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The New Generation and the New Russia: Modern Childhood as Collective Fantasy

Julia Mickenberg

In 1931, a Soviet schoolbook designed to teach young Russians about the Five-Year Plan was a best seller in the United States.¹ *New Russia's Primer: The Story of the Five-Year Plan*, by Soviet engineer-cum-author M. Il'in, reached U.S. audiences thanks to George S. Counts, a progressive educator and professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, who, along with his assistant, Nucia P. Lodge, translated the book from its 1930 original.² The book "took America by storm." Juvenile editor Ernestine Evans called the decision to distribute *NRP* through the Book of the Month Club "the outstanding event of the publishing world this year." And the National Education Association's *Journal* proclaimed, "Such a book is more than significant. It is epochal."³

NRP established its author's reputation in the USSR, but the book's reception in the United States may be more noteworthy, marking a moment in which Soviet engineering—of factories and of individuals—was of enormous interest.⁴ Words such as *mystical*, *romantic*, and *thrilling* resound throughout the many reviews of *NRP*; even critical reviewers tended to find the book engaging.⁵ The compelling portrait of material and social progress under the Five-Year Plan fueled the "romance of economic development" that captivated Soviet and U.S. citizens alike.⁶ References to that "thrilling adventure" of the Five-Year Plan echoed the thrill produced by the revolution itself among the U.S. avant-garde in the years following the Bolshevik revolution and the "collective sense of possibility" it released.⁷

In the 1920s and 1930s "the utopian dream that industrial modernity could and would provide happiness for the masses" captivated leading figures in both the United States and the USSR, Susan Buck-Morss maintains.⁸ In *NRP*, a clear-speaking engineer presents the first Five-Year Plan as a magnificent means to making life more equitable and fulfilling. The book's "modernist utopia" contrasted sharply with U.S. waste and inequality, so evident in the early 1930s. Just as significantly, *NRP* suggested that children had a role in creating this utopia, at a time when young people in the United States faced unprecedented poverty and bleak prospects.⁹ So influential was *NRP* that it inspired imita-

tors in the United States; the most successful, *America's Primer* (1931) by civil liberties attorney Morris Ernst, focused on the United States' lack of planning and was clearly meant as a contrast to the Soviet alternative.¹⁰

NRP is a "literary paean" to the 1,680-page Five-Year Plan, arguing that the endless mass of "figures and tables" is "more interesting than any story of adventure."¹¹ The first chapter explains "What One Can See in Figures":

In the Kalmik region, in the middle of the naked steppe, grow buildings of steel and concrete alongside the felt tents of the nomads.

Steel masts rise over the whole country: each mast has four legs and many arms, and each arm grasps metal wires.

Through these wires runs a current, runs the power and the might of rivers and waterfalls, of peat swamps and coal beds.¹²

Il'in alternates between first person plural ("We must discover and conquer the country in which we live"); third person (for descriptions of blast furnaces producing pig iron, oil rigs drawing oil, or chemistry "transform[ing] rubbish into useful and valuable things"); and the imperative, used to address children directly and offer them a role in the drama described.¹³ Etchings by French-born and U.S.-trained artist Roland F. Cosimini (figure 1), based

Figure 1.

Cover from *New Russia's Primer: The Story of the Five-Year Plan*, by M. Il'in, translated from the Russian by George S. Counts and Nucia P. Lodge. English translation © 1931, renewed 1959 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

on photographs in the Russian original (figure 2), are dominated by machines and manmade structures; human figures, unless operating machines, often signify backwardness and contrasts between old and new Russia.

If one theme of *NRP* is the contrast between old and new, a key subtext is that Soviet Russia is new because it rejects the logic underpinning the West in general, and the United States in particular. Il'in follows his opening chapter, "What This Story Is About," with "Two Countries." This juxtaposition informs the rest of the book, and it encouraged U.S. readers to turn a critical eye on themselves. Drawing upon newspaper accounts as well as U.S. economist Stuart Chase's critique of industrial inefficiency, corporate greed, and false advertising, *The Tragedy of Waste* (1925), Il'in describes the ironies of capitalist production: milk poured into rivers, vegetables dumped, and corn burned—all to raise prices for the benefit of a few rich men—while "thousands of people go hungry."¹⁴ Meanwhile, people in the United States are convinced to buy things they do not need and barely use. "But how is it with us? The more machines we have, the easier will be the work, the shorter



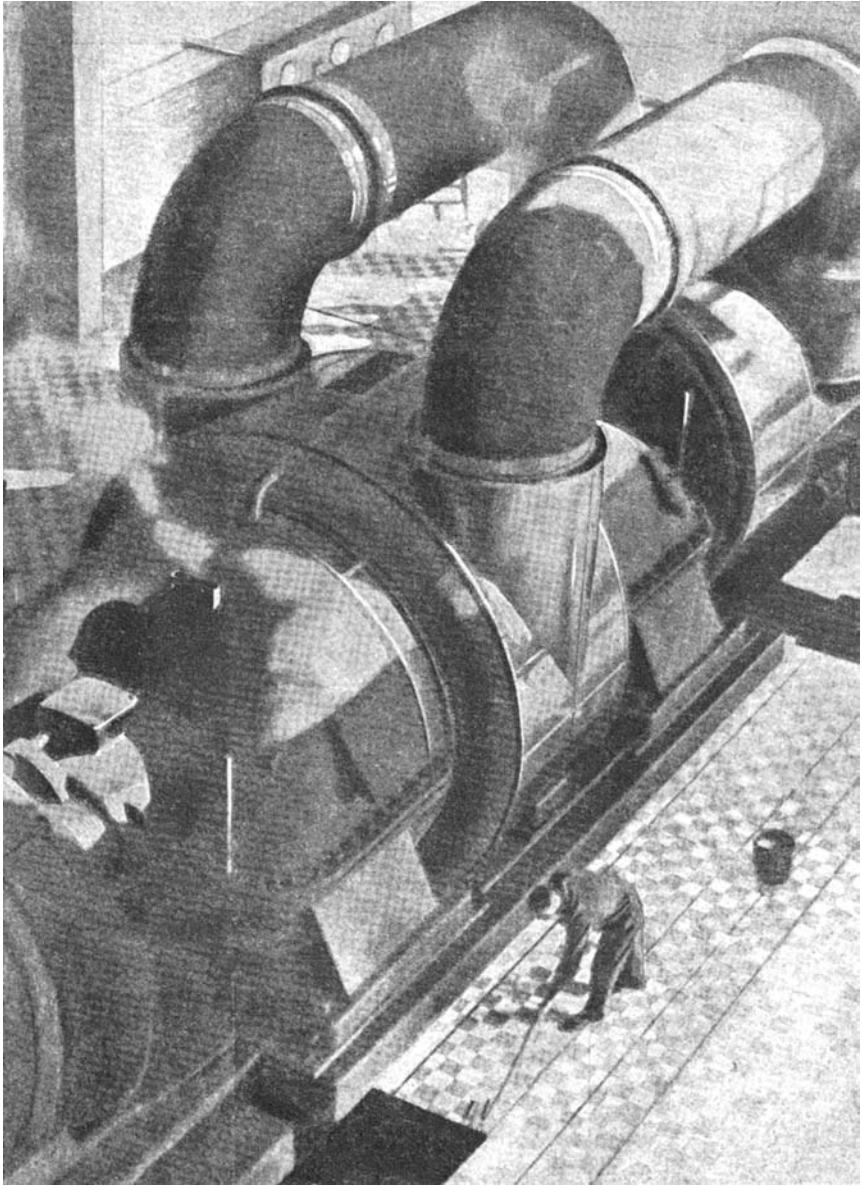
NEW RUSSIA'S PRIMER

At last the Russian Government's own story of the Five-Year Plan — put out, not for propaganda, but for the information of their own people — is available to American readers, told in simple language and with a vividness that dramatizes the whole gigantic undertaking.

'The book is not merely intelligible, it is literally fascinating. Practically every page carries the mark of genius.'
— Professor George S. Counts of Columbia University.

The Story of the Five-Year Plan





will be the working day, the lighter and happier will be the lives of all.” The chapter concludes with a clear rationale for the plan’s ambitious agenda: “We build factories in order that there may be no poverty, no filth, no sickness, no unemployment, no exhausting labor—in order that life may be rational and just. We build factories in order that we may have as many mechanical helpers as possible—machines in order that these mechanical helpers may belong to all and work for all equally. We build in our country a new, an unheard-of, a socialistic order.”¹⁵

NRP showed national planning harnessed for the collective good, in contrast to the capitalist logic of competition, exploitation, and greed. Moreover, Il’in’s engaging style and earnest (yet playful) address to children, on subjects usually thought appropriate only to adult specialists, suggested how seriously children were taken in Russia. Promising its putatively young readers that machines and Taylorist efficiency would build a better world for all, *NRP* appealed

to many U.S. liberals—most of them adults—who, like the Bolsheviks, believed that technology and children, properly managed, were keys to a better future.¹⁶

Children and childhood were central to revolutionary Russia’s appeal for U.S. moderns in

Figure 2.

