

The Influence of Pedological Theories on the Social Integration of Arctic Minorities in the Early Soviet Era

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Abstract

My thesis explores the development and application of pedological theories in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, focusing on the social integration of Arctic minorities. Pedology, science of the child, aimed to transform “backward” children from national minorities into unified socialist society. The research investigates how the most relevant pedological theories, influenced by the ideological and political debates, intersected with educational practices aimed at small peoples of the Far North. The study analyzes the theoretical frameworks and their practical implementations. The findings indicate that while pedology aimed to provide a scientific basis for State modernizations initiatives, including the Far North, it was slowly disintegrating from the inside influencing the practical application by various reasons such as the lack of consistent methodology. Therefore, this study reveals significant gaps between theoretical ambitions and practical realities.

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List of Abbreviations

RSFSR – Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic

Narkompros – Commissariat of Enlightenment

Rabfak – Worker's faculty

Introduction

In the 1930s, the Soviet Union embarked on vast social experiments to forge a new social order, aiming to dismantle the existing “bourgeois” system. Children, embodying the revolutionary dreams and possibilities for profound change¹, were pivotal to these efforts. They were seen not only as symbols of the future but also as key to legitimizing the nascent socialist regime², making them central targets of social engineering.

During this transformative era, pedology — the study of children’s psychological and physical development within their social environments — gained prominence in the Soviet scientific and political landscape. It was driven by the ambition to mold the “new Soviet man,” a task deemed crucial for the homogeneous socialist society envisioned by Soviet leaders. This focus was particularly intense on children from national minorities in remote areas like the Soviet Arctic, who were perceived as the most “backward” and thus prime candidates for demonstrating the transformative power of socialism.³

These children, living in what were considered vestiges of “primordial communism,” were idealized by Soviet theorists who saw in their communal lifestyles the seeds of socialism. As such, they became the subjects of pedological studies and specialized educational programs designed to both preserve their “pure” socialist traits and integrate them into the broader Soviet society. These programs were steeped in Marxist-Leninist ideology, aiming to transform these children according to the theory of historical materialism.

However, the implementation of these initiatives was fraught with challenges and contradictions.

While the Soviet regime idealized the primitive communism of these small, isolated

¹ Kirschenbaum, L.A. *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2001., p. 2

² Hoffmann, L. *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914–1939*. Ithaca, 2011., p.22

³ Slezkine, Yuri. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Cornell University Press, 1994.

communities, it also aggressively pursued their cultural assimilation. This often led to the erosion of traditional lifestyles and cultural identities, placing pedological efforts at the crux of ideological ambition and practical reality. This tension highlighted the conflicting objectives: pedology sought to address each child's development with a nuanced approach, yet the state required the rapid and uniform assimilation of these children into the mass Soviet identity as swiftly as possible, at the same time bending its ideological line, which had to be conformed to. Moreover, sometimes pedology adopted a scientific language grounded in emphasizing the pathology and defects of these children⁴, which underscored their differences even further, compounding the complexities of integration.

This study is crucial for several scholarly and historical reasons. Firstly, pedology has not been extensively explored within the academic field. Although the discipline experienced a resurgence in the 1960s, leading to foundational contributions to modern child psychology, pedology, in general, remains a relatively under-researched area. This is especially true for the pedology of national minorities, which has been almost entirely excluded from academic discourse despite its significance in shaping Soviet attempt to design a unified mass society and its contribution in formulating a racial language of exclusion and classifications that was and still is largely mythologized behind the soviet official narratives⁵.

Considering this complex backdrop, this study aims to unravel the layers of influence that pedological theories and practices wielded over the social integration of Arctic minorities. It critically examines the interplay of race in shaping the pedological agenda. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the question: 'How did the pedological theories and practices developed

⁴ Byford, Andy. "Imperial Normativities and Sciences of the Child: The Politics of Development in the USSR, 1920s–1930s." *Ab Imperio*, 2016: 71-124

⁵ Mogilner, Marina. *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. Novoye Literaturnoye Obozrenie, 2008.

in the Soviet Union in the 1930s influence the social integration of Arctic minorities, and what role did the concept of “race” play in this process?’

The study is organized into two principal sections. The first section delves into the epistemological underpinnings showing the role northern national minorities considered the most “backward” group of RSFSR take in pedological theory. In the second section, I examine the empirical evidence surrounding the application and outcomes of pedological theories and education practices in the Soviet North.

Literature Review

My thesis explores the theme of pedology concerning national minorities, a topic that remains relatively neglected in academic research. Central to this study are the works of Andy Byford, particularly his 2020 book “Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia”⁶.

Byford's detailed analysis situates pedology within the intellectual currents of its time, offering a comprehensive view that no other works in the field match. His article, "Imperial Normativities and Sciences of the Child: The Politics of Development in the USSR, 1920s–1930s,"⁷ also serves as a critical resource, focusing specifically on the pedology of national minorities.

