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The evolution of the system of care for social orphans in Russia

The Soviet inheritance and the current trends in Saint-Petersburg

Summary

This article describes the educational system for 'children deprived of parental care' as it was envisaged in the USSR between 1957 and 1991 and as it has developed in Russia, particularly in Saint Petersburg, since 1992. With regards to the Soviet period, relevant laws and theoretical articles on education in boarding schools and orphanages, as well as testimonies, are quoted to portray what education in institutions for orphans was like. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of children not taken care of by their parents has increased rapidly. There has also been a growing number of initiatives to help children that are partly living on the streets. Changes in legislation and in attitudes towards children have been analysed by reference to the law, to various articles and mostly especially to numerous interviews. The vital role of NGO's in these changes is stressed.

Introduction

Although the USSR signed the Convention on Children's Rights in 1989, in today's Russian Federation (R.F.) respect for fundamental rights, such as schooling and access to the health system, is not guaranteed for all children (Rybinskij 1997). Given such conditions, the future of those who cannot rely on parental protection is particularly worrying. In 1996, such children accounted for 1.6% of the population of young persons in Russia, with 142,000 children living in orphanages (Karelovaja 1997). The futures of those brought up in these institutions are often catastrophic: unemployment, lack of housing, criminality and criminal prosecutions. The families they start of their own seldom last, therefore frequently leaving a new generation of abandoned children. What educational factors could explain the nearly systematic failure of young people brought up in orphanages? What efforts are being made to prevent such failures and to address the problem? These are the questions which motivated six months of research in Saint Petersburg, the results of which are presented here.

In order to understand today's system of care for children educated in orphanages it is crucial to look back to the Soviet structures, most of which remain to this day and form the basis upon which new trends in the treatment of children have emerged. Let us not forget that it is during the Soviet era that the educational responses of those currently in charge of educating these children developed.

The first paragraph of this article, therefore, describes the structures envisaged by the Soviet legislation since 1957, the year in which the development of boarding schools began. After giving an outline of the fundamental principles of the Soviet theory on boarding-school education, I will show how it has been put into practice within institutions dedicated to orphans and children 'deprived of parental care'.

The second part deals with the evolution of the system in the 1990's. It first seeks to explain the increase in the number of children placed in orphanages and known as 'social orphans'. It goes on to mention the phenomenon of street children, a title given to a number of children in orphanages. This phenomenon led to the creation of a several non-governmental organisations whose activities could only be taken into account here in relation to Saint Petersburg. Only then does the article tackle the issue of the education of 'social orphans': the different means of placing them into care that exist, the new legislation and the private initiatives that have led to changes. Lastly the article deals with the difficulties that young people face when coming out of orphanages.

All of these observations are based on legal texts dating from 1957 to 1997, manuals aimed at teachers, newspaper articles and numerous interviews with people in charge of institutions, as well as interviews with teachers in orphanages, not to mention, of course, the various publications on this subject.

History: the placing of children in institutions from 1960 to 1990 in the Soviet Union

Whereas in the post-war decades most children admitted into Soviet orphanages had actually lost their parents, from the 1970's this was true for only 10% of them. Increasingly other reasons led to children being placed in institutions. Orphanages had to welcome children 'deprived of parental care', that is to say either abandoned children, sometimes from birth when the child was illegitimate, or removed from a family environment considered harmful.

