap labour, but bringing them also required additional administrative and logistical efforts involving obtaining tools, material, adapting premises, etc. Finally, employing students entailed the necessity of calculating the losses caused by unskilled trainees into the reporting of plan execution (Конохова, 2015: 128–134).

Yet another consequence of the implementation of the law "On the strengthening of the link between school and life…" were the so-called work and leisure camps (Russian: *летнее трудовые лагеря* or *лагера труда и отдыха*). These camps were for pupils from the 7th grade onwards, were non-compulsory and the local Komsomol committees played a leading role in their organization. Unlike ordinary pioneer camps, their participants were offered a specific combination of leisure and work, involving mainly various forms of assistance on state and cooperative farms (Димке, 2013: 139). Finally, the period of the Thaw brought a rapid development of student construction brigades (Russian: *студенческие строительные отряды, стройотряды*) – associations of student youth formally volunteering to

work on the construction of various buildings throughout the USSR. The members of such brigades were not only Soviet students, but also those from the bloc of people's democracy countries.

The tradition of student construction brigades dates back to the period of forcible industrialization of the late 1920s and 1930s, the Second World War and post-war reconstruction. The revival of this movement in the 1960s was originally associated with a campaign to develop wasteland in the Kazakh SSR, the Volga region, the Urals, Siberia and the Far East (Бурахина and Олейников, 2011: 29; Темников and Третьяков, 2018: 228). However, even after the Soviet state quietly began to withdraw from the operation of the so-called reclamation of tselina (Russian: *освоение целины*), student construction brigades continued to be called up and directed to work during the holiday season, and in the mid-1960s a legal framework was formulated to regulate their functioning (Ралко, 2017). As a rule, however, they consisted of adults, and their work was also paid. Construction brigades composed of secondary school students were organized on a smaller scale (Кудряшёв, 2019: 114).

All the pedagogical projects of the Khrushchev period flowed directly from the climate of the era, which is described in scholarly writing as the last attempt to embody the communist utopia (Вайл and Генис, 2013). They were not as radical as the ideas for organizing didactics in the immediate post-revolutionary period, which, among other things, eliminated grading systems in measuring progress in teaching, formal requirements for entering university or scientific degrees, but they did presuppose a profound reconstruction of educational institutions in the spirit of a return to "truly Leninist values". One of the very intriguing aftermaths of the Bolshevik Revolution was the struggle for a liberatory education. This included not only literacy campaigns and introduction of co-education, but also a range of learning methods that could have been seen then as a radical pedagogy. Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, the commissar for education tried to implement the standards of progressive Western didactics such as John Dewey's "Learning by Doing", The Dalton Plan, and the Montessori method. The most far-reaching Soviet concepts of education have even called for the closure of schools and the transfer of all learning to kolkhozes and factories (Pipes, 1994: 314–320). Lunacharskiy prioritized creativity and critical thinking over formalized knowledge:

> Frankly, we don't attach so much importance to the formal school discipline of reading, writing and spelling as to the development of the child's mind and personality.

> Once a pupil begins to think for himself he will master such tools of formal knowledge as he may need. And if he doesn't learn to think for himself no amount of correctly added sums or correctly spelled words will do him much good (Behrent, 2012).

Schooling in this vision was based on practice and pupils were stimulated to search for the best solutions on their own. The teacher was not supposed to pronounce anything *ex cathedra*, their one task was only supporting the process of gaining knowledge. The term "labour (work) school" (Russian: *трудовая школа*) comes from this period. Anna Louise Strong, an American journalist traveling around postrevolutionary Russia, recorded it in her conversation with a local teacher:

> "We call it the Work School," said a teacher to me. "We base all study on the child's play and his relation to productive work. We begin with the life around him. How do the people in the village get their living? What do they produce? What tools do they use to produce it? Do they eat it all or exchange some of it? For what do they exchange it? What are horses and their use to man? What are pigs and what makes them fat? What are families and how do they support each other, and what is a village that organises and cares for the families?" "This is interesting nature study and sociology?" I replied, "but how do you teach mathematics?" He looked at me in surprise. "By real problems about real situations," he answered. "Can we use a textbook in which a lord has ten thousand roubles and puts five thousand out at interest and the children are asked what his profit is? The old mathematics is full of problems the children never see now, of situations and money values which no longer exist, of transactions that we do not wish to encourage. Also, it was always purely formal, divorced from existence" (Strong, 1925; see also Behrent, 2012).

