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*Separate Schools: Gender, Policy, and Practice in Postwar
Soviet Education* (review)

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continuity or Khrushchev's housing policy signified a radical break with Stalinist practice, as is conventionally argued.¹²

To sum up, although the new book by Meerovich, Konysheva, and Khmel'nitskii seems to represent a pessimistic take on Soviet history by the Russian intelligentsia, it is a valuable contribution to the discussion on the history of urban policy. It raises a number of important questions on issues such as city construction legislation, norms and regulations for city planning, and city building practice during the First Five-Year Plan. Even more important, it encourages readers to question what the role of the professionals was in making Soviet history.



Brigid O'KEEFFE

E. Thomas Ewing, *Separate Schools: Gender, Policy, and Practice in Postwar Soviet Education* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010). 300 pp., 11 Ill. ISBN: 978-0-87580-434-7.

In May 1954, the United States Supreme Court issued its monumental *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, declaring the racial segregation of schools unconstitutional. Thereby, it rejected the “separate but equal” rationale affirmed by the Court in 1896 and used to legally justify the racial segregation of all manner of public institutions in the United States. A mere three months later, in July 1954, the Soviet Union repudiated “separate but equal” schooling for boys and girls – that is, the educational norm for millions of Soviet children in as many as 169 cities since 1943. In his valuable, erudite, and unique study, *Separate Schools: Gender, Policy, and Practice in Postwar Soviet Education*, E. Thomas Ewing examines the Soviet Union's eleven-year experiment in gender-segregated schools. He provides new insight into this particular Soviet educational experiment's rationale, implementation, failures, and ultimate repudiation.

¹² Some recent research has challenged this conventional view and underlined certain continuities in housing policy after Stalin's death. See: Mark Smith. *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev*. DeKalb, 2010.

In conducting this postmortem of Soviet single-sex schooling, Ewing also seeks to inform contemporary debates – especially current debates in the United States – about the enduring controversy of single-sex schooling and its wider historical context.

A noted specialist on Soviet education, Ewing is the first to provide an in-depth historical study of Soviet gender-segregated schooling. He offers a historiographical antidote to what he sees as both scholarly inattention to and misunderstanding of the phenomenon of Soviet single-sex schooling. When scholars have approached at all the topic of Soviet separate schools for boys and girls, he argues, they have sweepingly explained the experiment as but another manifestation of Stalinist “retreat” from revolutionary ideals – most notably, the ideal of gender equality – or as a knee-jerk reaction to wartime exigencies. Moreover, Ewing asserts, scholars have focused overwhelmingly on gender-segregated schooling as an avenue for discussing women’s lives and the construction of female gender in the late Stalinist period. The effect that separate schooling had on boys and the Soviet construction of masculinity has been largely ignored. Ewing, in turn, demonstrates that the (temporary) rejection of coeducation was inspired by seeming crisis in Soviet classrooms already bedeviling

educators and officials on the eve of World War II. He insists that a study of gender-segregated schooling has as much to tell us about Soviet boys as it does girls, and as much about constructs of masculinity as of femininity.

In July 1943, the Soviet Union – then notably at war – rejected more than two decades of commitment to coeducation, seemingly disavowed its dedication to gender equality, and inaugurated a policy of single-sex schooling in the country’s urban areas. Yet, Ewing shows quite clearly, this seemingly abrupt decision had been in the works prior to the 1941 German invasion. Extant records indicate that behind-the-door discussions among a range of educational authorities regarding the potential utility of gender-segregated schooling began as early as 1939. When these discussions expanded in the spring of 1941, they were prompted as much by the perceived need to militarize education as they were by swelling enrollments in Soviet schools. Most of all, Ewing suggests, official support for separate schools owed to an already prewar desire to more effectively regulate the behavior of Soviet youth and to more energetically discipline presumably unruly Soviet boys in particular.

