

***Deaf in the USSR:
'Defect' and the New Soviet Person,
1917-1991***

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Declaration

I, Claire Louise Shaw, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis examines the history of the deaf in the Soviet Union from the February Revolution of 1917 to the fall of communism in 1991. Its primary goal is to assess the impact of disability on Soviet programmes of identity and the fashioning of a Soviet subjectivity and selfhood. From the birth of the Soviet state, the nascent deaf community sought to cast off the stigma, marginality and legal restrictions of their pre-revolutionary status and re-forge themselves as Soviet people. Deaf individuals adopted and transformed Soviet values, such as collectivism, humanism, labour and initiative, in an ongoing attempt to find their place within Soviet society. This utopian drive for equality and inclusion was tempered, however, by competing and sometimes contradictory understandings of the deaf: as objects of state beneficence and welfare, and as a separate community defined (both positively and negatively) by their “defect”.

The thesis explores the activities of state bodies in the spheres of deaf education, labour and culture as well as the changing medical and educational theories of deafness, but its primary focus is the agency of deaf individuals, including how they constituted their own individual and collective selfhood. Its main source base is the archive of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf, the organisational body run by the deaf from 1926 to the present, alongside archival sources from other state institutions (the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR and the Trades Union) as well as printed sources (deaf journalism, literature, theatre and art). On this basis, the thesis argues that a unique deaf-Soviet identity developed in the Soviet Union, at times in opposition to state action, but firmly embedded within the ideological framework of the Soviet utopian project as a whole.

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Note on Transliteration and Terminology

Russian words have been transliterated according to the Library of Congress scheme and are italicised in the text.

The Russian word ‘deaf-mute’ (*glukhonemoi*), in adjective and noun form, was in common use for much of the Soviet period. I use the term when translating from original source material; elsewhere, I use the terms ‘deaf’ (*glukhoi*), ‘hard-of-hearing’ (*tugoukhii*) and ‘hearing’ (*slyshashii*). Although it has become the convention in Western scholarship to capitalise the adjective ‘Deaf’, this has political connotations specific to the Western (and particularly American) deaf community, and as such I do not follow that convention here.

Glossary and Abbreviations

artel	work group
<i>aktiv</i>	group of activists
APN	Academy of Pedagogical Sciences
d.	<i>delo</i> , archival file
f.	<i>fond</i> , archival fund (collection)
<i>fizkul'turniki</i>	participants in 'physical culture' activities
FZU	Factory-Plant School
GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation
GTO	'Ready for Labour and Defence', a state-sponsored physical-culture programme
<i>internat</i>	boarding school
<i>ispolkom</i>	executive committee
<i>kolkhoz</i>	(plural <i>kolkhozy</i>) collective farm
Komsomol	Communist Union of Young People
<i>komsomolets</i>	(plural <i>komsomol'tsy</i>) member of the Komsomol
<i>krai</i>	territory
<i>likbez</i>	literacy class
Minsobes	Ministry of Social Welfare (<i>previously</i> Narkomsobes)
Minzdrav	Ministry of Health (<i>previously</i> People's Commissariat of Health)
Mintrud	Ministry of Labour (<i>previously</i> People's Commissariat of Labour)
Minpros	Ministry of Enlightenment (<i>previously</i> People's Commissariat of Enlightenment)
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs
Narkomsobes	People's Commissariat of Social Welfare (<i>later</i> Minsobes)
Narkomzdrav	People's Commissariat of Health (<i>later</i> Minzdrav)
Narkomtrud	People's Commissariat of Labour (<i>later</i> Mintrud)
Narkompros	People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (<i>later</i> Minpros)

<i>oblast'</i>	region
op.	<i>opis</i> , inventory
<i>Osoaviakhim</i>	'Defence, Aviation and Chemical', a voluntary defence organisation
<i>profsoiuz</i>	trade union
<i>raion</i>	district
<i>rabfak</i>	workers' faculty at an educational establishment
RGANI	Russian State Archive of Contemporary History
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Social and Political History
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic
SEER	Slavonic and East European Review
<i>sovkhos</i>	(plural <i>sovkhozy</i>) state farm
Sovnarkom	Soviet of People's Deputies
SPON	Social and Legal Protection of Minors (department under Narkompros)
UPM	Educational-Industrial Workshop, subordinate to VOG (<i>later</i> UPP)
UPP	Educational-Industrial Enterprise, subordinate to VOG (<i>previously</i> UPM)
<i>VES</i>	<i>V edinom stroiu (In a United Rank)</i> VOG magazine, 1972-present
VIKO	All-Union Industrial-Consumer Unification of Invalids
VOG	All-Russian Unification of Deaf-Mutes <i>later</i> All-Russian Society of Deaf-Mutes <i>later</i> All-Russian Society of the Deaf
VSG	All-Russian Union of Deaf-Mutes
VSNKh	Supreme Soviet of the Economy
VTsSPS	All-Union Central Soviet of Professional Unions (Trades Union)
VUZ	Higher Educational Establishment

Introduction

We do our deeds in silence,
And our deeds speak for us.
Ivan Isaev¹

Dvoe (The Two), a short film from 1965 by the director Mikhail Bogin, opens in the bustling streets of a nameless Soviet city.² A music student, Serezha, is walking home from rehearsals at the conservatory of music when he accidentally knocks into a young woman, Natasha. His verbose and witty apologies are met with nothing but an enigmatic smile in response, and she walks on. Intrigued by her beauty – and her silence – he follows her across town, making a series of fruitless attempts to provoke her into speaking to him. The reason for her reticence soon becomes clear. On the steps of a theatre, she stops to chat to a friend, expressing herself in vibrant sign language. Time freezes. In an instant, Serezha understands: Natasha is deaf.

From its opening scenes, *Dvoe* plunges the viewer into the everyday world of the Soviet deaf community. Natasha is a member of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf (*Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, or VOG), and subscribes to its monthly magazine, *Zhizn' glukhikh (Life of the Deaf)*, a poster for which adorns the front door of her flat. In the daytime she studies acrobatics at the State Circus School, and at night she operates the lights at the Theatre of Sign and Gesture, the professional Soviet deaf theatre founded in Moscow in 1957. Natasha communicates in sign language with her deaf friends, and with Serezha through lip-reading or written Russian on scraps of paper torn from his book of musical scores. The film revels in her ‘otherness’ and the exoticism of her community, hidden in plain sight within the city Serezha thought he knew. Yet at the same time, as Bogin himself was keen to

¹ Ivan Isaev, *Mnogogolos'e tishiny: Iz istoriia glukhikh Rossii* (Moscow, 1996), p. 80.

² *Dvoe*, directed by Mikhail Bogin, 1965, USSR. The film was shot in Riga, but aspects of the screenplay, such as the scenes shot in the Theatre of Sign and Gesture, situate the action firmly in Moscow.

stress, the film also reveals the commonalities between the two young people, especially the uniquely Soviet identity that they both share. As they get to know each other, Serezha and Natasha discover their mutual interest in the arts, their similar ambitions and experiences. She comes to see his chamber orchestra play, and he attends a performance by the Theatre. ‘Above all’, Bogin commented, ‘we wanted to tell on screen of the spiritual community of Soviet people, of genuine human dignity and humanism’.³

According to deaf reviewers, Bogin’s film ‘vividly and accurately told of our society, which offers people all possibilities for the highest and fullest development of their creative strengths’.⁴ Yet despite this positive interpretation, the film is not without its ambiguities. Whilst the relationship between Serezha and Natasha points to a shared Soviet identity, Natasha and her deaf friends are far from integrated into the wider Soviet community. Their reliance on sign language actively prevents interaction with hearing people. Similarly, the reaction of certain hearing individuals to deaf characters is telling: in a later scene, some young men try to get the attention of two of Natasha’s friends (using the same chat-up lines as Serezha had used on Natasha) but, on realising that the pair are deaf, they turn away in disgust. It is not even clear if the relationship between the two central characters is ultimately successful. The final scenes show alternating shots of Serezha and Natasha walking separately through a park: whether they are walking towards or away from each other is a matter of interpretation.

³ Mikhail Bogin, cited in V. Baulin and I. Razdorskii, ‘Dvoe’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 18, no. 7 (1965), p. 13. *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, published in various forms throughout the Soviet period, is one of the central sources used in this thesis. Founded as an organisational newspaper in 1924 under the auspices of the Deaf-Mute Section under VIKO, it was re-launched in 1933 as a fortnightly magazine under VTsSPS, the central body of the trades union. Publication was suspended in 1941, on the eve of the Second World War, and not resumed until 1957, at which point the magazine was re-launched as the monthly *Zhizn’ glukhikh* under the All-Russian Society of the Deaf (VOG). In 1972, the magazine was renamed *V edinom stroiu* (*In a United Rank*). The referencing for this source follows the pattern established by the magazine itself. From 1924 to 1933 it is treated as a newspaper and referenced by date. 1933 is considered its foundation as a magazine (*zhurnal*), and volume numbers are counted from this date, regardless of the pause in publication or the change in name: thus the first volume of *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, published in 1957, is referenced as volume 10, and the first volume of *V edinom stroiu* is referenced as volume 25. The newspaper only provides the first initial and surname of its authors, instead of the usual name and patronymic: as such, unless the author can be identified from other documentation, they are referenced in this manner throughout this thesis.

⁴ Baulin and Razdorskii, ‘Dvoe’, p. 13.

Bogin's film thus portrayed deaf people as both Soviet and un-Soviet, engaged in and distanced from the wider Soviet community. It is this tension – between inclusion and exclusion, equality and difference – in the lives and identities of Soviet deaf people that forms the central focus of this thesis. It examines the history of the deaf in the Soviet Union from the February Revolution of 1917 to the collapse of the Soviet state in 1991, situating the experience of deaf people within the broader framework of Soviet programmes of identity and the fashioning of a Soviet subjectivity and selfhood. Using sources from the All-Russian Society of the Deaf, an organisational body run by the deaf from 1926 to the present day, alongside institutional archives, deaf journalism, literature, theatre and art, it traces deaf engagement with the Soviet project to remake man and society in its various incarnations throughout the Soviet era. It argues that a unique deaf-Soviet identity developed in the Soviet Union, at times in opposition to state action or distanced from hearing Soviet society, but always firmly embedded within the ideological framework of the Soviet utopian project as a whole.

Soviet Deafness

Deafness, referred to in Soviet parlance as a 'defect' (*defekt*), took on particular meanings in the Soviet context. Understandings of deafness became intimately bound up with Bolshevik ideology and the ideals of the communist experiment. From the moment of its creation, the Soviet state represented an ongoing transformative project, through which the raw human material of a 'backward', peasant country was to be forged anew as a classless, egalitarian, and ultimately communist, society. The individual was viewed as plastic, able to be moulded into the revolutionary ideal of the 'New Soviet Person', the rational, conscious and collectivist worker in whose name power had been seized. In popular culture, this ideal individual was often manifested physically, embodied in the healthy, muscular workers and plump children of Soviet novels, films, posters and parades. Soviet individuals were expected to work to remake themselves in the mould of these Soviet heroes. Yet, within these utopian dreams, it was unclear what the consequences would be if an individual was physically flawed. What impact did the disabled or 'defective' body have on a person's ability to become a New Soviet

Person? This question has particular significance in understanding both the nature of the ideal of selfhood perpetuated by the Soviet Union, and the techniques of population politics employed to achieve it: recent studies of the treatment of deaf people in Nazi Germany, for example, including their sterilisation and murder by the state, have shed new light on National Socialist theories of heredity and genetics and their implementation in practice.⁵

Deafness occupied an ambiguous role in the Soviet Union. Not in itself incapacitating (or even visible), deafness did not preclude physical fitness or labour, key aspects of the theoretical make-up of the New Soviet Person. In fact, as the key Soviet theorist of deafness, Lev Semenovich Vygotskii, was to point out in 1924, ‘as a labour apparatus, as a human machine, the body of a deaf-mute barely differs from the body of a normal person and, consequently, a deaf person retains all the fullness of physical possibilities, bodily development, the acquisition of skills and labour abilities’.⁶ As an ‘invisible’ disability, deafness did not prevent an individual from wielding a hammer or working a metal lathe; nor, as the decades passed, did it impede deaf participation in the symbolic rituals of Soviet life, such as the May Day parades on Red Square.