Legislation

In the context of crime prevention among young people, all institutions concerned were recommended to keep an eye on and, if necessary, to influence the family situation of those children whose bad behavior was apparent. To this end, several institutions had to co-operate, including schools, the police (the inspectorate dealing with young persons) and the 'commissions on the issues of minors' established by law in 1967 (still in force in 1997). According to this law, the commission on the issues of minors was required to investigate whenever a young person missed school or work or was found guilty of an offence or of an action considered to be dangerous to the community or contrary to the interests of society. And yet, whenever a child's behavior did not comply with the rules then in force this was automatically attributed to bad parental education, since supervising ones children was considered to be an educational responsibility of paramount importance. If the commission came to the conclusion that the family environment was detrimental to the child it could remove the parental authority by way of a legal action. The child would then be put into foster care or placed in a State institution. For a long time, the only institutions authorised to welcome children 'deprived of parental care' were the orphanages. But, in 1957, the Soviet Union's council of ministers ratified a 'regulation on boarding schools' (Anweiler 1979), the number of which was, according to a plan voted in 1957 (CK KPSS), to be increased by a factor of 14 so as to accommodate 2.5 million pupils by 1965. It was also decided that the existing orphanages would progressively be transformed into boarding schools and that 'orphans' of school age would, from then on, only be sent to boarding schools. Although orphanages had in theory been made superfluous by this plan most of them continued to operate without making the transition to boarding schools. The two institutions differed mainly in terms of their size, with boarding schools hosting a larger number of children, and by the fact that children in orphanages attended local schools close to their institution whereas boarding schools had their own schools. In fact, a boarding school had to bring together all the facilities necessary for the life, schooling, and communal work of at least 120 pupils. This included housing blocs, a school and a small agricultural or industrial enterprise. Children whose family conditions were considered to be unfavourable to their education were to be welcomed there as a matter of priority: that is say children with sick or imprisoned parents, children from large or single parent families, etc.

The increase in number of these institutions was considered desirable in several respects. On the one hand, boarding schools had social advantages since they enabled single mother's to take up paid employment and could increase the school attendance rate in rural areas, where distances to school had been an obstacle until then. On the other hand it was now theoretically possible to isolate children from negative outside influences and to achieve a standard of education that complied with the socialist model, combining work with the education of the children.

After several years of operation, boarding schools were divided into categories, some reserved for particularly gifted children, others for physically or mentally handicapped children or others again for children 'deprived of parental care'. In 1985 (MP SSSR), there were 544 orphanages and 130 boarding schools for children 'deprived of parental care' in the Russian Federation of Soviet Socialist Republics, housing more than over 100,000 children in total.

The rules governing life within boarding schools and orphanages were largely determined by legislation. Hence, the 'Orphanage Regulation' ratified by the USSR's Ministry for Education in 1978 (MP SSSR) contains precise instructions as to the duties of children as well as to the rewards and punishments that could be considered. It is clearly specified, for example, that children must obey any orders of a member of staff of the institution. The regulation also contains directions concerning the children's timetable and their various activities which had to be divided between school tuition, contributions to household tasks, work useful to the community and leisure such as sports, games and cultural activities. It was essential that children were kept busy and supervised 24 hours a day (Dunstan 1978). Therefore room to manoeuvre left to the directors, teachers and children with regards to the organisation of life in orphanages and boarding schools was very restricted.

Similarly, the number and distribution of employees was strictly prescribed. In 1984, the number of children that a teacher had to look after as a group was set at 35. According to the 1957 law on boarding schools, teachers were not only responsible for making sure that the children were ordered and disciplined but also for making them prepare for their classes, for organising outings, etc. The 1978 law added to these responsibilities that of responding to individual needs and interests and that of respecting each child's personality. Teachers had no training specific to the needs of children 'deprived of parental care' but were simply recruited from amongst school teachers; some of them had taken optional classes in boarding school education.

Once a pupil reached the end of his schooling, the director of the institution was legally responsible for providing him with professional training or a job. Once a young person reached adulthood and left the institution, the director had to find him accommodation, then monitor his progress and come to his aide in times of crisis. Exceptionally, young persons on a training course or studying could remain in the orphanage some time after having reached adulthood. In order to improve its material conditions, each institution had to have a 'patronage council' composed of local party of representatives, trade unions, communist youth groups (komsomol) as well as companies. The factories and the kolkhozes were required to contribute towards supplying and equipping these institutions as well as being required to train and hire young people leaving them.