Photograph from M. Il’in, *Rasskaz o Velikom Plane* (Moscow: State Publishing House, 1930), 69. Caption reads: “A steam turbine of fifty thousand horsepower. Do you know how much stronger it is than this man? One million times.” The illustrations in Counts’s edition do not correlate exactly with the photographs in the Russian edition, but many of Cosimini’s etchings are obviously drawn directly from photographs in the original.

the 1920s and 1930s: interest in the Soviets’ social engineering of children matched interest in their industrial progress, a theme better documented in scholarship.¹⁷ Echoing Russians’ debt to U.S. innovations, whether in Fordist factories or Deweyan schools, liberals and radicals in the United States likewise closely followed both industrial progress and educational practice in Russia. The USSR carried modernity’s fetishization of the machine and fetishization of the child to their logical extremes, producing rhetoric that, for some U.S. observers, signaled the Bolsheviks’ commitment to realizing the era’s promises. *NRP* offers a useful starting point for exploring how an image of the “New Russia” fed the collective fantasy—and the fantasy of collectivity—in the modern ideal of a “new generation”: a generation freed from old inhibitions, empowered rather than overwhelmed by the machinery of modern civilization, and acting cooperatively as citizens of the world.

A New Generation

This ideal of a new generation, born to new women and transformed through the new psychology and the “new education,” was closely tied to a positive view of the “new Russia” among many artists and intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, quite apart from the small but growing Communist Party.¹⁸ For evidence we turn to another best-selling book from this era. *The New Generation: The Intimate Problems of Modern Parents and Children* (1930) was edited by V. F. Calverton and Samuel D. Schmalhausen, coeditors of *Sex in Civilization* (1929) and the two leading exponents of a psychoanalytic approach that linked psychological and sexual liberation to class struggle (the *New York Times* called them “jointly the Karl Marx of the Sexual Revolution”).¹⁹ Introduced by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, *NG* contains contributions from thirty-two eminent psychologists, physicians, educators, anthropologists, literary figures, and other intellectuals, among them historian Arthur Wallace Calhoun, anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead, educators Scott Nearing and Agnes De Lima, psychologists John B. Watson and Lewis Terman, child study specialist Sidonie Gruenberg, sexologist Havelock Ellis, and literary figures Sherwood Anderson, Alfred Kreymborg, and Michael Gold.²⁰ Reviewed in more than forty publications, ranging from the *New York Telegram* (“If any book could have a wider appeal it escapes the mind at the moment”) to the *Sioux City Journal* (which called the book “strong medicine for parents”), *NG*, not unlike *NRP*, generated both praise and controversy.²¹

In their preface, Calverton and Schmalhausen predicted that modern innovations, particularly those in education and psychology, would bring about “a humanized society [that] will fashion ‘new parents for old’ and make marvelously possible *the child’s coming of age*” (the latter phrase an allusion to Edward Carpenter’s influential *Love’s Coming of Age* [1911] and a marker of the links between children’s and women’s liberation, the focus of Calverton and Schmalhausen’s 1931 publication, *Women’s Coming of Age*).²² At the core of *NG*’s eclectic subjects was a concern with raising children in an era of dizzying technological, demographic, and intellectual transformations. In the new machine age, as Agnes De Lima notes in “The Dilemma of Modern Parenthood,” raising children has become more difficult than ever. Parental authority has waned while the pressure to raise children well has escalated, as nearly every social ill is traceable to bad parenting.²³

The core tension that De Lima identifies is the conflict between fostering individual freedom and building a sense of social responsibility, or a collective

ethic. "Since men acting in concert or through their chosen representatives had brought the world so near disaster," De Lima notes, referring to the First World War, "we must give up mass action. Free, dynamic and creative individuals are imperative if the social fabric is not to fall by its own weight."²⁴ But this desire to breed "free, dynamic and creative individuals" coexisted with a fantasy of collectivity among American moderns. Despite rejecting "mass action," De Lima elsewhere endorsed using schools "to help root out those narrow ambitions and ancient animosities that haunt and dominate Europe and to replace them with a desire for cooperation."²⁵ This effort to breed individuality *and* cooperation through education resonated with John Dewey's "call for a new and more collective individualism."²⁶ The widespread interest among Americans in Soviet education and child rearing reflected this mind-set.

Although "The Child in Soviet Russia" by Scott Nearing, an avowed radical,²⁷ was the only article in *NG* wholly devoted to the new *Russian* generation, Russia comes up throughout the collection. Bertrand Russell claims that "at present the State, except in Russia, is in the grip of moral and religious prejudices which make it totally incapable of dealing with children in a scientific manner." V. F. Calverton's essay on "The Illegitimate Child" notes that illegitimacy is a nonissue in Russia; and T. Swann Harding's "What Price Parenthood" contrasts the financial and physical burdens of parenthood in the United States with state-supported prenatal care, maternity leave, and child care in Russia.²⁸ These and other references point to ways in which Soviet philosophy and practice became foils for critiquing the U.S. system by way of its child rearing.

And indeed, while the essays represent no single political viewpoint, most are critical of U.S. parenting and educational practices, even when they acknowledge the difficulties faced by parents and teachers. However, the good news the essays collectively offered was, according to Ruth Benedict's review, proof of "the almost infinite flexibility of human nature" and, as a corollary, the possibility of redeeming civilization by way of the child.²⁹ And here, several contributors suggested, the Russian example could be especially instructive. As Arthur Wallace Calhoun notes in his essay, "The Child Mind as a Social Product," "it is clear that the mind of childhood and youth is the pivot of successful social transformation." Contrasting "our current 'American Tragedy' of mishandled childhood" to Soviet Russia's practices, Calhoun imagines what it might mean to "give childhood a chance": providing for the child's physical health, his mental health, and his education as part of a collective. "If we chose to deal fairly with the child mind, we could have in short order

an ideal world,” he muses. And Russia, he insists, offers a practical model for “inaugurat[ing] the real ‘century of the child.’”³⁰ Such a position was by no means undisputed, even among liberals, a point I will return to later. My questions here have to do with why so many forward-thinking Americans became invested in the “Soviet experiment” in physical and social engineering at this moment in time and why the central place of Soviet Russia for those wishing to transform U.S. society by way of the child has been largely forgotten.

The U.S. press produced a huge volume of commentary in the 1920s and 1930s on Russia’s children, from observations about programs devoted to maternal and child welfare, to notes on the conditions of Russia’s *besprizorniki* (homeless children), to extensive discussions of Soviet schools and children’s literature. Certainly not all of this commentary was positive, as evidenced by titles such as “Tragedy of Child Life Under Bolshevism” (*Current History*, July 1921), “Moulding the Infant Mind in Russia” (*Living Age*, February 1924), and “Russia’s Wolf Packs of Homeless Children” (*Literary Digest*, March 1926). However, given the cold war lens through which we recall this earlier moment, the ratio of positive to negative commentary—not just in Communist outlets but in leading liberal cultural, educational, and social work publications ranging from the *Saturday Review of Literature* to *School and Society* and *The Survey*—is striking.

According to historian Lisa Kirschenbaum, during the early years of Bolshevik rule, “‘childhood’ functioned as a means of imagining revolutionary transformation,” as the Bolsheviks equated the social position of children under capitalism with the universal problem of exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. “Finding ‘scientific’ grounds for imagining children as independent, rational, and powerful agents of revolution, the Bolsheviks rejected some of the most cherished, naturalized, and emotionally charged Western visions of childhood.”³¹ Bolshevik conceptions of childhood appealed in the United States to a generation in revolt against outworn tradition. Early Soviet efforts to apply some of the most radical elements of Western educational principles, such as “free upbringing” (which “required the near total subordination of teachers to each pupil’s creative impulses” and which “aspired to nurture children’s allegedly natural instincts for labor and to create a model community of equals”) represented striking efforts to translate the utopian impulses animating the Russian revolution into concrete terms.³²

Even before the Depression, which made alternatives to capitalism more attractive, portraits by Western observers of Russian educational practices, the collective sense of responsibility for children’s welfare, and the prioritizing of culture over commerce foretold, for some observers, a bright future despite

a woefully inadequate present. As modern dance pioneer Isadora Duncan proclaimed in 1921, “[The Russians] may not have enough to eat there, but they are determined that art, education, and music must be free to all. I am eager to see if there is one country in the world that does not worship commercialism more than the mental and physical education of its children.”³³ Duncan traveled to Russia that year and established a dance school, which she largely funded through her own performances. Helen Keller, likewise, in 1923 hailed “the distinctive children of Russia,” including those attending a home for the blind named in her honor: “I love them because round them clings the sanctity of ideals and aspirations, the incredible courage and sacrifices of a people who uphold the hope of humanity . . . The thought is unbearable that they should be sorrowing in a land where there is a passionate desire ‘to bring the light of joy into every child’s eyes.’”³⁴

Paul Hollander distinguishes between a “utopia” and a “myth or collective fantasy,” noting that utopias usually “involve plans and calls for implementation.”³⁵ I use “collective fantasy” to denote both the ideal of collectivity and the group of people who embraced this ideal. On the one hand, what appealed to some U.S. observers—both radical and liberal—was the Bolsheviks’ attempt to put seemingly utopian ideas into practice. The Soviets sold their system as “the best in the world” for children, and model institutions and programs (which, in fact, rivaled or surpassed those in Western nations such as Britain, Germany, and the United States) “were a fixture of nearly every foreign visitor’s itinerary.”³⁶ Although children were subjects of genuine compassion and far-reaching efforts on the part of the Soviet State—often at great cost to adults—outside the exemplary institutions that served only a fraction of the nation’s children, conditions were often grim. Children were disproportionately victims of war, famine, collectivization, and industrialization. At least 7 million children were homeless in 1920–21, and the problem persisted into the 1930s, with many *besprizorniki* suffering from disease and malnutrition (or even dying of starvation), and challenging the best efforts of the Soviet government.³⁷ Moreover, while “there was [between 1918 and 1935] widespread talk of ‘children’s rights’ and of ‘self-government’ . . . education was also an instrument of political control, a way of supplying the new state with technically and politically literate subjects.”³⁸