However, there are certain areas in Byford's research that he, due to the ambition and scope of his analysis, overlooks, only occasionally touching upon them without delving deeper. Although Byford acknowledges that pedology of national minorities was closely related to the concept of "race," he chooses not to explore the various scientific viewpoints associated with this concept, nor does he engage in the debate about the relationship between this concept and the scientific language of pedology. Consequently, Byford also decides to overlook the main reason for the disagreements in pedological theories, which is directly embedded in this racial language.

To construct this argument, I utilize the research of Marina Mogilner, whose academic focus lies on the study of this language⁸. In her equally ambitious research in physical anthropology, she

⁶ Byford, Andy. *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁷ Byford, Andy. "Imperial Normativities and Sciences of the Child: The Politics of Development in the USSR, 1920s–1930s." *Ab Imperio*, 2016: 71-124

⁸ Mogilner, Marina. *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. Novoye Literaturnoye Obozrenie, 2008.

seeks to find the reasons for the emergence of this language and its function within the social structure. Another important work on the topic of "race" in the post-imperial society is by Francine Hirsch⁹, who explores the politics of nation-building in early Soviet Union within the framework of its complex interaction with ethnographic science.

Byford also underexplores the relationship between pedology and the politics of enlightenment as a means of integration, although he provides an excellent theoretical framework for my own empirical analysis. In this regard, Slezkine's "Arctic Mirrors" ¹⁰becomes indispensable. Like Hirsch, he examines the role of ethnography in shaping imperial and Soviet practices. His work lacks the scientific component that other studies are rich in, though I would not say it is entirely absent. Rather, his work resembles a collection of political and everyday aspects of the interaction between the state apparatus and small peoples, which, however, somewhat humanizes science.

⁹ Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. 1st ed. Cornell University Press, 2005.

¹⁰ Slezkine, Yuri. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Cornell University Press, 1994

Chapter 1: Pedological Theories

1.1.General Context

The Russian revolution brought radical changes, affecting the foundations of political, economic, and social life in Soviet Russia. Following the turmoil of a devastating chain of wars, the nation found itself with a destroyed industrial base. McClelland writes that the devastation was so severe that even by the 1920s, the mines were unable to return to their initial production plans, producing only one-tenth of their pre-war output. The situation was exacerbated by the war's toll on most of the skilled industrial workers, resulting in leaving the country divided between a largely uneducated peasant majority¹¹ and a diverse array of national minorities, both groups lacking the technical and political expertise necessary to forge a strong, cohesive socialist state. At the same time, the threat of a new war with Europe was looming. The country needed to be rebuilt, and quickly – "We are 50-100 years behind the advanced countries. We must cover this distance in ten years. Either we do it, or we will be crushed," Stalin declared¹².

The Bolsheviks faced a daunting task — to transform the devastated and backward country with a post-imperial diverse population into a stable and homogeneous culture and mentality-wise socialist state, in line with trends of modernity, in the shortest possible time. This period in the history of the Soviet Union can be characterized as a time of massive experiments, during which the Bolsheviks sought the most effective techniques and methods of transforming and

¹¹ McClelland, James C. *The Utopian and the Heroic: Divergent Paths to the Communist Ideal*. Conference on The Origins of Soviet Culture, sponsored by the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, The Wilson Center, May 18-19, 1981., p. 118

¹² Stalin, Joseph. *On the Tasks of Economic Managers: Speech at the First All-Union Conference of Workers of Socialist Industry*. February 4, 1931. The quote was translated by me. Original: "Мы отстали от передовых стран на 50-100 лет. Мы должны пробежать это расстояние в десять лет. Либо мы сделаем это, либо нас сомнут"

developing society. In this process, the combination of a scientific approach with ideological tenets became defining in the Bolsheviks' strategy. Using science as a tool to achieve ideological goals allowed the Soviet government to formulate policies based on apparent objectivity and rationality, which in turn lent legitimacy to their reforms¹³.

One of the targets of early Soviet social engineering were children. They were considered the embodiment of the brighter future¹⁴. Still unspoiled by the bourgeois system, they were *tabula rasa* capable of realizing the ideals of the emerging socialist order. Such potential transformed them into a key to the nascent state legitimization¹⁵. As Kirschenbaum notes, children were seen as "real revolutionaries" in this sense¹⁶. The child in the minds of the Bolsheviks was eventually intended to grow into the "new Soviet man" - the image of the ideal mass Soviet citizen, forming a cornerstone of that very homogeneous societal structure that the government sought to achieve.

During this period, pedology came to the forefront as an interdisciplinary scientific movement aimed at defining the biopsychosocial laws and norms that govern the development of individual and mass children¹⁷, perfectly fitting into the intellectual and political context of the era. When promoted as a new scientific discipline, pedology was primarily positioned within the humanities, and like any humanity science of that time, it was focused on the "remaking" of human beings¹⁸. Pedology uncompromisingly believed in the plasticity of the human nature, thus in the potential for its transformation and development through specifically created conditions.

¹³ Byford, Andy. Introduction. *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. p. 19

¹⁴ Kirschenbaum, L.A. *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2001., p. 2

¹⁵ Hoffmann, L. *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939*. Ithaca, 2011., p. 22

¹⁶ Kirschenbaum, L.A. *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2001., p. 2

¹⁷ Byford, Andy. Introduction. *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. p. 2

¹⁸ Etkind, A. *Eros Of The Impossible: The History Of Psychoanalysis In Russia*. 1st ed. Routledge, 1997.