Although the deaf might blend into the Soviet crowd, their hearing loss nonetheless represented a direct challenge to Marxist ideology, which posited the primacy of community and social interaction in the shaping of individual consciousness. Being deaf, as Commissar of Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii would assert in 1929, meant an inability to ‘enter into real relationships with others, to extend those telegraph lines that are speech between people’.⁷ This lack of speech was seen to impact directly on a deaf individual’s mental development, and as such, his ability to become a rational and collective-orientated Soviet person. At the same time, the ‘oral’ nature of Soviet life, with its songs, speeches and slogans, was configured as a vital facet in the construction of the new, collective social order. As Michael Gorham

⁵ For a detailed study of Nazi Germany, see Horst Biesold, *Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany*, trans. William Sayers (Washington D.C., 1999).

⁶ L. S. Vygotskii, ‘K psikhologii i pedagogike detskoi defektivnosti’, in *Voprosy vospitaniia slepykh, glukhonemykh i umstvenno-otstalykh detei: sbornik statei i materialov*, ed. L. S. Vygotskii (Moscow, 1924), (5-30) p. 21.

⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 42.

suggests, in the years following the revolution, oratory was viewed as a process that enabled both speaker and listener to lose ‘attributes distinctive to his personality and enter into the ranks of the collective “I”’.⁸ Inability to engage with this vital part of Soviet culture had the result of pushing the deaf further to the margins of Soviet life.

Deafness, therefore, represented a particular obstacle to the Soviet transformative project. By depriving individuals of speech and thus distancing them from social life, hearing loss cut deaf people off from the educative influence of the collective. In a society predicated on collectivism and the ‘illiberal self’, this distance could be interpreted as anti-Soviet, and perhaps even dangerous.⁹ Yet at its heart, the revolutionary project also rested on ideals of opportunity and transcendence. The utopian potential inherent in the ideal of the New Soviet Person – that of transforming a flawed individual into the Soviet ideal – was applied equally to the deaf. In the Soviet context, deafness was seen as a challenge, an obstacle to be ‘overcome’ through medical, social and educational means. With the right training and skills, and the right support, it was argued, deaf people could transcend their ‘defect’ and become active and useful members of Soviet society. As Vygotskii affirmed, ‘if we create a country, where [...] the deaf find their place in life, where [deafness] will not automatically signify a lack, then [deafness] will not be a defect. [...] To overcome defect – that is the central, fundamental idea’.¹⁰

Soviet ideologues thus posited a complex theory of deafness, in which fears of the marginal and isolated position of deaf people sat at odds with deaf people’s perceived ability to labour and ‘overcome’ their defect. This thesis traces the shifting contours of these ideas, including how they manifested themselves in medical, educational and social policy enacted by the state. The main focus of the thesis, however, is not on the perceptions of deaf people by the Soviet state and society, but rather on the agency and activity of deaf people themselves: the manner in which deaf people engaged with the Soviet project and constituted their own individual and collective selfhood. From 1917 to 1991, the changing frameworks of Soviet identity

⁸ Michael Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, Ill., 2003), p. 15.

⁹ The concept of the ‘illiberal self’ is discussed in David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, 2003).

¹⁰ Vygotskii, ‘K psikhologii i pedagogike detskoj defektivnosti’, p. 30.

found an echo in the deaf community, as deaf people worked to make (and remake) themselves as Soviet individuals. Within this broader transformative process, three distinct themes are identified: agency, community, and welfare.

The revolution was a watershed moment for deaf individuals. Before 1917, deaf people had been equated with the insane or mentally impaired and kept under a system of tutelage which curtailed their rights and individual freedoms. In its destruction of the legal structures of tsarism, therefore, the revolution also enabled deaf people to shake off the bounds of tutelage and claim agency and independence for themselves. Throughout the Soviet period, this demand for agency would prove a defining motif in the history of the deaf. Soviet deaf individuals insisted time and again on their right to work, to study, to support themselves and to be independent (*samodeiatel'nye*) citizens of the Soviet state. This demand for agency was not simply a question of self-sufficiency, however. Soviet deaf people wrote themselves into the Soviet narrative of 'overcoming', challenging their 'defect' by seeking to demonstrate that their capabilities matched, and even surpassed, those of the hearing. Over the Soviet period, these claims to agency shifted, from a practical focus on industrial skills and basic education, to a broader conception of the artistic and educational talents of Soviet deaf people (as epitomised in the figure of Bogin's Natasha). In labour, education, culture, and social life, deaf people rejected their marginal, pre-revolutionary identity and claimed equality of capability and opportunity.

Whilst claiming the right to be viewed as equal Soviet citizens was an important step, achieving this equality in practice was much more difficult. In 1917, the majority of deaf people in Russia lived alone in rural communities, were illiterate, unskilled, and supported by their families. Turning this group of 'scattered' and uneducated deaf people into ideal Soviet citizens – from 'backward' individuals to the 'first ranks' of the Soviet body politic – represented a unique challenge to individual and collective transformation. Deaf individuals, state agencies, and the All-Russian Society of the Deaf thus struggled to find the appropriate techniques to facilitate this transformation. The 1920s and 1930s saw a privileging of industrial labour, with deaf people encouraged to migrate from the countryside to the city in

order to remake themselves as Soviet workers. Political education, often through the medium of sign language, was conducted in the factories and in local social clubs. Similarly, adult education and literacy training were called upon to enlighten and raise the Soviet ‘consciousness’ of deaf workers. In later years, participation in ‘high’ culture, such as film, theatre and art, rounded out the picture of the ideal Soviet deaf individual. These techniques changed over time and had various degrees of success: whilst many individuals grasped the opportunity to become skilled workers eagerly and with ease, transformation proved a frustrating and incomplete process for others. The frequent disjunction between the ideals of deaf transformation and its problematic reality is a central theme in this thesis.

To strive to remake deaf people as equal and active Soviet citizens did not imply complete integration into the broader Soviet collective. From the very beginning of the Soviet period, deaf people insisted that agency and ‘Sovietness’ were possible only if the deaf joined together to run their own services and facilitate their own transformation: ‘the affairs of deaf mutes are their own’, asserted one of the early leaders of the deaf community, P. A. Savel’ev, in 1925.¹¹ The Soviet period thus saw the creation of a distinct deaf community, framed by its institutions, but increasingly defined in terms of language and everyday life. The All-Russian Society of the Deaf (VOG), founded in 1926, but with roots stretching back to before 1917, created an institutional framework that gradually came to encompass all areas of deaf people’s lives, including work placement, living space, social activities and cultural and educational services. Techniques of ‘concentration’, or the grouping of deaf people in state industry and educational establishments, similarly fostered a collective deaf identity. This creation of a distinct deaf community was not immediately accepted by the state, or even by many deaf people themselves: the 1920s and 1930s saw bitter power struggles between VOG and state departments over the control of services for deaf people, including direct challenges to VOG’s dominance from deaf activists in the trades union. By the early 1950s, however, such struggles had been resolved, and VOG had become the sole institution managing the lives of Soviet deaf individuals. This deaf community, institutionalised in VOG, thus became a defining factor in the lives and identities of Soviet deaf people.

¹¹ P. A. Savel’ev, ‘Istoriia povtoriaetsia’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 1st October 1925, p.1.

Alongside institutional factors, a significant role in the development of Soviet deaf identity was played by the development of a national sign language. The Soviet state had a fluctuating and ambiguous attitude to sign language: in line with most Western theorists of the time, Soviet linguists did not consider sign to be a language in its own right. This attitude had its roots in the work of Soviet psycho-linguists and behaviourist psychologists such as Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, who argued that individual consciousness was formed through the translation of sensory perceptions, such as sight and sound, into spoken language.¹² Sign language, as a communicative system based on visual perception of gesture, was thus not considered capable of allowing an individual to access higher levels of consciousness. The most damning criticism of sign language was made by Stalin in discussions of his theoretical work *On Marxism and Linguistics*, published in 1950, when he dismissed sign language as ‘not a language, and not even a linguistic substitute’.¹³ This argument was most strongly adhered to by Soviet educators, who kept sign out of the classroom throughout the Soviet period.

Yet despite this theoretical condemnation of sign language, the state tacitly accepted sign language as a communicative tool within the deaf community, even facilitating its development. Groups of ‘concentrated’ deaf individuals in state industry were served by sign-language instructors, who translated lectures and instructions and liaised between hearing managers and deaf workers. This not only absolved deaf people of the need to communicate in spoken or written Russian on a daily basis, but also encouraged the learning of sign language by the wider deaf masses. Deaf individuals from the countryside, who were predominantly illiterate and communicated in some variant of ‘home sign’, were thus required to learn standardised ‘city sign’ to be able to work in state industry. Sign language translation, in factories, higher education establishments, courts of law and doctors’ offices, became a common feature of daily life for deaf people. Over time, this acceptance of sign language as an everyday reality provoked a reconceptualisation of its role as a language. By the 1950s, the development of sign-language theatre as an

¹² An explanation of this theory and a discussion of its impact on deaf education can be found in A. I. D’iachkov, *Sistemy obucheniia glukhikh detei* (Moscow, 1961), pp. 136-138.

¹³ I. V. Stalin, ‘Tovarishcham D. Belkinu i S. Fureru’, *Pravda*, 2nd August 1950, p. 2.

art form, both on an amateur level within the deaf club system, and on a professional level in the Theatre of Sign and Gesture, raised its status. Similarly, developments in linguistics, such as the creation of the first sign language dictionary by I. F. Geil'man in 1957, caused sign to be recognised more widely as a language worthy of the name.

As the Soviet deaf community developed, therefore, deaf individuals began to define themselves through their newly acquired language. This definition often functioned in an oppositional manner, with signing deaf individuals (who referred to themselves as 'deaf-mutes' well into the 1950s) often constructing their identity in opposition to the 'speaking' masses. In many cases, the pejorative term 'speaking' was applied equally to the hearing and to those late-deafened individuals who argued against deaf separatism within Soviet society. Whilst this linguistic identity was a consistent and significant dynamic, the Soviet deaf community never followed in the footsteps of the American Deaf community to construct their identity in ethnic-linguistic terms. The notion of deafness as a distinct, language based 'nationality' was occasionally raised within VOG discussions, but always dismissed. At a lively VOG meeting in 1936, for example, the suggestion by VOG chairman P. A. Savel'ev that the deaf community was like a separate nation was soundly rejected by those present. As one deaf activist remarked, 'does comrade Savel'ev wish this to imply that deaf people should have their own specific culture? The question comes down to the fact that deaf people have special conditions that makes their access to general culture more difficult. Our task is to overcome these difficulties.'¹⁴ In the Soviet Union, therefore, deafness represented what the historian of deafness in Japan, Karen Nakamura, has termed a 'hybrid and intersectional identity'.¹⁵ Whilst individuals sought to remake themselves as 'Soviet', they at no point rejected their identity as 'deaf', understood both in medical terms – as 'defect' and 'physical lack' – and in terms of their language and everyday lives within the deaf community.