Socialist education

All of the Soviet academic experts on boarding school education refer to their predecessor Anton Semenovitch Makarenko who directed centres for abandoned and delinquent children in Ukraine in the 1920's and 30's and whose practical experience and thoughts on education are still considered of interest in Russia and in many countries beyond. However, during the last decades of the USSR, only certain elements of Makarenko's theory, taken out of context, have been put into practice in boarding schools.

The factor considered to be of the greatest fundamental importance to education was collectivity. Through it, children were expected to understand and adopt vital concepts such as self-discipline, self-criticism, perseverance, a sense of responsibility, of duty, of justice, etc. To achieve this purpose, teachers were to organise the community according to precise rules. For instance, it was considered advisable to create mixed groups, that is to say, groups of children of different ages and classes. In this way the eldest could participate in the education of the youngest by helping them to tidy their dormitories or to learn their lessons. Placing the elder ones in charge of the younger ones' order and discipline was a way in which to give the elder ones responsibilities and thereby to encourage them to be a good example.

Educational academics recommended another means for making pupils acquire a sense of responsibility for their own affairs, a technique also practiced in Makarenkos camps and known as 'self-administration'. In boarding schools and orphanages auto-administration, which was meant to extend to all aspects of community life, was implemented in the form of delegates elected by the pupils at the beginning of each school year and put in charge of determining the tasks to be accomplished throughout the year and then of allocating these amongst the groups of children. The creation of various commissions was also envisaged, each responsible for a precise domain, such as the organisation of inter-pupil school support. Through these commissions, which, in turn, were required to delegate their tasks amongst the various children, self-administration could finally involve all the members of the community, giving to each person a sense of their responsibility within the life of the community.

In Socialist education, discipline was at least as important a factor as collectivity. In order to teach pupils to acquire discipline self-administration was also used, the pupils were given the responsibility of organising competitions, the object of which were, for example, to abide by the rules. Competition between the groups was meant to stimulate children, encouraging them to improve their own performance and to supervise the actions of their class-mates. Through the collectivisation of activities, such measures enabled children to become used to respect for order and self-discipline. It is for that reason that Soviet educational academics described collectivity as both the object and the subject of education.

The tremendous importance given to the strict observation of rules, which regulated the most minor details of daily life, issues of hygiene in particular, can seem impressive. It appears as though it was the teachers' main concern. This can be explained by the fact that children came to orphanages and boarding schools from families in which cleanliness, punctuality and politeness were not satisfactory, encouraging teachers in these institutions to try to reverse the situation by exaggerating the severity of the rules.

The third essential component of Soviet educational theory was education in professional work. From the notion that work is the foundation of human life and the supreme driving force in the development and perfection of society came the conviction that children must be introduced to professional work from a very early age. In the regular schools this conviction gave rise to classes in professional work. In orphanages and boarding schools, extra-mural activities had to include different types of work: from household tasks such as airing the dormitories or watering the plants to works considered to be useful to the community, from the restoration of furniture to the aesthetic improvement of buildings or gardening. Moreover each child had to participate in some form of production, whether industrial or agricultural. Boarding schools were therefore equipped with workshops for sewing and for metal or wood-work and kept a small agricultural production. Wherever this was not the case, the director of the institution had to reach an agreement with those in charge of local factories and of neighbouring kolkhozes so that his pupils could work there in exchange for cash or goods in kind. In each institution a medical team was given the responsibility of supervising the children's health and of determining the working capacity of each so as to avoid excessive physical activity. The educational benefits ascribed to the education of children through work were varied in kind: firstly, it allowed pupils to acquire useful if not essential skills for adult life. Moreover the planning, distribution and co-ordination of work through self-administration, which could also set in motion productivity competitions, was meant to develop a sense of organisation in the future citizens. Finally, production work, strongly recommended in a 1959 communiqué (MP SSSR), was explicitly justified by the necessity for orphanages to contribute towards their own supplies and finances so as to reduce the burden on the State budget.

