Between Defectological Narratives and Institutional Realities: The “Mentally Retarded” Child in the Soviet Union of the 1930s

MARIA CRISTINA GALMARINI-KABALA

SUMMARY: This article analyzes the gap between the defectological narrative of care and the reality of institutional life for children with learning disabilities in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. It shows that, under Stalin, the Soviet discipline of defectology entailed a promise of correction and social integration that aligned well with the official rhetoric of triumphant socialism and that incorporated new, specific ideological meanings into its long-standing narrative of care. I also show that the defectological narrative was rarely realized in practice due to not only scarce material resources but also a profound reversal of defectological and Marxist conceptions of labor. By analyzing the disconnect between rhetoric and reality in the treatment of “mentally retarded” children in prewar Stalinism, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the Soviet system and ideology of care.

KEYWORDS: special education, Soviet Union, learning disabilities, children, defectology, mental retardation, institutions
In a book on children’s “mental retardation,” the Soviet expert in special education Leonid V. Zankov provided the “pedagogical characterization” of Valia G., a ten-year-old “oligophrenic” girl born in 1938. Zankov first outlined the conditions of Valia’s early childhood, her speech impairments, and her abnormal interactions with other children in regular day cares; then, he moved to discuss Valia’s arrival at an auxiliary school in Moscow and her improvement under the care of her special education teacher, L. A. Gorlova. Through an “individualized approach,” the “study” of all the various aspects of Valia’s personality, and an emphasis on her “positive traits,” Gorlova had successfully helped Valia “overcome” her “defects.” Zankov’s narrative included many details concerning Valia’s development and final triumph over her disability, ranging from her behavior in class and during excursions to her participation in theater performances and games with her peers. All this was so vividly described that readers could almost imagine the little girl Valia sitting at her desk, slowly learning to read, and shedding tears over the classic Russian fairy tale *Sister Alenushka and Brother Ivanushka.* In Zankov’s retelling, the story of Valia’s progress dramatized the ways in which Soviet special education “develop[ed] each student.” More importantly, exemplifying the care, correction, and integration provided in the Soviet Union to all feebleminded children, this story allowed readers to “effectively discover the great ideas of the true, socialist humanism, on which Soviet special pedagogy [was] based.”

In sharp contrast with Valia’s successful rehabilitation as described in Zankov’s book are the stories of a group of disabled boys and girls compiled by the director of a home for “mentally retarded” children in Kirov province. For instance, Mariia Agalakova suffered from mental debility as well as paralysis of the right hand; hence, she should be placed in a sartorial
workshop. Evgenii Mironov was so mentally retarded that, at the age of sixteen, he still attended the second class of middle school; therefore, he should be employed in a turner or locksmith workshop. Nikolai Vikharev, Nina Viatkina, and Anna Istomina suffered from acute forms of imbecility and idiocy and could not perform any independent physical labor; all three of them were to be sent to homes for disabled adults when they reached the age of sixteen. In a few other cases, the director of this children’s home indicated the child’s date of birth or whether he or she still had parents. However, his pedagogical reports revealed a complete lack of interest for all the multiple dimensions that, in Zankov’s view, made up the personality of a “defective” child and were crucial to his or her correction and integration. No mention was made of children’s positive traits, their psychophysical development, or their emotional well-being. Rather, the children of these reports were literally reduced to two items—their defect and the jobs accessible to them. Their stories neither revealed any overcoming of impairment nor suggested the presence of a benevolent state that cared for its most vulnerable subjects.

In this article, I analyze the gap between the narrative of care proposed by Soviet experts such as Zankov and the actual functioning of special education for mentally retarded children living in Soviet institutions. My analysis confirms the argument that historians of Stalinism have advanced in relation to other areas of Soviet welfare, health, and education. David Hoffmann, Catriona Kelly, Mark Edele, and Beate Fieseler, for instance, have shown that the Soviet rhetoric of “care” (zabota) fulfilled important ideological functions because it touted the humanity of the socialist system in contrast to both the tsarist regime and capitalist societies. However, this rhetoric very rarely materialized into reality due to the constant dearth of financial resources, lack of trained personnel, and bureaucratic malfunctioning. These scholars have provided
insightful discussions of the disconnect between ideologized narratives and the lived realities of children, veterans, and adults with physical disabilities. Here, I contribute to this historiography by arguing that the case of mentally retarded children in the years of prewar Stalinism, more than other vulnerable groups of Soviet society and other time periods, adds a new dimension to our understanding of the Soviet system and ideology of care. This case study sharply reveals that at the roots of the gap between rhetoric and reality were not only material conditions, but also a notion of labor that departed from its original emancipatory ideals and, in the end, reduced all human worth to the ability to perform productively.

The period from the late 1920s to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1941 was a distinct era for the Soviet equivalent of special needs education, a discipline known in Russia as defectology (defektologiia). Not only did Stalinist defectology include an ideological framing (as in fact did any other scientific and humanist discipline of the time), but it also incorporated into its long-standing narrative of care specific meanings that were crucial to the emerging Stalinist worldview. In particular, the Soviet defectologists of the 1930s advanced a concept of successful rehabilitation that emphasized not so much the defects of their charges but the defect overcome. This notion of defectology as a project of positive correction and integration expressed the official optimism of the Stalinist 1930s because it closely paralleled the broader rhetoric of the “triumphant” construction of socialism (pobedivshii sotsializm), while also providing concrete examples of its many achievements. In addition, since mentally retarded children were presented as “the most oppressed and unhappy people” of both tsarism and capitalism, the fact that in the Soviet Union they could lead lives as “joyful and happy” as all the other citizens eminently signaled the effectiveness and the humanity of the Soviet system. At the historical conjunction
when official discourse declared that fairy tales had become reality, the question of whether
defectological ideals translated into the reality of children’s institutions— and why not—acquires particular relevance.

By first identifying the ideological meanings that leading defectologists of the 1930s wove into their narrative and then discussing how life in the institutions inverted this narrative, I show a paradox of Soviet care under Stalin. On one hand, the ideological mandate to turn defective children into integrated citizens performing useful jobs crucially informed defectology. On the other hand, the reduction of children’s worth to their productive abilities provided the most serious limit of the Soviet ideology of care. Labor was at the same time a means of rehabilitation, a sign of integration, and a reason for exclusion.