Yet a third dimension was at play which further complicated this 'deaf-Soviet' hybridism. Throughout the Soviet era, but particularly in the post-war period, deaf

¹⁴ 'Vystuplenie t. Buslaeva (instruktor VTsSPS): Po sokrashchennoi stenogramme', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* 4, no. 7 (1936), p. 9.

¹⁵ Karen Nakamura, *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca, 2006), p. 11.

people were increasingly conceptualised as worthy recipients of state welfare and care. This emphasis on welfare sat somewhat awkwardly with the desire for deaf agency and independence that had developed after the revolution. Nevertheless, welfare was a significant dynamic within the broader contours of the Soviet project that shaped understandings of selfhood and identity. As Jeffrey Brooks has suggested, Soviet society under Stalin functioned as a ‘moral economy’ in which citizens expressed gratitude to the beneficent state (and in particular to its leader, Stalin) for their continued well-being.¹⁶ Yet in the post-war and Khrushchev eras, as Mark Smith argues, the concept of welfare became deeper and more universal: ‘it was a stage marked by popular participation, revived Leninist idealism, and state investment, making possible, apparently, a newly vigorous attempt to modify the consciousness of the Soviet person while improving all aspects of his standard of living.’¹⁷ Receipt of state welfare thus became a defining mode of Soviet citizenship.

In the post-war period, deaf individuals began to engage actively with this notion of Soviet welfare, demanding benefits (*l’goty*) and care from the state. From the late 1940s, deaf individuals were offered material benefits and a wide variety of cultural and social services to facilitate their engagement in Soviet society. In 1956, a new state law granted deaf individuals the right to pension payments on top of their usual salaries in industry. In this manner, deaf people began to configure themselves as an ‘entitlement community’, defined by Mark Edele as ‘a collection of individuals sharing similar claims to special treatment’.¹⁸ Deafness, in this conception, made deaf individuals deserving of benefits above and beyond their fellow, hearing citizens. This dynamic was encouraged by both deaf people and the state: the provision of benefits and pensions for deaf citizens was configured as an example of Soviet ‘humaneness’ (*gumannost’*) that was widely propagandised, both within the Soviet deaf community and abroad. Yet the receipt of state welfare did not necessarily contradict notions of deaf agency and independence. Many of the material benefits and services for deaf people were provided by VOG, an institution

¹⁶ Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank you, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2000), p. xv.

¹⁷ Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb: Ill., 2010), p. 16.

¹⁸ Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society* (Oxford, 2008), p. 185.

that was (from 1954) independent of government subsidy and funded by the profits from deaf-run factories. Similarly, the provision of pensions for deaf people did not deny them the ability to work, study and be active members of Soviet society; it merely provided additional subsidies to improve their quality of life.

This thesis thus traces the shifting interactions between these three modes of identity in the lives of Soviet deaf people. Through examining how Soviet deaf individuals acted and sought to frame their actions, it attempts to uncover the complex and evolving relationship of deaf people to the ideological framework of the New Soviet Person. At the same time, it examines the development of a deaf community, institutionalised in VOG, which shaped and informed the lives of deaf individuals. Due to its focus on the institutional frameworks surrounding deafness, the scope of this thesis is confined to Soviet Russia and the All-Russian Society of the Deaf: the experiences of analogous deaf societies in the ‘Brother Republics’ are touched on but not examined in detail. The majority of these societies, however, were established after VOG and modelled upon it: as such, in many ways the Soviet Russian experience can be read as the foundational history of deafness in a socialist state.

Disability and the Body

In its examination of deafness and disability, this thesis builds on a narrow body of literature that examines disability and the body in the Soviet context. The question of Soviet disability as an area of study was first raised in 1985, at a conference convened at Michigan State University by William McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum. The resulting volume of papers identified three areas of potential investigation: the historical backdrop to disability in the Soviet Union from before the revolution to the Second World War; the contemporary picture of the treatment of disability; and the ‘popular image’ of the disabled, discerned, in the absence of popular opinion surveys, through ‘literature, aphorisms and jokes’.¹⁹ The editors made clear that they were breaking new ground: ‘Our subject is in fact enormous. But even within the USSR, the dimension of the disabled population and the extent and effectiveness of

¹⁹ William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum, ‘Introduction’, in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, ed. William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum (Pittsburgh, 1989), (3-10) p. 8.

its treatment is little publicised, and for decades virtually nothing on the subject reached the foreigner's eye.'²⁰ The significance of this new topic for the field of Soviet studies was stressed: 'societies always reveal themselves through their treatment of the helpless among their own populations.'²¹

The papers collected by McCagg and Siegelbaum provide a wide-ranging introduction to the subject of Soviet disability, covering such varied topics as the treatment of schizophrenia (David Joravsky), the problem of industrial accidents (Lewis Siegelbaum) and the image of the war wounded in Soviet literature (Vera Dunham). The collection provides an excellent background to the conceptual frameworks governing disability in the Soviet context, such as the holistic and rehabilitational attitudes inherent in defectology, and the problem of consciousness in the scholarship of Lev Vygotskii. Bernice Madison's article is of particular value, presenting a detailed overview of the legislation governing disabled individuals, including the war disabled, physically disabled, blind and deaf.²² These works are somewhat hampered by the limited access to sources in the 1980s: in the absence of archival documentation, the papers use published state legislation, newspapers, statistical collections and works of literature and art to glean a picture of disability in the Soviet Union. As a result, they are unable to analyse the individual and collective agency of disabled individuals in any detail, leaning instead towards examinations of attitudes *to*, and treatment *of*, the disabled. One notable exception is Paul Raymond's article, which uses dissident *samizdat* literature to examine the activities of the Action Group to Defend the Rights of the Disabled in the USSR.²³ Yet despite these limits, the collection raises significant questions about Soviet disability, and posits a number of methodological approaches in order to answer them.

The Michigan Conference opened up the subject of Soviet disability to scholarly analysis. Since that time, however, few scholars have attempted to extend the work

²⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

²¹ Ibid., p. 3.

²² Bernice Madison, 'Programs for the Disabled in the USSR', in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, ed. McCagg and Siegelbaum, pp. 167-198. Also see Bernice Q. Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1968).

²³ Paul D. Raymond, 'Disability as Dissidence: The Action Group to Defend the Rights of the Disabled in the USSR', in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, ed. McCagg and Siegelbaum, pp. 235-252.

begun by McCagg and Siegelbaum. The understanding of disability in the Soviet context, and the everyday experiences of Soviet disabled individuals, has represented a significant lacuna in Soviet historical scholarship. This is especially surprising given the institutionalised nature of Soviet disability, and the resulting rich source material available in the newly opened archives. One facet of disability that has warranted some attention, however, is the treatment and activities of those individuals disabled by fighting in the Second World War, as examined by the historians Beate Fieseler and Mark Edele.

Making detailed use of archival sources, Fieseler has traced the attempt by disabled veterans to reintegrate themselves into the Soviet workforce after the war. She argues that the expectation that war invalids would be rehabilitated through labour led to the neglect of their social welfare: ‘the provision for invalids became subordinate to the reconstruction process.’²⁴ Similarly, Mark Edele has discussed the problem of disability as part of his work on war veterans as a developing social movement. He charts the ‘tension between symbolic status and frustrated material expectations’ in the experience of disabled veterans after the war: the perceived right of disabled veterans to state welfare and benefits in return for fighting and being wounded in the service of their country (their role as an ‘entitlement community’) was counteracted by an incomplete welfare system and a fragmented sense of identity.²⁵ These studies of disabled veterans have done much to highlight the ambiguous and problematic role of disabled individuals in Soviet society, particularly in terms of their relationship to the welfare state. In light of their ‘special status’ and the broader dynamics of the post-war treatment of veterans, however, the experience of the war disabled must be considered a particular case. As yet, those disabled at birth or by peacetime accident have not merited similar scholarly investigation.

Alongside case studies examining the experience of disabled veterans, scholars of Soviet history and cultural studies have published works which have illuminated the

²⁴ Beate Fieseler, ‘The Bitter Legacy of the “Great Patriotic War”: Red Army Disabled Soldiers under Late Stalinism’, in *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention*, ed. Juliane Fürst (Abingdon, 2006), (46-61) p. 58.

²⁵ Edele, *Soviet Veterans*, p. 100.

role of perfect (and imperfect) bodies in Soviet culture. In his detailed analysis of Soviet cultural norms from the revolution to the Second World War, David Hoffmann has discussed the promotion of the healthy body as a vital part of the attempt to produce New Soviet People. Through techniques of public health and hygiene, as well as an emphasis on physical culture and leisure pursuits, he argues, the Soviet state sought to ‘acculturate’ individuals and their bodies, instilling enlightened and ‘civilised’ behaviours and practices. This process of physical acculturation had a dual purpose, in that it ‘was prompted by both instrumental and aesthetic considerations’: ‘These officials needed a healthy and orderly workforce, and particularly during the industrialization drive of the 1930s they emphasized values of hygiene, order and efficiency above all others. But they also sought to improve and uplift workers and peasants for their own sake, and because cleanliness and neatness corresponded to aesthetic ideals of what a socialist society should look like.’²⁶ The healthy body was thus conceived as both a tool for improving the quality of individual labour, and an aesthetic goal in its own right.²⁷

Hoffmann’s analysis situates the promotion of the healthy body within a broader ‘civilizing process’, through which the Soviet state attempted to create a modern, enlightened and aesthetically pleasing body politic. His work investigates the tools of this promotion, including state health, labour and leisure policy, ideological debates and propaganda images. Despite this focus on Soviet ideals of health and vigour, however, Hoffmann makes no mention of those who were unable to conform to these ideals: the disabled ‘other’ against whom the ideal Soviet self was implicitly juxtaposed. By contrast, Lilya Kaganovsky has made this ‘other’ the central focus of her work.²⁸ Using psychoanalytic theory to examine the production of ‘Stalinist heroes’, she argues that ‘the world of the Stalinist novel and Stalinist film is filled with damaged male bodies. Their sacrifices to the Soviet cause make them worthy of elevation to the status of “hero”; yet their extreme forms of physical disability reveal

²⁶ Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values*, p. 18.

²⁷ On the dynamics of this drive for ‘health’, and contingent fears about disease and deviance, see also Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison, Wis., 2008); Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (DeKalb, Ill., 2007); Kenneth M. Pinnow, *Lost to the Collective: Suicide and the Promise of Soviet Socialism* (Ithaca, 2010).

²⁸ Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh, 2008).

what might be called an ideological and cultural fantasy of Stalinism: the radical dismemberment of its male subjects'.²⁹ Alongside the promotion of the ideal body, 'socialist-realist novels and films of that period surprisingly often rely on the figure of the wounded or mutilated body to represent the New Soviet Man'.³⁰

For Kaganovsky, this prevalence of disabled male heroes provides a key to understanding the aesthetics of power in the Stalin period. Physical lack, she asserts, is a 'precondition of Stalinist male subjectivity': 'a response to the narrative of "extravagant virility" produced by Stalinist art, pointing to the mediation between reality and desire, of what it means to be so close and yet so removed from power'.³¹ The dominant ideological discourse of Stalinism informed its male subjects that to be whole, they ought to be superhumanly active, able and strong – in the model of Stalin, the 'father of the people, leader, master' – yet in reality, Stalinist men were unable to live up to that ideal. This disjunction, according to Kaganovsky, resulted in cultural products that emphasised the 'circumscribed masculinity' of its heroes, 'a masculinity that openly acknowledges and privileges its own undoing, that insists on weakness, on blindness, on distance from power'.³²

The disabled heroes of Stalinist literature and film, in Kaganovsky's analysis, provide a means by which to reflect on the impossible ideals of Soviet masculinity.³³ In a similar fashion, other scholars of Soviet literature have attempted to discern the unconscious or symbolic meanings conveyed by disabled characters in Soviet fiction. Keith Livers has analysed metaphors of disability used in Lev Kassil's 1939 novel *The Goalkeeper of the Republic*. Recurrent images of blindness and lameness, he argues, are used to provide symbolic keys to understanding individual characters in the novel, with disability ultimately understood as a positive stimulus to self-development, pushing the wayward, individualistic hero toward greater

²⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 7

³² Ibid., p. 10.