With such an approach, pedology quickly gained the state's favour, as it echoed the trends of modernization and Marxist ideology overall, providing a scientifically grounded method in the social engineering of the child population¹⁹.

Children from the most "backward" national minorities represented a special category in pedology, considered as a critical case to prove the principles of historical materialism and refute Western theories that emphasized heredity over environmental influences (nature vs. nurture debate). These children were seen as embodying the concept of the "primitive man," representing an early stage of social evolution in their progress towards a developed socialist state. As such, they served as a kind of experimental ground for pedological theories, viewed as extreme examples of the initial evolutionary stage of a society. The perspective was based on the notion that these children must rapidly pass through various stages of socio-cultural development, effectively skipping "entire historical periods"²⁰ to demonstrate the transformative power of the environment. This approach was rooted in the belief that, through targeted educational and social interventions, it was possible to accelerate their integration into the Soviet economic and ideological system. The state's motivation was to fast-track their development, showcasing the potential for rapid cultural and cognitive advancement and thereby validating the accuracy of Marxist theories on social evolution and the malleability of human nature under the right environmental conditions.

1.2. Pedological Theories

In theory, the goal of pedology was to determine how these children could be culturally and psychologically transformed into full-fledged members of the communist society as quickly as possible, by investigating which changes in their environment could lead to the most effective

¹⁹ Slezkine, Yuri. "The Fall of Soviet Ethnography, 1928-38." *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (1991)

²⁰ Ventskovsky. *Pedagogical Study of National Minorities, Prosveschenie Natsionalnostey*. 1930, no. 7-8 (1930): 98.

outcomes. This approach was intended to demonstrate that even the most "backward" groups could be quickly integrated and modernized, serving as a profound example of the potential for social transformation under the right conditions. However, the practical construction of these theories in relation to children from national minorities proved to be a complex task due to the ongoing debates concerning different theoretical paradigms to be applied.

As Byford highlights, the theoretical foundation of pedology can be divided into several main directions—biogenetics, sociogenetics, and Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, which transcends the bio-social dichotomy due to their synthesis.²¹ The bio-social dichotomy revolves around whether human development is based on biological "hereditary" laws or whether the social environment plays a larger role. It is also important to note that the understanding of "genetic" here differs from the common understanding of genetics in biology, which is associated with heredity and DNA. In this context, "genetic" refers to the process of development and emergence of human psychological and cognitive functions—that is, their genesis or developmental history. This approach in psychology and education means analysing how various psychological functions and abilities arise and develop over the course of a person's life. It suggests that to understand any psychological function, one must study how it was formed and changed over time—from the earliest stages of a child's development to maturity, which is precisely what pedology dealt with.

At the root of all Soviet development theories lies the foundational influence of Lamarckian thought. This interest was partly driven by criticism of Darwinian evolution, which many Soviet scientists and politicians believed was tainted by its association with Western capitalism and social Darwinism. This criticism often stemmed from the notion that Darwinism implicitly supported the status quo by promoting a form of biological determinism incompatible with the

²¹ Byford, Andy. Chapter 6. *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

transformative social program of the Bolsheviks. Lamarck's theories, revived in this context, provided a theoretical foundation more aligned with Marxist principles. Lamarckian evolution emphasized the ability of organisms to acquire and inherit traits through interaction with their environment, suggesting that changes could be imposed and inherited more rapidly than Darwinian natural selection would allow. This idea was particularly attractive in the Soviet context, where rapid industrialization and cultural transformation were deemed necessary for the state's survival and competitiveness on the global stage.

As noted by Francine Hirsch, this trend was influenced by "neo-Lamarckism,"²² which adapted Lamarck's ideas to modern scientific and ideological needs. Neo-Lamarckism posited that not only physical traits but also cultural and social characteristics could be altered and inherited through active environmental influence. Even so-called "primitive" states of society development could be overcome not through slow generational changes but through direct and immediate environmental modifications. For Soviet theorists and leaders, this theory resonated with the need for rapid education and integration of a vast, culturally diverse, and economically disparate population into the socialist project through targeted interventions. It was believed that the environmental conditions created by the socialist state—through education, propaganda, and social organization—could directly transform new generations into the "new Soviet man," ideally suited for life in the new social order.

Because of this Lamarckian base, even the biogenetic approach in the Soviet context was reframed through this lens to adopt a more environmental focus rather than concentrating primarily on hereditary factors. While Soviet biogenetics acknowledged the role of biological and genetic factors in human development, it was heavily influenced by the prevailing belief in

²² Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. 1st ed. Cornell University Press, 2005.; Hirsch, Francine. "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics." *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): p. 32

the plasticity of human nature and the powerful impact of environmental conditions. This shift allowed for a more integrated view that combined biological predispositions with the transformative power of the environment, aligning biogenetics more closely with the sociogenetic perspective.