Khrushchev's other reforms also moved in this direction, above all the implementation of the principle of rotation in the composition of party bodies and the abolition of branch ministries (Pichoja, 2011: 235–238). The realization of Soviet idealism was also to be served by large-scale social mobilization campaigns as mentioned above, such as the campaign to develop uncultivated agricultural land, or centrally controlled social engineering projects like the anti-religious campaign. And although the law of 1958 involved a whole army of young workers in productive work at its core, as with other reforms of the period, such was Khrushchev's enthusiastic belief in the possibility of remodelling the system, rather than a return to the Stalinist concept of education through labour (cf. Składanowski, 2009: 85)[2]. There is a theme in the literature of the connection between the wide-

[2] Popular in the 1930s, the Stalinist concept of education through labour (Russian: *перековка*) applied to Gulag prisoners, criminals and juvenile delinquents. The rhetoric of

spread involvement of student youth in productive work and the fear of a subversive role played by Hungarian students during the 1956 revolution (Конохова, 2015: 129). The economic motive is also hinted at – the intensive manpower training for the factories may have served for implementation of Khrushchev's dream of economic growth for the USSR encapsulated in the slogan "catch up with and overtake America". In particular, the rehabilitation of political prisoners reduced the supply of cheap labour (Барабина and Гафурова, 2016: 129). However, the abolition of fees for secondary and tertiary education, the resurrection of *rabfaks* – courses that prepared working youth for university entrance exams – and the growing number of students[3] were examples of the opening of channels of social mobility that had been closed during the Stalinist period.

## FROM ADVENTURE TO NIGHTMARE – A WHOLE RANGE OF MEMORIES

After Khrushchev was removed from power in 1964, the new leadership of the USSR withdrew from many of the reforms of the Thaw period, including, in part, the reform of education. Above all, grade 11 was abolished in general schools, and the move away from two days of work in grades 9–10 had already been taking place in the declining period of Khrushchev's rules. This was due to the same difficulties that arose in incorporating students into workplaces, i.e. the whole logistics of adapting these workplaces to accommodate students en masse and sharing produc-

re-socialization at the time gave the impression that through labour and participation in the workers' collective, anyone could experience a transformation. In the practice of the Great Purge, people marked by their social background or political past had no chance of doing so. However, upbringing through labour was not an educational project aimed at Soviet society as a whole (Fitzpatrick, 1999: 75, 79). The Soviet education under Stalin changed. The first symptoms of the failure of liberal concepts from the very post-revolutionary period were noticeable ever earlier, i.e. during the New Economic Policy. In a nutshell, if at the beginning the Bolsheviks had been convinced that communism is a "natural" condition and pupils would be instinctively inclined towards it, over time they increased indoctrination. This retreat from widely understood liberalisation of education in favour of a return to the conservative model of schooling meant reimplementation of discipline, grades, exam and fees, as well as full political control over school, which aimed at limiting access to education and at the same time limiting social mobility (see more Pipes, 1994: 314–320; more broadly see: Волкова, 2013).

[3] During Khrushchev's rule (1953–1964), the number of university students in the USSR increased from 1,562,000 to 3,258,000 (*СССР в цифрах в 1963 году*…, 1964: 158).

tion resources with them. At the ideological-propagandist level, a closer link between school and life was still advocated. The notion of a general polytechnic school continued to function in the official discourse on education and referred both to the institution where the acquisition of professional qualifications takes place, the formation of moral attitudes and education to live in a collective. The Brezhnev Education Act of 1973 created a legal framework for involving children and young people in socially useful work and production.

> A general education school provides labour education and training for pupils in conjunction with socially useful, productive work. Polytechnic education in a general school is ensured through the content and organization of the entire teaching and educational process and by familiarizing pupils in theory and practice with the fundamentals of modern production. Students in general education schools are taught and educated through regular classes, socially useful and productive work, and various extracurricular activities (*Закон СССР от 19 июля 1973*).