³³ In contrast to Kaganovsky, this thesis does not pursue gender as a mode of analysis. Whilst the dynamics of masculinity are a significant part of Soviet representations of the ideal body, the politics of gender have not proved to be a major issue within the history of the Soviet deaf community.

consciousness.³⁴ Similarly, Iurii Murashov has examined the symbolic significance of blindness in Soviet cinema: examining scenes from the socialist-realist classics *Istrebiteli* (*The Fighter Pilots*, 1938), *Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke* (*The Story of a Real Man*, 1948) and *Podvig razvedchika* (*Secret Agent*, 1947), he concludes that 'the eye divides, the ear unites'.³⁵ These works thus analyse disability in terms of cultural image-making and ideology, with disabled bodies being 'read' in order to better understand the dominant norms of Soviet selfhood. Yet the impact of these norms in practice on Soviet attitudes towards the disabled, and on the experience of disabled individuals themselves, is not addressed.

In Russia, by contrast, the last fifteen years have seen a slew of publications detailing the history of the deaf community. In the mid-1990s, the deaf archivist Alla Borisovna Slavina began to criticise the tendency of VOG members to reflect nostalgically and at a distance on the Soviet past: 'there is only one fundamental source – the [archival] document.'³⁶ Between 1996 and 2003, the Moscow Symposium of Deaf History was held every two years, resulting in four edited volumes of papers by deaf and hearing individuals alike. These volumes focused primarily on local and institutional histories: the first Symposium included papers on the history of the primary deaf organisation of the 1st State Ball-Bearing Works, and the development of deaf education at the Moscow Institute of Chemical Engineering.³⁷ In 2007, this growing tradition of deaf history culminated in Viktor Aleksandrovich Palennyi's 700-page *History of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf*.³⁸ This work, intended to be the first of a two-volume definitive history of VOG, combines a narrative of the development of deaf organisation in the Soviet Union with appendix collections of primary materials, including archival documents, newspaper articles, letters and poems. These works have been published by VOG for distribution amongst their members: as such, they do not seek to engage with

³⁴ Keith Livers, 'The Soccer Match as Stalinist Ritual: Constructing the Body Social in Lev Kassil's *The Goalkeeper of the Republic*', *The Russian Review* 60, no. 4 (2001), pp. 592-613.

³⁵ Iurii Murashov, 'Slepye geroi – slepye zriteli: o statuse zreniia i slova v Sovetskom kino', in *Sovetskoe bogatstvo: Stat'i o kul'ture, literature i kino: K 60-letiiu Khansa Giuntera*, ed. M. Balina, E. Dobrenko and Iu. Malashov (St. Petersburg, 2002), pp. 412-426.

³⁶ A. B. Slavina, 'Tak kakaiia u nas biografii? Zhurnalists beseduet s istorikom', *VES* 49, no. 1 (1996), p. 4.

³⁷ See *Materialy pervogo moskovskogo simpoziuma po istorii glukhikh*, ed. Ia. B. Pichugin (Moscow, 1997).

³⁸ V. A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiskogo obshchestva glukhikh* (Moscow, 2007).

scholarly debates on disability and ‘Sovietness’ as such. Yet in their meticulous and detailed attention to sources, they provide a solid base of information on the nature of deaf organisation in the Soviet period. Palennyi’s volume, in particular, has been an invaluable resource in the preparation of this thesis: his work draws on sources that are not readily available to the researcher, and as such has proved extremely useful in filling in the holes left by the accessible archival and print record.

This thesis seeks to build on this existing literature to examine the experience of Soviet deaf people, both in relation to the images of perfect and imperfect bodies that abounded in Soviet culture, and as a facet of broader questions about disabled individuals, their agency and activity, and their relationship to the Soviet state. At the same time, however, it attempts to situate deafness within current debates on individual and collective subjectivity and the role of ideology in shaping the Soviet self.

Soviet Selfhood

Soviet subjectivity, especially the dialogue between individual agency and ideology within the Soviet self, has long been the subject of scholarly debate, a debate which has only intensified with the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening up of new source materials to historical investigation.³⁹ In the 1960s and 1970s, ‘revisionist’ Soviet historians challenged the prevailing ‘totalitarian’ view of the Soviet subject as ‘a victim of “propaganda and terror”, atomised from his fellow men by fear, dissolved in communist “patterns of thought”, and unable to sustain a critical distance between himself and society’.⁴⁰ The new archival histories produced after 1991 appeared to vindicate this view: works based on the newly-discovered archival files of citizens’ letters, public opinion reports, meeting transcripts and personal diaries began to construct a new narrative of popular agency and ‘everyday resistance’ to Soviet rule.⁴¹ Yet these new works often sidelined the role of ideology

³⁹ For an overview of the ‘totalitarianism’ versus ‘revisionism’ debate, see Stephen Lovell, *The Soviet Union: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 8-11.

⁴⁰ Anna Krylova, ‘The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies’, in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000), (168-210), p. 179.

⁴¹ See, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, 1999).

in shaping Soviet selfhood. Soviet individuals, in the scholarship of Sarah Davies, Sheila Fitzpatrick and others, held themselves ‘aloof from the values of the communist regime’, using Soviet ideology for their own ends whilst retaining the ability to critically oppose its structures.⁴² Expressions of dissent and resistance were often read as keys to uncovering a true self, existing outside the influence of ideology, whilst expressions of support for the state, or the explicit use of ideological language, was typically configured as a cynical performance, an attempt to ‘play the game’ that concealed the ‘real’ opinions of the individual.⁴³

More recently, however, scholars such as Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin have begun both to question this picture of performance and unbelief and to rehabilitate ideology as a mode of analysis.⁴⁴ As Hellbeck argues in the introduction to his work on Stalinist diary writing, ideology does not deny the possibility of individual agency: ‘The individual operates like a clearing house where ideology is unpacked and personalised, and in the process the individual remakes himself into a subject with distinct and meaningful biographical features. And in activating the individual, ideology comes to life.’⁴⁵ Both ‘performative’ texts, such as letters to newspapers and Soviet leaders, and ‘personal’ texts, such as diaries, revealed the influence of ideology as a conceptual framework shaping the expression of individual thoughts and actions, even when these thoughts and actions opposed or contradicted the Soviet regime. Agency and ideology thus co-exist and inform each other.

⁴² Jochen Hellbeck, ‘Speaking Out: Languages of Affirmation and Dissent’, in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000), (103-137), p. 103. To take an example, in her discussion of the ‘leader cult’, Sarah Davies has argued that ‘ordinary people selected those aspects of the official cult language which conformed with their own ideas about leadership and modified and rejected others. They also reappropriated the official language for their own quite rational ends’. Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 167.

⁴³ For example, in his case study of workers in the Soviet city of Magnitogorsk, Stephen Kotkin argues that workers at Magnitogorsk learned to ‘speak Bolshevik’: ‘It was not necessary to believe. It was necessary, however, to participate as if one believed – a stricture that appears to have been well understood, since what could be construed as direct, openly disloyal behaviour became rare.’ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 220

⁴⁴ For an introduction to this debate, see articles by Eric Naiman, Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin in *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (2001).

⁴⁵ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), p. 13. Hellbeck quotes Hannah Arendt: ‘The sources talk and what they reveal is the self-understanding and self interpretation of people who act and who believe they know what they are doing. If we deny them this capacity and pretend that we know better and can tell them what their ‘real’ motives are or which trends they objectively represent – no matter what they themselves think – we have robbed them of the very faculty of speech, in so far as speech makes sense.’ p. 11.

This thesis seeks to extend this debate by examining how deaf individuals engaged with ideology, a process which both shaped and revealed the particular contours of the deaf-Soviet self. Soviet values, such as collectivism, initiative, consciousness and labour were key categories used by deaf individuals to express their own identity, but they also shaped the ways in which that identity developed. Ideology opened certain avenues and closed others, driving deaf individuals and the deaf community to develop in certain ways. This shaping was not unconscious, however. As deaf individuals engaged with Soviet ideology, fractures and contradictions appeared that reveal the points at which deaf individual and collective selfhood departed from the dominant ideals of the New Soviet Person. In seeking to forge themselves as Soviet, deaf people were often selective in their interpretation of what the New Soviet Person was like, or used ideological language to express their desires in opposition to the state. As such, this active engagement with Soviet ideology can reveal the subtleties and nuances of deaf identity in the Soviet context.

Furthermore, the long chronological perspective of this thesis allows for Halfin's and Hellbeck's theories to be challenged in new ways. These scholars have focused exclusively on the Stalinist 1930s, seeing the period as an almost hermetically sealed cultural sphere in which Soviet ideology provided the sole interpretative framework for understanding and expressing selfhood. By extending the analysis of Soviet subjectivity back to 1917, and forward through the post-war period to the Brezhnev and Gorbachev eras, this thesis is able to examine the effect of other influences on the deaf-Soviet self. Ideology did not exist in a vacuum; the challenges faced by pre-revolutionary deaf individuals influenced how they approached the ideology of the new Soviet state, and the post-war period saw the opening up of the Soviet deaf community to the influence of international conceptions of deafness. As such, the experience of the deaf community in certain instances ran counter to the prevailing norms of Soviet selfhood. Soviet identity in the 1930s, for example, has been defined by Jeffrey Brooks in terms of a passive relationship of gratitude to Stalin, the beneficent leader, for material goods and care: conversely, the experience of deaf people in this period was defined by agency and independence, as deaf people sought to shed the constraints of pre-revolutionary charity and tutelage and take charge of

their own lives. The 1960s and 1970s, by contrast, a time in which trends of dissidence and opposition to the Soviet regime were gathering force, saw a shift in the deaf community towards the passive reception of state beneficence and care, influenced by international conceptions of deaf people as ‘victims’ of their social systems. The development of deaf-Soviet selfhood was thus often influenced by other conceptual frameworks.

Nevertheless, these outside influences did not negate the significance of ideology in forming the deaf-Soviet self. Deaf individuals saw the revolution as an opportunity to overcome their marginal status and achieve equality, and they continued to tap into this revolutionary ethos, individually and collectively, throughout the Soviet period. As histories of the deaf community frequently asserted, ‘only the Great October socialist revolution granted deaf-mutes civil and political rights’.⁴⁶ The drive to fulfil the ‘promise of October’ and lead ‘full-blooded lives’ was a consistent spur to the activities of deaf individuals and the Soviet deaf community as a whole. This thesis, therefore, refutes the notion of the deaf (and indeed, of Soviet individuals in general) as either passively accepting, or actively resisting, identities imposed upon them by the Soviet state. Deaf individuals had a complex and evolving relationship with the New Soviet Person and Soviet ideology. Whilst their fluctuating engagement with aspects of Soviet identity demonstrated their role as active agents and fashioners of their own identity, their consistent use of ideological language and frameworks suggests the pervasive influence of ideology on the Soviet deaf.