Soviet Defectology in Its Historical Context

The equation between human value and performativity was certainly not unique to the Soviet Union. Scholar of disability studies C. F. Goodey has argued that in all societies that presumed themselves to follow Enlightenment ideals of rationality and put a premium on intelligence, people with learning disabilities represent an “extreme out-group”— too different and dangerous to be truly included. Historically, children with intellectual difficulties have been seen not as acceptable forms of human variation but as defectives that needed to be corrected or, more frequently, excluded from the society of the “normals.” Yet, in the Soviet Union, visions of disabled children’s worth (or lack thereof) had specific ideological nuances and practical outcomes that were closely related to the development of the discipline of defectology over the
first half of the twentieth century. A brief review of these developments is crucial to understanding the specificity of the Stalinist context.

Defectology emerged in late tsarist Russia as a science that strove to correct children’s physical, mental, and moral defects through a combination of medical and pedagogical interventions. It was part of a wider “child study” movement that attracted specialists from a diverse range of fields, such as psychiatry, psychology, pedagogy, and medicine. In addition, defectology was closely associated with pedology (pedologiia)—a prominent discipline of the time devoted to children’s socialization but interested in both normal and defective children. After 1917, the new revolutionary state enthusiastically took up defectology, as its approach seemed to provide an effective means to deal with the devastating consequences that the First World War, the Revolution, and the Civil War had on the Soviet minor population. Strongly believing in mankind’s ability to transform itself if put in the correct socioeconomic conditions, the Bolsheviks were well disposed toward a science that promised to achieve defective children’s transformation into socially fit citizens. As Andy Byford has argued, the years between 1917 and 1924 were a time of “struggles,” when defectology articulated the crisis of Soviet society and defective children were embodiments of all the pathological that the Bolsheviks hoped to fix within their society. Children with physical and intellectual disabilities as well as homeless vagrants and minor criminals were not blamed for their handicaps and misbehaviors, but rather seen as the victims of an unhealthy environment and the objects of a modern and scientific project of transformation.

To help defectology achieve its pedagogical and therapeutic goals, the early Soviet regime decided to abolish all charitable societies and turn the protection of defective children
into the exclusive responsibility of the socialist state and its multiple agencies of governance.¹⁴

In particular, with the normalization of Soviet life in the mid-1920s, the majority of mentally
retarded children were sent to auxiliary schools (vspomogatel’nye shkoly) managed by the
Commissariat of Education, while only seriously deficient children who also required medical
therapy were to live in the facilities of the Commissariat of Health. Of course, a neat distribution
according to diagnosis was rarely the reality of how children were institutionalized. Often,
feebleminded children drifted in colonies for moral defectives or ended up in the pediatric wards
of psychiatric hospitals. At least in principle, however, the Commissariat of Education held
jurisdiction over most mentally retarded children.¹⁵

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, a series of changes in the economic, political, and
social life of the country affected defectology too and prepared the ground for a new phase in the
history of this discipline. First, the introduction of the Five-Year-Plan economy in 1928 and the
growing need to prepare for war throughout the 1930s made fitness for labor and productivity
paramount across Soviet society. In administrative terms, the new productivist ethos began
affecting special education in 1931–32, when the Collegium of the Russian Commissariat of
Education decided to turn the five-year-long program of its auxiliary schools into an “auxiliary
factory-and-workshop seven-year-long program.” As the new name revealed, the focus of special
education was now to be on technical training, but the Commissariat of Education was still
responsible for it. From a conceptual perspective, the new economic processes compelled the
defectologists to introduce a new emphasis on job training and employability while also
maintaining the importance of holistic approaches to children’s educational and psychological
needs.¹⁶
Second, in the 1930s, the Stalinization of science imposed stricter ideological constrains on all disciplines, and several branches of knowledge began to be repressed. Pedology, for instance, “had been supported by the Bolshevik political elite throughout the 1920s as a framework for all research related to children and . . . entrusted with managing the process of the state’s implementation of universal education.”17 In 1936, however, it was denounced as a “bourgeois deviation” that produced an overtly negative appraisal of Soviet children. Pedological research centers were closed down and, as a way to purge the Commissariat of Education of its mistakes, the management of institutions for the correction of defective children was moved to the Commissariat of Social Assistance.18 Already in May 1935, the directive of the Council of People’s Commissars and Central Committee of the Communist Party, “On the Liquidation of Child Orphanhood and Abandonment,” strongly involved the Commissariat of Social Assistance in the care of both physically and mentally defective children. This agency was now put in charge of a network of facilities including three different types of homes: for children with impairments in their mobility (but not for the blind and deaf, who continued to be under the aegis of the Commissariat of Education), for mentally defective children who were still able to work, and for children who were completely unable to work. Depending on the evaluations made by a special commission of the local section of the Commissariat of Social Assistance, the latter group of children could also be sent to colonies for “chronically insane” managed by the Commissariat of Health. Only minors diagnosed with very light forms of mental retardation were to remain in the auxiliary schools of the Commissariat of Education.19 This restructured network of facilities had the official task to provide all defective children with both education and job training. However, the new division of labor among commissariats clearly reflected a shift of
importance from the former to the latter. The primacy of vocational training would be confirmed in September 1949 by a directive of Aleksei Sukhov, minister of social assistance.²⁰

Last but not least, the Constitution of 1936 proclaimed socialism achieved. The Soviet Union was said to have laid the foundations of communism, life had allegedly become more joyful, and the environment could no longer be considered the primary cause of children’s impairments and psychological disturbances. In contrast with the preceding decade, in the 1930s defective children could not possibly be the victims of external factors because Soviet society was no longer in crisis. In this context, proper Soviet subjectivity required adherence to rigid norms of able-bodiedness, rationality, and discipline, while all people who deviated from these features were suspected of political unreliability. For instance, disabled men and women without a job and regular housing were equated to parasitic elements and harshly harassed by the Soviet police.²¹ Out-of-mainstream children, who in the 1920s were called “morally defective” and seen as redeemable, now appeared to contradict official claims about an ideal, “happy Soviet childhood.” It was largely to preserve those claims that many undisciplined and recalcitrant children began to be labeled as delinquents and given criminal convictions.²²

At the same time, entitlement to state care continued to be granted to children with concrete bodily handicaps and forms of mental retardation. Concerning the latter group, researchers in defectology gravitated around two major centers—the Moscow State Pedagogical and Defectological Institute and the Institute of Defectology of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the Russian Federation. Each of them issued textbooks for practicing defectologists and other specialized publications. It is to these writings as well as to documents intended for internal circulation within the Commissariat of Social Assistance that I turn in the following
section to analyze the ways in which the defectological narrative of the Stalinist years foregrounded the triumphant overcoming of defect. This was a narrative targeted at state authorities in various commissariats in order to guarantee the discipline’s survival, but also at other experts in an effort of professional self-justification. Ordinary citizens do not appear to have been the intended audience, and the role that mentally defective children played in the state’s self-representation to the masses—in the media as well as in films and works of literary fiction—still needs to be analyzed.23