The concept of the "primitive man" was crucial for both biogenetic and sociogenetic approaches in Soviet pedology. The biogenetic approach in pedology, deeply inspired by early biological theories, asserts that fundamental psychological and behavioral traits are biologically predetermined and influence human developmental trajectories. This perspective is rooted in Darwinian evolutionary ideas, emphasizing that developmental processes are governed by biological evolutionary laws, similar to Haeckel's recapitulation theory, which suggests that individual development (ontogeny) reflects the evolutionary development of the species (phylogeny).

In Soviet pedology, Pavel Blonsky exemplifies this approach, viewing child development as a reflection of human evolutionary history, assuming that "the child essentially repeats the history, the genesis of science,"²³ starting from their initial point of consciousness, which closely resembles the "primitive" mind. A child could overcome the primitiveness by gaining the necessary critical thinking tools in his education process. Notably, due to the Lamarckian influence, Blonsky's biogenetic position was not exclusively focused on biology but integrated it with the impact of the environment, reflecting a dynamic interaction, not a deterministic process, for which the theory was nevertheless criticized later.

This approach resembles one of M. A. Reusner, Soviet sociopsychologist. In 1925 as a part of his work called "Problems of Social Psychology"²⁴ he explored how human psychology adapts

²³ Blonskii, P.P. *Zadachi i Metody Novoi Narodnoi Shkoly*. Moskva: Zadruga, 1917.

²⁴ Reusner, M.A. *Problemy Sotsial'noi Psikhologii*. Rostov-na-Donu: Burevestnik, 1925.

differently based on the level of societal production and the corresponding cultural environment. He suggested that the psychological framework of an individual is fundamentally altered by the complexity of their societal context.

Reusner proposed that in environments with rudimentary technological development, individuals tend to retain more animalistic and instinctual behaviours. These instincts are strongly tied to simple and direct external stimuli, such as sounds or smells, which are processed internally. This reflects a survival mechanism suited to less complex societies, where responses are predominantly driven by immediate sensory inputs. In contrast, in societies with advanced productive forces and technologies, individuals are less dependent on these primal instincts. Instead, they develop a sophisticated system of symbols and externalized cognitive structures, allowing them to navigate and manipulate more complex social realities. This shift leads to a reduction in reliance on innate instincts as individuals increasingly engage with constructed cultural symbols and ideologically driven technologies that extend their cognitive capacities beyond instinctual reactions.

Reusner's perspective offers a framework to understand the impact of societal evolution on the psychological development of national minorities, often labelled as "primitive". This theory suggests that as these communities engage with more advanced societal infrastructures, there occurs a fundamental shift in their psychological makeup.

Historically, these groups may have relied heavily on primitive instincts, which were essential for survival in less developed environments. However, exposure to advanced technologies, structured education systems, and broader social networks encourages a transition towards more refined cognitive processes. This shift enhances capabilities for abstract reasoning and problem-solving, aligning their psychological development with the broader evolutionary trends observed in human civilization.

At the Pedological Congress in 1927, Nikolai Bukharin ²⁵criticized the biogenetic approach for its tendency to extrapolate biological laws onto social phenomena. He labeled it an "undoubted mistake,"²⁶ as such an approach leads to incorrect interpretations of social processes, turning them into something rigidly predetermined and immutable, reflecting racial theory and concepts of "historical and non-historical peoples" ²⁷ that were popular scientific discourses in Western Europe at the time (such as the German racial theory of Aryan superiority). It's important to note that the USSR sought to exclude these theories from its scientific sphere, as they were considered legitimizing bourgeois exploitative systems, sanctioning discrimination, and social inequality. According to Bukharin, the biogenetic approach insufficiently emphasized human plasticity—the ability for rapid adaptation and change, which allows for social transformations. The immutability and resistance attributed to human nature by some biogenetic theories would have rendered any attempts at social reform futile. Bukharin's critique fully demonstrates that such a theory is incompatible with the official state Marxist ideology, thus scientific contradictions transitioned into political and ideological arenas.

In response to the ongoing debate, another leading pedologist, Aron Zalkind, proposed the theory of sociogenetics, which emphasized the importance of the social environment in the psychological development of humans. He argued that this is the only correct approach, building his theory exclusively on Marxist phraseology²⁸. Thus, he becomes a leading representative of pedology and asserts an ideological principle, declaring war on dissent²⁹. Unlike the biogenetic approach, which views a child as a set of primordial instincts that need to be overcome, Zalkind

²⁵ The full quote of N. Bukharin was taken from Schwartzman, P.Ya., and I.V. Kuznetsova. "Pedology." In *Repressed Science*, vol. 2, edited by Nauka, 121–139. St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1994.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Schwartzman, P.Ya., and I.V. Kuznetsova. "Pedology." In *Repressed Science*, vol. 2, edited by Nauka, 121–139. St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1994.,

²⁹ Ibid.

argued that social factors are the primary driving force in development and on the contrary, views a child as a product of social environment –

“In this immaturity lie rich opportunities for further development, flexibility, and plasticity that allow for change and improvement. [...] It is only over the extended period of childhood that a human personality is formed, fundamental character traits are developed, knowledge and experience are accumulated, and a type of social behavior is established.”³⁰

However, Zalkind did not deny the role of heredity and biological determinants in the process of child development either. As he further elaborates, it would be wrong to look at the child as a complete blank slate as many Soviet pedologists do because indeed some of the human’s identity, types and most characteristic traits are biologically predetermined. In his opinion, it did not mean that genes are the ready-made qualities but rather *potential* to be developed - the environment can either facilitate or hinder this self-development, but it is believed that it cannot make any substantial, qualitative changes.