This notion of the deaf-Soviet self, developing in dialogue with Soviet frameworks of identity, informs the approach to sources in this thesis. The sources analysed here could be described as ‘performative’, encompassing records from the archive of VOG (official reports, transcribed sign-language debates from congresses and organisational meetings, letters to state departments), deaf journalism, published books and theatre. ‘Private’ sources, such as the diaries analysed by Hellbeck, have yet to be found and, given the pervasive problem of illiteracy amongst deaf people

⁴⁶ V. G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh: Istoriia, razvitie, perspektivy* (Leningrad, 1985), p. 7.

throughout the Soviet period, may not be forthcoming. As a result, one could argue that the sources used should be approached with caution, showing, as they do, a particular bias towards positive expressions of support for the Soviet project and the use of dominantly ideological language. However, the sources examined do not represent a straightforward replication of Soviet models of selfhood. Deaf individuals' relationship to the New Soviet Person was in constant flux: from the intense debates over aspects of Soviet selfhood in the 1920s, through the complex engagement with Soviet narratives of 'overcoming' and transcendence in the 1930s, into demands for 'benefits' and welfare in the post-war period. Even into the 1960s and 1970s, a period dominated by extremely formulaic propaganda, the occasional fractures in the dominant narratives enable the particular nature of deaf-Soviet selfhood (as it differed from the broader contours of Soviet ideals of selfhood) to be traced.⁴⁷

To be sure, the sources examined in this thesis only permit access to one narrative: that of deaf people who chose to enter the Soviet deaf community and remake themselves as Soviet subjects. At points within this narrative, there are hints at the existence of 'other' deaf individuals who rejected the dominant 'deaf-Soviet' identity as promoted by VOG, such as the deaf postcard-sellers who were the subject of a VOG crackdown in the 1930s, or the deaf hooligans who became a pressing concern in the post-war period. Only the shadow of this deaf 'other' is present in this thesis: uncovering him will be the work of future studies.

This thesis, therefore, situates the experience of deaf individuals within the frameworks of Soviet identity and selfhood. It does not, however, argue that deaf-Soviet selfhood unconsciously mirrored that of the 'hearing' population at large. A combination of factors influenced the development of Soviet models of deaf identity, including memories of pre-revolutionary disenfranchisement, a growing community identity, and the obstacles posed by the physical constraints of their disability. Yet the positive engagement of deaf individuals with the Soviet project remained

⁴⁷ As such, this thesis also engages with Alexei Yurchak's theories of the 'hypernormalization of authoritative language' in the 1960s and 70s. See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), pp. 37-59.

constant. The revolution had indeed been liberating for the deaf, and the memory of this liberation informed their relationship to Soviet ideology and Soviet power.

Deaf History

In examining Soviet deafness as a facet of broader, culturally specific frameworks of identity, this thesis also seeks to extend the paradigm of disabled or ‘Deaf’ identity, as developed primarily in the works of American historians. A relatively new historiographical phenomenon, the school of disability history has emerged in response to dramatic shifts in the understanding of disabled identity in the United States since the late 1980s. These shifts have attempted to change the interpretative framework surrounding conceptions of disability, from a medical model of physical ‘lack’, to a social model in which ‘politics, culture, economics and larger ideological notions of normality define who is and who is not disabled; or conversely, who is and who is not normal’.⁴⁸ Disabled individuals have sought to challenge the dominant constructions of ‘normality’ within American society which, in their eyes, have caused disability to be framed as ‘deviant’. To that end, disabled activists have turned to history as a means both to understand the development of these models of ‘normality’ and to challenge them: ‘If, in the present moment, America is truly engaged in “the last great inclusion”, then the new disability history must provide that moment with a usable past.’⁴⁹

As a facet of disability history, and as a field in its own right, deaf history has also been marked by a striving for redefinition and a rediscovery of agency. John Vickrey Van Cleve, the editor of a volume on deaf history published in 1993, argued in his introduction that ‘as historians probe more deeply into the past, they ask new questions and discover new evidence, it is becoming apparent that deaf people have played a larger role in their own history than has been recognised [...] deaf people

⁴⁸ Kim E. Nielsen, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* (New York, 2004), p. 13.

⁴⁹ Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, ‘Introduction: Disability History: From the Margins to the Mainstream’, in *The New Disability History: American perspectives*, ed. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York, 2001), (1-32) p. 20.

were involved actively in trying to shape their own experience'.⁵⁰ Histories sought to show how social, economic and political factors had shaped the treatment of deaf people. Yet in seeking to reconceptualise deafness, the 'new scholarship' posited a new model of deaf identity. Drawing on the experience of the American deaf community in the 1980s and 1990s, this model saw deafness not as a disability, but as a form of ethnic difference. As Lennard Davis has suggested, American deaf individuals have come to define the deaf as 'a linguistic subgroup like Latinos or Koreans. [The deaf] feel that their culture, language and community constitute them as a totally adequate, self-enclosed, and self-defining subnationality within the larger structure of the audist state.'⁵¹

This view of deafness as an ethnic category was shaped, in particular, by the 'Deaf President Now!' protest at Gallaudet University, the liberal arts college for the deaf in Washington D.C. In 1988, deaf students of the university barricaded the campus and forced the new hearing president to resign, in favour of a deaf man, I. King Jordan.⁵² Students explicitly framed their demands in ethnic terms, with placards declaring, 'We still have a dream', and 'This is the Selma of the Deaf'. Two years later, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was 'presented as a new civil rights law, extending anti-discrimination protections to people with disabilities'.⁵³ As Karen Nakamura has argued, this adoption of the ethnic framework of identity was politically powerful: 'Minority politics in the United States is unique because of the availability of the powerful and articulate frame of ethnic multiculturalism [...]. Members of new immigrant groups are understood as being entitled to bilingual language support in the classroom, minority civil rights, or protection under anti-discrimination laws without having to argue for this status'⁵⁴ By defining themselves as 'Deaf-American', the deaf community could thus assert their rights to recognition within American society. On this basis, histories of deafness in America have sought to align the deaf community with other marginal groups, including Native Americans

⁵⁰ John Vickrey Van Cleve, 'Preface', in *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship* ed. John Vickrey Van Cleve (Washington D.C., 1993), (ix-x) p. x.

⁵¹ Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London, 1995), p. xiv.

⁵² For a detailed account of the protests, see John B. Christiansen, *Deaf President Now! The 1988 Revolution at Gallaudet University* (Washington D.C., 1995).

⁵³ Nakamura, *Deaf in Japan*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

and immigrants, whom the state sought to ‘Americanize’ during the early twentieth century.⁵⁵

This ethnic framework of identity is somewhat problematic, however. Minority ethnicities are defined by heredity, with the cultural values of the community handed down from parents to children. Whilst deafness may be hereditary in some cases, many deaf people are born to hearing parents. As a result of this disjunction, historians of deafness have posited a model of ‘Deaf culture’, rooted in the use of sign language, which distinguishes the deaf community from the hearing world. Children enter this world through deaf schools, the ‘hubs’ of Deaf culture, in which they learn sign language and become members of the Deaf cultural community. A functional distinction has thus emerged between ‘deaf’, indicating an inability to hear, and ‘Deaf’, suggesting membership of this ‘linguistic subnationality’ with its implications of unique cultural experience. As such, these historians posit a form of deaf identity which stands outside of the cultural frameworks of the society in which deaf people live, and which, historically, has been subject to interference and imposition by that society (an argument which strikingly mirrors that of Soviet historians of ‘everyday resistance’). Examples of these histories include Harlan Lane’s deeply polemical *When the Mind Hears*, or Susan Burch’s *Signs of Resistance*.⁵⁶

Deaf history has thus far been dominated by this linguistic-ethnic model of American Deaf identity. Extending the ethnic paradigm further, this model has even come to be regarded as universal and international, with several recent histories attempting to locate a sign-language-based ‘Deaf culture’ within other, non-Western communities.⁵⁷ Yet some historians have sought to challenge this interpretative framework by situating deaf identity within nationally specific conceptions of selfhood. One such example is Karen Nakamura’s *Deaf in Japan*, an analysis of

⁵⁵ See Susan Burch, *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II* (New York, 2002), p. 3.

⁵⁶ Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: a History of the Deaf* (London, 1988), and Susan Burch, *Signs of Resistance*.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Susan Burch, ‘Transcending Revolutions: the Tsars, the Soviets and Deaf Culture’, *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 2 (2000), pp. 393-399. This attempt is further complicated by the fact that sign languages are not standardised across nations: British Sign Language and Russian Sign Language, for example, are not mutually comprehensible.

changing notions of Japanese deaf identity over the course of the 20th century. Nakamura takes pains to explain the lack of a linguistic-ethnic conception of deaf identity amongst Japanese deaf people: ‘In Japan, for many reasons, it has been difficult to establish a similar type of powerful ethnic-minority frame. As a result, [Japanese deaf people] have had to use other frames in order to leverage political power: human rights, an appeal to the commonality (and thus mutual responsibility) of all Japanese, neighbourhood volunteerism, and perhaps most powerfully with the government, a sense of falling behind the West.’⁵⁸ Japanese deaf identity, in Nakamura’s argument, has developed in dialogue with notions of selfhood that are historically specific to Japan.⁵⁹

This thesis thus attempts to follow in Nakamura’s footsteps by examining Soviet deaf identity as a facet of Soviet selfhood more broadly. In doing so, somewhat paradoxically, it uncovers the existence of a Soviet ‘deaf culture’ that is strikingly reminiscent of its American counterpart. These similarities have been highlighted by the American Deaf historian Susan Burch: ‘As in other nations, [the deaf] 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.’⁶⁰ In fact, seen in these terms, Soviet deaf culture would seem to be a much stronger and more distinct phenomenon than its American equivalent, with the institutional framework of VOG fostering and perpetuating the particular linguistic, cultural and communal identity of Soviet deaf people. Yet the lack of an ethnic dimension to this ‘culture’ must be stressed. Deaf people did not seek to stand outside of Soviet society; instead, their consistent desire to engage with the Soviet project influenced how they viewed their developing community. The desire to conform to Soviet values, such as collectivism, labour, consciousness and autonomy, framed and directed the development of this community. Tellingly, as the Soviet deaf community opened up to the wider world in the 1960s and came into contact with other models of deaf selfhood, their sense of ‘Sovietness’ was only reinforced. This examination of Soviet selfhood, therefore, contributes to this debate

⁵⁸ Nakamura, *Deaf in Japan*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Nakamura has also co-edited a volume on the variation in modes of deaf identity worldwide: *Many Ways to Be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities*, ed. Leila Monaghan, Constanze Schmalig, Karen Nakamura and Graham H. Turner (Washington D.C., 2003).

⁶⁰ Burch, ‘Transcending Revolutions’, p. 399.

on frameworks of deaf identity, and supports the argument that deaf identity is tightly bound to its historical context.

Overview

While the structure of this thesis is broadly chronological, each chapter focuses on a particular theme or issue. Beginning with the creation of the first All-Russian Union of Deaf-Mutes in July 1917, Chapter 1 traces how tsarist conceptions of deaf people as objects of state tutelage influenced deaf responses to both Soviet power and the ideal of the New Soviet Person. Whilst engagement with Soviet concepts of identity was seen as an opportunity to avoid marginalisation and attain independence, the push for deaf autonomy was also seen in communal terms, with deaf individuals demanding the right to rule themselves. Opening after the creation of VOG in 1926, Chapter 2 moves into the mass politics of the 1930s, tracing how deaf people wrote themselves into the broader transformative project of Stalin's 'Great Break', fighting to overcome their own bodies and join the 'first ranks' of the Soviet body politic. At the same time, it examines how the discourse of the purges influenced demands for deaf-only organisations within Soviet social and economic structures, and inflamed fears about those deaf people who could not, or would not, conform to the Soviet deaf ideal. Chapter 3 examines the Second World War as a decisive break in Soviet deaf history, tracing how the legacy of war provoked new ways of seeing and treating deafness. The post-war period saw a rise in the status of the disabled and, with it, a growing demand for services and benefits. As a result, VOG as an institution became more powerful and more tightly controlled, eventually subsuming all services for deaf people into its purview. At the same time, the chapter examines the post-war educational debates on the nature of deafness and its treatment in schools, debates which would shape the structure of deaf education for the remainder of the Soviet period.

