TRANSCENDING REVOLUTIONS: THE TSARS, THE SOVIETS AND DEAF CULTURE

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Revisionist scholarship has redirected our interpretations of race, class, and gender but has yet to fully address a fundamental component in our historical identity: physical ability and its underlying concept of normality. Scholars in Deaf history offer one approach to this issue by examining the community through a cultural lens rather than a medical or pathological interpretation. In contrast to the medical perspective of deafness, which reduces the experience of deafness to a physical condition and a pedagogical problem, the works of Deaf historians have revealed a vibrant culture with its own folklore, visual humor, publications and associations, as well as its own primary, signed language. However, most of these researchers have focused primarily on Western Europe and the United States in an attempt to demonstrate the validity of a cultural model of Deafness. Moreover, the corpus of these current social studies remains limited by an ambiguous definition of culture. The relative abundance of American and Western European studies has inadvertently created an image of a monolithic Deaf culture. The focus on sign language and education as cultural informants of Deafness also neglects other crucial determining conditions. An excellent counter-example to the western cultural model of Deafness is Russia. The history of Deaf people there offers substantive corroborating evidence to the cultural model. More importantly, close examination of Russian and Soviet Deaf history redefines and clarifies the meaning of social identity, ultimately expanding the notion of community in general and the cultural model of Deafness in particular.

Two scholars in Russian Deaf history offered important critiques of this community. The late Howard Williams of Great Britain focused extensively on the attempts to establish schools for the deaf during the Imperial age and early Soviet period. An educator of the deaf himself, Williams was astutely aware of the political and pedagogical issues involved in educating this minority community. Igor Abramov, the late head of the Moscow Federation of the Deaf, also examined deaf education, but included closer study of his community's reactions, as well as more overt criticism of the regimes. Both researchers produced cogent works in the field, but were not able to expand the scope of their studies to include other cultural issues in Deaf history before their untimely deaths. This work depends heavily on Williams' and Abramov's research, and seeks to address some of these more complex issues.

A distinctive Deaf culture began in Russia, as in other nations, with the establishment of deaf residential schools. This minority group demonstrated attributes prevalent in other Deaf communities: they shared a common sign language, established clubs and periodicals for and by the Deaf, passed down their own folklore, and primarily socialized with and married other Deaf people. However, the unique social-political-economic environment in Russia fostered a cultural minority that differed in important ways from European and American Deaf
communities. Four areas in particular: education, economic and employment status, social characteristics, and the relationship between the community and the state informed a decidedly Russian Deaf cultural identity.

In most Western nations, deaf education began as a Christian endeavor, with ministers and priests attempting to “save” those who could not hear the word of God by giving them written and signed communication. In Russia, Imperial and secular philanthropy defined Deaf education. Inspired by a meeting with a deaf boy in 1807, Dowager Empress Maria Fedorovna sought advice on Deaf education from progressive France, and she implemented their sign language-based form of teaching at the Murzinka School in Pavlovsk, the first Russian Deaf school. In 1809 this institute moved to St. Petersburg and became the largest deaf school in Russia. With the blessing and official approval of the Tsars, other schools for the deaf soon appeared in Warsaw (1817), Odessa (1843), Moscow (1860), and Kazan (1886). Deaf Russians benefited both from the sanctioned use of sign language, the primary feature of their cultural identity, and Imperial recognition. Funding for schools, however, remained precarious. Without consistent financial support from the state or the Church, Russian deaf schools often closed, or catered only to the well-to-do. As a gesture to assuage growing concerns over the limitations of deaf education, the Imperial family helped establish a supervisory organization in 1898 known as the Guardianship, or the Marinskii Foundation for the Deaf. This all-Russian charitable organization established a network of schools for the deaf and hard of hearing, sought improvements in vocational training, and publicly campaigned against the neglect and suffering of the deaf and hard of hearing. Plagued by corruption and inefficiency, however, the Guardianship ultimately offered limited aid to deaf people, and dissolved shortly before the Bolshevik Revolution. During its existence, the Guardianship focused primarily on major urban sites, and consequently deaf education remained highly varied according to geography and class.