Each secondary and incomplete secondary general school was assigned a so-called base enterprise, which provided a reference point for the practical part of the education. Formally non-compulsory summer internships, most often carrying out on state and cooperative farms, were also introduced for the pupils of these schools. These were not aimed at acquiring any specific vocational skills, but at generally familiarizing children and young people with manual labour. The law also sanctioned the establishment of various student brigades. On this basis, the so-called TOS, labour brigades of senior pupils (Russian: *ТОС, трудовые отряды старшеклассников*) were created, under which the organization of work and leisure camps continued. In 1974, by decree of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, educational-production combinations were introduced (Russian: *учебно-производственный комбинат*) – a kind of consortium of schools and enterprises, under which students in grades 8–10 received their education at school for five days a week, and for one day they worked in an enterprise (*Постановление Совета Министров СССР от 23 августа 1974*; Жукова, 2019). Despite the above-mentioned legal regulations, the practice of the USSR left wide scope for various types of abuse, and consequently transformed schools into a reservoir of manpower ready to be used as required. The link between the school and the enterprise, which appears in the memoir material, took very different forms:

> Working during school hours at the local poultry farm. I went three or four times. We cleaned manure, disposed of dead chicken and collected eggs. The most disgusting job was hanging the chickens upside down by their legs, and the aunt in the cloth apron cutting their throats (Пятов, 2019b).

> And in the 10th grade we were sent to work in the factory. Free of charge, that is, for free. We repaired old industrial boilers. These were the kind of barrels with heaters, like a big electric kettle, containing about 100 litres. The main malfunction was usually cockroaches shorting out the relays, and the heating elements getting burnt out. We unscrewed and replaced them (Gosh100, 2020).

Furthermore, on the basis of the researched memoir material, four distinct categories of institutionally enforced child and youth labour practised in the USSR during post-Stalin era can be distinguished. The first category, which occupies the most space in the memoir material, are occasional labours. It consisted of periodically taking schoolchildren and students out of their classrooms to work in agriculture, most often during the harvesting of grain, cotton, tobacco, sugar beet, potatoes and other root vegetables. During the spring period, occasional labours may have included the weeding of fields and the planting of forests. Depending on the intensity of fieldwork, adult white-collar workers were also subject to this type of mobilization (Цай, 2017: 136; Козлова, 2021). Young workers were required to provide their own protective clothing, tools such as buckets, shovels and knives, and usually their own provisions.

> Sometime around September and October we were taken out of school and sent to the fields from the fourth grade onwards. We spent the whole day in the field picking potatoes and carrots from the frozen, wet ground. Potatoes were easier to collect, as machinery had been passing over before and the ground was more or less unconsolidated. But we had to dig in with children's hands and pull out the potatoes ourselves. The teacher would check on us to make we didn't miss any potatoes (Козырев, 2019).

> From about the sixth grade onwards, the school year started with the potato harvest. We had to walk several kilometres to the field. Sometimes it would start to rain, and when you reached the potato field your clothes would be soaked through. You had to bring a shovel and lunch with you (zet_vorazan, 2020).

Pupils' labour was rather free, with occasional symbolic payments or gestures of gratitude like a bar of chocolate or being allowed to take a sack of potatoes home. The work of the barracked students was paid, but this issue did not seem to have been explicitly regulated. Memories record both

pleasant surprises at the size of the payout (Цай, 2017: 140) and a sense of total exploitation at having to deduct the cost of meals, very often described with undisguised disgust (Пятов, 2019a). Within this category, a clear regional differentiation emerges from the memoir material. In the European and non-cotton-related Asian part of the USSR, the experience of this type of work provokes reflection: to what extent was it an unconscious exploitation and to what extent an acceptable form of education? It is sometimes recalled with bitterness and disappointment, mainly because of the contrast with the official propaganda message, which boasted exemplary legal protection for underage citizens and spectacular economic achievements. In some cases, the memories also reflect the success of Soviet social engineering, which shaped in the youngest children already the conviction that they should make their own contribution to the common good:

> As far as I remember we were not paid at all for our work on the potatoes, but for our work on the beetroot we received some kopeks, say 8 roubles 52 kopeks, depending on how many days we worked. Work in the fields was perceived as assistance to our collective farm. And money was not the main thing (zet_vorazan, 2020).