The Defectological Narrative and Its Ideological Meaning under Stalin

The defectologists’ very definition of mental retardation was part of their narrative of defect overcome. This was achieved through the notion of development and the use of a developmental atypicality model or developmental deficit model that were based on inherent individual delays and phases of educational progress. Terms such as “oligophrenie” (oligofreniia), “mental retardation” (umstvennaia otstalost’), and “feeblemindedness” (slaboumie) were largely used as synonyms to indicate “atypical mental development” or “incomplete development of complex forms of mental activity,” which mostly derived from impairments of the central nervous and endocrine systems.24 Other definitions were less clinical and preferred instead to emphasize pedagogical observation and failure in school as the main qualitative threshold to diagnose mental retardation. But they too used the notion of development. According to the well-known defectologist Lev Vygotskii, mentally retarded children were boys and girls who “stayed behind in their development” and proved “unable” to complete school assignments and study in regular
schools “in step” with the other children. Special education in other modern societies had similarly introduced development and temporality to separate feebleminded children from “normal” boys and girls. Indeed, as historian Murray Simpson has suggested, this discourse (and the system of special education informed by it) gained momentum in the Western world precisely after the passage of compulsory education laws, when teachers began to view children with learning disabilities as hindrances to their success as educators. In the Soviet Union too, as Byford has indicated, it was when mass education became better organized that the boundary between regular and special schools (i.e., normal and defective children) became more rigid than what had been in the initial years of educational experimentation. Under Stalin, however, the construction of mental retardation as a developmental impairment also had specific ideological meanings. First, there was an ideological purpose to the replacement of external factors with inherent individual delays in development as the frame of reference for the category of mental retardation, namely, to reflect the official discourse that the environmental conditions of Stalinism could not possibly cause defects. When environmental sources—such as mothers’ overwork during pregnancy or their consumption of alcohol—were identified for the sake of scientific rigor in etiology, they were always located “abroad” or in “pre-revolutionary times,” but never at the time of “the achievements of the first and second Five-Year-Plans.” Second, development was meant to suggest that although the causes of mental retardation were internal, this defect could still be corrected through expert intervention.

Thus defined in a manner that closely reflected educational reforms and ideological changes in Soviet life, mental retardation could symptomatically manifest itself in either cognitive or emotional and behavioral problems, but most frequently it was revealed by a
heterogeneous combination of all of them. For instance, a characteristic feature of mentally retarded children was considered to be the presence of pathological traits in their “emotional-characterial sphere.” These could include too much “unorganized intellectual energy” and “elevated agitation,” or, on the opposite end, complete inertia, difficulty in developing interest, and lack of motivation—all features that interfered with children’s work habits and capacity to focus on schoolwork. At other times, mentally retarded children had difficulty understanding concepts and articulated their thoughts illogically, incompletely, unclearly, and superficially. In addition, while their senses (especially their sight and hearing) were the same as those of normal children, the mentally retarded lacked a good sense of observation. As the defectologist M. F. Gnezdilov explained, these children looked without seeing and heard but did not listen. Having mechanic and incomplete perceptions of the outside world, mentally retarded children could not make sense of what they came in contact with. Finally, their body too was believed to be pathological, as these children were found to have abnormalities in their height, weight, and motor abilities.

The three-level division by which the defectologists grouped children according to the severity of their defects was also constructed around developmental delays in intellectual, behavioral, and physiological aspects, and the extent to which they could be reduced. First, the idiots (idioty) were children whose development did not reach the stage of a two-year-old. These children were incapable of caring for themselves, let alone using tools of any kind. They could learn neither to speak nor to understand human speech or move autonomously. With defectological help, however, they still could learn to react to sounds, bright lights and colors, as well as moving objects. The second group included the imbeciles (imbetsily). Their development
corresponded to that of a normal child between two and seven years. These children had little propensity to engage in any autonomous or purposeful activity, and their speech remained defective throughout their lives. Through systematic exercises and extensive training, however, they could learn how to read and write. They could also acquire basic skills of daily self-care and even simple manual jobs, but they could not work and live independently. Last, the morons (debily or morony) had the lightest form of feeblemindedness. They could receive education but were characterized by slowness and their intellect remained similar to that of a normal twelve-year-old child. The American Association for the Study of the Feeble-Minded had proposed the same tripartite scheme in 1910, but it had identified only morons as able to benefit from education. The Soviet defectologists, instead, claimed for their discipline the capacity to at least reduce—and in some cases even fully correct—the behavioral and intellectual defects of all retarded children.

Indeed, the statement that all children—not only the physically impaired, but also the imbecile and idiotic—should be provided with some elementary education was a crucial point in the defectological narrative developed after the 1935 reform. For instance, in its guidelines to the directors and teachers of the facilities of the Commissariat of Social Assistance, a Scientific-Methodological Cabinet composed of physiologists, psychiatrists, and defectologists insisted on universal and individualized education. This meant that while all children should receive education, curricula should be specific to each child and his or her specific needs. In the homes for physically disabled, the school program was supposed to follow the recommendations of the Commissariat of Education and cover the material normally studied in regular elementary and middle schools. In the homes for idiots, instructors should teach basic habits of hygiene and
personal health, while in the homes for imbeciles teachers were supposed to adopt a five-year
school program specifically drafted by the Commissariat of Social Assistance. According to the
latter program, schoolwork began when children were eight years old and continued until they
were twelve. Afterward, children would receive specialized training in industrial workshops and
agricultural enterprises for two hours a day until they turned sixteen and would be hired into the
local economy. Similarly, in a 1940 draft article on the education of mentally retarded children,
defectologists Grachev and Zubrilin required that all homes of the Commissariat of Social
Assistance work on correcting children’s “mental and physical shortcomings” and “developing
all aspects of the child’s personality.”

The defectologists strove to embed “correctional-educational” objectives in all facets of
children’s life in the institution, while also emphasizing that each activity should make mentally
defective children feel pleasure, satisfaction, and creativity. Clearly incorporating the notion and
specific semantics of “the happy Soviet childhood” into the defectological narrative, one expert
wrote, “Technical activities that are interesting to the children and proportionate to their
strengths turn the childhood of our children into something emotionally rich, creative, and
joyful.” Children’s inclinations and desires were not to be opposed but rather harnessed in the
process of correction. As Zankov explained, the teacher should pay attention to the child’s
“interests, demands, and needs” and note the specific ways in which each child perceives the
surrounding world. Natural science classes and empirical experiments were particularly
important in this context as they “sharpen[ed] the senses of children with serious mental
retardation, direct[ed] their attention to the world around them, develop[ed] their observational
skills, and reinforce[d] their awareness.” Extracurricular activities were crucial too. These had
to be varied and appropriated to the level of a child’s impairment. They included playing chess, setting up theatrical performances, playing musical instruments, building toys and miniature models, gardening, and visiting local clubs, reading rooms, and radio stations.