Russia’s uneven approach to Deaf education had some unintended positive effects for Deaf culture as educated Deaf people filled the interstices created by the system. For example, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Russian schools overwhelmingly subscribed to the French system of deaf education. This sign language-based approach offered a visually accessible means of education, and also gave deaf people new opportunities to work as teachers within the schools. Such an environment encouraged the growth of Deaf culture, and solidified ties between older generations of deaf people—the teachers—with young deaf students. However, in the late 1800s the German oralist method increased in popularity and application. Emphasizing speech and lip-reading with the expressed goal of mainstreaming deaf children, oralism challenged the manual method, and with it the attributes of Deaf culture. Highly organized and well-funded oralist organizations dominated the field of education in America and many European nations by the early twentieth century as well. However, Russia’s weak educational infrastructure enabled greater resistance to the application of strict oralism. By 1900, the large, urban schools tended to be pure oralist. In other countries, this pedagogical trend curtailed the number of Deaf teachers of the deaf. This was not so much the case in Russia, however. Unrestricted by pervasive regulations and intense competition, many graduates of the urban schools responded by leaving the cities, choosing instead to live and establish
deaf schools among the peasants. This not only enabled less fortunate children to gain an otherwise unattainable education, but it allowed Deaf people to dictate the standards of education. This specifically included the preservation of sign language within the classroom as well as outside of it.\textsuperscript{8} A substantial number of other Deaf students remained in the urban schools, offering cheap labor, but also preserving and transmitting Deaf cultural values.

The ascendance of the Provisional Government in February, 1917, apparently had relatively limited influence on the Deaf community. Greater political concerns held the attention of the government, and few changes occurred regarding educational policy. There is relatively little available evidence on or by the Deaf community during this period; most accessible documents focus on bureaucratic and pedagogical issues. For example, although the Guardianship remained, its power had waned and increasingly teachers and administrators organized separately to ask for improvements at their schools. Although members from the Ministry of Popular Education ultimately met with prominent educators and agreed to release some appropriations for deaf schools, the funding remained sporadic and insufficient, keeping the schools primarily dependent on philanthropic organizations to survive. Efforts were made to place deaf education under the auspices of the Ministry of Popular Education, thereby legitimating and stabilizing the field, but little progress had occurred before the outbreak of a larger war.

The Bolshevik Revolution had immense—and unique—ramifications for the Deaf community. On June 5, 1918 the Soviet government placed deaf education under the charge of the People's Commissariat of Education.\textsuperscript{9} Bureaucracy, however, complicated the unification and standardization of schools. During the Civil War years from 1918 to 1920 the absence of a clearly defined system of educational programs meant that some schools retained their special structure, while others fell under the aegis of different Soviet departments, such as Narkomsores. The chaos of war meant that actual curricula and organization of institutes were left to the teachers, many of whom were Deaf during this period. Moreover, financial backing from the state rather than from charities allowed a new system to emerge that provided more stable conditions than before. A new form of patronage defined deaf education, and while perhaps more demanding of its dependents, the Communist Party offered substantial gains for the Deaf community.

The Civil War ended in 1920, but its impact left the economy sluggish and the national budget for education was cut, causing the educational opportunities for deaf students to decline. Instead of working to increase the number of deaf schools, the government focused on differentiating three different types of deaf schools: those for the totally deaf, those for the partially deaf (born with defective hearing), and those for late deafened or adventitiously deaf. Although a medical view of deafness motivated the Russian tracking system, it afforded greater Deaf cultural cohesion. As hard of hearing and late deafened students attended different schools or departments, profoundly deaf students had new opportunity to interact with their true peers, and often with more sympathetic teachers. Russia, in principle, remained strongly oralist through the early years of Party rule. While some profoundly deaf students undoubtedly suffered under the label of "mentally backward" and "oralist failure," it appears that the de-
partments for the profoundly deaf allowed more sign language use and employed deaf faculty to work with them.