Practical implementation

The next paragraph mainly takes into account the negative accounts of orphanages and boarding schools published during the Soviet era, even though there were many more positive comments made. The latter, however, merely confirm the viewpoints of politicians and academics. Presenting them here would serve only to recite once more the official stance without bringing any new information on the reality of orphanage education. More in-depth historical research would be required to refute the positive accounts that were given. Nevertheless, the critical comments analysed here, even though small in number, allow for a relativization of the official position. They reveal a picture of orphanage education that is not necessarily compatible with the theoretical projects described above.

As far as the material problems faced by institutions are concerned, the flaws most frequently cited concern the failure to meet the sanitary and medical supervision standards set by the various directives.

The dissatisfaction of a few witnesses with regards to the educational methods practiced was based on several aspects. Firstly, the disciplinary rules were judged to be too severe and the space left to pupils' own initiative too restrictive, leading them to be passive and discouraging their sense of responsibility. It is indeed true, for example, that the model timetables published in 1962 (Gmurman) left little room for the individual personality of each child. However, it was not so much the insistence on discipline that most upset certain commentators, but the way in which it was imposed. Indeed, articles published in the 60's and in the 80' reveal cases of children beaten by their teachers or locked up for several hours or even days as punishment. Depriving children of food was apparently a widespread practice amongst boarding school staff. As a means of pressure, children were also threatened with being sent to the 'special' educational institutions set up to improve the behaviour of minor delinquents.

Another aspect that was the subject of criticism might, upon first impressions, appear to contradict the above criticisms. It has often been noted that members of staff in orphanages or boarding schools took exaggerated care of the children, preferring to undertake difficult tasks for them, so that very little effort was required of them. The harmful consequence which is associated with this phenomenon is the incapacity of young people coming out of these institutions to undertake even minor action necessary to their daily lives. Thus, they had never prepared a meal, washed or repaired their clothes nor managed a budget. In addition, since all these tasks were carried out far from their sight, the children never realised the scale of these activities.

In practice therefore, the sense of responsibility and the autonomy of the pupils left much to be desired. In fact, the self-administration policy which, according to academics, was meant to foster these qualities was often no more than a formal concept, as the activities which children were supposed to organise themselves were often pre-determined by the educational team. If a number of reports by the directors of institutions are to be believed, the competitions were predominantly used to instil a sense of discipline in the children. The latter were, for example, encouraged to supervise each other, the best pupils holding up to ridicule the less disciplined ones during the closing ceremony of the competition (Ljalina 1965). The beneficial effect of such activities seemed undeniable however, as order and discipline were maintained during the entire duration of the game.

Through these accounts, the difference between the institutions for children 'deprived of parental care' from 1960 to 1990 and A.S. Makarenko's centres becomes clear. In the latter, self-administration was closely linked with the work that children carried out together, fixing their building, feeding themselves and to become gradually better equipped. The children themselves were in charge of the entire life of the community and the role of teachers was to suggest new objectives, to draw the children's attention to certain weaknesses and to encourage them to establish new rules or to perfect existing ones. It is in that way that, motivated by the collective experience, its members became exemplary citizens: brave, responsible, organised, educated and able (Sünkel 1994). However the partial implementation of these principles, by removing the dynamic essential to their proper operation, lead to results that were sometimes disastrous.

It seems that the subject of institutions for orphans was a completely taboo subject in the 70's, such that none of the problems mentioned above were broached during those years. This is not surprising given the reasons children were being placed in those institutions at the time, reasons increasingly connected to the social deviation of families. The Socialist revolution was supposed to have eliminated this phenomenon (Beljakov 1992; Kovalev 1977). It is therefore primarily from the Perestroika period onwards that the calls began to be heard for the training of teachers in a way that was more adapted to the specific needs of children 'deprived of parental care' and to education in boarding schools. Teachers were criticised for supervising children rather than helping them grow up.