In the end, the aim of defectological education was double: first, defectology guaranteed children’s development to their full potential and in all realms of their personality; second, it turned them as much as possible into “socially fit” citizens with the ability to perform useful work (a goal that in the Soviet Union applied to the education of the normals too). The two goals were closely intertwined, and in fact, achieving the first largely entailed pursuing the second. As the defectologist F. D. Zabugin explained in a 1928 essay, “By receiving knowledge and socially-useful skills that are commensurate to their strengths and capabilities, [mentally retarded] children will cease to be those . . . anti-social elements that . . . fill up the cadres of the delinquents and mentally ill.”42 Dmitrii I. Azbukin reiterated the point in his 1936 textbook on oligophrenie: while charitable assistance only humiliated mentally disabled children and diminished their human dignity, socially useful work emancipated them and provided them with real integration.43 It was by maximally raising defective children’s working capacity (trudosposobnost’) that they would not remain “invalids” for their entire lives, but find a job and thereby participate in the joyful working life of the Soviet collectivity.44

The ways in which Soviet defectology conceptualized physical labor as an instrument in the correction and integration of mentally retarded children betray both the progressive aspirations of this discipline and its new ideological trappings. Labor was a well-established component of Russian special education since the late nineteenth century.45 According to defectological wisdom, manual labor was particularly well suited to mentally retarded children
because it simultaneously released the positive creative energies hidden in their personality, made them physically stronger, and helped their spiritual development. Labor was not an end in itself but a means to expand children’s horizons and introduce new concepts to them. Together with physical exercise and play, it strengthened children’s will, improved their organizational skills and hygienic habits, and enhanced their mobility, agility, and sense of orientation. When conducted in groups, it cultivated proper social behavior and citizenship by encouraging discipline, sense of duty, and comradely solidarity. All these qualities allowed mentally retarded children to develop into “worthy” (polnotsennye) persons. Defectological books of the 1930s supported their claims about the healing power of labor by presenting emblematic success cases. For instance, Azbukin told the employment story of the seventeen-year-old girl B.N. who, upon completion of an auxiliary school, first received additional training in a textile factory and then found a job as weaver. B.N. was a Komsomol member and a shock worker as well as the recipient of multiple bonuses such as a bag and a stay at a health resort.

This idea of labor as a factor of emancipation aligned with the Marxist conception of humanity that lay at the foundations of the very Soviet project. On one hand, defectological theory upheld the scientific certainty that children with various types of impairments had potential for learning and social integration. On the other hand, Marxism rejected charity as a form of condescension that did not lead to emancipation. In its place, Marxist doctrine promoted labor as the only medicine that cured the social pain of invalidism in adults as well as in children. As historians Irina Sirotkina and Marina Kokorina have argued in relation to the mentally insane in the Soviet Union, “In the official mythology [work] became imbued with magic powers: an ability to improve, reform, and remodel both social life and the individual.” While the
defectological idea of corrigibility worked well with Marxist notions of individual happiness and social justice, Marxist views of charity and labor resonated with defectology’s emphasis on children’s capabilities. From a defectological perspective as well as from the standpoint of Marxist theory, the motivation for mentally retarded children’s vocational training was neither merely economic—to cut back the pension rolls and minimize social problems—nor exclusively humanitarian—to improve children’s chances of participation in society—but rather included significant aspects of both. As we will see in the next section, however, in the institutional setup of the children’s homes labor was rearticulated as an exclusive function of production, in which the demands of productivity outdid the idea of labor as a means of personal improvement.50

Finally, the defectologists of the 1930s took pains to integrate into their narrative of care one additional ideological component of the Stalinist worldview: the portrayal of defectology as a unique achievement of Soviet socialism. As leading experts averred, only in the Soviet Union did scientists reject inheritance-based explanations of mental retardation as an immutable condition; only in the Soviet Union did the state take upon itself full economic responsibility for the care of its most vulnerable populations; and only in the Soviet Union did the law mandate truly universal education, including the education of all mentally defective children.51 Certainly, the Soviet approach to children’s disabilities was more progressive than the eugenic models in vogue in many other countries in the interwar years. At its extreme, the view of mental deficiency as a financial burden and a social threat found implementation in Nazi Germany where state-sponsored special education was abolished and any deviation from the norm of human development gave ground for euthanasia. In less blatant ways, European countries that had introduced universal education since the early 1900s still excluded from it severely disabled
children who were deemed uneducable, providing them only with medical care and custodial housing.\textsuperscript{52} Despite its relative progressiveness and claim to uniqueness, however, the Soviet defectological approach to feebleminded children had not developed in isolation. It owed much to the French school of thought, especially to the theories and practices developed by Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, Édouard Séguin, and Alfred Binet.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, it fit with contemporary trends in the international expert community, which encouraged the use of labor as a didactic and therapeutic tool and promoted productivity in children with disabilities.\textsuperscript{54} This debt to foreign science was initially acknowledged by the Russian defectologists, but then became taboo in the mid-1930s. For instance, references to methods elaborated “abroad” appeared in a 1928 collection of essays edited by S. S. Tizanov and L. V. Zankov. Still in 1933, the defectologist Nikolai Konovalov devoted a relatively large space in his monograph \textit{Mentally-Retarded Children} to the discussion of special education in France, Belgium, Great Britain, and Weimar Germany.\textsuperscript{55} Tellingly, however, Konovalov’s book stopped being referenced in Soviet bibliographies on the topic of mental retardation published after 1936.\textsuperscript{56} Given this historical context, the affirmation of Soviet exceptionality in the care of defective children should be interpreted neither as a cynical propaganda device nor as a naïve belief in the optimal state of Soviet special education. Rather, it was another aspect of how defectology aligned itself with the official discourse of Stalinism. For this discipline to fulfill its ideological functions and support the claim of Soviet moral superiority, it was crucial to obscure any source of inspiration, any intellectual middle ground, and any precedent abroad.

Thus, defectology was presented both as a science of human improvement and as a sign of the Soviet state’s benevolence. This narrative was ideological in that the very existence of
defectology legitimized Soviet socialism as the answer to individual and social injustice. But its ideological significance was also in that this narrative warped a reality of social exclusion and marginalization. This aspect can be best gauged by focusing on how mentally disabled children were treated in the facilities of the Commissariat of Social Assistance.