The rise of oralism and the debates about methodology have remained at the center of Deaf history. At times this has been viewed as the most defining aspect of Deaf identities. The Russian response to oralism differed in important ways from that in Europe and America, revealing a more complex understanding of Deaf people's status in society, and of cultural Deafness. The most striking example of this departure is the Russian Deaf community's view of Feodor Andreevich Rau. A native of Germany, Rau moved to Russia in 1892 to work at a Mennonite deaf institute in Tig'. By 1899 he was the director of the famed Arnold-Tretiakov school in Moscow. An ardent oralist, Rau dedicated his life to teaching and educating children with hearing disorders, and his "dynasty" extended from the 1890s to his death in 1957. Nevertheless, during his lifetime and long after, the Deaf community claimed him as one of their most revered members. Their devotion appears sincere. Publications and public discussions may have offered exceedingly positive reviews of Rau because the Tsars and later the Communist Party backed him. However, more private information from interviews, personal letters, and other community sources consistently support his enviable reputation. It is important to note that Rau loved deaf people, and his students appreciated his interest during a period when few people actively helped deaf citizens. That Rau improved the status of deaf people in his lifetime is undeniable. He personally helped locate jobs and apartments for his students, and fought to expand educational opportunities and legal protection for the community. Given the precariousness of deaf people's place in society, particularly before 1917, Rau's intercessions proved to be of great value.

Under both the Tsarist and Soviet regimes, the Russian people suffered considerably, influencing their daily lives and informing their historical-cultural identity. Deaf people shared these experiences, but also faced particularly difficult obstacles in terms of accessibility. This stark reality also contributed to Deaf people's response to oralism. Lacking a strong sense of individual rights or privilege, and living within an restricted environment—economically and socially—Deaf Russians not unreasonably also looked to oralism as a solution to their tangible handicap. While they maintained and preferred signed communication amongst each other, they understood the crucial need to work with the larger community in order to survive. This pluralistic approach, combining more tolerance for strong oralism and oralists, as well as promoting the use of sign language, demonstrates a more complex understanding of cultural Deafness. To be Deaf in Russia did not necessitate rejection of oralism to the extent that it did in, for example, America or France.

A significant cultural difference between Russian Deaf people and their peers in other nations was the impact of economics and the status of Deaf workers. In 1926 the Party granted Deaf people their own constitutive congress, the All-Russian Organization for the Deaf, or VOG. Under the direct supervision of the People's Commissariat of Social Welfare, VOG's creation represented a watershed moment for Deaf people in Soviet Russia. Its first leader, Ivan Savel'ev, established a highly beneficial and symbiotic link with the Party.

Deafened at age 2 with meningitis, Savel'ev became an accomplished machinist at an early age, and moved to Moscow in 1920 in hopes of creating a
union for all the deaf in Russia. At a plenum in Moscow on November 19, 1922 Savel’ev met Lenin in person. The extent of subsequent direct communication between the two men remains vague, but Savel’ev apparently impressed the Party leader and his wife, who later encouraged greater opportunities for deaf people. VOG members had rallied for greater access to work, but Savel’ev offered a more promising solution: Deaf-only Rabfaks. These enclosed factory-educational facilities—not unlike Ford’s isolated factory-towns in America—had become a popular means of promoting greater cohesion and productivity. In 1929 Savel’ev personally asked Nadezhda Krupskaja (Lenin’s wife) to intercede with the Party on behalf of deaf workers and students. She complied, and so did government officials. VOG chapters were established at the Moscow RabFak and others appeared at the Novosibirsk and Tomsk RabFaks. Interpreters were provided to “fingerspell” and translate the lessons into signs at the Rabfak schools. Some of these deaf students went on to higher education in such places as the Agricultural Academy and Moscow’s Bauman higher technical school. Over time, these Deaf enclaves became renowned sanctuaries of Deaf culture, where deaf and hearing people (often relatives) all communicated in Russian Sign Language, and deaf people had equal status with their hearing peers. This Russian variation of Martha’s Vineyard (where a high rate of hereditary deafness and geographic isolation led to common usage of sign language among hearing, as well as deaf inhabitants) had the tacit approval of the Soviet regime. In these Vineyard-gorods, Deaf values were the norm: residents used sign language, praised deaf-deaf marriages and deaf offspring, enjoyed Deaf folklore and visual humor, and created visually accessible entertainment and social events.