By the early 1950s, therefore, the institutional structures surrounding deaf people were concretely elaborated, and the foundations of deaf-Soviet identity were laid. The remaining two chapters document the development of this deaf-Soviet identity

in new arenas. Chapter 4 examines the creation of the Theatre of Sign and Gesture, the professional deaf theatre founded in Moscow in 1957, as a means to investigate the impact of the ‘thaw’ in the Soviet deaf community. By analysing discussions on the form and content appropriate to deaf theatre, it attempts to define the parameters of deaf engagement with art and culture, and the nature of a particular deaf-Soviet cultural identity. Chapter 5 looks at the activities of VOG in the international arena, especially the interaction of its members with the World Federation of the Deaf and other national deaf organisations. It assesses the impact of the Cold War on Soviet understandings of deafness abroad, and on the ways in which Soviet experiences of deafness were propagandised. Through this propaganda, it traces the development of the ‘welfare paradigm’ within Soviet deaf identity, and examines the impact of this paradigm on the Soviet deaf community itself. Finally, an epilogue considers the final years of the Soviet Union, tracing the ways deaf-Soviet identity was historicised and undermined during the late Brezhnev and Gorbachev eras.

1 *Revolutionising Deafness*



figure 1
Deaf-Mute Cell of the RKP(b), 1925

In October 1925, the fortnightly newspaper *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* (*Life of Deaf-Mutes*) published a short article entitled 'The Life of the Komsomol', celebrating the fourth anniversary of a deaf branch of the communist youth organisation in Saratov.¹ The article detailed an evening event held to celebrate this milestone: the benefits that communism had conferred on deaf individuals were palpable in the descriptions of the newly decorated, cosy club, lit by electric lighting and hung with pictures of

¹ S. Usachev, 'Zhizn' komsomola: 4-ia godovshchina Saratovskoi iacheiki RLKSM', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 1st October 1925, p.2.

Lenin and other party leaders. Yet the focus of this article was the change that had been wrought in the young deaf individuals themselves. Groups of active, cultured young deaf people were portrayed ‘carrying out lively debates amongst themselves’, discussing the issues of the day. Local party members gave speeches to enthusiastic applause and, after the Internationale had been sung in sign language by the young members, instructive plays, games and entertainments continued well into the night.

This article, and others like it, attested to the articulation by the mid-1920s of a model of deaf Soviet selfhood. Drawing on the broader conceptual framework of the New Soviet Person, the ideal deaf individual was conscious and educated, lively, energetic and devoted to the cause of building communism. Even in this short article, however, it is clear that this model in no way represented an unproblematic appropriation of Soviet concepts of identity. Although much was made of the engagement by deaf *komsomol'tsy* with the symbols and rituals of Soviet life, the very existence of a deaf-only branch of the *komsomol* undermined the ideal of inclusion within the Soviet body politic. The clear desire to engage with Soviet models of the self was likewise undercut by the delight taken in the sense of a deaf community; the few hearing people at the party were clearly at a disadvantage: ‘and here and there amongst all the masses dart hearing people, separated from the deaf-mutes by the paucity of their sign language, alternated with lip-read explanations.’² Whilst unmistakably ‘Soviet’, the model self in this article is first and foremost ‘deaf’, and is thus both engaged in and distanced from the Soviet drive to remake the individual and society. This tension between inclusion and difference was to be given concrete form in 1926, with the foundation of the All-Russian Unification of Deaf-Mutes (*Vserossiiskoe Ob'edinenie Glukhonemykh*, or VOG), a deaf-run organisation under the auspices of the People’s Commissariat of Social Welfare established to provide services to deaf people and facilitate their engagement in Soviet society. This body, later renamed the All-Russian Society of Deaf-Mutes, would play a central role in the lives of deaf people for the duration of the Soviet Union’s existence.

² Ibid., p. 2.

This chapter examines the development of this complex and contested model of deaf Soviet selfhood, from the revolutions of 1917 to the foundation of VOG in 1926. The seismic shifts in legal and conceptual frameworks engendered in this period fundamentally revolutionised the ways in which deaf people sought to define themselves and were defined by the state and society. On one level, this transformation was practical: deaf people could finally shake off the legal constrictions of tsarist society, with its structures of tutelage and reliance on charity, and begin to direct and shape their own lives. On a conceptual level, though, this new direction was framed by the shifting conceptions of agency and the self being played out in Soviet society as a whole. In engaging with the both state and the language of revolution, with its privileging of (at different times) notions such as autonomy (*samodeiatel'nost'*), mutual aid (*vzaimopomoshch'*), labour (*trud*) and consciousness (*soznatel'nost'*), the contours of this path to deaf self-definition and agency were drawn. This dialogue with dominant cultural frameworks, however, was influenced in no small measure by the pre-revolutionary experience of deaf people. The rejection of charity and state tutelage, and the demand, on an individual and a group level, for rights and citizenship, informed and shaped the ways in which deaf people responded to Soviet notions of humaneness and social welfare. 'Sovietness' was thus mediated by issues of normality and disability, competence and the definition of 'deafness'.

Tracing the development of these concepts in the context of deaf organisation poses particular problems for the researcher. This revolutionary decade was a period of experimentation, of attempts (and failures) to organise and define the deaf as a group with a coherent identity and place within society. Before the foundation of VOG, no systematic records were kept, and thus the few sources available are concentrated around the major milestones in Soviet deaf organisation in this period: the convening of the All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes in July 1917, the liquidation of grass-roots deaf organisations in 1921, the establishment of deaf party organisations from 1921 to 1925, and the foundation of VOG in 1926. The limited scale of such organisation, and its confinement to a few urban centres, further impacts on the type of archival sources available: for the most part concerned with dry, organisational matters and usually written by one of a small group of deaf 'activists'. To be sure,

deaf journalism, specifically the organisational newspaper *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, published from 1924, allowed for discussion of ideals and methods beyond Moscow and Leningrad and thus broadened the scope for engagement. The limitations of the early sources, however, reflect the limited nature of deaf organisation in this period: driven by a very few deaf activists educated in pre-revolutionary institutions, and hampered by the obstacles of civil war and lack of funds. It would not be until the 1930s that these organisations would engage with deaf individuals on a large scale. Nevertheless, even in this limited forum the specific trajectory of deaf engagement with revolutionary and Soviet models of selfhood can be traced.

Deaf Organisation before October

The revolutionary upheavals of 1917 proved a watershed for deaf people, both through their promotion of new conceptual frameworks of self and society, and in their rhetoric of liberation from the social and political structures of tsarist society. For the deaf, revolution entailed an end to the legal restrictions which had, up to this point, curtailed their activities and engagement in society. Until October, deaf individuals had been governed by Article 381 of the State Legal Code, which had remained essentially unchanged since 1833.³ According to this document, deaf-mutes (*glukhonemye*) were equated with the insane, held under guardianship until the age of 21, and were then only registered as 'legally capable' (*pravosposobnye*) after being examined by an 'expert' to prove mental competence.⁴ This quality was measured primarily by a grasp of the Russian language: the individuals in question were required to demonstrate that they could 'freely express their thoughts and express their will' in order to have the right to 'direct and dispose of their property with all others of majority'.⁵ They would then have to read the relevant legal acts aloud, affirm that they reflected their will, and sign their name. The assumption was made, therefore, that deafness impaired mental competence, and with it the ability to participate fully in society. Deaf individuals were held in a position of state tutelage,

³ V. A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiskogo obshchestva glukhykh* (Moscow, 2007), p. 11.

⁴ *Zakony grazhdanskiye: (Sv. Zak., t. X, ch. 1, isd. 1914) so vklucheniem pozdneishikh uzakonenii rasiashenii po resheniiam Obsh. Sobr. I Grazhd. Kass. Depart. Pravit. Senata s 1866 po 1914 g (vkluchitel'no)*, ed. A. K. Gauger (Petrograd, 1915), Statute 381, p. 129.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

with the onus on individuals to prove their own competence in order to become independent citizens in the eyes of the law.

In legal terms, the liberation of 1917 represented an end to the state-imposed, tutelary position of deaf people. However, it should not be assumed that this legal disenfranchisement had curtailed all deaf organisation. For several decades before the revolution, new spheres of activity and agency, and a growing sense of identity as a distinct social group, had been developing amongst deaf people. These shifts developed within two particular social spaces: the school and the social club. Deaf education in Russia had, from its outset, been charitable in nature: the first school for the deaf was formed after a chance meeting in a Pavlovsk park between the Empress Maria Fedorovna and a young deaf boy, Alexander Meller, in 1806.⁶ The school, relocated to St. Petersburg in 1810, was maintained with considerable funds and personal involvement by the Imperial family. In a similar fashion, the Arnol'do-Tretiakov School in Moscow, founded in 1860, and schools in Kharkov, Novocherkassk, Tsaritsyno and Vitebsk were established through individual charitable initiative.⁷ Yet despite this implicit rendering of deaf people as passive recipients of charity, education was to prove a vital means to achieve agency. According to a sub-clause of Article 381, graduates of both the St. Petersburg and the Arnol'do-Tretiakov School were not required to undertake the usual examination to prove legal competence, and could instead immediately enter government service as a *chinovnik* of the 14th rank.⁸ Of the seven pupils to graduate from the St. Petersburg School in 1870, for example, five were admitted to state service.⁹ Others, having been granted legal independence, entered private service, worked as artists or engravers, or ran their own businesses.¹⁰

⁶ N. M. Lagovskii, *Sankt Peterburgskoe uchilishche glukhonemykh (1810-1910): Istoricheskii ocherk*, (St. Petersburg, 1910), p. 14.

⁷ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 13. On the development of deaf education in pre-revolutionary Russia, see Howard G. Williams, 'Founders of Deaf Education in Russia' in *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship*, ed. John Vickrey Van Cleve (Washington D.C., 1993), pp. 224-236.

⁸ *Zakony grazhdanskie*, p. 130.

⁹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

For deaf people, education thus proved a means to circumvent the legal restrictions imposed upon them by demonstrating their mental competence and fitness for inclusion within society. Although the primary focus was on literacy, educational establishments also sought to provide their pupils with practical skills to enable them to make a living. The St. Petersburg School built its own handicraft workshops in 1865, with the goal ‘to teach the poor deaf-mute some form of craft, [and] in this way to put into his hand the means to support himself after he leaves the school and lives independently’.¹¹ By 1900, these workshops trained deaf pupils in carpentry, boot making, bookbinding and even farming, on a working farm outside the city.¹² Thus, educational establishments sought to help their pupils achieve some form of social independence and integration into hearing society. Yet this push for individual autonomy was complemented by a growing sense of a deaf community fostered by these schools. Many pupils chose to remain as teachers after graduation, and to devote themselves to educating further generations of deaf children. Even outside the schools, the social links between pupils remained strong. As one deaf individual commented in 1907, ‘young deaf mutes, upon leaving their schools, are [...] unable to ignore their reminiscences and renounce their spirit of comradeship even after many years; they retain the desire to associate with their comrades, with people who share their views and educational habits.’¹³

Alongside providing an education, therefore, deaf schools enabled a nascent deaf community to take shape.¹⁴ These ties of friendship and the desire to socialise initially manifested themselves informally, as in the ‘deaf side-street’ (*pereulok glukhonemykh*) in Astrakhan, so named because groups of deaf people with links to the nearby school would congregate there to chat.¹⁵ Yet these clubs soon took on an official character. In 1888, Fedor Aleksandrovich Bukhmeier, a state advisor and graduate of the St. Petersburg School, formed the St. Petersburg Society for the Care of Deaf-Mutes (*Sankt-Peterburgskoe Obshchestvo popecheniia o glukhonemykh*),

¹¹ *Ustav S. Peterburgskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh*, (St. Petersburg, 1893), cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 10.