As Byford highlights³¹, Zalkind's position went beyond challenging the very foundations of pedology as a science. In his 1928 work "Fundamental Questions of Pedology," Zalkind criticized the biogenetic approach for its potential to perpetuate class and ethnoracial inequalities through a passive stance that does not actively engage with its research subjects. For Zalkind, pedology was less about conforming to established scientific methodology, which seeks to passively observe and record developmental laws, and more about actively mastering and directing these developmental processes. His sociogenetic approach was a call to transform

³⁰ Zalkind, A.B., A.A. Faivusnovich, V.M. Torbek, E.I. Radina, G.A. Fortunatov, A.F. Fedosenko, eds. *Pedologiya: Uchebnik dlya Doshkol'nykh Otdeleniy Pedagogicheskikh Tekhnikumov*. Moskva: Uchpedgiz, 1934., p. 6. The quotation was translated from Russian by me.

³¹ Byford, Andy. Chapter 6: Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198825050.001.0001>.

pedology into a proactive science capable of engineering societal transformations, particularly emphasizing the plasticity of human nature, which he believed could be significantly shaped through targeted interventions. This perspective was not only an academic stance but also a political strategy aimed at aligning pedology with the broader goals of the Bolshevik regime's revolutionary transformation.

1.3.Science and Racial language

However, the disagreements between the biogenetic and sociogenetic approaches were much deeper than Byford notes in his study. The main stumbling block was not methodology, as it was not fundamentally different – both approaches had the same root in Lamarckian framework, but the racial language on which these theories were based.

Racial language was integral to the scientific discourse of the 19th century, particularly within anthropology. According to Mogilner³², anthropology sought to describe the diverse population of the Russian Empire using 'objective' scientific categories. These categories were based on physical measurements such as eye colour, height, and limb length. Anthropologists used these measurements to perform statistical analyses and identify correlations among different ethnic groups. Initially, 'race' was seen merely as a physical type, without additional connotations.

However, this approach eventually led to the fragmentation of the population into various groups, which inevitably introduced a political context. Thus, racial language was in one way or another a hostage to politicization and a very slippery tool for use.

With the politicization of the term "race," its meaning and interpretation became more varied. Now, "race" could be perceived in various categories—both biological and socio-cultural. There was no longer a clear distinction between biology and culture in this matter. Against this

³² Mogilner, Marina. *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. Novoye Literaturnoye Obozrenie, 2008.

backdrop, many discussions arose—whether the physical and constitutional characteristics of peoples are fixed or dynamic and can evolve, and whether culture is an inherent characteristic of a people or rather a product of the environment³³. Within the Marxist ideology, culture was directly dependent on external, i.e., social and economic factors. Race, in the same ideological framework, merely represented a phase or a specific level in historical development³⁴. This understanding of race and culture in the Marxist tradition implies that any ethnic or cultural differences are temporary and will disappear in the process of achieving a socialist society where all nations will merge into a single socialist culture.

The term "backwardness" in relation to national minorities, according to Soviet ideology, was also supposed to denote a stage of economic and social development. However, after the revolution, as state ideology began to interfere with science, the very language of description of differences that pre-revolutionary anthropologists had so diligently tried to construct in order to denote the heterogeneous structure of society disappeared. The Soviet Union, having inherited this heterogeneous structure, failed to provide a suitable alternative³⁵ which led to the fact that pedologists and other social scientists who were connected to the production of social knowledge had to seamlessly incorporate this language into their own discourse, however, inadvertently were falling back into polemics with theories from the imperial period due to the use of this language causing being constantly on edge between the old and new interpretations, between biology and culture. The "backwardness" and "primitiveness" of national minorities fell precisely into this criterion, increasingly tightening the noose around the neck of pedology.

1.4. Pedology of National Minorities

³³ Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. 1st ed. Cornell University Press, 2005.

³⁴ Hirsch, Francine. "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics." *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (2002): p. 33-34

³⁵ Mogilner, Marina. *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia*. *Novoye Literaturnoye Obozrenie*, 2008. p. 496

This was the moment when Vygotsky's theoretical approach comes to the forefront. In 1930s, Lev Vygotsky³⁶ developed the cultural-historical theory (historical-genetics at that time) of psychological development, which represents a synthesis of biological and social approaches to studying the human mind. Based on the premise that the cultural environment is the main driver of the development of higher mental functions, Vygotsky emphasizes how primary, or "primitive" psychological functions (such as perception, memory, and attention), which people share with animals, are transformed into more complex mental processes through cultural and social interactions.

Vygotsky's theory explains that cultural tools, such as language, writing, and educational systems, serve as "mediators" between the social environment and cognitive development. For example, a child learns to solve mathematical problems not on their own, but through interaction with more experienced teachers and peers, using language and other symbolic systems. This transformation from simple to complex, from biologically predetermined to socially constructed, becomes key in the development of human cognitive abilities.

