

## Political education in the Soviet Union

### A Response to Jeffrey Brooks

Alexandre Sumpf

**Alexandre Sumpf defends his view of political education in the Soviet Union. Anything but another study on the Bolshevik agenda in the countryside, his book investigates the process of professionalization of Soviet agents, and emphasizes the fluidity of individuals' approach to politics in the early stages of the Soviet regime's attempt to shape a New Man.**

Jeffrey Brooks' review of my book<sup>1</sup> interested me for it revealed the gap between his approach of Soviet history and mine. My famous colleague chiefly showed concern for the possibility of writing something new today about the Russian/Soviet peasantry.<sup>2</sup> I respectfully think he should have discussed the sources and methodology used in my book, instead of pointing out what I did not write, and *could not* write because my query was not his.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, Peasants into Bolsheviks?, *Books and Ideas*, [14-09-2011] (<http://www.booksandideas.net/Peasants-into-Bolsheviks.html>)

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Brooks cites a book by Aaron Retish (2008) which I have of course read, but whose conclusions about peasants' support for Bolsheviks did not match what I observed in archives, and failed to convince me because of an insufficient reflection about the "local scale." On the "Peasant question", I relied on the books written by Jane Burbank (*Russian Peasants Go to Court. Legal Culture in the Countryside*, 2004) and Ilya Gerasimov for the late tsarist period, or by Sarah Badcock (*Politics and the People in Revolutionary Russia. A Provincial History*, 2007) and Donald J. Raleigh (*Experiencing Russia's Civil War. Politics, Society and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov*, 2002) for the early Soviet period.

I never intended on writing another book on the Bolshevik agenda in the countryside or on their attempt to turn peasants into “Bolsheviks” during the 1920s. Rather, I focused on a series of collective and individual initiatives interrelated by the quite fluid notion of “political education,” connecting peasants (not *the* peasantry) with non-peasants (sometimes communists, sometimes urban dwellers) or other peasants perceived by villagers as agents of the new state.

The goal of my project, which was also its difficulty, was to examine multiple spatial scales – “center(s)” and “peripheries”, local autonomy and chain of command (see chapter 2). On the one hand, my social history of politics stumbled over my insufficient evaluation of political education’s role among Bolshevik institutions in the village. On the other hand, I freed myself from the rigid scheme of prescriptive signals “from above” and reception from “below”, looking rather for places of (mis)understanding, strata of written and oral communication, personal relationships along the hierarchy.

So far, researchers have underestimated the distinction between political education and the Party’s *agitprop*.<sup>3</sup> *Agitprop* was meant to regularly mobilize specific groups on specific themes, and looked for immediate and automatic action in the name of the Party. Conversely, *Glavpolitprosvet*, a *state* agency, did take the time to educate broadly and revolutionize ways of thinking to provoke a conscious and definitive involvement in favor of *the regime*. Operated by governmental agencies, “political education” all together was an authoritative discourse central to the shaping of the New man; a series of practices often in mutual contradiction; an unevenly controlled network of local institutions in direct contact with the population; a social group (educators and trainees) which varied according to time and space; and finally a set of symbolic attitudes which could be adapted according to circumstances. At the time, nobody knew exactly what political education meant, but millions of people experienced it during a decade.

My attempt to produce a *social* history of a political phenomenon did not confront the (old) opposition between state persuasion and violence on peasantry. Many fascinating pages had

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (1985), or even Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning among Bolsheviks* (1997).

been written about it; of course, I could not ignore them. However, I situated my research at the level of individuals; I focused on opportunities, abilities, and strategies of involvement for rural *new men* in an enterprise by all means exceptional in the village. Brooks rightly regrets the absence of prosopography in my book.<sup>4</sup> I did attempt for five years to come up with sources in order to compensate the lack of information, but could not track the destiny of political educators as individuals and as a collective after the turmoil of collectivization. My hypothesis was that *professionals* – i.e. agents perceiving political education as state duty rather than fulfilling a traditional “populist” vocation to educate backward people – had probably been hired in kolkhoz clubs, but many certainly tried as well to escape a countryside in ruins. Reluctantly restricting my study to the 1920s, I insisted on the *uncertainty* of Soviet careers, in particular in the field of political education, which was a stepping stone towards better positions inside the Soviet administration, but at the same time an ill-recognized status with poor consideration and financial support by local authorities, and an ambiguous position among fellow villagers.