In other words, U.S. admirers of Soviet practice vis-à-vis children based many of their assessments on the ideal rather than on the reality. Finally, there is the question of timing: in schooling, for instance, the radical experimentation and emphasis on children’s free expression that produced a number of striking educational innovations in Russia in the decade following the revolution

gave way during the first Five-Year Plan (1928–1932) to a growing emphasis on discipline, loyalty, and achievement. Much of the U.S. commentary, at least until the mid-1930s, shows little attention to these changes.³⁹ So despite Russia's very pragmatic appeal (recall Lincoln Steffens's famous comment: "I've seen the future, and it works!"), the romance of Russia in general—and Russian childhood in particular—among many of those seeking to realize the promises of the modern age is more accurately understood as a "collective fantasy" and, by implication, a fantasy of collectivity, given the distance between ideal and reality in so many areas of Soviet practice.

It seems ironic that Stalinist Russia, a brutal dictatorship that consolidated its power during the very Five-Year Plan that *NRP* mythologized, would fire the imagination of people interested in liberating children from the oppressive structures of modern civilization. Designed to rapidly modernize Russia, the first Five-Year Plan involved forced collectivization of agriculture, massive industrial buildup, and an obsession with efficiency and output that played out through a combination of incentives and repression. But low unemployment, social mobility, and a renewed sense of national purpose under the plan made many Westerners rationalize that the costs of the plan were either negligible or necessary, according to historian David Engerman.⁴⁰

The dream of wisely engineered machinery liberating people—"who know [the machine] as a splendid toy and not a hateful tyrant," in the words of Greenwich Village radical Floyd Dell—had animated Americans since the beginning of the industrial era; Edward Bellamy's enormously popular utopian novel, *Looking Backward* (1888), is premised on this very idea.⁴¹ During the Depression, Soviet efforts to build massive, efficient machines and to mold collective-oriented individuals resonated with the New Deal ethos of planning and efficiency as well as the moderns' calls for a "new generation" poised to embrace the machine as a "splendid toy."

Production for Use: Il'in's Marvelous Machines

Russian constructivism, seeking an aesthetic to express the notion of "thing-as-comrade," aimed to reclaim the creativity of industrialism while also liberating its objects from the commodity fetishism undergirding capitalism.⁴² Images of Soviet machines held out an appealing promise of men and women freed by technology, working for the collective good of society, themselves transformed in the process. Not incidentally, the constructivists devoted a great deal of attention to children's literature. As literary critic Evgeny Steiner notes, "works made for children had particular significance for the builders of the new world,

since here it was not a matter of re-forming the intended audience, but of forming them in the first place, both aesthetically and socially.”⁴³

Early Soviet children’s literature, in its constructivist, experimental phase (that is, up until the mid- to late 1920s), and also during a period of tighter state control under Stalin, reveals an obsession with harnessing science and technology to create a socialist utopia. As critic John McCannon notes, Soviet “children’s authors embraced science and technology as symbols and subject matter, portraying them as forces that would enable the USSR to create the world’s greatest industrial economy, the world’s most equitable social order, even the world’s highest class of human beings.” Steiner suggests that the “production book” (on machines, industry, or how-things-are-made) became the most popular genre of Soviet children’s literature in the mid-1920s, as writers and artists sought a form appropriate to the political, industrial, and human transformations that would necessarily undergird the creation of socialism.⁴⁴

U.S. commentary remarked upon the seamless translation of Soviet ideals into compelling children’s literature. “The gusto and zest with which they can recruit the young to think about economics rather than business, engineering projects rather than private claims, astonishes the rest of the world,” Ernestine Evans notes in a 1931 article, “Russian Children and Their Books.”⁴⁵ And Thomas Woody, education professor at the University of Pennsylvania, summed up his impressions of Soviet children’s literature by noting that “[Russia’s] leaders dream of a paradise of motor trucks, tractors, steam shovels, skyscrapers and traveling cranes, the income from manipulation and exploitation of which shall improve the conditions of everyone who contributes something by his own activity of mind and body.”⁴⁶

U.S. children’s books of the same era were, likewise, full of machines, and while production books resonated differently in the United States, the Soviet influence upon U.S. children’s literature in the 1930s and 1940s is unmistakable, from an aesthetic, ideological, and a practical standpoint; even the practice of mass-producing affordable children’s books, most successfully undertaken in the Little Golden Books, drew inspiration from Soviet practice.⁴⁷ The production book genre was given its greatest impetus in the United States by Bank Street educator, John Dewey disciple, and friend of Russia, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, whose “here and now” philosophy, based on engaging children with real-world objects and situations, was influential among educators and authors of children’s literature in both the United States and the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ The early Little Golden Books such as Gertrude Crampton’s *Tootle* (1945) and a longer tradition going back to Henry Lent’s *Diggers and Builders* (1931), Vera

Edelstsadt's *A Steam Shovel for Me!* (1933), and Watty Piper's *The Little Engine That Could* (1930) participated in the technocratic idealism that inspired both Edward Bellamy and the great "captains of industry." But in the United States it was never clear who should benefit from the power of machines: here a business ethos that favored corporate profits and enterprising industrialists competed with an ethos that emphasized technology's capacity to eliminate waste and benefit humanity.⁴⁹

In the Soviet Union, the ideological line was certainly clearer. What McCannon calls "five-year plan culture"—beginning with the first plan's inception under Stalin in 1928—only reinforced and inflated Russians' obsession with the machine, which played out in all realms of Soviet literary output. In the context of Stalinist orthodoxy, M. Il'in, the pseudonym for Iliya Yakovlevich Marshak (used to distinguish Il'in from his older brother Samuel Marshak, a poet and popular author of children's fiction) was "the writer who proved most skillful at creating books that were politically acceptable, technologically focused, and genuinely appealing to young readers." Several of Il'in's books were translated into English and received praise from U.S. educators.⁵⁰

In *NRP*, machines are central characters and metaphors throughout, but an entire chapter, "Iron Workmen," is devoted to them, their qualities, their variety, their promise, and the infinite need for them:

We still require many machines. We must have locomotives, ships, lifting cranes, conveyers, electric cars, and elevators to transport and raise loads: pumps and ventilators to drive water, air, gasoline and oil through pipes: building machines, railroad machines, excavators, hewing machines and tractors. But can one enumerate all of them? We need a vast army of machines—coal miners, ore miners, loaders, carriers, builders, farmers, weavers, chemists, cobblers, millers, butter-makers.⁵¹

Even words that usually describe humans—farmers, miners, chemists, and so on—here represent machines.

The book's subject matter and visual aesthetic invite comparisons to U.S. photographer Margaret Bourke-White's *Eyes on Russia*, which was published the same year as *NRP*. Bourke-White's text highlights her interest in Russian industry and in the Five-Year Plan, which she calls "a great drama being unrolled before the eyes of the world." Her photographs emphasize the "structural pattern," "rhythm," and energy highlighted in the text, whether in the imposing images of a bridge, a dam, cranes and girders, a tractor, or in the photographs of workers, such as one labeled "The Woman Who Wept for Joy" (figure 3): here a woman hunches over dozens of spools of thread laced to a loom, the threads stretched across her form like an explosion. As



THE WOMAN WHO WEPT FOR JOY

Figure 3. Margaret Bourke-White, “The Woman Who Wept for Joy,” from *Eyes on Russia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), © Estate of Margaret Bourke-White, licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Bourke-White’s caption would have it, this woman’s joy at production literally explodes through the loom she operates. Because the woman’s face is barely visible in the photograph, the caption’s implication is that machines are viable vehicles for human expression, and that this drama of machine production is likewise a human drama as well.⁵²

If the parallels to Il’in were not obvious enough, the preface to *Eyes on Russia* by Maurice Hindus proclaims that Bourke-White’s ability to capture the plan’s “romantic appeal” is reminiscent of “Il’in, the author of the well-known Russian Primer.”⁵³ Art historian Terry Smith suggests that Bourke-White’s photographs of industry “set the visual style of industrial America.” It was thus only logical that she would feel called to Russia, where, as she herself put it, “machine worship was everywhere.”⁵⁴

Despite their avowed commitment to free enterprise, both Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford were heroes in Russia, where the goal was to “Americanize” industry through Fordist production techniques, not for profit, but in the service of socialism. The Soviets imported vast quantities

of U.S. machinery, and Albert Kahn Associates, the architect of Ford, built more than five hundred plants in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, thus keeping the business afloat through the lean years of the Depression.⁵⁵ The entire Fordist system of production was seized upon as key to rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union, though Lenin imagined that Taylorist efficiency might allow for increased production without exploitation, thus facilitating the redistribution of wealth. According to historian of technology Thomas Hughes: “The lowered cost of production, the short installation time . . . and the vastly increased reliance on engineering and management skills required by scientific management fascinated Lenin.”⁵⁶

Il’in’s book embraces this socialized Taylorism, highlighting economies of scale and the benefits of scientific management. In his chapter “On the March for Metal,” Il’in extols the virtues of the large factory:

In it there is more order and less confusion, and every one has his own special task. One sharpens an instrument, another works with it. One drives in the bolts, another screws on the nuts.