The July 1943 decision surprised teachers, parents, and pupils in cities across the country. Vigorous propaganda, meanwhile, promised

them that separate schools would guarantee optimal education for Soviet youth and rectify the purported shortcomings of coeducation. In the midst of war, this unexpected policy shift was implemented quickly and even haphazardly. While confusion often reigned in urban schools in the fall of 1943, Soviet authorities publicly idealized gender segregation as the long-awaited salve for festering educational problems – especially of lack of classroom discipline. Stalin, meanwhile, is reported to have privately commented: “Creating separate boys’ and girls’ schools in the large cities is likely to make things calmer” (P. 34).

As urban primary and secondary schools were reorganized along the key boundary of gender, Soviet officials reassured the public that the new educational order would ensure equal education for boys and girls. The curriculum was to stay the same for all pupils, regardless of gender. That said, gender-segregated schooling was simultaneously justified as necessary to crucially account for boys’ and girls’ “particularities” so as to better prepare them as adult citizens endowed with both the same and different social roles (P. 35).

Recognizing the limits of his sources, Ewing is appropriately wary of diagnosing public opinion surrounding this abrupt transition to “separate but equal” schools for urban Soviet boys and girls. While

few voices emerge in the historical record protesting the decision as a betrayal of gender equality and a dangerous return to prerevolutionary pedagogical methods, Ewing suggests that the transition to single-sex schooling proceeded smoothly and agreeably overall. Only after teachers, parents, and pupils settled in to gender-segregated schooling did unresolved tensions at the heart of the project begin to bubble to the surface and heat increasingly public debates about this controversial late Stalinist educational policy.

Throughout the eleven-year experiment, Ewing demonstrates, girls’ schools were praised as model institutions where learning proceeded in a near-uniformly hygienic, calm, orderly, and decorous environment. Soviet officials resolutely claimed that the purported prior Soviet achievement of women’s equality had made these ideal conditions of separate girls’ schools possible. According to the scripts of official discourse, girls now enjoyed the attainment of “a completely identical level of general education” as boys, but did so in a manner “appropriate to nature and certain distinctions in the social roles of the sexes” (P. 71). In practice, this meant that pupils of girls’ schools often examined the classics of Russian literature with special attention to praiseworthy female protagonists, studied chemistry with an eye toward the improve-

ment of domestic caretaking, and “enjoyed” expanded opportunities to study needlework, child care, and cooking as extracurricular activities, if not as part of their core curriculum.

Boys’ schools, meanwhile, increasingly featured in the Soviet imagination (and, often enough, in Soviet reality) as sites of unrestrained mayhem, disorder, and disciplinary malfunction. Following the 1943 policy shift, boys were soon deemed worse off in their separate schools than they had been in coeducational institutions. By all accounts, they hooted, hollered, cursed, smoked, fought, skipped class, smashed windows, defiled classrooms, and abused teachers. Ewing reports that Soviet teachers overwhelmingly sought to avoid or else escape assignment to the boys’ schools. According to Soviet officials and some educators, however, single-sex schooling was not at fault for the failures seen in the boys’ schools. Rather, a declared insufficiency of effective teachers was blamed. Rectification of this seemingly epidemic disorder was often sought in the transfer of “the best” teachers from girls’ to boys’ schools and the disproportionate allocation of resources to further boys’ extracurricular activities. “The failure of boys’ schools,” Ewing argues, “was being transformed into a loss inflicted on girls’ schools” (P. 131).

If boys’ schools were a practical failure, Ewing contends, girls’ schools were “an ideological failure” (P. 128). Separate schools had not solved, but rather had seemingly exacerbated the initial problem of discipline for boys. Meanwhile, they contradicted in the minds of many Soviet citizens – men and women, and especially female pupils – the Soviet Union’s commitment to gender equality. Teachers, parents, and students increasingly spoke out against single-sex schooling as disadvantageous and insulting to girls, deleterious in encouraging boys’ bad behavior, and socially unhealthy for all pupils concerned. By mid-1950, Soviet citizens began publicly and vigorously urging a return to coeducation – a wish granted them by Soviet authorities in July 1954.