The concept of "primitive" for Vygotsky was in no way derogatory, it was merely a model to understand how the basic, universal aspects of human psychology develop. It was a model of a "simpler" mental structures for revealing the common pattern of minorities and therefore, assisting in construction of general developmental theories³⁷.

According to Vygotsky, the psychological functions of primitive man were deeply interconnected with his social structures. He suggested that the collective and social nature of early human communities played a crucial role in the development of cognitive functions. This transition from primitive cognitive functions to more complex ones was also mediated by the

³⁶ Vygotsky, L.S., and A. Luria. *Studies on the History of Behavior: Ape, Primitive, and Child*. 1930.

³⁷ Byford, Andy. "Imperial Normativities and Sciences of the Child: The Politics of Development in the USSR, 1920s–1930s." *Ab Imperio*, 2016: 105.

gradual accumulation of cultural knowledge, which was embedded in the social practices and tools of the community. Thus, "primitiveness" was a result of psychological adaptations to specific temporal environmental contexts. This led to a new methodology—pedological expeditions. The main goal of the expeditions was to gather data on the physiological, psychological, and educational characteristics of children from different ethnic backgrounds. The work involved assessing developmental norms, identifying deviations, and understanding the influence of environmental and cultural factors on child development.

The main question that surrounded these expeditions in 1930 was regarding the methods pedologists should use for studying “a child growing up in more primitive cultural conditions than our own”³⁸ The aim of their research was to find this “primitive” model that was already discussed before, however, they lacked knowledge in which methods to use, especially with a government constantly standing behind and watching every step. They asked children a large number of question and tested them with Binet and Simon metric scale, only to result in showing a low IQ. Bulanov states that the reason of such results lays in the environment, meaning the low results do not mean that they are somewhat “backward” or “inferior”, it merely means that their environment lacks certain qualities for developing certain cognitive instruments in order to solve these tests.

As it is evident from the Shubert’s report³⁹, pedologists were restricted from the use of the term “primitive” towards national minorities, however, she still proceeds with it a few pages later for which she will receive harsh criticism from Blonsky and Valitov in 1932.

³⁸ Bulanov, I., “Finding from a Study of the Behavior of the Tungus Child”, *Pedologiiia*, no. 2, 1930, p. 194-207

³⁹ Shubert, A.M., “The Experience of Pedological-Pedagogical Expeditions to Study the Peoples of Far-off Regions”, *Pedologiiia*, 1930, no. 2, p. 167-171

Within the frames of the journal *Zalkind*⁴⁰, the loyal lackey of the Bolshevik government, states that any hint on “inferiority” or in his sense, “backwardness” or “primitiveness” is a relic of exploitative bourgeois system, reflecting unfairness to the progress that national minorities have achieved to that day. He was not the only one with such criticism as the confrontation between science and ideology kept escalating.

In 1932, Blonsky and Valitov published a scathing critique of pedology in their articles, focusing primarily on methodological issues within the racial discourse⁴¹. This topic is complex and fraught with controversy, as deficiencies in methodology had frequently been pointed out by the very scholars under critique. A major contributing factor to this confusion was the state's overwhelming influence on scientific endeavours. Pedology, by its nature, advocated for diversity and tailored approaches to child development, necessitating detailed investigations of various environmental influences—a process that demanded significant time and resources, and relied on the cooperation of diverse scientific communities. However, the state's pervasive ideological control hindered the progression of these scientific activities, imposing constraints that were fundamentally at odds with the ethos of pedology from the outset. This governmental interference not only decelerated an already sluggish process but also set numerous ideological pitfalls, progressively constricting the academic freedom until the eventual suppression of pedology in 1936⁴².

⁴⁰ Zalkind, A.B., “Psychoneurological Study of National Minorities”, *Pedologiya*, 1930, no.2, p. 165-166

⁴¹ Blonskii, P.P. "O nekotorykh tendentsiakh pedologicheskogo izucheniia detei razlichnykh natsional'nostei." *Prosveshchenie natsional'nostei*, no. 4 (1932): 48-51.; Valitov. "Za marksistsko-leninistskuiu metodologiyu v izuchenii natsional'nogo rebenka." *Prosveshchenie natsional'nostei*, no. 4 (1932): 51-56.

⁴² Resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) from July 4, 1936, on pedagogical perversions in the system of the People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros)

Chapter 2: Small People of the North

When I began this research, I understood that there was not much material on the topic of pedology of national minorities, and even fewer studies on the impact of theories on practice, especially on the practice of integration. The only studies that came close to discussing the relationship between theory and the subject were focused on anthropometric and psychometric tests as a point of intersection. However, tests were only one of the many components of the discipline. The goal of pedology was, in one way or another, to integrate the culturally and economically heterogeneous population into one large homogeneous structure. Education was one of such practices. Schools were the very point of intersection, and teachers were to become mediators between the subject and the theory.