In the large factory things come running to the workmen. Everywhere there are moving belts, ball-bearing tracks, elevated roads, revolving tables, inclined troughs, spiral stairs, and lifting machines. Objects fly upward, drop downward, run up to the ceiling, fall from one floor to the next. Men stand still but things move. . . .

On our front of factories and mills we shall go into battle with large detachments, with closed ranks. Proper organization, unanimity, discipline—these will give us victory.⁵⁷

U.S. readers encountered Il’in’s book at a moment when the Fordist system and capitalist economic cycles in their country had, as Terry Smith puts it, “so threatened an entire generation of workers that they bitterly resisted change and sought other forms of collectivity, provoking the Ford engineers to ditch their visions of the factory as a domain of invention and to take up the tools of tyrants.”⁵⁸ The promise of machines operating for people (rather than people mechanically operating machines) and production for human betterment was deeply attractive to U.S. workers and intellectuals who had become disenchanted with the capitalist ethos of individual gain and a system in which mechanization was not so much “labor saving” as a cause of unemployment.

If some technocrats and idealists in the United States believed Soviet Russia offered a way out of exploitative systems of production, in reality, as Thomas Hughes notes, “irrational and unsystematic speed-ups and production-quota rises became a lasting characteristic of Soviet Taylorism and Soviet technology.”⁵⁹ Indeed, the logic of the “shock brigades,” popularized in competitive

production under the Five-Year Plan, suggested not human beings liberated by machines but, rather, humans made into machines.⁶⁰ By 1931, when *NRP* was published, the leading constructivist artists in the Russian avant-garde recognized that their ideal had been crushed by the Five-Year Plan itself: “Quite the reverse of crucibles of socialist education, the factories were increasingly places of exploitation of the working class.”⁶¹ For some U.S. commentators, however, the picture Il’in painted seemed concrete and realizable, not impossible and utopian, like flying bicycles and other schemes articulated by the Russian avant-garde a decade earlier. *NRP* suggested that socialism would eradicate the exploitative nature of industrial production under capitalism and, in the process, make “new people.”

While U.S. citizens were, arguably, infantilized by modernity’s pressures,⁶² under Il’in’s portrait, Russians seemed to have found a way to harness modernity in order to collectively grow up. In contrast to a popular culture “deliberately tuned to the twelve-year-old mentality,” Stuart Chase notes in a review of *NRP* in the *New Republic*, “Russian children . . . are devoting their attention to electric power, conservation, exploration of natural resources, machine production, tractor farming, economic geography and the historical backgrounds of capitalism and socialism.” And journalist Louis Fischer explains that, thanks to the Book of the Month Club, now “little Russians and grown-up Americans can go to the same school.” This comparative level of culture—“Soviet children [on par with] American adults”—seemed to offer a telling comment on the two civilizations.⁶³

NRP suggested that Russian children were not just learning all about the new society being built, but also that they were also being given a meaningful role in its building. We see this in Il’in’s third chapter, “Scouts of the Five-Year Plan,” and in the final chapter, “New People,” which U.S. reviews quoted profusely. Contrasting the backbreaking labor and poor working conditions, household drudgery, inadequate child welfare, and poor living conditions of the present, Il’in describes a future society, with work that is pleasurable and easier (thanks to machines); living conditions that reflect the most advanced technology, architecture, and aesthetics; and leisure that is relaxing and enriching.

However, Il’in cautions, “this better life will not come as a miracle: we ourselves must create it.” Moreover, the greatest transformation that must take place is human: “We must root out uncouthness and ignorance, we must change ourselves, we must become worthy of a better life,” he insists. Il’in concludes his book with “The Little Five-Year Plan and the Big Five-Year Plan,” promising his young readers: “Every one of you can be a builder of the

Five-Year Plan.” Outlining concrete tasks that children can perform, ranging from “discover beds of lime and phosphorous” to “destroy bedbugs, roaches and flies” as well as “teach the illiterate to read and write.” Il’in concludes: “Herein lies your power.”⁶⁴

The New Education and the New Russia

Both the form and the content of Il’in’s primer pointed to the radical possibilities of a “new” education, an education purposefully devoted to building a new kind of society and, most important, to creating “new people.” George Counts not only insisted that *NRP* offered a model of how textbooks might be written, but also that it would make teachers fundamentally rethink the purposes of U.S. education.⁶⁵

Of course, by 1931 education had already been reinvented in the West, with experimental private schools cropping up in the 1910s and 1920s, and with some of their practices filtering into public schools.⁶⁶ The “new education,” a term usually synonymous with “progressive” or “experimental” education, aimed “to reshape schools in the interests of childhood.”⁶⁷ It assumed that public education had lost its relevance, and failed to serve either children or society. Writing in Calverton’s *Modern Quarterly* in 1925, Scott Nearing insisted that in most schools the child’s mind is treated like a “storehouse,” and knowledge itself is a commodity, which children are supposed to regurgitate at the appropriate moment. Everything about the system encourages the teacher to reproduce the status quo, and textbooks “tell a simple, unilateral story,” discouraging the student from ever having to think. Moreover, anyone who shows “any essential divergence from the ways and ideas of the established order” is called a “Bolshevik.”⁶⁸

This “Bolshevik” tarring had much to do with right-wing efforts to discredit educational experimentation—and the disruption of established authority that experimentation often brought. Although most advocates resisted defining “new education” beyond the idea of openness to experimentation, they noted several of its features. First, it grew in reaction to the “old education,” emphasizing obedience, memorization, order, and drill. As John Dewey noted in 1930, progressive schools “are symptoms of a reaction against formalism and mass regimentation; they are manifestations of a desire for an education at once freer and richer.” Progressive schools and teachers stressed freedom, creative expression, and practical activity that linked academic skills to real life. Their creed was learning by doing, rather than “passive absorption,” and they aimed to foster individuality and inculcate social responsibility and self-

discipline. Practitioners tended to be active in child study movements, and they emphasized cooperation between schools and homes. At bottom, these educators professed a “faith in the natural tendencies of the child.”⁶⁹ Still, such faith did not eliminate the need for “new modes of social control”: for significant numbers, social control—even remaking human nature to promote peace, cooperation, and international understanding—seemed of a piece with the “freedom” progressive educators wanted for children.⁷⁰

“New education” also had associations with political radicalism. Agnes De Lima noted in 1925, “A teacher recently prophesied that the next heresy hunt will be directed against the rapidly growing number of people who believe in ‘experimental’ education. Some canny sleuth will discover that there is a direct connection between schools which set out deliberately to train children to think, and to develop creatively, and the radical movement.”⁷¹ The New Education Fellowship, an international organization based in the United Kingdom with which the U.S.-based Progressive Education Association became affiliated, had this reputation for political radicalism: among its stated goals were “the establishment of a world commonwealth free from the evils of wasteful competition and from the prejudices, fears, and frustrations that are the inevitable outcome of an insecure and chaotic civilization.”⁷² In the United States, a contingent among progressive educators explicitly called for making schools agents of social change, a movement perhaps best summed up in the title of George Counts’s 1932 treatise, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*

As Counts’s prominence in educational circles and his connection to *NRP* suggests, the Bolshevik label that was bandied against “new” or “progressive” education was not simply a way to tar experimentation as radical or even a way to discredit radicalism. Rather, it points to the reality that practitioners of the new education often did look to Russia for inspiration. This interest predated the Bolshevik revolution; early advocates of vocational education praised Russian models in the late nineteenth century.⁷³ After the revolution, and into the 1930s, positive commentary on Soviet education was common among Western educators. They noted widespread adoption of Dewey’s “project” method, in which academic skills were taught through real-life experiments, problems, and excursions; they marveled over the idea that Soviet education encompassed all levels of social and cultural life, and not simply the schools (“Russia is a vast experiment in education,” notes a 1931 article in *Science Education*); they hailed the abolition of corporal punishment in Soviet schools; and they likewise looked favorably upon coeducation and the level of student self-government under the Soviets.⁷⁴ And, indeed, “for

about fifteen years, commitment to educational experiment within the Soviet administration was far greater than anywhere else in the world at the time,” historian Catriona Kelly notes.⁷⁵

One key to Soviet education’s appeal to Western observers was the fact that new educational principles—from the project method to self-governance among students—were being applied on a national scale. This was especially true in the early 1920s, when progressive educators in Russia “found patrons in the Communist Party, who shared the goal of designing schools to challenge traditional authority.”⁷⁶ Journalist Anna Louise Strong, who would spend more than a decade in Russia, proclaimed of Soviet schooling, “Their idea is modeled more on the Dewey ideas of education than on anything else we know in America.” Writing about Russian schools during the 1921 famine for *Progressive Education*, she suggested the hunger for knowledge almost seemed to surpass students’ physical hunger: “Even in those darkest days one thing was noticeable about the schools . . . The children might be hungry, they might be without pencils or books, but they were self-reliant little communities.”⁷⁷ “Self-reliance,” the Emersonian watchword, here obviates the need for pencils, books, or even food. Anticipating Il’in’s links between transforming the land and creating “new men and women,” Strong concludes:

Education becomes practical and vivid, the handmaid of immediate work. It loses in academic flavor; it gains in application to modern problems. Before the youth of Russia lies undeveloped the greatest stretch of territory on earth. Its mines and forests and rivers and farms challenge them; its hundred and thirty million peasants and nomad tribes speaking sixty different languages call to them. Out of this raw land and this backward people they are building the first socialist commonwealth in the world.⁷⁸

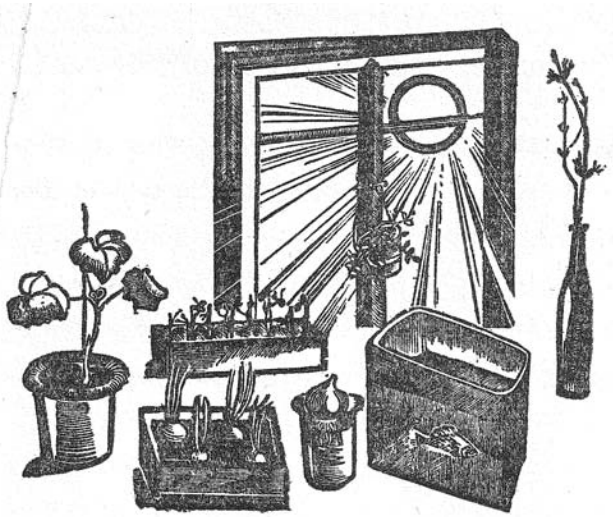
Dewey himself joined a chorus of voices echoing the phrase, “for the first time in history,” in their descriptions of Soviet education. What is really novel in Soviet education, he says in 1928, “is not . . . the idea of a dovetailing of school activities into out-of-school activities, but the fact that for the first time in history there is an educational system officially organized on the basis of this principle.”⁷⁹ Dewey’s “Impressions of Soviet Russia,” which he collected in a book along with other observations of “the revolutionary world” (including China, Mexico, and Turkey), helped crystallize a liberal consensus around the idea that Soviet Russia offered a potent laboratory—perhaps *the* potent laboratory—for the new education, as well as more general lessons for child welfare.⁸⁰ Even while acknowledging “a certain patriotic pride in noting how in many respects an initial impulse came from some progressive school in our country,” Dewey laments that the visitor from the United States “is at once

humiliated and stimulated to new endeavor to see how much more organically that idea is incorporated in the Russian system than in our own.” Indeed, he says, given popular assumptions about the “total lack of freedom” in the Soviet Union, “it is disconcerting . . . to find Russian school children much more democratically organized than are our own” and also trained “much more systematically . . . for later active participation in the self-direction of both local communities and industries.”⁸¹

At a time when Dewey’s ideas were having their most visible impact in the United States on a relatively small number of experimental private schools, his works were translated and widely read in the USSR, and he was received as a celebrity during his 1928 visit to Russia. All of this may have helped dispose him favorably to the Soviet system.⁸² But Dewey’s excitement went beyond educational activity: “One has the impression of movement, vitality, energy,” Dewey writes in his *Impressions*. “The people go about as if some mighty and oppressive load has been removed, as if they were newly awakened to the consciousness of released energies”⁸³ (see figure 4). As Engerman notes, Dewey “focused on Russia’s cultural transformations” and downplayed, or even dismissed the political ends toward which Russia’s pedagogical program was geared.⁸⁴ For Dewey—initially, at least—the most significant event was a “revolution of heart and mind,” and efforts to achieve a “popular cultivation, especially an esthetic one, such as the world has never known.” He and others assumed that such powerful energies would inevitably achieve higher ends than the Bolsheviks could have predicted.⁸⁵

Dewey’s positive impressions and the contradictions they gloss over speak to the distinctions between the process-oriented project of progressive education in the West and the politicized and increasingly ends-oriented project of Soviet education. As a Soviet teacher told a writer for *Progressive Education* in 1932, “We are not followers of free education . . . We feel that it is our duty to direct the child. We create an environment in which the child inevitably comes to the conclusions to which we want him to come.”⁸⁶

Although the more liberal educational policies implemented in the USSR in the 1920s, emphasizing educational opportunity, individual autonomy, and student initiative, were more in tune with the vision of U.S. reformers, dramatic changes instituted beginning in 1929 wedded schooling to the social and economic transformations called for under the Five-Year Plan. According to Kirschenbaum, “the conviction that cultural change required training children to be disciplined socialists replaced the vision of the rising generation naturally and spontaneously throwing off the weight of the past. The young child, like the worker, was no longer imagined as capable of building



V

NEW SCHOOLS FOR A NEW ERA

Figure 4. "New Schools for a New Era," in *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World*, by John Dewey (New York: New Republic, 1928). Picture supplied from a Russian schoolbook by Ernestine Evans.

the future on his or her own."⁸⁷ By 1931, "The Communist Party Central Committee repudiated a decade of experimentation by calling for a return to classroom-based instruction with a standardized curriculum, stable textbooks, regular examinations, and competitive grading." And by the mid-1930s, greater emphasis was placed on academic achievement, and on regurgitation rather than analysis. More broadly, the ideal of the "obedient" and "grateful" child replaced that of the autonomous child.⁸⁸

These changes prompted Dewey to retract his praises of Soviet schooling. As Engerman notes, "the very same issues that had excited Dewey—the connection between the schools and the economy—when carried to . . . [an] extreme ultimately led to the discrediting of professional educators and their schools."⁸⁹ But the initial excitement many felt in what Dewey called "an enormous psychological experiment in transforming the motives that inspire human conduct" points to the twinned desire that machines could reap na-

ture's abundance for human good and that human nature could be remade to bring joy in working for the collective. Writing in *The Nation* in 1932, radical theologian Harry Ward (who had close ties to the CP) notes, "Soviet educators are saying that the youth who have grown up since the revolution constitute a new type of person. They mean new not simply as contrasted with the pre-revolutionary Russian or older Party members, but with the rest of the world."⁹⁰ Such hopeful observations about the new person, or in Russian phraseology, the *novy chelovek*, a product of the revolution, resonated with Western fantasies of a New Generation, created through a modern psychology fitted to the industrial age.

Childhood and/as Utopia

The alternative to platitudes such as that expressed by Ward was speechlessness; this too was a common response to Russia. One repeated theme in Dewey's book is that words are inadequate to describe what he sees. "These remarks are doubtless too indefinite, too much at large to be illuminating," Dewey says at one point in his *Impressions*. In another attempt at description he falters, insisting: "I cannot convey it: I lack the necessary literary skill. But," he insists, "the net impression will always remain."⁹¹ Similar sentiments were also expressed in reviews of *NRP*. "One could do it justice only by endless quotation," explains Louis Fischer, Moscow correspondent for *The Nation* and at that time an admirer of Russia (as for others, it later became his "God that Failed");⁹² and Ernestine Evans, who supplied Dewey with pictures from Russian schoolbooks to illustrate his *Impressions*, found she could adequately describe neither *NRP* nor Russia itself: "I myself have never been able to explain anything about Russia to anybody," she laments in the *New York Herald Tribune*.⁹³ This inability to find words suggests a response that is more emotional than logical, a reaction to experience that is shaped as much by desire as by reality.

Tropes that run through writings by Western observers of Soviet child welfare and education share much with utopian fiction, a genre that itself shares elements with the nonfictional *NRP*, "a fairy story told in terms of iron, coal and wheat," as one review put it.⁹⁴ How fitting for a civilization that had not only purged fairy tales, but also, in theory, made them unnecessary. As Louis Fischer glibly proclaims, "what need is there of creating a world of myths and gnomes when the new society rising under their very eyes is so exciting, romantic and fascinating?"⁹⁵

It is appropriate that some of the most utopian ideas about Russia would be expressed through the lens of childhood. The child is a marker of hope (and fear), a symbol of possible futures. And the treatment of children seems a ready indicator of what is to come. Starting with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), nearly every utopian scheme, from those in literature to practical experiments, has included an educational component.⁹⁶ Robert Owen's New Harmony, founded in 1825, sponsored both the first kindergarten and the first community-supported public school in the United States. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's fictional *Herland* (1915), the entire society is child focused, with collective mothering and constant opportunities for education: "It was all education but no schooling," Gilman's narrator notes. From their earliest days, children in Herland are taught "a beautiful group feeling." Of Herland's babies the book's narrator remarks, "never did I see such sure-footed, steady-handed, clear-headed little things."⁹⁷

Gilman's socialist-feminist utopia, with children cared for communally and educated constantly, is not far afield from the portrait of Russian childhood in the accounts of some U.S. observers, although the dire poverty of Russian children would seem quite foreign in Herland. In his essay in *NG* on "The Child in Soviet Russia," Nearing proclaims, "Never have I seen a more engaging picture of happy childhood."⁹⁸ Il'in promises: "Healthy strong giants—red-cheeked and happy—such will be the new people."⁹⁹ But U.S. observers seemed to suggest that Russian children were already nearly there: healthy, happy, and looming large, if not quite physical giants. Watching children on their way to school in a remote corner of Georgia was for Nearing "an inspiring sight." The children "were clean. Their clothes were neat. Their faces shone as they romped and sang along the streets." Dewey himself proclaimed, "I have never seen anywhere in the world such a large proportion of happy and intelligently occupied children." And Lucy L. W. Wilson, writing the same year as Dewey, likewise insisted, "Nowhere else, except in progressive private schools and in experimental public schools of Germany, have I ever seen as large a proportion of capable, happy, and eager children."¹⁰⁰