Public debate over gender segregation in urban schools, Ewing contends, provides a valuable window onto the potentially dialogic relationship between state and society in the final years of the Stalinist regime. Citizens openly spoke out against a policy they deemed ineffective and harmful and pressured the postwar regime for change. Ewing contends that early evidence of “the thaw” is seen in the remarkable opening words of the decree restoring coeducation: “Taking into consideration the wishes of parents and the opinions of teachers...” (P. 213). Soviet authorities retained

their “monopoly on policy making,” Ewing argues, but had here proven capable of responding favorably to public opinion, “so long as popular perceptions were consistent with political objectives” (P. 222).

Ewing’s study draws from a wealth of both published and unpublished materials. Archival sources employed in his analysis speak to perspectives of Soviet officials, educators, parents, and pupils who directed or otherwise experienced gender-segregated schooling in all corners of the country and thus not merely in Moscow or Leningrad. Ewing rightly admits both the limitations and interpretive possibilities of his source base, demonstrating reasoned caution throughout. Nonetheless, a couple of minor questions of methodology remain. In one passing reference, it is suggested that perhaps different textbooks were designed for and used in boys’ and girls’ schools (P. 216). Yet Ewing does not consult such texts (if they indeed existed), or any textbooks at all, for insight into the gendering of Soviet schools. It is also likely that Ewing’s analysis would have been enhanced by oral histories conducted among the many former pupils of the Soviet Union’s separate schools. Such an oral history project, in any event, may prove a fruitful avenue for other historians and anthropologists to pursue as the field moves toward greater understanding and

appreciation of the postwar period of Soviet history.

Separate Schools, meanwhile, is every bit as overtly presentist in its concerns as it is historical. Ewing seeks not only to illuminate this previously unexplored history of Soviet single-sex schooling, but also to intervene in contemporary and, especially, North American debates over the practice. In his clearly articulated view, the Soviet example serves most appropriately as a cautionary tale for educators, policymakers, and parents tempted to adopt gender segregation as a hoped-for means to alleviate all manner of challenges in the classroom. Without claiming inevitability, he suggests that the perceived advantages of single-sex schooling are likely to prove illusory in any context just as they did in the pained (and sometimes painful) Soviet example. In this sense, Ewing’s book should broadly appeal not only to historians and other scholars of education but also to policymakers interested in the persistent dilemma of improving instruction for all children, girls and boys.

Ewing tends to be heavy-handed in his writing, repeating at times unnecessarily the coordinates of his arguments, the blueprints of their presentation, and even the factual material that supports them. The book therefore would have benefited from more disciplined editing and the production of a trimmer volume.

Yet Ewing succeeds in revealing how the Soviet experiment in single-sex schooling rested on and reinforced longstanding perceptions of gender difference in the Soviet Union. In its careful examination of the vigorous public debate inspired by these separate schools, this study also offers fresh insight into the subtle and stark changes in postwar Soviet political culture. *Separate Schools* therefore promises to interest and enlighten specialists interested in Soviet education, late Stalinism, the onset of “the thaw,” and the practice of gender-segregated schooling more generally.



Алексей ФИЛИТОВ

Виктор Деннингхаус. В тени “Большого Брата”: Западные национальные меньшинства в СССР (1917–1938 гг.). Москва, РОССПЭН; Фонд “Президентский центр Б. Н. Ельцина”, 2011. 727 с. Приложения, Указатель имен. ISBN: 978-5-8243-1535-6.

Российский читатель уже имел возможность познакомиться с творчеством немецкого историка В. Деннингхауса, в частности с его солидными монографиями о немецкой диаспоре в Москве и немцах Поволжья в начале XX века.¹ В своем новом труде он существенно расширил диапазон своих научных интересов: если ранее они концентрировались на проблемах немецкого этноса в России (причем в большей степени в применении к периоду до 1917 года), то теперь речь идет об исторических судьбах, по крайней мере семи “основных групп нацменьшинств Запада в СССР” (С. 699) – немцах, поляках, греках, эстонцах, финнах, латышах и латгальцах, литовцах. Трудно согласиться с рецензентами двух интернет-изданий, когда они утверждают, что Деннингхауса и ныне в его новой книге “по-

¹ В. Деннингхаус. Немцы в общественной жизни Москвы: симбиоз и конфликты (1494–1941). Москва, 2004; Он же. Революция, реформа и война: немцы на Волге на закате Российской империи. Саратов, 2004.