Unfortunately, I must note in advance that no concrete and solid connection between the theories discussed in the previous chapter and educational practice aimed at integrating Northern minorities has been found at this moment. No journal or document mentions the role of pedology in schools in the Far North or the work of pedologists in these institutions. Pedology is often associated with measurements and research, but the ultimate goal of these tests was to increase the effectiveness of educational practice for Soviet children. I was specifically interested not in the results of the tests, but in the final result in the form of methodologies. However, such a document did not exist because the discipline itself could not resolve its internal contradictions, nor withstand external ideological attacks.

However, there is a certain connection, albeit so insignificant that it may turn my further analysis into pure speculation. When my research turned to rabfak, the Institute of the Peoples of the North, pedagogical colleges, and the training of personnel for indigenous schools, I found that teachers trained in these institutions were familiar with pedological theories⁴³, although specific theoretical paradigms were unclear—what theory they studied, what they read, and how they were taught to apply knowledge about national minorities in practice. Much of this information is hopelessly lost or buried deep in Russian archives, to which I do not have access. However, from this, it still follows that the connection existed, but it raises the question—why is it so obscure, or why is it not visible in practice? Or perhaps it was so obvious that it was taken for granted and therefore not explicitly documented?

2.1. Context

The Committee of the North, established in 1924, played a crucial role in integrating the small peoples of the North into the Soviet state. It acted as a mediator, coordinating efforts in economic development, cultural interaction, and political integration, with the main goal of rapid modernization⁴⁴. However, educating the indigenous peoples of the Far North presented significant challenges due to harsh climatic and geographic conditions, scattered settlements, and a lack of infrastructure.⁴⁵

The traditional nomadic lifestyle of many northern peoples required flexible and mobile educational programs.⁴⁶ Additionally, there was a severe shortage of qualified teachers willing to work in these harsh conditions. The indigenous peoples faced numerous educational barriers, including a lack of Russian language skills and high levels of illiteracy.⁴⁷ The absence of written

⁴³ Nerush, Varvara Olegovna. "Educational Plans for 'Northerners': On an Interdepartmental Conflict in Leningrad in 1925-1930." *Humanitarian Accent*, no. 1, 2021, pp. 70-78.

⁴⁴ Slezkine, Yuri. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Cornell University Press, 1994.

⁴⁵ Lunacharsky, Anatoly. "Zadachi Narkomprosa na Krainei Severe." *Severnaya Aziya*, no. 3 (1927): 18-22.

⁴⁶ Lunacharsky, Anatoly. "Zadachi Narkomprosa na Krainei Severe." *Severnaya Aziya*, no. 3 (1927): 18-22.

⁴⁷ Slezkine, Yuri. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Cornell University Press, 1994, p. 394

forms for many native languages created dual barriers, complicating the educational process. Mistrust towards Soviet authorities and innovations further exacerbated these challenges.

To address these issues, the Soviet government implemented measures to create educational programs tailored to local cultures and languages. Efforts included developing written forms for previously oral languages and creating alphabets and educational materials to start education in native languages. This aimed to reduce cultural barriers and encourage participation in the educational process.

Systematic work began with the Committee of the North's establishment, focusing on the gradual implementation of Soviet norms and principles to integrate the indigenous population. Boarding schools (*internat*) and cultural bases (*kultbaza*) were introduced to provide education and promote cultural development. Boarding schools allowed children to study during the academic year and return home in the summer. Cultural bases, in theory, served as universal centers for education, culture, and governance.⁴⁸

Despite these efforts, significant challenges persisted. The creation of written forms for the languages of the small peoples began only in the 1930s under Vladimir Bogoraz at the Institute of the Peoples of the North. Until then, education was predominantly conducted in Russian, posing difficulties for students. Experimental teaching methods allowed students to write words in their native language using the Russian alphabet, and educational materials were adapted to reflect local realities.⁴⁹

In 1926, special educational programs were developed to adapt to the Far North's conditions. These programs emphasized local nature, traditional economy, and public life involvement,

⁴⁸ Ibid., In practice, as Slezkine mentions, they were empty most of the times because there was no work force to support it.

⁴⁹ Leonov, "Tuzemnye shkoly na severe." Sovetskiy sever, 1929.

rejecting Russification policies and supporting national cultures⁵⁰. Despite efforts, the lack of adapted textbooks and materials remained a significant problem, slowing integration and adaptation. Vladimir Bogoraz's "Primer for the Northern Peoples," created in 1927, was one of the first textbooks specifically adapted to local needs, combining grammar, arithmetic, and political enlightenment.

The educational system aimed to quickly prepare local personnel for the Soviet economy, focusing on practical tasks. The 1929 educational program, focusing on the project method of teaching⁵¹, marked progress towards technical integration of northern minorities into the Soviet system, despite ongoing challenges.

2.2. Analysis

In this section of the chapter I would like to focus on the analysis of the Primer created by Bogoraz, Soviet ethnographer of the Russian Northern region as I think this work better than anything reflects on pedagogical discussions happening in this period of time.