Amongst the problems described, many were linked to the strict regulations imposed by the National Ministry for Education (Kalabalin 1990). For instance, the institutions had no ready cash available, their suppliers being paid directly by the relevant administration. As a result it was impossible, for example, to give children money equivalent to the cost of their meal so that they could prepare it themselves and learn to manage a given sum for a specific aim.

In addition to the lack of freedom that institutions were given, the role within society that fulfilled boarding schools for children 'deprived of parental care' and orphanages has been called into question a number of times since the end of the 80's. A. Katolikov (1990), who directed a boarding school for children 'deprived of parental care' for a long time, denounced the use to which such institutions were put, very often serving the purpose of scaring or threatening disobedient children. It also seems that school teachers or directors, as well as the personnel of the commissions on the issues of minors, considered boarding schools as a useful solution to the problem posed by undisciplined or not very studious pupils. It is in this way that children were brutally removed from their families, with whom they ended up cutting off all contact, so that children truly 'deprived of parental care' were thus produced.

The care of social orphans in the 1990's in Saint Petersburg

Social orphans

'Social orphans', a recent word in the Russian vocabulary, means children who, for financial reasons, cannot be looked after by their parents. These children account for 95% of orphanage and boarding house children. Between 1992 and 1996 the number of children registered as 'deprived of parental care' in the Russian Federation (R.F.) has increased by 68% whereas the total number of young people was decreasing. During the same period in St Petersburg, the number went up by 94% (Administracija 1997; Karelovaja 1997).

To explain this increase one must first take into consideration the worsening of economic conditions for the majority of people since 1991, characterised by massive unemployment and salaries too low to meet the cost of living. In 1993, officially 35% of St Petersburg's population lived beneath the poverty threshold (Astaf'eva 1994). The crisis first hits society's most vulnerable such as large families, single parent families and refugee families, whose children are victims of this situation. In 1997, indispensable minimum hygiene and health care of children could not be ensured in 0.45% of St Petersburg's families, which made up 0.9% of the population under 18. In addition, due to a law in favour of housing privatisation, many sold their house for absurdly low prices without realising the consequences. As a result, homelessness has been on the increase including among young people.

Economic difficulties are often a cause of family break up. In 1996 in St Petersburg, one marriage out of seven broke up to leave a single parent family with two or more children (Administacija 1997). Most often in the case of a family break up, women stay in charge of the children. As drinking problems have been on the increase amongst women since 1992, this means that children are not cared for or that they leave home to escape violence. Statistics from the Russian Home Office show that 2 million children under 14 (6.2%) a year are victims of their parents' violence (Sojuz senscin 1996).

Health related problems, equally on the increase in Russia, lead sometimes to children being abandoned at birth. For example, out of 44 children born with Down's syndrome in St Petersburg, all but two have been given up to the care of the State (Cesanova 1996).

Lastly, political conflicts in other regions and former USSR republics cause thousands of refugees to enter the country, including children, who try to survive in the big cities.

Street children

Street children (that is children not looked after) and social orphans (children without parental care) are not necessarily identical. But taking into consideration the increasing work recently done with street children and the fact that street life sometimes means a step towards orphanage or boarding house, it is important to mention them.

For St Petersburg, the number of street children varies between 1,500 and 60,000 depending on the definition of 'street children' used for the statistics. A. Syrcov (1997), a doctor working with these children, distinguishes three groups. The smallest group consists of about 600 children who have severed all links with their parents, taking refuge in cellars, attics or hot water tunnels. Very independent, they can survive by themselves and repeatedly escape when placed in institutions. The second group, not very large either, is one of teenagers who seek to express their opposition to their parents and to society by living in the streets. The largest group, according to Syrcov, is made up of children and young people who look for money in the daytime but spend the night with their parents. These children could end up being part of the first group if family links, which are already very fragile, finally break down and cause them to start sleeping on the street.