Although in the early 1930s millions of ragged, hungry, homeless children still roamed Russia's streets, casualties of poverty, famine, and civil war, even these *besprizorniki* were a source of "deepest hope" to some U.S. observers because of their ability to survive, and because of Soviet efforts to deal with them.¹⁰¹ A hopeful vision of Russian childhood, especially in the era of the first Five-Year Plan, correlated with an optimistic vision of technology's ability to transform society in positive ways, and found expression in paeans to "new"

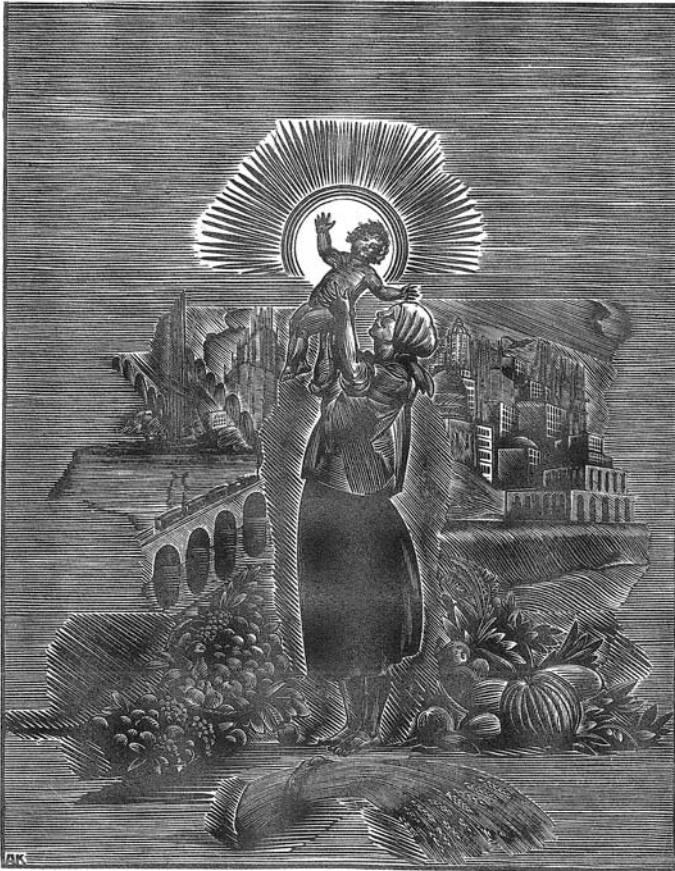
(as opposed to “old”) Russia in both radical and liberal outlets where the new Russia represents “the apotheosis of the child”¹⁰² (figure 5).

Though the constructivist project was infused with utopian energies, Steiner argues that it inevitably ended in the dehumanization we now associate with Stalinism: “the glorification . . . of the machine, of the diagram, the plan, of headlong forward motion, could not help but bring about a devaluation of simple, old human values.”¹⁰³ Signs of this devaluation were widespread in the Soviet Union by the early 1930s, but from the perspective of Depression America, the seeming logic of Soviet planning, social welfare, state support of the arts—and, above all, a commitment to children—could seem compelling. Viewed more generously, the whole reason that some in the United States looked to Russia was that they could still imagine the possibility that modernity’s promises might one day be realized; indeed, Christina Kiaer argues, “the Russian avant-garde contained many lines, the most promising of which could have led toward a very different kind of socialist object and socialist subject.”¹⁰⁴

Utopia and Dystopia

Dewey’s final assessment in his *Impressions* may have foreshadowed his ultimate disenchantment: although he says the Soviet “experiment” is “by all means the most interesting one going on upon our globe,” he nonetheless admits, “for selfish reasons I prefer seeing it tried in Russia rather than in my own country.”¹⁰⁵ *NRP* appeared on the scene in the United States at a pivotal moment: within a few years, the consensus about Russia would shift so dramatically that nearly every text under discussion in this article has been forgotten, reminders of an embarrassing episode in American liberalism. Indeed, it is precisely the adulation of Russia that makes many of the supposedly modern, advanced views expressed in *NG* seem outdated today. And, in fact, several critical reviews of that book focused precisely on its predominantly positive portrait of Russian childhood. “The cure [the book’s contributors] offer, the adoption of the Soviet system, is its own refutation,” notes one reviewer, who, like others, singled out for praise Malinowski’s essay, which dismisses the viability of “collective motherhood” and proclaims that “the so-called freeing of children in the Soviet Republic has assumed catastrophic dimensions.”¹⁰⁶

Similarly, although negative reviews of *NRP* were far outweighed by positive ones, they provide evidence of a heated debate among liberals on the subject of Soviet Russia. Some commentary hints at the knee-jerk reactions of right-wingers (who found signs of “Bolshevism” in all forms of social welfare and



THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE CHILD

accused the Soviets of “nationalizing women” and “openly promoting free love”).¹⁰⁷ However, there is much in the commentary surrounding *NRP* that presciently anticipates the liberal consensus vis-à-vis Russia that would gain traction with the Moscow Trials of the late 1930s and the Nazi-Soviet pact, and that would solidify after World War II. “[*NRP*] reveals a strange insensitivity to the foreordained creation of a race of robots,” notes an unsigned *New York Times* review. “The worship of mere bigness was never more fervent than in these pages.”¹⁰⁸ A review in *Bookman* (also unsigned) begins by echoing claims that the book is “without propaganda or political bias” but then begins to call into question the “scientific and industrial utopia” that Il’in describes: “It is a beautiful, fascinating story, told with a gentleness that catches the childish mind. Apparently, it matters little that the children who read this story of

Figure 5.

“The Apotheosis of the Child,” from *The Survey* 64.9 (1930). Image is one of a series of woodcuts by Russian artist A. Krafchenko included with an article on child welfare in Russia. Other images contrast “old” and “new” Russia, for example, pairing images depicting children’s play before and after the revolution: 1. “In old Russia it was only the child of wealthy parents who had a place to play.” 2. “Playleaders and children now fill the parks, which were once private estates.”

the Five-Year Plan will emerge from school to find themselves along with their elders the slaves, not of machines or improvident capitalists, but of a small group of Communists firmly seated in Moscow.”¹⁰⁹

In contrast, fans of *NRP* often failed to connect Il’in’s portrait of an idealized future to the

current situation in Russia, or else suggested that Il’in’s choice of emphasis (“romance” rather than “drama”) was understandable: “Here is hardly a word on the strain, the sacrifice, the heart-searching and heart-burning that this sensational crusade for a modernized and socialized Russia has imposed on the population,” Maurice Hindus notes in the *Saturday Review of Literature*. If, as Hindus says, Il’in’s book tells little about how the plan actually works, Hindus nonetheless praises its “charm,” calling *NRP* “a prose poem of which Turgenev might have been proud.”¹¹⁰

In fact, a careful reading of *NRP* does hint at the “drama” Hindus says is missing. Framed by a discussion of the need for collective ownership in order to achieve socialism, Il’in describes “village capitalists, the kulaks” as “the chief obstacle on the way to socialism.” His portrait of collectivization’s benefits concludes: “The Revolution first removed the manufacturers and landowners. Now we are setting ourselves the task of disarming another class—the kulaks, the capitalists of the village.” An English version published in Russia in 1932 uses even stronger language, replacing “disarming” with “liquidating.”¹¹¹

Il'in's portraits of Taylorist efficiency are, likewise, rather chilling in certain passages: "We can force Nature to obey. We can also organize labor so that all chance factors will be eliminated," he writes. In another chapter he notes, "There will be no mistakes. A definite task is assigned each machine and a definite task for work: so many minutes, so many seconds. To each detail a definite time on the road, a definite schedule of arrival and departure. . . . There will be no mistakes. Six minutes to the tractor, not seven and not eight, but just six."¹¹² As Kiaer points out, there were two sides to the constructivist vision: "the dream of the transparent relay between human subject and socialist object that eliminates alienation but redeems the desires lodged in the past for the socialist future; and the nightmare transparency of the rationalized public sphere of total control and visibility."¹¹³

Most utopian images of Soviet Russia coming from Western observers and commentators were articulated before the extent of Stalinist brutality was evident, but the pattern was already there for those who wished to see it. At the same time, official efforts made on behalf of children's health, education, welfare, and artistic development suggested the possibility of socialism in the future. Il'in's modernist utopia fed the collective fantasy of a "new generation" embraced by both U.S. moderns and Bolshevik revolutionaries. The new society presaged by Il'in demanded a new person: the product of "rational psychology"; of an enlightened welfare state that valued women's reproductive work and their work as laborers; and of a practical, meaningful education. This education would provide tools for harnessing technology for the good of society, aesthetic appreciation, and a strong group feeling. It was this hopeful vision—a vision never realized in Russia or anywhere else—that prompted many intelligent people to judge the Bolsheviks by their efforts "to develop a race of children who will be their own superiors," while neglecting the larger costs paid for such efforts and, especially, the growing willingness to sacrifice the individual for the sake of the collective.¹¹⁴

Despite criticisms of the Soviet regime following the 1936–1938 show trials, at the New York World's Fair in 1939, the Soviet pavilion—where visitors could marvel at Russia's central place in the "World of Tomorrow"—was the most popular exhibit.¹¹⁵ And during the wartime U.S.-Soviet alliance (1941–1945), portraits of brave Russian children were staples of U.S. journalism and children's literature.¹¹⁶ By the late 1940s, however, all had changed: Counts himself published several scathing critiques of Soviet education (such as *The Country of the Blind: The Soviet System of Mind Control* [1949]), and in many instances "civic education" programs became little more than courses in "Americanism versus Communism," with Soviet Russia representing the great threat to civilization.