The Reality of Institutional Care for Mentally Retarded Children

In their specialized publications, the defectologists claimed that the success stories they told were representative of the fate befalling all the graduates of auxiliary schools. However, they largely avoided giving precise information on how many feebleminded children lived in the Soviet Union and how many indeed graduated from these schools and turned into integrated citizens. Some statistics, although unreliable and incomplete, are instead offered in a few official decrees on defectological education as well as in the correspondence between individual school directors and the Commissariat of Social Assistance. In 1931, for instance, the Commissar of Education, Andrei Bubnov, wrote that 2 percent of all Russian school-aged children suffered from some form of mental retardation, with an additional 3 percent having both cognitive and physical impairments. If we believe official statistics indicating that the number of Russian children attending primary schools in 1931–32 was 13,082,353, then we can roughly estimate that between 260,000 and 655,000 children with cognitive disabilities lived in the Russian Federation. The official bulletin of the Commissariat of Education recognized that the Soviet regime reached out to less than 30 percent of this population. Table 1 includes additional data collected from archival and printed sources.
At first glance, these numbers seem to reveal that the 1935 jurisdictional passage from the Commissariat of Education to that of Social Assistance caused a significant reduction in the infrastructure available for the care of mentally retarded children. In fact, these numbers obscure an important point. While in 1927 the facilities managed by the Commissariat of Education included both fifty open-doors auxiliary schools (serving 7,354 students) and thirty boarding schools (with a total of 2,701 students), in 1937 and 1940 all the facilities of the Commissariat of Social Assistance were residential.60 A better comparison would juxtapose the 2,701 mentally retarded children institutionalized by the Commissariat of Education in 1927 to the same group of children residing in the homes of the Commissariat of Social Assistance in 1937 or 1940.

Table 1. The Care for Mentally Retarded Children in the Russian Federation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Facilities</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3,442\textsuperscript{a}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>10,855\textsuperscript{b}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>34 (+10 with mixed population)</td>
<td>n/a\textsuperscript{c}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>40 (+18 with mixed population)</td>
<td>n/a\textsuperscript{d}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “Mixed population” indicates a cohort of both mentally and physically defective children.

\textsuperscript{a} Khananii S. Zamskii, \textit{Umstvenno-otstalye deti. Istoriiia ih izucheniiia, vospitaniiia i obucheniiia s drevnikh vremen do serediny XX veka} (Moscow: Akademiia, 1995), 302.
\textsuperscript{b} \textit{Vsesoiuznaia shkol’naia perepis’}, 15 dekabria 1927 goda, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Moscow: Gosplanizdat, 1930), 472. These statistics excluded the autonomous republics on the territory of the Russian Federation. For the entire Soviet Union, the number of children attending schools for defectives included 4,336 “difficult to raise,” 11,398 “mentally retarded,” and 6,017 “physically defective.”
\textsuperscript{c} Kh. D. Slobodianskii and K. S. Zubrilin, \textit{Organizatsiia detskikh domov v sisteme sotsial’nogo obespecheniia} (Moscow: Steklorg NKPS, 1937), 19.
\textsuperscript{d} Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federtsi, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 46–59 and 63–79. An additional 29 facilities were devoted exclusively to the care of physically disabled children.
Unfortunately, we do not have that number. All we know is that around 15,000 children (55 percent of which were orphans) had “moved through” the homes of the Commissariat of Social Assistance between 1935 and 1940, and 7,563 physically and mentally defective children were stably living in them in January 1940.  

Besides providing statistics, the reports drafted by individual school directors also indicate that the reality of children’s lives within their facilities were very different from the narrative of defects overcome advanced by the defectologists. The homes of the Commissariat of Social Assistance did not fulfill their responsibilities of improving the health of feebleminded children, giving them good nutrition and attentive care, “developing all aspects of [their] personality,” and making them feel happy.

A first set of problems was of a financial nature. These institutions were an item in the oblast-level budgets of the Commissariat of Social Assistance and as such were supposed to be funded by the provincial sections of this Commissariat in line with the norms set by the central administration in Moscow. The provision of household objects, instead, was the responsibility of centralized funds and occurred through a subdepartment of the Commissariat of Social Assistance called Rosglavsnab. Finally, food had to be distributed by local agencies such as chambers of commerce and consumers’ cooperatives. Provincial homes for mentally retarded children, however, received funds with great delays and never in the promised amount. In particular, the provision of food happened irregularly and many facilities survived exclusively thanks to their own vegetable gardens. Of course, this had an impact not only on children’s education, but above all on their health. In addition, most homes for mentally retarded were located in old, inadequate buildings that desperately needed to be restored, adapted to the needs
of disabled children, and equipped with new appliances and furniture. In 1939, for instance, it was a luxury for any facility of the Commissariat of Social Assistance to have running water and proper canalization. According to several reports dated 1946, things became even worse after the war.

A second key issue was the notorious personnel problem typical of all Soviet institutions. There simply were neither enough doctors nor enough teachers with adequate professional knowledge. Yet, what stands out in the case of mentally retarded children is that the personnel did not know the children sufficiently well to individuate their treatment. Contrary to the defectological principle that teachers needed to study each child individually in order to provide the best correctional pedagogy, the defectologist Zabugin recognized that the homes’ personnel “does not know the children well, and for this reason can neither give precise and correct advice nor teach proper skills.” As the Commissar of Social Assistance, Anastasiia Grishakova, remarked in 1940, the personnel were unable “to employ an individualized approach to each child and cultivate in them the habits of socialist behavior.” “Random, unreferenced people,” continued Grishakova, “are often invited to assume managerial responsibilities.” while the young graduates of the most prestigious pedagogical institutes did not want to work in the homes for mentally retarded children. In 1948, a report on the state of special education in the Russian Federation calculated that 18 percent of the teachers working in these institutions had only an elementary education, 44 percent had a middle school education, and only 38 percent had a higher education. In addition, while feebleminded children were believed to require medical therapies that strengthened their nervous systems, very few homes could guarantee this type of treatment. In 1939–40, only fifty homes for defective children (out of eighty-seven) had a doctor
at their disposal. In 1948, the Commissariat of Social Assistance reported that there were only six doctors in the entire Russian Republic working for its homes, while fifteen other doctors offered their help without being part of the homes’ salaried staff.

The heterogeneous contingent of children put under the care of the Commissariat of Social Assistance after 1935 created problems as well. Despite official guidelines, children with mental dysfunctions, who were dangerous to themselves and their peers and who required constant supervision and medical care, were often sent to the homes of Commissariat of Social Assistance instead of the clinics of the Commissariat of Health. Furthermore, children recognized as “slightly retarded”—and in principle destined to the auxiliary schools of the Commissariat of Education—lived side by side with children deemed “seriously retarded.”