The high number of children living partially on the street should be seen in relation to the changing role of the school. If in the past the teachers also played the part of social supervisors, nowadays they register pupils who previously never attended school without questioning what they have been up to (Zasorin 1996, Viktorova 1996). In the same way, the communist youth movement, which was not limited to political training but which guaranteed out of school activities and supervision has not been replaced: leisure clubs and various activities organised by the city, with summer camps combining leisure and paid work, only reaches a minority. Instead of receiving a basic education, more and more children spend their days trying to earn money. Their activities go from windscreen cleaning and transporting goods through to stealing and prostitution.

The city and some non-governmental organisations (NGO's) have initiated various forms of help for the street children such as the distribution of fresh bread and social and medical support. These activities are financed either by donations (most often from Western Europe), or by the city. There are also programmes supported by various organisations (UNICEF, Soros, EU).

In some of St Petersburg's colleges, teachers are now being trained to be social workers. This profession did not exist in Soviet Union. The police used to be in charge of children found on the street. They were temporarely locked into a centre. This is still often the case today as there is no real system of support for these children; such a system would mean qualified people trained to work with the street children and their families. Social workers are recruited by the city council for schools, orphanages, the family centre, etc. in order to prevent parents' lack of care.

Some NGO's use street workers, this means educators who try to be in touch with the street children and offer some support. Their approach is radically different from the one of the police whose aim is to clean the streets. Nevertheless, it is quite usual to hear about police who cannot cope with the number of children in their care who ask help from the NGO's social workers. This arrangement is surprising as civil servants and NGO's usually don't trust each other. Civil servants tend to be sceptical towards any activity over which they no longer exercise control.

Educating social orphans

Children do not always go straight from the family or the street to a state institution. Children's hostels, private and public institutions can look after children in emergency situations. Social workers check the family situation to decide if the child can go back home. Often the only solution found is for parents to give up their rights to the child who is then fostered.

These temporary hostels, abolished during the socialist revolution, are now on the increase. In 1992, St Petersburg's mayor signed a motion to open three public institutions. Since then, others hostels have been opened, each founded on a special deed. Some are entirely financed by foreign donations; this is not appreciated by the city council who can neither check where the money goes nor the hostels' precise activities.

There is for example a private hostel in St Petersburg which seems more like an orphanage in as much as it is not a temporary shelter but an educational centre, where children stay until they learn to be independent. The *'Bereg'* centre welcomes ten 14 to 18 year olds from the street. They learn to run their own lives, they have to get some professional qualifications and, what is unusual is that they are encouraged to develop links with their parents. But the specificity of this centre is not legally recognised. Law says that private education centres can be opened but they will be supported only if they are licensed. To this day, there is no system for private institutions dealing with long term placements to obtain a licence. This is why the *Bereg*'s educators are keen to encourage the city council to institute the necessary laws. In the meantime the centre has no official status. It is often used by police inspectors who want to house problem children.

Some city hostels own their existence to private initiatives. Such as the *'Dom miloserdija'* opened in 1992 by parishioners whose church had been used as a refuge by three abandoned boys. In this hostel, social workers and psychologists first enquire about the possibility of returning the child to its parents. If necessary, the parent's rights are taken away and enquires are made about a foster family. When one is found, the child at first is sent only for holidays. After a while the fostering becomes official. Psychologists and social workers keep an eye on the fostering family. If after one year the child has not been fostered, he/she has to go to an orphanage.

The new 1996 Family Code (Semejnyj kodeks) lays out various possibilities for fostering for children without parental care. Firstly, there are some local fostering authorities responsible for defending the rights of the children and supervising their placement when parental rights have been taken away. Hostels and other institutions dealing with these children have to notify the fostering authority concerned. Preferably fostering must be done within a family and not an institution. If possible, the child's wish should be taken into consideration. In order to improve adoptions a database programme has been created. It is meant to gather, at local, regional and federal level, information about children available for adoption as well as listing interested parents. Due to evidence of trafficking of children, conditions for adoption abroad have become more stringent than in the early 1990's.