It is hard to fathom that the “new Russia” once produced widespread excitement and even admiration in the United States, given the cold war lens through which this moment is inevitably refracted. Both the new Russian child and the giant industrial enterprises undertaken during the Five-Year Plan were powerful icons of modernity, marking both new possibility as well as the uneasy tension between collectivity and individuality that lay at the heart of the modernist project. The future imagined through Russian children and giant machines coincided with—and enabled—a hopeful vision for the modern U.S. child and, by extension, for modernity itself.

The challenges of living in the modern world have only multiplied since the 1930s, and the totalitarianisms of the past seventy-five years have produced necessary skepticism about utopia. In Soviet Russia millions died and millions more suffered, all in the name of achieving socialism. Believers in that system were thus implicated in one of the great horrors of the twentieth century. But the collective fantasy that linked hopes for a “new generation” to the “new Russia” represents more than just the dangers of naïveté. It also recalls faith in the possibility that society could be remade in more enriching, equitable terms, that children could be raised to be citizens of the world, that a nation’s productive capacity could be harnessed for the benefit of the masses. True utopia exists only in fiction. But perhaps understanding the utopian impulses of an earlier generation, while cognizant of the grave limitations of their vision, can be instructive for the future.

Notes

- I thank Dan Birkholz, Russ Castronovo, Carolyn Eastman, Karl Hagstrom-Miller, Curtis Marez, Jeff Meikle, Rebecca Onion, Shirley Thompson, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful feedback on this essay.
1. The book was the number five seller in “general books” between June 15 and July 14, 1931, and was tenth on the nonfiction best-seller list for 1931. *New York Times*, July 30, 1931, 22; January 21, 1932, 21.
 2. Lodge was an assistant at the International Institute, where Counts was associate director.
 3. Nora Beust, “Books for Young America,” *Progressive Education* 9.7 (1932): 536. Ernestine Evans, “A Most Passionate Primer,” *New York Herald Tribune Books*, May 3 1931, 5. “New Russia’s Primer,” *The Journal of the National Education Association* 20 (1931): 283.
 4. On the significance of Il’in and *NRP* in a Russian context, see John McCannon, “Technological and Scientific Utopias in Soviet Children’s Literature, 1921–1932,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 34.4 (2001): 153–69.
 5. Evans, “A Most Passionate Primer”; Stuart Chase, “The Engineer as Poet,” *New Republic* 67 (1931): 24–25; Louis Fischer, “Soviet Children and American Adults,” *The Nation* 133.3445 (1935): 71–72; Review of *NRP*, *American Political Science Review* 25 (August 1931): 784.
 6. George F. Kennan quoted in David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 5.

7. George S. Counts, "A Word to the American Reader," in M. Il'in, *New Russia's Primer: The Story of the Five-Year Plan* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), viii; Christine Stansell, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 321.
8. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), xiv.
9. The term "modernist utopia" is from McCannon, "Technological and Scientific Utopias," 154.
10. Morris Ernst, *America's Primer* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931). Reviewers said the book paled in comparison to its Russian predecessor. See, for instance, Evan Clark, "Uncomfortable and Thrilling," *New York Herald Tribune*, August 23, 1931. Clipping in Morris Ernst papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, Box 3. Theodore Roethke was also in negotiation in 1934 to write a schoolbook about a planned community in Michigan "on the order of the Russian Primer for use in the schools." Allan Seeger, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 80–84.
11. McCannon, "Technological and Scientific Utopias," 161; Il'in, *NRP*, 1.
12. Il'in, *NRP*, 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 28, 97.
14. *Ibid.*, 12.
15. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
16. Counts insists that "there is no expectation that the translation will be used by children" (ix–x).
17. Several works on U.S. interest in Russia do comment on children and childhood and/or education, although this is not at the center of their analysis. See David Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore*, and "John Dewey and the Soviet Union: Pragmatism Meets Revolution," *Modern Intellectual History* 3.1 (2006): 33–63. See also Lewis S. Feuer, "American Travelers to the Soviet Union, 1917–1932: The Formation of a Component of New Deal Ideology," *American Quarterly* 24 (1962): 119–49; and Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*, 4th ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 141.
18. The U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA), established in 1919, held up the USSR as a model in many realms of practice, and its publications often negatively contrasted U.S. education and child welfare to those of the Soviet Union. The CPUSA also promoted Il'in's books in its publications (reviewing them and selling several through the New Masses book service) and sponsored translations (as with Il'in's *How the Automobile Learned to Run* [1945], published by International Publishers' Young World Books series for children). Still, prior to the mid-1940s the CPUSA had no monopoly on fascination with Russia in the United States, and unless identified as such, most of the figures in this essay were liberals or small "c" communists rather than CP members, and their putative audience was the liberal mainstream.
19. Undated clipping in the *New York Sun* in Calverton's papers (in New York Public Library) lists *NG* high among nonfiction best sellers in New York. Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 93–99. Henry James Forman, review of *Sex in Civilization*, *New York Times Book Review*, June 4, 1929, 8.
20. Calverton also attempted to recruit as contributors psychiatrists Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Alfred Adler; educator John Dewey; physician Arnold Gessell; and also Judge Ben Lindsay, among others. Correspondence in Calverton papers.
21. George Britt, review of *NG* in *New York Telegram*, April 24, 1930; Warner M. Hubbard, "Authors of Ultra-Liberal Group Mix Strong Medicine for Parents," *Sioux City [Iowa] Journal*, May 18, 1930. Scrapbook, Calverton papers, page numbers not visible.
22. V. F. Calverton and Samuel D. Schmalhausen, preface to *The New Generation: The Intimate Problems of Modern Parents and Children*, ed. V. F. Calverton and Samuel D. Schmalhausen, 7–14 (New York: Macaulay Company, 1930), 13. Italics in original.
23. Agnes De Lima, "The Dilemma of Modern Parenthood," in *The New Generation*, ed. Calverton and Schmalhausen, 465–79, esp. 471, 474.
24. *Ibid.*, 472.
25. Agnes De Lima, *Our Enemy the Child* (New York: New Republic, 1925), 241.
26. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore*, 181.
27. Nearing was a member of the Communist Party in the 1920s, but was too independent and was expelled from the party (and simultaneously resigned) in 1930.

28. V. F. Calverton, "The Illegitimate Child," in *The New Generation*, ed. Calverton and Schmalhausen, 189–206; Bertrand Russell, introduction to *The New Generation*, ed. Calverton and Schmalhausen, 21; T. Swann Harding, "What Price Parenthood," in *The New Generation*, ed. Calverton and Schmalhausen, 330–56.
29. Ruth Benedict, "The Family as Scapegoat," review of *NG*, *New York Herald Tribune Books*, April 27, 1930, 3.
30. Arthur Wallace Calhoun, "The Child Mind as a Social Product," in *The New Generation*, ed. Calverton and Schmalhausen, 74–87, quotes on 87.
31. Lisa Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (London, New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), 2, 5.
32. *Ibid.*, 20.
33. Isadora Duncan, "I Will Go to Russia," in *Isadora Speaks*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1981), 63.
34. Nadezhda Krupskaya and Helen Keller, *Children at Work and Play in School Communes* (Chicago: Friends of Soviet Russia, 1923), n.p.
35. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, 30.
36. Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia: 1890–1991* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 8, 61.
37. Jennie A. Stevens, "Children of the Revolution: Soviet Russia's Homeless Children (*Besprizorniki*) in the 1920s," *Russian History* 9, pts. 2–3 (1982): 246.
38. Kelly, *Children's World*, 93.
39. See note 88 below.
40. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore*, 5.
41. Floyd Dell, *Were You Ever a Child?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), 94–95. On Bellamy see Cecilia Tichi, *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, and Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 105–15.
42. Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 2.
43. Evgeny Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades: Revolutionary Artists and the Making of Early Soviet Children's Books* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 7.
44. McCannon, "Technological and Scientific Utopias," 155; Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades*, 111–69.
45. Ernestine Evans, "Russian Children and Their Books," *Asia* 31 (November 1931): 686.
46. Thomas Woody, "Children's Literature in Soviet Russia," *School and Society* 30.763 (August 10, 1929): 186. Information on Woody from Engerman, *Modernization*, 181.
47. Noel Carrington, "A New Deal in 'Juveniles,'" *The Junior Bookshelf* 6.2 (1942): 41–44. Mary Reed, educational consultant for Bank Street Books (the first Little Golden Books), was part of an educational delegation to the Soviet Union in the late 1920s.
48. Vera Fediaevsky, "'Here and Now' Stories in Russia—an Experiment," *Elementary School Journal* 26.4 (1925): 278–89. Mitchell "was listed as a sponsor of the United States Soviet Friendship Celebration at the Madison Square Garden in New York City on November 16, 1944." FBI file for Franklin Folsom, obtained by author.
49. See Nathalie op de Beeck, "'The First Picture Book for Modern Children': Mary Liddell's *Little Machinery* and the Fairy Tale of Modernity," *Children's Literature* 32 (2004): 41–83.
50. Katerina Clark, "Little Heroes and Big Deeds: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan," in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (1978; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 189–206. McCannon, "Technological and Scientific Utopias," 161. On reception of other Il'in books, see, for example, Beust, "Books for Young America."
51. Il'in, *NRP*, 89.
52. Margaret Bourke-White, *Eyes on Russia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 23, 56. The text, a page in from the photograph and easy for someone flipping through the book to miss, explains that the woman was weeping because Bourke-White had chosen to photograph her rather than some pretty girls on the floor. Ironically, then, hers were tears of vanity, not joy in socialist construction. *Eyes on Russia*, 55.
53. Maurice Hindus, preface to *Eyes on Russia*, by Bourke-White, 14.

54. Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 192; Margaret Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 95.
55. Smith, *Making the Modern*, 85.
56. Thomas P. Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870–1970* (New York: Viking, 1989), 259.
57. Il'in, *NRP*, 74–75.
58. Smith, *Making the Modern*, 54.
59. Hughes, *American Genesis*, 259.
60. Hughes, *American Genesis*, 249; Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 182.
61. Paul Wood, "The Politics of the Avant Garde," in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant Garde, 1915–1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 20.
62. Ernest Sutherland Bates, "We Americans: A Study in Infantilism," in *Our Neurotic Age*, ed. Samuel D. Schmalhausen (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1932), 438.
63. Chase, "The Engineer as Poet," 24; Fischer, "Soviet Children and American Adults."
64. Il'in, *NRP*, 162.
65. Fischer, "Soviet Children and American Adults," 72. Counts, "A Word to the American Reader," ix.
66. The best source on the development of progressive education remains Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961). In public schools experimental programs were often pragmatic attempts at efficiency and cost saving, as in the Gary plan's out-of-classroom projects that made it possible to accommodate more students with fewer classrooms.
67. Scott Nearing, *The New Education: A Review of Progressive Educational Movements of the Day* (Chicago: Row, Peterson & Company, 1915), 5.
68. Scott Nearing, "Why American Teachers Do Not Think," *Modern Quarterly* 2.3 (1924–25): 223.
69. John Dewey, "How Much Freedom in the Schools," *New Republic* 63 (July 9, 1930): 204; L. Zilliacus, "An Analysis of the New Education," *New Era* 11 (1930): 172.
70. Esther Caukin, "Education and International Relations," *Progressive Education* 7.6 (1930): 313. Also see Wyatt Rawson, ed., *The Freedom We Seek: A Survey of the Social Implications of the New Education* (London: New Education Fellowship, 1937), introduction by Fred Clarke, x.
71. De Lima, *Our Enemy the Child*, 238.
72. Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, 248. "The New Education Fellowship," *World Unity* 7 (1931): 409.
73. Cremin, *Transformation of the School*, 21–34.
74. Gerald S. Craig, "Science in Russian Elementary Schools," *Science Education* 16.1 (October 1931): 3.
75. Kelly, *Children's World*, 70.
76. Thomas Ewing, *The Teachers of Stalinism: Policy, Practice, and Power in Soviet Schools of the 1930s* (New York: P. Lang, 2002), 5. Even when officially sanctioned, such progressive efforts were often not successful. In addition to constraints imposed by lack of resources, some parents and teachers resisted both the "project method" and granting what appeared to be excessive autonomy to children. Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse, Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917–1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
77. Anna Louise Strong, *For the First Time in History: Two Years of Russia's New Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 210; Strong, "Education in Modern Russia," *Progressive Education* 1.3 (1924): 158–59.
78. Strong, "Education in Modern Russia," 159.
79. John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World, Mexico—China—Turkey* (New York: New Republic, 1929), 84.
80. *The Survey* described a parent-education program in New York City as "A Five-Year Plan for Parents." *The Survey* 62 (January 15, 1932): 433.
81. Dewey, *Impressions*, 106–7.
82. "John Dewey in Russia," *The Survey* 61 (December 15, 1928): 348–49.
83. Dewey, *Impressions*, 4.
84. Engerman, "John Dewey and the Soviet Union," 43, 51.

85. Dewey, *Impressions*, 7–8, 31, 252, 58, 130. Also see Lucy L. W. Wilson, “The New Schools in the New Russia,” *Progressive Education* 5.3 (1928): 251. Miriam Finn Scott, “Russia’s Children,” *Woman’s Journal* 14.9 (1929): 7.
86. Gretchen M. Switzer, “The Red October School,” *Progressive Education* 9.5 (1932): 358.
87. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, 162.
88. Ewing, *Teachers of Stalinism*, 7–8; Kelly, *Children’s World*, 93. Also see Gail Warhofskey Lapidus, “Educational Strategies and Cultural Revolution,” in *Cultural Revolution in Russia*, 78–104. There are articles in U.S. educational journals that acknowledge these changes. See, for instance, William Bagley, “The Soviets Proceed to the Liquidation of American Educational Theory,” *School and Society* 37 (January 14, 1933): 62–63; “Changes in the Soviet Educational System,” *School and Society* 42 (December 14, 1935): 836–37.
89. Engerman, “John Dewey and the Soviet Union,” 48.
90. Dewey, *Impressions*, 113; Harry F. Ward, “Soviet Russia—Land of Youth,” *The Nation* 135.3500 (August 3, 1932): 104.
91. Dewey, *Impressions*, 48, 28.
92. Fischer, “Soviet Children and American Adults,” 72. See Fischer’s essay in *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (1950; New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 196–228.
93. Evans, “A Most Passionate Primer,” 5.
94. “New Russia’s Primer by M. Il’in,” *Bookman*, 544.
95. Fischer, “Soviet Children and American Adults,” 71.
96. Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, and John Stephens, “New Social Orders: Reconceptualizing Family and Community in Utopian Fiction,” *Papers: Explorations into Children’s Literature* 15.2 (2005): 6–21; David Halpin, “Utopianism and Education: The Legacy of Thomas More,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 49.3 (2001): 299–315.
97. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1998), 91–92.
98. Scott Nearing, “The Child in Soviet Russia,” in *The New Generation*, ed. Calverton and Schmalhausen, 232–42, quote on 232.
99. Il’in, *NRP*, 150.
100. Nearing, “The Child in Soviet Russia,” 232; Dewey, *Impressions*, 28; Scott, “Russia’s Children,” 8; Wilson, “The New Schools in the New Russia,” 254.
101. Agnes Smedley, “The ‘Wild’ Children of Russia,” *The Nation* 128 (1929): 437. For the Soviets, the *besprizorniki* represented “the chaos, anarchy, and breakdown of the new postrevolutionary society.” Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Society Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 89. Also see Stevens, “Children of the Revolution.”
102. Mabel C. Phillips, “Russia’s Drive toward Health,” *The Survey* 64.9 (1930): 388–93+.
103. Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades*, 175.
104. Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 264.
105. Dewey, *Impressions*, 11.
106. George Henry Payne, “The Needs of the Child,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 6 (May 31, 1930), 1093; Bronislaw Malinowski, “Parenthood: The Basis of Social Structure,” in *The New Generation*, ed. Calverton and Schmalhausen, 113–68, quotes on 134, 114.
107. G. M. Godden, “The Soviet Child,” *The Catholic World* 134 (December 1931): 348–51. More generally, see Kim Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2001).
108. “Making Little Robots in Soviet Russia,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1931, 66. In contrast, see “Primer Expounds Soviet 5-Year Plan,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1931, 7.
109. “New Russia’s Primer by M. Il’in,” *Bookman* 73 (July 1931): 543–34.
110. Maurice Hindus, “Modern Russia,” *Saturday Review of Literature* 7 (May 16, 1931): 828.
111. Il’in, *NRP*, 123–24. Count’s translation here appears faithful to the original Russian-language edition of the book, *Rasskaz o Velikom Plane* (Moscow: State Publishing House, 1930): the last sentence of the above quotation, in the Russian edition, reads, “Teper’ My Stavim svoej zadachej razoruzhit’ drugoj klass—klass derevenskih kapitalistov, kulakov.” The 1932 English-language edition published in the Soviet Union, probably for English-language instruction (it has an English-Russian glossary in the back), translates the word *razoruzhit’*—which my dictionary translates as “disarming or dismantling”—as “liquidating.” (Now we are setting ourselves the task of liquidating another class—the kulaks, the

- capitalists of the village.”) The slight change may point to the hardening of Stalinist orthodoxy. M. Il'in, *The Story of the Five-Year Plan* (Moscow: Co-Operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the USSR, 1932), 123.
112. Il'in, *NRP*, 107, 95.
113. Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 261, 263.
114. Scott, “Russia’s Children,” 9.
115. Anthony Swift, “The Soviet World of Tomorrow at the New York’s World Fair, 1939,” *Russian Review* 57.3 (July 1998): 364–79.
116. Examples of children’s books include Henry Felsen, *Struggle Is Our Brother* (New York: Dutton, 1943); and Vera Edelstadt, *Young Fighters of the Soviets* (New York: Knopf, 1944).