The Morshansk agricultural colony in Orel province is a clear example of how the distribution of children occurred in reality. In 1935, there were forty-six children living in this colony: twenty-seven of them were simply “neglected” (beznadzornye), while the other nineteen were orphans who had lived in the infamous Moscow neighborhood Sukharevka and mingled with the local criminal world. Despite the colony’s designation as a facility for physically impaired children, nine of its forty-six inmates had both physical and cognitive defects. Similarly, in the mid-1940s, the homes for mentally retarded children in the Siberian cities of Cheliabinsk and Tiumen’ hosted both physically and mentally defective children. This meant that the same didactic programs and textbooks were adopted for children with very different forms of disability—a fact that definitely overturned the defectological precept of individualized education.
Even more problematically, the directors and teaching personnel of these homes focused all their efforts on the practical goal of finding employment for their wards. They identified job placement (*trudoustroistvo*) as the ultimate purpose of their institutions and sought to teach children only useful working skills such as making bags, fixing shoes, sewing, knitting, and (for the most seriously retarded) performing simple agricultural work. This unilateral workfare focus was a problem both because of its ineffectiveness and because it inverted the defectological narrative of care by privileging the demands of the local economy over the interests of each child.

In terms of outcomes, a remarkably low number of teenagers with learning disabilities were hired into the Soviet economy. For instance, in 1939, the Commissariat of Social Assistance reported that it had found jobs for only around 300 among its contingent of sixteen-year-old mentally retarded children, while it had moved 691 of them either under the care of their parents or to homes for disabled adults and psychiatric colonies.74 Similarly, in 1940, 282 disabled teenagers were reported as either employed or continuing to study, while 465 mentally retarded sixteen-year-olds could not be placed on any job and ended up in invalids’ homes for adults (284), back with their parents (163), in the children’s homes of the Commissariat of Education (16), and in psychiatric colonies (2).75 Local enterprise managers disregarded the quotas of disabled youth that they were required to employ each year. Factory directors were reluctant to set up proper living and working conditions to accommodate disabled teenagers’ needs. Especially in the years between 1935 and 1940, enterprise managers concerned with meeting production requirements and military needs imposed a tough schedule on all their
workers. As a result, even when young disabled people had jobs, they frequently found themselves compelled to leave the factories.\textsuperscript{76}

As concerns the defectological goals of holistic correction and integration, the home directors’ approach thoroughly rearticulated the notion of labor put forward in them. This is most clearly revealed by a debate that involved a group of social workers, teachers, and administrators at a 1939 Meeting of Directors of Homes and Schools for Disabled Children. In this venue, the chair of the Scientific-Methodological Cabinet K. S. Zubrilin openly accused the authorities of not paying due attention to defective children and not fulfilling the promise of full employment. He claimed that although children’s “insufficiencies” definitely slowed down the educational process, the biggest “insufficiency” was located not in the children themselves but in the environment. More specifically, continued Zubrilin, it was the state’s inability to provide jobs to all its citizens that impeded the full social integration of mentally retarded children. This type of explicit criticism and reference to the environment as a cause of defects was rare in the Soviet Union of the late 1930s and definitely testifies to Zubrilin’s profound concern for feebleminded children. However, the only solution to it he could propose was to tie vocational training even more closely to the job opportunities realistically available to disabled teenagers.\textsuperscript{77} While this approach was a function of the institutional setup for this event (a meeting occurring under the aegis of the Commissariats of Health or Education might have shown less concern for issues of employment), it nonetheless reveals a significant reversal of the defectologists’ aspirations. Namely, that those in charge of governing defective children’s lives were inescapably bound to a discourse of job placement in which fitness for productivity became paramount and labor lost all its rehabilitative and emancipatory meaning.
Zubrilin was not the only speaker at this meeting to prioritize the question of productivity understood as the performance of paid work and the likelihood of future self-support. A man called Shakhalevich argued that each student should be assigned a job beforehand depending on the demands of the local economy and then simply be trained for it. 78 “To which jobs can we direct these children?” asked the social worker Popov and immediately answered his own question with a mystifying statement: “to those jobs where they can make good money.” Any other approach to the education of feebleminded children would mean squandering a “colossal amount of money.” 79 As a certain Kliuev echoed, “Our children end up where they are not supposed to go. Part of the financial means invested in them is wasted.” 80 Even though director Sokolov admitted that children might have their specific desires, he also insisted that the homes of the Commissariat of Social Assistance should encourage only those interests that have relevance to the Soviet economy. 81 All agreed that the crucial factor in shaping education policies toward mentally retarded children should be nothing else than the demands of local industry and agriculture.

Most strikingly, the social worker Priobrazhenskaia made a proposal that turned defectology’s narrative of special education completely on its head. Rather than thinking about the needs that each child had in relation to his or her specific condition, Priobrazhenskaia recommended to categorize children by the degree of their remaining labor capacity. In other words, Priobrazhenskaia proposed to apply to children the same definition and categorization of “invalidity” that the Commissariat of Social Assistance used for adults with impairments when it determined their entitlement to pensions and benefits. 82 While Vygotskii had argued that the education of mentally retarded children was more difficult than that of blind and deaf children
because it required “a qualitative change in the very content of the didactic work.”

Priobrazhenskaia suggested that children diagnosed with idiocy receive the same education as children with sensory and mobility impairments. The only discriminating variable should be the child’s remaining capacity to perform labor.

For children themselves, this rearticulation of the defectological—and Marxist—narrative of labor had complicated effects. For instance, social worker Beraia proudly stated that all disabled children “can be used in production,” Popov echoed that “they can be qualified workers,” and Shakhalevich gave examples of mentally defective children who successfully found employment in industrial production and enjoyed the “affection” of their able-bodied coworkers. These statements strove to dispel prejudice and mistrust in the capacities of this social group. They also denounced isolating social policies as backward. In fact, by arguing that mentally retarded children could overcome helplessness, Soviet social workers in theory enabled these children and entitled them to reap off the benefits of life in a Soviet working collective, including housing, food, and socialization. However, their narrow workfare approach ended up ignoring all the forms of social, mental, and emotional development as well as the noneconomic parameters of quality of life that were touted in the defectological narrative. Labor turned into a vehicle of exclusion because it compelled feebleminded children to perform as well as normal children in order to acquire worth.