¹² Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 17.

¹³ *Otchet S. Peterburgskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh za 1904-1905 god*, (St. Petersburg, 1907), cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 19.

¹⁴ Susan Burch, alongside other historians of deafness, has identified deaf schools as the ‘hub’ of deaf community identity. Burch, *Signs of Resistance*, p. 70.

¹⁵ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 13.

whose membership consisted almost exclusively of graduates and current staff of the school. The state-registered society sought to support other deaf-mutes, practically and financially, and to ‘assist closer relations between deaf-mutes for the attainment of the opportunity to spend their free time with the highest possible use and variety’.¹⁶ To that end, a club, ‘small in size, and with an exceptional family character’ was established, alongside a shelter and workshop for unemployed deaf school graduates, and followed in 1897 by a ‘Deaf-Mute Children’s Shelter’.¹⁷ Activities were funded by the Society’s membership fees, and an annual 1000 rouble subsidy from the St. Petersburg Executive Committee.¹⁸

The St. Petersburg Society broadened the scope of the deaf club from a forum for deaf friends to meet and socialise to a body that engaged in charitable works and sought to elevate the living standards and spiritual level of deaf people. In this respect, the Society was reminiscent of the ‘voluntary associations’ identified by Joseph Bradley as a constituent part of the civil society that began to emerge during the last decades of the tsarist regime.¹⁹ Such bodies, broadly defined by Bradley as the ‘modern, secular, self-regulating philanthropic, educational, cultural and learned societies, membership in which was voluntary rather than compulsory or ascribed and that offered new forms of sociability and self-definition’, functioned as a counterpoint to the ‘tutelary authoritarian regime’ of the state, in creating forums for public debate and engagement.²⁰ The St. Petersburg Society, with its limited membership and small budget, could not rival the scope of the philanthropic bodies discussed by Bradley, such as the Russian Technical Society or the Free Economic Society. However, it is clear that, in its aims and function, the Society drew on the framework of the voluntary association, and set itself up as an embryonic deaf interest group. Members lobbied government ministries for the right to build workshops, shelters and schools, and demanded state subsidies and revenue from church collections. Its charter, another typical facet of the voluntary association as

¹⁶ *Ustav S. Peterburgskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh*, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 14.

¹⁷ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Joseph Bradley, ‘Subjects into Citizens: Societies, Civil Society, and Autocracy in Tsarist Russia’, *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 4 (2002), pp. 1094-1123.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1094, nt. 1.

defined by Bradley, set out aims to support deaf families in all aspects of life, from financial aid to help in finding work and a place to live.²¹

In these early years, state-directed charitable activity and the nascent deaf organisations developed concurrently, with some deaf individuals working in government posts and participating in deaf societies, and strong family ties influencing policy in both forums. For example, the first Moscow-based deaf society was headed by A. V. Shlippe, the deaf son of a state advisor whose brother, F. V. Shlippe, was the chairman of the local *zemstvo* board.²² This concurrence of aims was evident in 1901, when the St. Petersburg Society voted to dissolve itself and hand its funds over to a newly established state body, the Imperial Highness Maria Fedorovna Trust for Deaf-Mutes (*Popechitel'stvo Gosudaryni Imperatritsy Marii Fedorovny o glukhonemykh*), which sought to centralise and standardise education for deaf children.²³ However, new deaf organisations continued to be registered, including a new St. Petersburg Society of Deaf-Mutes in 1904, and to declare themselves to be the true representatives of the 'very urgent and just desires' of deaf people.²⁴ Over time, these societies began to frame their activities as a reaction against the 'charitable and educational' attitude of the state towards deaf people, and explicitly, through their policies of work placements, loans and leisure activities, to engender a system of mutual aid.²⁵ Charity thus gave way to the notion of group autonomy, and the desire for deaf society members to act on behalf of their peers.

As deaf societies established a space for deaf people to become socially active, and to help others like themselves, they began to undermine the social framework of tutelage surrounding the deaf. One of the central aspects of the voluntary association, Bradley notes, was the role it played in allowing the disenfranchised scope for action: 'thus disenfranchised individuals could appear in public, represent themselves and their projects before their peers, frame public opinion, organise meetings, and hold public authority accountable; they could even assert a claim to

²¹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 14.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁴ *Otchet S. Peterburgskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh*, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

represent others.²⁶ Although Bradley is talking of women here, his words aptly apply to the deaf. Deaf organisation in this period refuted the traditional stereotype of the deaf as mentally incapable or as passive recipients of charity. Bodies such as the St. Petersburg Society were established on the initiative of deaf people, and run by them. Yet this discovery of a forum for public engagement and action by educated deaf people only served to highlight the tutelary status of the majority. Increasingly, members of these societies began to express concern about the divide between the developing deaf elite and the residual masses of deaf people. In 1895-1896, a study was conducted under the direction of Fedor Andreevich Rau, a German pedagogue who had become the director of the Arnol'do-Tretiakov School in Moscow in 1892.²⁷ The results showed that, of 1,404 deaf people in the Tula province, 1,198 lived with and were supported by their families. Of the 206 who supported themselves, the majority were unskilled workers, with a few cobblers and carpenters. Whilst 38.8 per cent of the men were married, only 2 per cent of the women had husbands, and there were no marriages between deaf people. For deaf society members, such facts only served to underline the necessity not only of developing ties between the deaf as a group, but of challenging the legal restrictions that prevented deaf people from helping themselves.²⁸

The development of a socially active deaf elite thus raised questions of autonomy and independence for the majority of deaf people. The revolutionary upheavals of the early twentieth century gave new impetus to this debate. The rhetoric of liberation that characterised the workers' movement echoed in the activities of deaf organisations. Shortly after the February Revolution of 1917, a decision was taken to organise an All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes to be held in Moscow in July of that year.²⁹ The Congress was envisaged as a catalyst to debate the position of deaf-mutes in Russia as a whole, and to organise an All-Russian Union of Deaf-Mutes (*Vserossiiskii soiuz glukhonemykh*, or VSG) to coordinate activities on a national scale. The organisational meetings, and the pamphlets written to publicise the event,

²⁶ Bradley, 'Subjects into Citizens', p. 1099.

²⁷ F. A. Rau, *Glukhonemye Tul'skoi gubernii* (Tula, 1899), cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 15.

²⁸ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 24.

²⁹ Congresses also formed an integral part of the activities of voluntary organisations: 'Congresses and the myriad public meetings provided forums [...] for public debate on a wide range of national policy issues.' Bradley, 'Subjects into Citizens', p. 1119.

demonstrate the impact of revolutionary rhetoric on the deaf. At a mass meeting held in St. Petersburg on 18th March 1917, Evgenii Efremovich Zhuromskii, a deaf graduate of the St. Petersburg School and a teacher of dactylology (finger-spelling), explained the significance of the proposed Union:

Away, ancient yoke! Under the weight of ancient slavery, the suffering deaf-mutes have endured [*pereterpeli*] privation, humiliation and insult. We will shake off the bonds of slavery and renew our lives ourselves. [...]

Comrades, remember that the Union is an organ of struggle for existence. Remember that the Union is the defence of your rights and interests. The more deaf mutes in the Union, the better and more true will be the work! Herein lies the pledge of success and happiness.³⁰

The desire for autonomy was thus reconfigured as a fight for individual and group rights in the face of centuries of oppression and hardship. With this rhetoric, the deaf implicitly equated themselves with the ‘downtrodden masses’ that the revolution was seen to have liberated. As Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii have pointed out, Russian workers of the revolutionary period had ‘a strong sense of themselves as “the labouring people” (*trudiashchikhsia narod*) [*sic*] united by a common sense of injustice and exclusion from society’.³¹ By virtue of their tutelary status and lack of rights, deaf people asserted, they too were deeply invested in the struggle for political recognition and autonomy.³² This equation with the revolutionary masses also impacted on the manner in which deaf people sought to claim autonomy. In the context of the revolutionary movement, which had gained political power and recognition through its unity and ‘mass’ nature, the need for a unified deaf organisation to speak for the interests of deaf people was invested with new urgency. In the pamphlet ‘An Appeal to Deaf-Mutes’, deaf people were assured that ‘now is

³⁰ E. E. Zhuromskii, *Vserossiiskii soiuz glukhonemykh* (St. Petersburg, 1917), cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 25.

³¹ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven, 1999), p. 108.

³² Boris Kolonitskii has referred to this co-opting of revolutionary and socialist identity in the period between revolutions as a ‘fashion for socialism’, and cites the founding of the ‘Socialist Union of Deaf-Mutes’ as evidence of its widespread impact. However, to characterise the VSG as ‘socialist’ is perhaps overstating the matter: whilst deaf activists chose to identify themselves as ‘downtrodden’, the organisation did not become overtly political in character until the 1920s. Boris Kolonitskii, ‘Antibourgeois Propaganda and Anti- “Burzhui” Consciousness in 1917’, *Russian Review* 53, no. 2 (1994), (183-196) p. 187.

not the time for each to speak for himself. Only a group of people, united in a union, will now have meaning, strength and authority'.³³

In the aftermath of February, therefore, deaf organisers and activists sought to harness the revolutionary potential of the moment and demand rights as a group. Yet this emphasis on rights only served to underline the limitations placed by state tutelage on deaf people, and the divergence between the expectations of deaf people and the assumptions made by the state and society about their role in society. In the weeks before the All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes, the Provisional Government promulgated a draft 'Law on Elections to the Constituent Assembly', which contained the clause, 'deaf-mutes are not included in the electoral role and will not participate in elections'.³⁴ This denial of the right to vote, not just to the legally disenfranchised, but to all deaf people, provoked considerable outrage. The Moscow Committee of Deaf-Mutes held protests outside the Provisional Government's headquarters, matched by similar protests in St. Petersburg, now renamed Petrograd.³⁵ In the face of such a strong reaction, the Provisional Government revised its position. On the first day of the Congress, 17th July 1917, an answer was received from the minister F. F. Kokoshkin, informing delegates that the final edit of the law would read: 'Those recognised as mad or insane under the established legal order, and likewise deaf-mutes under legal guardianship, will not participate in the elections.'³⁶ As a result, the question of legal rights was officially removed from the Congress's agenda.³⁷ However, the new wording merely brought the focus back to the problem of tutelage, and underlined the problematic disjunction between the categories and conceptions prescribed by the state and the reality of deaf people's lives.

During the course of the All-Russian Congress of Deaf Mutes, held from 17th to 22nd July 1917 and uniting forty delegates from societies around the country, debates focused on the continuing problem of tutelage, and the means by which deaf individuals could bypass legal restrictions and prove their legal competence. The set

³³ *Obshchenie k glukhonemym*, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 25.

³⁴ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 27.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 1, l. 71.

of resolutions published at the conclusion of the conference demonstrated the primacy of this concern. Delegates called for changes to the way in which legal competence was conferred in order to grant deaf individuals greater control over the process: ensuring, for example, that the ‘experts’ employed to conduct the examination were familiar with deafness, or at the very least accompanied by a deaf-mute representative.³⁸ They also proposed that graduates of deaf schools and those in service (*sluzhashchie*) should be granted automatic legal rights without examination. Other demands, such as the right of illiterate deaf individuals to sign-language translation in a court of law, sought to ameliorate the effects of legal disenfranchisement.³⁹ Beyond this, the vital role of education and skills in widening the scope of social autonomy was reinforced: a reform of deaf education was proposed to include a greater range of skills, so ‘the student should be granted access not only to physical, but also to mental labour’.⁴⁰ Yet, in the absence of fundamental legal reforms, none of these measures could solve the problem of tutelage. Deaf activists could only seek to alleviate its most limiting effects.