In others, they show quiet resistance and discouragement:

> In 1989 I entered the polytechnic and our whole class, without starting their studies, went to the collective farm (…) We worked on potatoes. Standing on the potato harvester and removing stones, haulm, rotten potatoes and other rubbish from the conveyor belt along with the dug up potatoes went into the hopper (…). The pay was low and the living conditions were poor, so we had a bad attitude to our work (Мои 90-е, 2020).

Where occasional labours involved students, however, it was generally not a traumatizing experience. The time spent in the fields was part of the general colour of youth, encompassing a stage of hardening of life attitudes, as well as memories of work often accompanied by mentions of first youthful alcoholic and sexual experiences. Occasionally, criticism of the phenomenon of casual labours is reduced to irony towards the inefficiency of the Soviet economy:

> Farm labour was not a prestigious occupation because in the future agricultural workers were to be replaced by machines. Until this happy time came, someone was ploughing and sowing. But they were no longer strong enough to harvest the crops, so the harvesting of the crops required the involvement of intellectual labourers (Цай, 2017: 136).

Meanwhile, memories from areas where cotton growing was the basis of the economy (Uzbekistan in particular) are straightforwardly dramatic. As it has already been proven, the roots of child, women and elderly labour abuse in Uzbekistan lay in the combination of several factors: economic incentives and disincentives, gender relations, demographics, and state policy (Keller, 2015: 296). Despite the great modernization campaign of the Khrushchev era, it was more profitable for the local agricultural leadership to overuse the cheap labour of people with a low social status than follow the central instruction concerning mechanization drive. The "anti-mechanization" mood and the conservative patriarchal social structure have sparked a paradox: the increase in the number of able-bodied men, who occupied artificial administrative-economic positions in the Uzbek agricultural sector while there were women, elderly and minors pulled out of schools did slave labour in the field (Keller, 2015: 305–306). These tendencies persisted even after the collapse of the USSR and it was not until 2021 when child labour was almost fully eradicated in this country ('Forced and child labour…', 2022).

Memories from the Brezhnev era reveal a huge gap between the degree of the rule of law that was respected in the European part of the USSR and that which actually operated in Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. The divide between the centre and periphery finds another dimension here: in the Uzbek provinces, children were forced to pick cotton from the very first classes (Пятов, 2019a), while this was not common in the larger cities:

> When I was 12 years old, my mother was promoted along the "party line" and we moved to the big city, which was only 20 kilometres from our town. But when I moved there I found myself in a completely different world. Here schoolchildren were not sent to pick cotton, and many of my classmates did not even once pick it. And workers and clerks were only sent to pick cotton on weekends. 20 kilometres and another world (Козлова, 2021).

During cotton harvest, secondary school pupils and university students were barracked for several months, the younger ones were transported daily. For students these trips were fully compulsory, only relatives of very high party officials avoided it. Added to the physical exertion was pressure and intimidation. Refusal to go on a cotton picking trip or problems with meeting the daily norm (60 kilograms for students) risked expulsion from the university. Among Tashkent Medical Institute students in the 1980s, a popular saying was: "You may not be

a doctor, but you must pick cotton" (Пятов, 2019a). The conditions of accommodation and feeding are described as extremely degrading: one had to bring one's own mattress, one's own bedding, a bathhouse was available once a fortnight, those barracked near their place of residence could go home once a week for a bath. Sometimes there was no adequately allocated space for toilets and hygiene activities, or they were made available in a way that was undignified. Working conditions were extremely dangerous:

> The fact is that many people had toxic hepatitis from defoliants used to treat cotton crops. Butiphos, an organophosphorus compound in the same line of poisons as the organophosphorus toxins used as chemical weapons, was used to defoliate cotton. Butiphos was used to make cotton plants shed their leaves. This was needed for machine harvesting, i.e. by combines. There were times when, despite being sprayed with these chemicals, the leaves did not drop and the harvesters were unable to pick the cotton and sent us off to the harvest. All the leaves were in a sticky substance – Butiphos. We ate with the same hands because in the field it was not always possible to wash our hands. There was not always enough drinking water in the field and thirsty students drank from ditches. So giardiasis was added to the toxic hepatitis (Пятов, 2019a).

> There have also been cases of children dying during harvesting work. When one such case was reported to the first secretary of the Uzbek SSR, Rashidov, he stated – "cotton harvest is a combat, and in combat there are casualties!" (r/PikabuPolitics, no date).