The defectologist Lev Vygotskii wrote that “humanity will one day win over blindness, deafness, and feeblemindedness. But it will defeat them much faster socially and pedagogically than medically and biologically.” This statement reflected the utopian desire to overcome the
limitations of being human by eliminating the bodily impairments and mental dysfunctions that intimate vulnerability and mortality. Far from being suddenly imposed by Bolshevik ideology, this desire existed already in late imperial Russia as well as in other modernizing European states. However, after 1917, the Bolsheviks made the discipline that captured this desire into an officially recognized field of knowledge and an important component of the socialist state’s welfare system. As opposed to other scientists and experts worldwide, Soviet defectologists rejected purely biological methods to “defeating” or “overcoming” mental retardation and argued instead for the importance of pedagogy and social policy.

While the “social” premises of defectology played a positive role in the development of special education in the Soviet Union, they also brought politics to the fore and opened the doors to politicized interpretations of mentally retarded children. In the 1920s, as Andy Byford has written, “both the diagnostics of trauma and the therapeutics of healing, rehabilitation, and resocialization” were “enactments of a normative regime in crisis.”89 In addition, as “the young Soviet state” was struggling to “raise the country’s educational levels, . . . the norms—developmental and educational—through which this new schoolchild population was to be framed, were still in flux.”90 In contrast, in the 1930s, definitions and classifications of mental retardation stopped presenting external events and experiences as sources of disruption in children’s development. In the conditions of socialist construction and triumphant Stalinism, the treatment of defective children was presented as a reflection of the medical and educational advancements of Soviet socialism. At the same time, the standards of normativity were reduced to productive fitness and the opportunities for reimaging the biological and psychological parameters of humanity significantly shrank.91
The context of the Stalinist 1930s informed not only the ways in which defectologists discussed diagnostics and treatment but also the actual functioning of special education in the Soviet institutions of care. When we move away from the research centers of Moscow and Leningrad, we see that there was deep despair among Soviet social workers in the face of their continuing failure to have much of an impact on the lives of feebleminded children. In particular, the efforts of the Commissariat of Social Assistance to integrate these children through job placement often had the opposite results. Constrained as they were not only by scarce material and human resources but also by the productivist ethos of the Five-Year Plans, the need to prepare for war, and deep-rooted prejudices toward disability, this agency’s endeavors in the end strengthened the stigmatization and marginalization of defective children, thus inverting the narrative advanced by the defectologists. School directors and teachers merged the notions of labor/rehabilitation and labor/exclusion in very ambiguous ways. Labor lost its—Marxist and defectological—emancipatory value; children’s worth was reduced to their productivity; and those unfit to perform useful jobs were barred from the benefits of Soviet life.

As Catherine Kudlick has argued in her groundbreaking article, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other,’” case studies of people with disabilities and the primary source documentation that they generate greatly enhance our understanding not only of notions of professional authority and medical practice, but also of ideas of citizenship, social order, human difference, and progress. Exploring the complex interplay of defectological representations of mental retardation, state policies toward defective children, and the specific conditions of prewar Stalinism, this article has shed light on some of these themes in a key period in Soviet history. Specifically, I have shown that at a time of triumphant socialist construction but also stricter
ideological demands on the professions, both state leaders and defectological experts asked boys and girls with learning disabilities to overcome their impairments and become integral members of the Soviet collective. Yet they rarely put children in the conditions to fulfill this call. When defectology proved unsuccessful, defective children were relegated to the side: warehoused in old people’s homes or sent back to their parents. Defectological textbooks obscured the failures of the reeducation actually practiced in Soviet institutions because this was the only way to preserve the claim that their discipline provided a successful approach to human vulnerability.

I would like to thank the editors of the Bulletin of the History of Medicine and the anonymous reviewers who provided crucial feedback on this article. Earlier versions were presented at the conference “Conceptual Foundations of Soviet Educational Policies” (Russian Presidential Academy for National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow, 6–September 26–27, 2014) and at a public talk at the College of William & Mary in September 2017. I am particularly grateful to Maria Maiofis, Ilia Kukulin, and all the other participants for their questions, comments, and constructive criticism. Research was assisted by a fellowship from the International Dissertation Research Fellowship Program of the Social Science Research Council with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.


2 Ibid., 3.

3 Ibid., 3.

4 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federtsiyi (hereafter GARF), f. 413, o. 1, d. 219, l. 5.

5 Children with learning disabilities were labeled as “mentally retarded” or “feebleminded” in most countries until the 1970s. Aware of the derogatory valence of these labels to our contemporary ears, in this article I chose to use them because they are the historically specific terms used in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and reveal the sensibilities of the historical actors who employed them. When I refer to the larger group of children with disabilities, I use


7 Document written by the social worker A. P. Grachev around 1939–41 (GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 64–65). See also the report on a children’s home in Zadonsk province written by its director A. P. Rybakova in 1941 (GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, l. 88); and Evgenii N. Medynskii, *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR* (Moscow: Izd-vo Akad. Ped. Nauk RSFSR, 1952), 134–35.

33


12 Byford, “Trauma and Pathology” (n. 9).

13 See, for instance, *Detskaia defektivnost’, prestupnost’, i besprizornost’. Po materialam 1-go vserossiiskogo s’ezda 1920 g.* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1922). See also Byford, “Imperfect Child” (n. 9), 605 and “*Lechebnaia Pedagogika*” (n. 9), 77.


16 Zamskii, Umstvenno-oststalye deti (n. 15), 318–19.

17 Byford, “Trauma and Pathology” (n. 9), 461.


20 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 131, ll. 1–6.

21 Galmarini-Kabala, *Right to Be Helped* (n. 14), chap. 5.


23 Besides the better-known story of Nikolai Ostrovskii’s hero Pavka Korchagin in the novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1934), one example of defectological triumphant overcoming that was spread to the larger masses is the case of Olga I. Skorokhodova. Skorokhodova was a blind and deaf woman who managed to achieve a full education and social integration thanks to the pedagogical help of the defectologist I. A. Sokolianskii. In her 1947 book *How I Perceive the World Around Me* (*Kak ia vospriminaiu okruzhaiushchii mir*), she argued that her life story showcased not only the achievements of the Soviet system of special education but also the unique humanity of Soviet socialism. The story of her correction and integration was often discussed in the Soviet press and praised for its superiority in comparison with the religious upbringing of her American counterpart, Helen Keller. Yet Skorokhodova was not born with
learning disabilities and became blind and deaf only at the age of five. On representations of the disabled to the masses see also Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov, “Heroes and Spongers: The Iconography of Disability in Soviet Posters and Film,” in Rasell and Iarskaia-Smirnova, *Disability in Eastern Europe* (n. 6), 67–96.