This stands in stark contrast to America and Europe. There, specialists and mainstream society frowned upon deaf separatism. (Indeed, Alexander Graham Bell feared the creation of a Deaf variety of the human race because of their isolated interaction and offered various suggestions to dissolve America’s Deaf culture. In Germany, the situation was still more severe. Beginning in the 1930s, the Nazis promoted the brutal extermination of deaf people, along with other “disabled” populations.) Starkly different economic realities also undermined Deaf workers in America and Europe. Stiff employment competition often resulted in underemployment or unemployment for Deaf people, as did technological advancements and legal regulations (like Progressive safety laws). Russia’s desperate need for laborers and praise for the proletariat, in contrast, gave their Deaf people a unique advantage. As able-bodied workers, Russian Deaf people—unlike other disabled people and other minorities—substantially improved their economic standing and cultural preservation during the Soviet period. In short, by focusing on deaf citizens as capable laborers, Savel’ev spoke to the more important, economic, need of the regime. Consequently, he was able to procure greater access to sustainable employment, as well as more VOG chapters to provide support services to employees throughout the Soviet period.

Russian Deaf people also enjoyed social outlets that differed from their peers in the West. NEP progressivism and consistent Deaf activism had allowed for the creation of VOG in 1926. With political and financial support from the regime, Deaf people overcame important social obstacles. Prior to this time the Deaf community, dispersed and without clear leadership, had struggled to improve
their standing in society. Their clubs and publications particularly languished under financial constraints. With the establishment of VOG, Deaf Russians not only gained greater access to those with power, but solidified their culture through state-funded Deaf-only sporting events and art exhibitions. For example, by 1939 the first All Russian inspection of amateur art of the deaf occurred. More than 59 clubs and 120 works were represented. Deaf people also prospered from Russia’s general love of mime and theater. As a popular entertainment, mime troupes in St. Petersburg and Moscow had consistent work and adoring audiences, and many deaf people both enjoyed employment and amusement in this arena.

State support fortified another common attribute. Deaf publications have remained a central “place” of Deaf cultural transmission and reaffirmation in most nations. While Deaf Russians published various independent newspapers before the Bolsheviks took power, most were short-lived. Exploiting the relative freedom of the NEP period, Savel’ev began his own paper for and by the Deaf in 1924. With the creation of VOG two years later, the Party also agreed to sponsor Savel’ev’s journal as the official organ of VOG. In The Life of the Deaf-Mute (Zhizn’ Glukhonemykh) and through official activities of VOG, Deaf people could read about deaf schools, social events, and the lives of their peers. While all publications in Russia were vulnerable to censorship laws and shamelessly promoted the Party line, The Life of the Deaf-Mute helped solidify Deaf people’s sense of their separate communal identity. In specific ways, VOG and its journal, while praising the Party, subverted several of its goals and policies.

A stunning example was evident in 1931–1932. Members at the Third All-Russian Congress of Officers of VOG sought public redress by publishing detailed monthly assessments of the state of universal education for the deaf in the Russian federation. Soon after, The Life of the Deaf-Mute published strong criticism of deaf education, including the Party-supported application of strict oralism. The activism did not end there. A team formed by Deaf Life investigated the well-known Moscow Institute, and proclaimed it a failed experiment, in essence because of its rigid oralist program. The team suggested a Combined Method approach instead. It is unclear how much these and other protests actually altered deaf education or other factors influencing the community’s life. However, the fact that deaf activists directly challenged dictates from the Party without reprimand is revealing.

These issues and events begin to reveal the complex relationship between the Russian Deaf community and the state. Tsars had little tolerance for deviancy; Stalin responded with terror. To be “Other” in Soviet society would, conceivably, be a capital offense. Various factors, including party patronage and even simple luck, may have enabled many in the Deaf community to survive in spite of their beliefs and actions. In the case of Savel’ev, Party patronage undoubtedly had enhanced VOG’s possibilities. Savel’ev emphasized his assets to the Party, while understating issues that might inspire conflict. However, it seems probable that Deaf people’s inability to communicate readily with outsiders perhaps also encouraged a perception of Deaf people as non-threatening if they were perceived at all. Simply put, their separate culture was overlooked and/or considered insignificant. In addition, Deaf people contributed to society with high production, and leaders like Savel’ev often were outspoken in their praise of the Party. Thus their marginal place from mainstream society allowed Deaf people to
create a cultural sanctuary in contrast to those more conspicuously—ethnically and philosophically—different.