And they had a slavish nature:

> And every evening everyone froze in front of the TVs, because the Uzbek national channel showed the percentage of fulfilment of the plan for each province. And if a province fulfilled the plan, it meant freedom and liberation (Козлова, 2021).

> Even the parents noticed the resemblance to a prison or concentration camp. Someone came to visit their child early in the morning, just as the convoy was being lined up to go to the field. And the parents were horrified: "There were about a hundred students, most of them aged 17–18, and no jokes or laughter. Everyone was frowning, with tired (from the morning) faces and silent. Like convicts!" (Пятов, 2019a).

The second category of productive activity that the Soviet state forced on children and young people was the work and leisure camps and construction brigades. It seems that this type of work commitment was the most optional and the memories associated with it are the most positive. The Komsomol, individual enterprises, trade unions and schools cooper-

ated in organizing these camps. They were attended by pupils from the older grades of incomplete secondary school and high school students, as well as young people from Eastern Bloc countries. During Brezhnev's rule, participation in a work and leisure camp could replace the summer internship. The work was most often related to the broadly defined agricultural sector:

> We worked in a canning factory. And actually, all the operations – from loading fresh cucumbers into the washing tank to taking the finished 3-litre jars off the conveyor belt and sending them to the autoclave – were carried out by us – schoolchildren in grades 6–9. In the whole plant, apart from the director and the accountants, I saw only two adult workers: an aunt who poured brine into jars from a hose and another aunt who kept count of the cassettes of jars sent to the autoclaves. That was it. Everything else was done by the children (germanych, 2009).

> By the second year we were luckier – we worked in the reclaimed fields (…). So, we, the schoolchildren, would go out to the drained bogs and, there, collect everything that used to lie at the bottom of these bogs – tree trunks, deadwood, large stones. We would burn the wood on the spot (…), put the stones in a pile and then load them into tractors, which would take them away (Мои 90-е, 2020).

The working day was filled with about four hours, the remaining time was devoted to recreation. The reminiscence material includes sports games, card games, concerts, discos and the legendary evening bonfires, remembered by all and with the greatest nostalgia:

> There was a lot of romance, mosquitoes too, and there were a lot of songs too. Because, every night, every evening, every night, we gathered around the fire (Димке, 2013: 143).

Camp participants were paid for their work, which, in retrospect, is remembered with pride and the amount of payment described with satisfaction (germanych, 2009; Филиппова, 2020). Accommodation and provisions are usually assessed as inadequate: multi-person tents, accommodation in converted farm buildings, however, holiday rentals are cited as the most comfortable; monotonous and unpalatable food, the preparation of which was often the responsibility of the campers themselves. Restrictions on access to showers, or washrooms and the lack of privacy are highlighted.

> There were five showers closing at 3pm (work ended at 1pm) and two cold water troughs for the 200 participants. Not everyone ate to their heart's content, as the nutri-

> tional norm was a cold cutlet with buckwheat groats, served daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Only once in a three-week stay was variety provided with two slices of cheese ('Atrakcje w kołchozie', 1989).

The labour itself for urban children and young people unfamiliar with the physical exertion was difficult, but overall in the memoir layer, the difficulties and organizational shortcomings are compensated for by the experience of some adventure. Interestingly, the contemporary blogosphere does not register any political indoctrination. Moreover, research dedicated to the work and leisure camps organized in the Leningrad region during the Khrushchev's Thaw proves even that participants were given the opportunity to experience unfettered debates in the spirit of revising Stalinist values:

> The arguments were, in general, for those times, harsh. Because someone was saying that he (Pavka Korchagin) was just crazy – laid down his life for who knows what. (…) And no one shouted and said: what are you saying? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? No! Everyone was speaking their opinion. And, in that sense, we were kind of brought up. But we were brought up properly. Because we were not told what to say (Димке, 2013: 143).[4]

Traces of indoctrination can be found in a critical report of the Polish Voluntary Labour Corps in one of the Soviet work and leisure camps. However, it seems to have been used for lack of opportunities to organize better attractions:

> The camp was supposed to be right on the Black Sea, while it was 50 km from the kolkhoz to the sea. Instead of sea bathing, they were offered a meeting with kolkhoz officials and a militiaman who warned of local gangs ('Atrakcje w kołchozie', 1989).