24 Quotations, respectively, from Dmitrii I. Azbukin, *Klinika oligofrenii* (Moscow: Uchpedgiz ‘Obraztsovaniia’, 1936), 4; and the entry “Oligofreniia,” in *Pedagogicheskaia Entsiklopediia*, ed. Ivan A. Kairov (Moscow: ‘Sov. Entsiklopediia’, 1964), 3:196–97, 196. This type of definition began appearing in works published in the late 1920s (see Zabugin, “Vspomogateliaia shkola” [n. 14]) and continued through the Soviet period (see Zankov, *O pedagogicheskom izuchenii* [n. 1], 142; and “Umstvenno-otstalye deti” [n. 19]).


27 Byford, “Trauma and Pathology” (n. 9) 460; Byford, “Imperfect Child” (n. 9), 607–13; and Byford, “Lechebnaia Pedagogika” (n. 9), 82.


29 Umstvenno-otstalye deti” (n. 19), 416.
Archive of the Russian Academy of Education (RAO), f. 113, d. 157, ll. 28–38. Program for the first grade of an auxiliary school.


Besides the sources referred to in notes 29–31, see also GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 219, ll. 54–55; and Azbukin, *Klinika oligofrenii* (n. 24), 11–33.

Vygotskii, “Uchrezhdeniia” (n. 25), 398.

Carey, *On the Margins of Citizenship* (n. 8); and Trent, *Inventing the Feeble Mind* (n. 5).

Azbukin, among others, insisted on this point throughout his monograph *Klinika oligofrenii* (n. 24). See 4, 10–11, 30, 70, 77, 85.

GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 219, ll. 20–22 and 30. See also Azbukin, *Klinika oligofrenii* (n. 24), 78–82.

GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 54–55, l. 72, and ll. 96–99; GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 107, l. 3 and l. 42.

GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 41–45.

GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 107, ll. 75–76. The motto “Thank You Comrade Stalin for Our Happy Childhood” was launched in 1936.

Zankov, *O pedagogicheskom izuchenii* (n. 1), 119.

GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 107, ll. 12–14.
42 Zabugin, “Vspomogatel’naia shkola” (n. 14), 133.

43 Azbukin, Klinika oligofrenii (n. 24), 73–77 and 79.

44 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, l. 85.

45 See Nikolai N. Malofeev, Spetsial’noe obrazovanie v meniaiushchemsia mire: Rossiia, vol. 1 (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 2010) and vol. 2 (n. 10).

46 RAO, f. 113, d. 101, l. 2.

47 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 107, ll. 74–82; and RAO, f. 113, d. 163, l. 1. Specifically on physical education, see RAO, f. 113, d. 163, l. 4. See also “Umstvenno otstalye deti,” in D’iachkov, Defektologicheski slovar’ (n. 19), 419.

48 Azbukin, Klinika oligofrenii (n. 24), 84.


50 As Larry Holmes has emphasized in relation to regular schools, this opposition between the demands of productivity and the emancipatory idea of labor shaped the educational reforms proposed by the Commissariat of Education throughout the 1920s. Due to various pressures exercised by the industrial branches of the government since the early 1920s, this Commissariat was always compelled to find ways to balance productivity and personal improvement in defining the role of labor in Soviet education. I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of this article for drawing my attention to this important part of the background. Larry E. Holmes,
The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917–1931


51 See, for instance, Azbukin, Klinika oligofrenii (n. 24), 37 and 54.


53 Simpson, Modernity and the Appearance of Idiocy (n. 26); Trent, Inventing the Feeble Mind (n. 5), 35–54.


See, for instance, the entry “Oligofreniia,” in Kairov, *Pedagogicheskaia Entsiklopediia* (n. 24).

Bubnov, “O vvedenii vseobshchego” (n. 15), 7.

*Kul’turnoe stroitel’stvo SSSR. Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moscow: Gosplanizdat, 1940), 40.


*Vsesoiuznaia shkol’naia perepis’, 15 dekabria 1927 goda*, vol. 1, part 1 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe planovokhoziaistvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1930), 472.

GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 46–59, 63–79.

GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 41–45.

Either the children’s parents or their closest relatives were asked to pay an admission fee and, in general, help out financially as much as they could. The fee depended on the family income. If
the disabled child came from a single-parent family whose income was less than seventy-five rubles a month, the fee was waived. Those parents who received either alimony from a former spouse or a state pension for the child were supposed to turn all this money over to the school. GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 73–74.

64 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 51–59.

65 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 843, ll. 6–6a, l. 7, l. 11, l. 14, l. 20, ll. 56–57, l. 64, l. 72, and ll. 75–76.

The homes for physically defective children seemed to fare better, especially when they happened to be located next to hospitals that served disabled veterans, such as in Tomsk province (GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 843, l. 55, dated August 1946). See also Malofeev, Spetsial’noe obrazovanie (n. 45), 2: 256. M. N. Gushchina has noted similar problems of financing and personnel in the facilities managed by the Commissariat of Education in the years before the war. See her “Deiatel’nost’ Narodnogo Komissariata Prosveshcheniia RSFSR v 1936–iune 1941 gg.” (Avtoreferat dissertatsii, Moscow, 2009).

66 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 23–24, dated 1939.

67 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 55–57.

68 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 843, ll. 22–24.

69 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 55–56.

70 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 843, ll. 22–24. The Iaroslavl’ home for mentally retarded children is a good example of this situation. See GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 843, l. 49, dated June 1946.

72 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, l. 86.

73 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 843, l. 64, ll. 69–71.

74 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 48–59.

75 GARF, f. 413, o. 1, d. 219, ll. 1–2. These numbers were self-reported by the Commissariat of Social Assistance. We do not have any additional sources to double-check them, and the only available comparator is the statement (also provided by this Commissariat) that 7,563 physically and mentally disabled children of all ages resided in its facilities in January 1940.


77 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 13–17.

78 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 19–20

79 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 21–22.

80 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 29–30.

81 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 27–29.


83 Vygotskii, “Uchrezhdeniia” (n. 25), 398.

84 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 25–26.

85 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, l. 18

86 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 21–22.

87 GARF f. 413, o. 1, d. 10, ll. 19–20. See also Sokolov’s intervention at ll. 27–29; and Zubrilin’s concluding remarks at ll. 35–36.

89 Byford, “Trauma and Pathology” (n. 9), 462.

90 Ibid., 465.

91 Only World War II would draw attention again to trauma and external conditions. This can be seen in particular in the case of so-called psychologically sick children, who around 1945 began to be diagnostically framed as victims of the war and the trauma it brought to the Soviet population. See Galmarini, “Moral’no defektivnyi” (n. 22).