In Russia, many parents prefer fostering to adoption. When fostering, parents receive benefits for the child's education and the defence of his/her rights. When adopting, they consider the child as theirs and do not receive any indemnities. A new form of fostering has been integrated into the 1996 family code called 'family orphanage'. They were started in the late eighties, the idea being that several children are placed with one set of parents who, on top of fostering indemnities are paid for the educational work they do. In 1997 the R.F. had 368 homes housing 2282 social orphans. Lack of publicity for this option explains the low number. As far as the promised money is concerned, it corresponds to a very modest standard of living and in reality is not paid in half of the cases (Rybinskij 1997). Nevertheless this sort of placement has many advantages compared to state institutions; it is cheaper and the conditions for the physical and mental development of the children are much better. What is more, the children acquire in a family atmosphere indispensable social qualities they cannot get in a boarding house (Rybinskij 1995).

Orphanages and boarding houses for children deprived of parental care

Early 1997 in R.F., three quarters of orphans were living in a family: 48.5% were in foster families and 24.6% had been adopted by new parents. 26.8% (153,200 children) were in state institutions. The following table shows the evolution of these institutions from 1992 to 1996 (Karelovaja 1997):

number for Russian Federation		**1992**	**1996**
nurseries for abandoned children		257	252
	total number of housed children	17700	22000
	average number per institution	68.9	87.3
orphanages		577	966
	total number of housed children	39600	62600
	average number per institution	68.6	64.8
boarding houses for orphans and children deprived of parental care		140	153
	total number of housed children	22900	28400
	average number per institution	163.6	185.6
boarding houses for mentally or physically handicapped orphans and children deprived of parental care		153	184
	total number of housed children	19800	23000
	average number per institution	129.4	125

The 1995 law concerning the institutions for children deprived of parental care (MO FR) brought important changes such as allowing the aforementioned private institutions. To top up their budget deficit, state institutions were encouraged to find money through donations or for services rendered (e.g. letting their sport facilities). This new law guarantees the children's rights protecting their dignity and intellectual freedom. Children cannot be forced to work nor can they be physically or morally abused. This list of rights is in sharp contrast with the list of obligations contained in the 1978 law. Teachers are now responsible for their educational methods and the child's individuality must be taken into consideration. Life in institutions has to be, as much as possible, organised as it would be in a regular family.

In order to encourage the children's independence, some orphanages, with sponsorship, have equipped flats with bathrooms and kitchens. Each group can then warm the food provided by the institution in their own flat, allowing children to eat whenever convenient.

Unfortunately, lack of funds often prevents the application of the law's proposal to run the institution along family lines which would for example mean replacing big dormitories by little rooms which is too expensive. In spite of all the measures taken by the government to improve orphanages and boarding houses, the situation worsens. In 1996, 10% of institutions lacked the most basic sanitary equipment and it is not unusual that children only get proper clothing thanks to charitable donations notably from abroad.

On the other hand, for administrative reasons, social orphans often change teachers and institutions during their childhood. A commission of foreign psychologists noticed in 1993 that following a pre-school test, many children had been classified as mentally retarded and put into equivalent institutions. However, according to international standards they would have average, if not above average, mental abilities. In these institutions, lack of proper teaching was hindering their development. This has been described as a violation of human rights (Alekseeva 1994).

Conversations with educators who have been working for 10 to 20 years in orphanages or boarding houses give us an idea of the evolution of educational methods. In some places it seems that nothing has progressed as the rules are extremely strict - for example children are only allowed to move around two by two under the teacher's orders and they cannot leave the building without special permission. Methods used to ensure discipline are still the same: deprivation of food, leisure activities or new clothes, threats, etc.