Students were able to earn extra money in the framework of the construction brigades during the summer. This was an away, voluntary labour, and possibly not always available to everyone on the spot:

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[4] Pavel (Pavka) Korchagin – protoagonist of the novel "How the Steel Was Tempered" by Nikolai Ostrovskii firstly published in 1932 in the magazine "Molodaia Gwardiia" and then in 1936 in a book form. Korchagin having gained class consciousness fought on the Bolshevik side in the civil war (1918–1920), then worked with great dedication, also socially, for the embodiment of the communist ideals, and at the same time he led an ascetic lifestyle, establishing the good of the Soviet homeland as the highest value for himself. For many years he was held up as a model for Soviet youth.

> The following year, the Pioneer and Strategist decided to try their hand at construction brigade. They recruited guys who could and wanted to earn money. The Pioneer and Strategist were looked upon with skepticism – it was obvious that they were not suited to physical work, and they did not need money, as their parents were providing for them, but in the end they were accepted. They worked in the construction brigade all summer, but at least in the autumn they were free from the harvest (Цай, 2017: 142).

At the level of the cadres managing the labour of the construction brigade, a specific "grey area" could be generated: the brigade commander, who, thanks to the creative accounting and "skilful" management of the plan, could earn much more than an ordinary builder (Цай, 2017: 142). Real payouts could be reduced from the initial arrangements, and there were also cases where the payout occurred only after the intervention of a high-ranking official of the state authorities (Пятов, 2019a).

The third, very capacious category of work in which children and young people in the USSR were systematically involved can be described as *subbotniks* and little communal works. This category would include all street and park cleaning actions, very different jobs depending on the needs of the environment, which were carried out during school classes e.g. instead of PE. In addition to cleaning, they may have included, for example, collecting herbs for pharmacies (Ernu, 2010: 18; Баканов, 2012: 50).

> At school, such blitz-subbotniki were often organized – for example, instead of an educationally useless PE lesson, we would clean the school, the surrounding streets, or some other public area (Цай, 2017: 84).

> Sometimes a whole class of children was sent to work on a building site, where they stacked bricks on pallets. This was called "OFP" [general physical training – M.S-S.] and fell under "socially useful work and physical activity". Interestingly, while some people got paid for this work, no one paid the children, and there were thousands of such cases (r/PikabuPolitics, no date).

Moreover, a whole range of school services can be included in this category, from cleaning classrooms, washing windows, cleaning and polishing floors, all-day canteen duties, work in the school garden, tidying up the school yard (snow clearing in winter) to taking part in school renovations during the summer holidays, during which the children themselves painted the rooms.

> We also had school canteen duty, for which we were taken out of the classroom for the day to set the tables and washed the dishes afterwards. It was very educational to see with your own eyes the piles of "food" being sent to the rubbish bin in giant bins…It was impossible to eat those school "schnitzels" and other "kupata" [a type of Georgian sausage – M.S-S.] The cooks simply stole the meat in bags (we saw this too) and made up for the shortage with what they had. Usually we only ate korzhiki [a type of yeast-free biscuit – M.S-S.] (I still adore them!) and other pastries, but we threw those cutlets at each other (Gosh100, 2020).

Shirking these activities could have lower behaviour records or even led to problems with promotion to the next grade.

Finally, the fourth, very popular category of work that students in Soviet schools had to undertake was compulsory recycling under the dictates of established norms, often leading to pathological behaviour:

> There was also all sorts of nonsense, such as collecting waste paper, scrap metal and glass vials – the latter of which existed in the 1960s and 1970s, when each pupil had to find and bring to class 7–8 empty medicine vials. It often made children laugh and pour out their parents' medicines and take the vials back to school to meet "unit standards" (r/PikabuPolitics, no date).

> The stupid norms for collecting scrap metal and waste paper – you had to make up the norm all year round. No one cared where you got the scrap metal or who you stole it from (Козырев, 2019).

> We used to steal tank tracks (a caterpillar component) from a neighbouring tank unit. It weighs 15 kilograms, bring one and you're done! (Gosh100, 2020).