"The Primer for Northern Peoples" by Bogoraz-Tan was published in 1927⁵², the very first textbook for northern minorities. Initially in Russian, it was later translated into various languages of the northern minorities. From the beginning, the primer is imbued with themes close to the native children—we see various tundra animals, attributes of their industries like boats, sleds, etc. The texts themselves are light, not overloaded with extraneous information, but they encourage critical thinking in children—some passages pose questions about the content that a child must answer. Gradually, the curriculum becomes more complex—the texts lengthen, transitioning into complete stories, geographic names appear, ideological attributes like flags, a

⁵⁰ Bazanov, A.G., and N.G. Kazansky. *Shkola na Kraĭnem Severe*. Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Uchebno-Pedagogicheskoe Izdatel'stvo Narkomprossa RSFSR, Leningradskoe Otdelenie, 1939.

⁵¹ Leonov, N. "Tuzemnye shkoly na severe." *Sovetskiy sever*, 1929.

⁵² Bogoraz, Vladimir Germanovich, and S. N. Stebnitsky. *Primer for Northern Peoples*. Moscow: Central Publishing House of the Peoples of the USSR, 1927.

portrait of Lenin, and as the child is sufficiently prepared, they are introduced to life beyond their region—whole cities, familiarized with technology like trams, cars, and factories depicted. Ultimately, the primer is replete with ideologically charged stories about the construction of the socialist state, albeit in a somewhat harsh manner.

Indeed, such a textbook can tell us a great deal about the education system for northern peoples. The priority of the environment, central to any development theories, is absolutely clear. The primer also reflects the biogenetic idea that with the gradual development of critical thinking through education, one can overcome "primitive" instinct, leading to a more complex system of symbolism. This applies not only to images but also to language itself. In 1927, the main debate over the education of "primitive" peoples was between biogenetics and sociogenetics. As we can see, biogenetics is still afloat, and this approach has not yet been abandoned.

Bogoraz was fully acquainted with pedological theories. This is evident not only from the primer itself but also from the programs at the rabfak (workers' faculties) where he was a professor. As an ethnographer and primarily a scholar of the north, he was significantly interested in any theories of developing the natives, overcoming their "backwardness." Slezkine also notes that he was a forerunner of ethnogeography, experimenting with different approaches to influencing one culture with another⁵³. The absence of mention of these aspects in studies, such as Byford's work, raises questions about the completeness of the topic's coverage in academic circles.

Now, tracing the connection between pedological theories and their practical application in the education of northern minorities is challenging due to several factors. Firstly, there was an obvious misalignment between expectations that pedologists and other scientists as well as the

⁵³ Slezkine, Yuri. "The Fall of Soviet Ethnography, 1928-38." *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (1991): 476–84

government representative have put into the overall situation including the readiness to cooperate, and the pace of progress that can be made, with the reality that they faced when they started implementing the programs. The shock from the difference between the mentalities was devastating that they had to change the teaching programs on place forgetting all the theoretical framework that have been covering in the previous educational facilities. More over, pedagogy had not developed a unified scientific methodology by the 1930s, leading to inconsistent implementation. Methodology for national minorities specifically was so limited that it left teachers improvising. This would be a very hard case for analysis.

Sparse documentation and significant gaps in records, especially in remote regions, further obscure the historical trail. Rapid political and ideological shifts in the Soviet Union influenced the suppression or alteration of certain theories, contributing to an uneven application of pedagogical principles. Additionally, the connections that do exist are often speculative due to the lack of direct evidence, and the diversity of theoretical paradigms exposed to educators complicates tracing a clear line of influence. Moreover, pedagogy focused more on measurements and research rather than practical methodologies, and the specialized knowledge of those creating educational programs was not systematically documented, leaving gaps in understanding their practical impact. Despite these challenges, hints of pedagogical influence can be seen in certain educational materials and practices, suggesting a complex and fragmented integration of these theories into the educational system for northern minorities.

Conclusions

This research has explored the complex role of pedology in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, particularly its impact on the social integration of Arctic minorities. Despite the ambitious theoretical framework and ideological aspirations of the Soviet state, the practical application of pedological theories in education was inconsistent and full of challenges. The analysis of pedological practices has revealed a significant disjunction between the ideological objectives and the real-world implications of these theories. While pedology sought to mold the "new Soviet man" through scientific and educational interventions, the complexities of implementing such theories across diverse and remote Arctic communities resulted in varied outcomes, often diverging from the intended goals.

The lack of concrete evidence linking pedological theories directly to educational practices in the northern regions shows the difficulties in assessing the full impact of these scientific ideas. However, those traces that do exist suggest that while pedological principles were discussed and perhaps ideologically valued, their practical application was sporadic and often overridden by broader political and economic pressures. Moreover, the suppression of pedology in 1936, just as it was beginning to influence educational practices, halted what could have been a more systematic and potentially effective application of these theories. This premature end leaves a gap in our understanding of how Soviet pedological theories might have further evolved and impacted the educational landscape of the Arctic minorities.

In conclusion, this study reveals the grand ambitions behind Soviet pedology and its ultimate shortcomings in practice. The role of pedology in Soviet educational reforms and national integration is a complex story of high ideals clashing with practical challenges. This exploration

helps us better understand the broader historical challenges faced by the Soviet Union in its efforts to unify its diverse populations into a single socialist society.

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