The archives I used are valuable not only for their quantity, but also for their quality. I have discovered an invaluable source, too rarely exploited (and not mentioned by Prof. Brooks), that allowed me to capture in detail the interactions between the institutions in charge of political education and the trainees: inquiry forms (*ankety*) filled by individuals. In 1924 and 1925, dozens of future rural political educators (*izbachi*) of the Moscow region answered the 50 questions asked to them by their educators and future recruiters. Richer than already well-known communist autobiographies, this kind of document reveals intentions, abilities, and mutual perceptions between unequally experienced and advanced political education workers. Thanks to the analysis of this source, I believe I have deepened Sheila Fitzpatrick’s and Michael David-Fox’s seminal works by analyzing the mechanics of recruitment. Authorities constantly denounced recruits’ lack of political reliability, knowledge of Marxism or rooting in the peasantry; but they rarely succeeded in appointing suitable individuals “from above.” At the local level, volunteers (always in scarce numbers) successfully passed selection tests despite what their teachers regarded as their ideological flaws (lack of formation, culture and will to

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<sup>4</sup> Only Ilya Gerasimov, in *Modernism and Public Reform in Late Imperial Russia. Rural Professionals and Self-Organization, 1905-1930* (2009) has succeeded in such an approach, particularly for the late tsarist era, but less convincingly for the 1920s.

learn). Conversely, newly recruited agents were rarely successful in their applications for administrative positions: they were generally sent back to their villages, and their ability to move from a region to another or from local to higher functions was severely limited. Power struggles between center and periphery, at each geographical level of the Soviet administration, played a pivotal role in the delicate issue of rooting the Soviet bureaucracy in the villages, which was further impeded by a high rate of turnover. Indeed, such instability was as much a product of the political workers' desires in the field as it was imposed on them by national authorities, who feared that if they stayed in one place too long, they would get too close to local authorities.

This was not a simple matter of transplanting (urban, non-peasant) “outsiders” or transforming (peasant) “insiders.” In my book, my goal was to investigate the process of professionalization of Soviet agents and how they addressed different audiences in the village. The *ankety* indicated that in the 1920s, *Bednota*, the leading newspaper during the Russian Civil war, had fallen far below the regional and the professional presses. Most *izbachi* from the Moscow province read *Moskovskaia derevnia* because it was available and close to local issues; after institutional subscription replaced free distribution, rural reading-rooms received it not massively, but regularly enough. They also read the corporative journals issued by *Glavpolitprosvet*, especially the monthly *Izba-chitalnia*. Were they the most literate in the village? Certainly not. And not only because rural school teachers did not engage massively in political education (they accounted for one-third of *izbachi*). Were peasants “backward” or considered as such?<sup>5</sup> This was not the point: Bolsheviks theorized how to address a public by offering a multi-strata message that could be understood by the maximum number of the diverse (and often temporary) groups constituting the audience.

I do agree with Brooks on this point: we cannot identify the targets of political education with certainty. On the one hand, its promoters constantly hesitated, went forward, repented, and were victims of the “General line”’s oscillations. On the other hand, and above all, local and

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<sup>5</sup> The criticism about my book’s cover is misplaced. Jeff Brooks certainly knows that the publisher has the last word, in France as in the United States. Moreover, my editor was interested not so much in the *muzhik*’s face on this photograph at *that* time of his life, but in the effect his face could have on those who look at him today – the historian and the reader of the book.

national “success” (in terms of audience, learning processes, participation, and involvement) depended on the involvement of both educators and those who participated in political education events on the field. Did they believe enthusiastically in the Leninist cultural revolution? Did they naively hope to move upward? Did they understand Lenin’s works or the awkward “Bolshevik talk” at all? It was not necessary to attend alphabetization classes, listen to agronomy advice, watch the movies shown by itinerant projectionists, or even apply for special *izbachi* courses. They could also forget how to read after an accelerated learning course, laugh innocently at the way the Revolution was staged on the screen, quit the job of political educator – a second-rate administrative function – and go back to the fields or move to the cities. During the 1920s (and the 1930s to a lesser extent), individuals could feel politically indifferent, choose not to choose between Bolsheviks and anti-Bolsheviks, and follow their own path – whether Stalin and historians like it or not.

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