On the sidelines of the considerations conducted here, one can also mention the phenomenon of non-systemic, individual employment of minors. Young people under the age of 18 were employed in various places: enterprises, kolkhozes, and institutions. Sometimes this required special permission from the local administrative authorities, sometimes it required acquaintances and arrangements, and other times it was done without any formalities. The lack of a unified and consistent practice in this procedure gave rise to complications when calculating the duration of time one worked before coming of age towards retirement age. This problem is already settled following the collapse of the USSR (Москвина, 2015: 210–213; Сурнин, 2022; zet_vorazan, 2020; Мои 90-е, 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the researched memoir material allows several conclusions to be drawn. First of all, existing against propaganda, institutionally enforced child and youth labour in the post-Stalinist USSR fulfilled two complementary functions: it served both economic purposes and remained in the service of ideology. Which of these functions was more important at any given time depended on the current needs of specific regions and on the prevailing political-client arrangements that took shape between the subjects of Soviet power, the party officials, and the cadres in charge. There is no doubt that the mass integration of children and young people into production processes entailed certain costs for the state – suffice it to say that students sent to work as part of construction brigades were sometimes transported by planes. In addition to the organizational costs, one must also take into account the losses resulting from inadequate work, negligent attitude to work, lack of experience and, last but not least, physical capabilities. These needed to be taken into account even in the case of such "simple" activities as weeding vegetables:

> In the first year there was hard labor – we were engaged in weeding vegetables. I'm afraid that then I, personally, brought the vegetables much more harm than good (*Мои* 90-е, 2020).

Despite this, the institutional impact on children and young people, especially under conditions of progressive ideological erosion and the growing resistance of Soviet society to propaganda messages, may have seemed the last bastion of state social engineering. Inculcated from an early age, the habits of preparation for physical labour and the fulfilment of norms combined with elements of paramilitary training (barracks, movement in organized columns) fit into a model of extensive economic growth from which the Soviet authorities never dared to deviate (see: Sutela, 1991: 72; Castells, 2004: 10–26).

The studied material also helps to illuminate a few more affairs. The fact that the issue of Soviet child and youth labour in the post-Stalin period remains relatively under-recognized in the scholarly literature demonstrates how promising the research potential still is in the socio-cultural history of the USSR. However, after thirty years of ideologically unfettered research into broad aspects of Soviet everyday life that is inspiring and cognitively fertile, it is becoming increasingly difficult to conduct. The

main problem here remains the question of access to archives and the possibility of conducting research by participatory observation and with the tools used in oral history. Access to all these sources is practically closed in relation to Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, which are key areas for the acquisition of empirical material for Soviet studies.

Moreover, the theme of Soviet child and youth labour in the post-Stalin era contributes an important voice in the discussion of the memory of the USSR as such. In this context, by the way, it appears both in memoirs published traditionally and in the contemporary blogosphere. Most of the authors cited above made allusions to the manifestations of post-Soviet nostalgia and published their testimonies in counterpoint or at least with irony towards it. It should be emphasized that these testimonies mainly concern the post-1965 period – the relatively best-appreciated period in the history of the USSR – and it is only when they are taken into account in the general syntheses of this era that a multidimensional picture of it can be constructed. The history of children and youth, understood and practiced as one of the emancipatory currents of contemporary historiography, can bring us closer to a deeper understanding of those sides of Soviet socio-cultural history that would remain unnoticed in research conducted solely from the perspective of an adult subject.

Research on child and youth labour in the USSR also confirms the enormous differentiation of this state: horizontally, i.e. between the various republics, above all between the European and Asian-Caucasian parts, and vertically, i.e. on the urban-rural line. It is impossible not to take them into account in studies of centre-periphery relations and mechanisms of internal colonization in the USSR. Moreover, this research also provokes further questions of a comparative nature: To what extent did the categories of child labour institutionally enforced by the Soviet state indicated above differ from the duties of children in other countries at a similar stage of economic development? Did the situation of Soviet children sent on compulsory summer internships or work and leisure camps differ significantly from, for example, the situation of children engaged in work on private farms in the People's Republic of Poland or even as early as the 1990s?

Finally, on the sidelines of strictly historical research, one might be tempted to reflect more broadly on whether any of the above-mentioned forms of activity would be acceptable and desirable in today's world. This is not about labour, but duties stipulated by the state and school and freed from the obsession with norms in the context of shaping an attitude of pro-social involvement and environmental awareness.

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