The Deaf community in Russia during both the Tsarist and Soviet period clearly demonstrated a strong sense of cultural identity. As in other nations, they joined associations of and for the Deaf, communicated with each other in their native language, RSL, actively sought improvements for their community, shared a folklore and other communal values. While they incorporated the common medical perception of their condition into their own identity, labeling themselves both handicapped and Deaf, the Russian Deaf community is still best understood through a cultural interpretation.

However, Russian Deaf history offers more than support for this historical approach. For example, provocative contrasts could be made between the treatment of this cultural community with the other ethnic and linguistic minorities in the Russian Empire. Closer study of Russia’s social obsession with suffering and the disability of the soul also might be altered by including the actual treatment of people with disabilities, including the Deaf. The Russian example further challenges western scholars to refine the cultural model of Deafness. While sign language and education played significant roles in unifying Russian Deaf people, economic needs and Party policies notably defined their place in society and means of self-representation. The Communist regime in particular emphasized the value of workers and of social equality. While in practice it clearly discriminated against ethnic minorities and dissidents, it tacitly encouraged Deaf culture. The funding provided to VOG, Life of the Deaf-Mute, Deaf Rabfaks and other Deaf-only events created opportunities otherwise impossible for such marginalized, “handicapped” people. At the same time, the extreme repression of the regimes changed the meaning of marginality, necessitating more subtle expressions and understandings of their “otherness.” Closer scrutiny of the defining characteristics of Deaf culture will not only enhance our understanding of this varied minority, but promises a more accurate understanding of the environments in which they lived.

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ENDNOTES
The author would like to thank the late Howard G. Williams and his family for their invaluable gift of books, articles, and advice for this project.


2. Abramov had various unpublished or untranslated tracts, but his “History of the Deaf in Russia: Myths and Realities,” in *Looking Back*, eds. Renate Fischer and Harlan Lane (Hamburg, 1993) offers an excellent example of his work.
3. Vestnik popechitel'`stva gosudarstvi imperatorissy Marii Fedorowny o glukhoneykh, 1907–
1908gg. No. 1 (September 1907) St. Petersburg.

4. Antonia G. Basova, Ocherki po istorii surdopedagogiki v SSSR (Outline History of Sur
dopedagogics in the USSR) (Moscow, 1965), 74–5. Howard Williams offers an excellent
edited translation of this work.

5. By this time there were possibly 200,000 deaf people living in the Russian empire,
yet only eleven schools in the whole of Russia proper and limited outreach programs.

6. For a broader study of Russia and education, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, Education and
Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921–1934 (Cambridge, 1979) and The Cultural Front:
Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia (Ithaca, 1992).

7. It also threatened the quality of education. By dedicating the majority of school time
to lip-reading and speech, deaf students had less opportunity to study academic subjects
that would prepare them for employment after graduation.

8. For example, schools run by Deaf directors like Burmensky, Vasytovitch, and Zhu
romsky used signed communication in the classrooms. Basova, Ocherki, 80.


11. For more on Rau, see, for example, his Metodika obucheniya glukonemykh (Moscow,
1934); A. Dyachkov and A.D. Dobrova, Khrestomatiya po istorii vospitaniya i obucheniya
glukonemykh detei v rossii, Vol. 1 (Moscow, 1949); Mnogolose lisheni: iz istorii glukhyykh rossii
(Moscow, 1996).


13. The study of Deafness is also revealing. Defectology, the Russian term for Disability
studies, includes deafness. Such terms, while offensive to Western Deaf people, seem less
onerous to Russians. Defectology does not differentiate physical from mental impairment,
and the profoundly deaf often were grouped with the mentally retarded. However, a num
ber of defectologists were also activists for the community, once again blurring notions
of the "other".

and Harlan Lane (Hamburg, 1993), 203.


17. Basova, Ocherki, 132.

18. By 1936, 419 deaf people were being taught in higher and secondary establishments.
Basova, Ocherki, 132.

19. During the Tsarist period, there were no laws requiring deaf education, nor were
there guaranteed employment opportunities for this community. The creation of state
funded organizations, publications, schools, and Deaf Rabfaks enabled deaf people to
enhance their abilities to support themselves and solidify their cultural networks.


23. Basova, Ocherki, 148.