In other places, children enjoy more freedom. Some educators allow them to go out from a certain age providing they know where and with whom. Others prefer to cocoon their children, depicting all sorts of dangers outside.

Most educators seem to doubt the orphans' ability to finish their schooling, thinking they are predetermined by their parents' genes to alcoholism and delinquency. Nevertheless, a few think that effort and hard work can give orphans the same chances as others.

Leaving the orphanage

Young people are on their own when they leave their institution between the age of 16 and 18. The 1995 law for orphans makes it compulsory for directors and social workers of these institutions to find house and work/training for their protégés and to monitor their progress. But, even when this is the case, some of these young people soon find themselves jobless and homeless for various reasons. In orphanages, they are still very dependent. Used to life without having to work for sustenance, they are often unable to organise their time and money. Their emotional and social development is very limited because they have been cut off from society and have only formal and transitory relationships with adults. On top of this, when they leave less than half has achieved an average educational level (corresponding to 8 years of schooling) that would enable them to apply for professional training (Beljakov 1994).

This is why many young people, unable to resist the temptation of a large sum of money, sell the housing allocated to them. Russian society is very prejudiced towards social orphans. Employers, assuming they will follow into their 'asocial' parents' footsteps, are reluctant to employ them. If they get a job, these young people often lose it because of their unreliable and unpredictable behavior. Unable to earn money legally, many turn to illegal activities and stealing and end up in jail. Jail conditions in Russia are such that young orphans are traumatised and generally rejoin the delinquent or even criminal milieu.

The result of economic and political changes are thus particularly dreadful for young people from orphanages: whereas in the Soviet Union they could generally keep their housing and their work whatever happened, nowadays, the unemployment and homelessness as well as suicide rate is extremely high amongst them (Prelovskaja 1996).

In St Petersburg, where every year 250 youngsters leave the orphanage (Lebedev 1994), there is a community centre and several NGO's to help them. The community centre can shelter fifteen of them before they get housing. During that time they are given lessons on budgeting, sexuality, law and order, etc. to prepare them for the real world. On Sundays, under supervision, they take turn to prepare a meal for themselves with ingredients they are given.

NGO's support young people in administrative and legal processes and help them to get access to medical care. Orphans tend to abandon their children and young mothers are encouraged to break this cycle. The NGO's volunteers, who are often former orphanage teachers, encourage and challenge young people to overcome their difficulties by themselves.

Conclusion

It seems that the new laws concerning the placement of children and the institutions open new possibilities as they recognise private initiatives and invite state institutions to become more independent. Their application is nevertheless hindered by obvious obstacles: on top of the lack of resources for orphanages and boarding houses, there is a growing indifference due to the economic crisis - families are too worried about their own survival to care about fostering. In state orphanages, educators, constrained by tradition and the rigidity of the system, find it difficult to change educational methods in order to prepare children for their independence. Amongst state institutions, only the more open ones accept a dialogue with NGO's which can lead to various forms of partnership and opens the door to new realistic ideas. It is indeed the people in charge of independent projects who are the ones able to be innovative, they can adapt to R.F.'s changing society without compromising on matters of human rights.

One must not forget that NGO's in Russia are a new phenomenon and the law takes time to adapt to this new way of working. Not having any control on NGO's activities, local authorities are very reluctant to co-operate on a long term basis. NGO's, on the other hand, are very keen to keep the freedom they enjoy thanks to western aid and they mistrust the old-fashioned methods of the civil service. It is nevertheless obvious that the future of NGO's depends upon politicians and civil servants who must agree to build a real partnership.

NGO's western sponsors have to tread carefully in a area where they do not know the ground. In the long run, the consequences of foreign sponsorship on NGO's autonomy have to be acknowledged. But if the NGO's still sensitive role is to be encouraged the sort of support they need to play their part in public life still has to be found.

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