The Congress, therefore, manifested certain preoccupations that had been developing over several decades. The first, a demand for autonomy, had shifted from a general desire for independence from tutelage and the achievement of agency to a demand for legal rights and citizenship. The second, the expression of a particular group identity as deaf people, had become not just a goal, but a tool in the achievement of that autonomy. As a deaf activist from Petrograd, Aleksandr Iakovlevich Udal’, suggested: ‘there is no need to state that a cause of our unenviable legal position is [...] our “scatteredness” amongst the rest of humanity and our lack of organisation into a whole, complete [*komplektnoe*] society.’⁴¹ In the context of the revolutionary upheavals of 1917, the Congress, and the resulting creation of the All-Russian Union of Deaf-Mutes (VSG), represented an opportunity to seize revolutionary momentum and demand rights alongside other oppressed minorities. This notion of oppression did give rise to a certain amount of anti-hearing rhetoric: Udal’ talked scathingly of ‘normal’ people (*normal’nye*), who ‘believed and still believe that they have a right

³⁸ Ibid., l. 71.

³⁹ Ibid., l. 72 ob.

⁴⁰ Ibid., l. 71.

⁴¹ Ibid., l. 166.

to exploit their deaf-mute brothers in humanity'.⁴² This reference to the malicious exploitation of deaf people by the hearing, whether justified or not, served to create a rhetorical 'other' against whom the deaf community could define themselves, and further reinforced the view that only as a group could the deaf represent their own interests. The revolutionary period, therefore, was both liberating and constraining for the deaf: the rhetoric of freedom engendered by February validated their own struggles for autonomy, even as this freedom was still legally denied them. On the eve of October, therefore, the All-Russian Union of Deaf-Mutes set out their demands for equality with a sense of revolutionary urgency.

New Laws, New Concepts

With the October Revolution of 1917, it seemed that the liberation promised by February had been finally achieved for the deaf. Both the wave of initial decrees produced by the Bolshevik government and the Constitution proclaimed on 10th July 1918 declared the conferral of civil rights and 'genuine freedom' on all working peoples of the new revolutionary state, including those with disabilities.⁴³ The right to elect and to be elected was granted to those labourers and soldiers 'who have been to any degree incapacitated'.⁴⁴ In late 1918, Zhuromskii, by now a prominent member of the All-Russian Union of Deaf-Mutes (VSG), was elected member of the Petersburg Provincial Soviet.⁴⁵ A year later, a decree published by the Soviet of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) set out the state's intention to integrate the education of deaf children into the state system, and allow deaf adults to work alongside the hearing in 'those branches of industry, where deafness does not prevent the completion of labour responsibilities'.⁴⁶ It would seem that, in breaking the shackles of 'oppression and arbitrary rule' that had bound the proletariat, the revolution had also broken the legal shackles of tutelage that had bound the deaf.⁴⁷

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1. 176.

⁴³ 'Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the R.S.F.S.R. Adopted by the Fifth All-Russia Congress of Soviets, July 10, 1918' in *First Decrees of Soviet Power: Acts of Legislation November 1917- July 1918*, ed. Yuri Akhapiin (London, 1970), p. 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴⁵ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 30.

⁴⁶ See V. G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh: Istoriia, razvitie, perspektivy* (Leningrad, 1985), p. 174.

⁴⁷ 'Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia, November 2, 1917', in *First Decrees of Soviet Power*, ed. Akhapiin, pp. 31-32.

Yet despite removing the negative influence of legal restrictions on the deaf, the first years of the revolution saw little positive guidance on how deaf individuals were to engage with this new society, or to gain this liberation in practice.

The decade following 1917 was consequently characterised by experimentation, both by deaf people and the state, in establishing how the deaf were to function within the new ideological framework of self and society promoted by the Bolsheviks. This period of experimentation proceeded in two distinct stages. The All-Russian Union of Deaf-Mutes (VSG) continued to function through the revolution, and attempted to guide deaf activities on a national scale until economic and state pressures forced its closure in 1920. Between 1920 and 1926, provision for deaf people was transferred to the state and split between several branches of the People's Commissariat. Concurrently, however, a burst of grass-roots organisation by deaf people in the provinces led to increasing calls for a new central body to guide deaf activities. Several abortive attempts to form such a body, such as the short lived 'Deaf-Mute Section', a small state body under the umbrella of the All-Russian Cooperative Association of Invalids (VIKO), and a proposed deaf-mute council within the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), culminated with the founding of the All-Russian Unification of Deaf-Mutes (VOG) in June 1926. Throughout this period of experimentation, the shifting ways in which the deaf acted and, crucially, sought to frame their actions, demonstrated the dialogue between deaf organisation and the conceptual frameworks of socialism.

In their pre-revolutionary struggles for autonomy and agency, the deaf had sought means to gain inclusion within the body politic. The criterion for this inclusion, or the definition of the 'normal' against which the disabling effects of deafness were measured, was that of education and mental competence. With the Bolshevik revolution, however, that definition had shifted. A new ideal of subjectivity had emerged against which the individual was to be judged: that of the New Soviet Person. As David Hoffmann has stated, 'subjectivity – the capacity to think and act on the basis of a coherent sense of self – received considerable attention in the Soviet system. Soviet authorities sought to fashion a certain type of subject – the New Person whose thinking and actions would be based on an awareness of his or her role

in building socialism. Through education, propaganda, and subjectivizing practices, Party officials constantly strove to instil this awareness, or consciousness, in Soviet citizens'.⁴⁸ Within this broad striving towards ideal selfhood, certain aspects were given particular emphasis: engagement in socially useful labour, education (particularly the promotion of literacy), and the subordination of individual desires to the collective good. Within this new conceptual world, the deaf began to engage with, and measure themselves against, certain aspects of this ideal.

The most immediate of these engagements, in the aftermath of the revolution, was with the notion of labour. The 1919 'Constitution of the RSFSR' had asserted that: 'the RSFSR declares labour to be the duty of all citizens of the Republic, and proclaims the slogan: "He who does not work, neither shall he eat!"'⁴⁹ In this spirit, members of the VSG established organisations in Petrograd and Moscow in 1918, with the explicit intention of providing assistance and training in labour skills to unemployed deaf individuals. The Moscow 'House of Deaf-Mutes' contained workshops in carpentry and the production of ladies' shoes and stockings.⁵⁰ Petrograd's equivalent 'House of Labour and Education of Deaf-Mutes' trained members to knit, sew, make boots and work with wood and metal.⁵¹ This emphasis on labour had the immediate practical goal of supporting the deaf financially: the goods produced by members of the Moscow 'House of Deaf-Mutes' were sold at markets across the city, and the proceeds contributed to the activities of the organisation.⁵² In 1924, an article in *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* stated that 'the House of Deaf-Mutes is not a factory, nor an enterprise, with the goal of making a profit, rather it is an institution with the task of giving people, who have come in search of a piece of bread, the opportunity to earn that piece not in the form of alms, but through honest labour'.⁵³ For the deaf, this ability to support themselves independently was in itself a significant achievement of autonomy in practice. The social independence that they had so urgently demanded before the revolution could be achieved, it seemed, through the acquisition of basic labour skills.

⁴⁸ David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, 2003), p. 45.

⁴⁹ 'Constitution of the R.S.F.S.R. July 1918', p. 156.

⁵⁰ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵³ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 33.

This emphasis on labour as a means to achieve agency demonstrated the interrelation of the conceptual notion of the Soviet individual and the particular goals of the deaf community. On the surface, the enterprises established by the VSG were nothing new within the system of deaf organisations: pre-revolutionary deaf schools and clubs had both promoted handicrafts as a way to achieve practical independence in the face of legal disenfranchisement. Yet the symbolic role of the worker as a central facet of the Soviet self had reconfigured the role of labour in deaf organisation. By finding work in industry, deaf people were able to support themselves, and simultaneously prove themselves worthy of inclusion within Soviet society. This belief was central to the declaration, during the II All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes in 1920, that ‘the Workers’ and Peasants’ government alone can offer the deaf-mute the possibility to feel himself a person and a citizen’.⁵⁴ To be sure, the path to equality still represented an individual challenge of transformation: as the VSG workshops demonstrated, the acquisition of skills was central to finding work in industry and thus becoming a labourer. However, unlike with the pre-revolutionary emphasis on literacy, the immediate consequences of deafness no longer functioned as an obstacle: legal (or mental) competence (*pravosposobnost’*) had given way to work ability (*trudosposobnost’*) as a marker of inclusion.

In promoting labour as a path to autonomy, deaf organisations thus recognised that the paradigm of ‘normality’ had shifted, and that deaf individuals needed to engage with the new conceptual framework to achieve social independence. Within this practical striving for autonomy, the deaf situated themselves within the broader Soviet utopian narrative of transformation, from the ‘dark’, pre-revolutionary masses to the enlightened proletariat of the Soviet state. Over the course of the decade, this emphasis on the transformative power of labour was enshrined in both legislation and the rhetoric of Soviet deaf activists and state bodies. In 1925, the Deaf-Mute Section under VIKO published a circular to promote new legislation on the organisation of deaf labour artels.⁵⁵ This document set out a concrete model of deaf

⁵⁴ *Builleten’ Vserossiiskoi konferentsii glukhonemykh*, 29th May 1921, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 63.

⁵⁵ According to Richard Stites, the prevalence of artels, defined as ‘teams of men who shared resources, hired out for a common task, and shared the wage’, demonstrated the influence of concepts

labour organisation: after carrying out a census (*uchet*) of deaf individuals in the area, representatives of the Deaf-Mute Section were to establish a plan of labour cooperation, and to organise artels on that basis.⁵⁶ With the proceeds, the Section would organise clubs and cultural activities, and, where necessary, provide legal help for deaf individuals. The circular stated that, for the deaf, this form of organisation represented the ‘most correct and true path to their organisation, autonomy [*samodeiatel’nost’*], and the improvement of their material position’.⁵⁷ The document, signed by the Deputy Commissar for Social Welfare I. K. Ksenofontov, reinforced the notion that through labour, deaf people could transform themselves from a ‘disorganised mass’ into Soviet workers.⁵⁸

Along these lines, deaf labour associations were established on a wide scale in the mid 1920s. Associations in Saratov, Kursk, Penza, Rostov on the Don, Ivanovo Vosnesensk and Voronezh were established, all with the explicit goal of furthering ‘work placement’ (*trudovoe ustroistvo*) for their members.⁵⁹ The most developed of these was the ‘Help for Deaf-Mutes’ (*Pomoshch’ glukhonemym*) society, established in Ivanovo Vosnesensk by A. S. Kolmazin and G. I. Bogorodskii in 1924. At the end of May 1925, its chairman Kliucharev gave a report to the general meeting detailing the progress made by the organisation.⁶⁰ Serving forty-five members of a local deaf population of 1,500, the society was small in scope. The majority of its female members worked as seamstresses, and male members as boot makers, in the artels attached to the society. The report, however, demonstrated how traditions of labour, and the notion of a labour identity, had begun to be inculcated in society members: ‘At first we paid the most attention to trade. This was natural, because we needed funds; we needed to consolidate the work already begun. Now, we concentrate on industry, on labour processes.’⁶¹ The deaf were thus included in the Soviet conceptual idea of the individual transformation of the labourer, from a backward,

of sharing and equality on labour practices after the revolution. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1989), p. 125.

⁵⁶ Polozhenie ‘ob upolnomochennykh po rabote sredi glukhonemykh pri Gub. Obl. i Okruzhnykh GIKO’, in *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 1st June 1925, p. 3.

⁵⁷ ‘Tsirkuliar VIKO pri NKSO No.44’, in *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 15th June 1925, p. 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, pp. 70-73.

⁶⁰ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 3, d. 9, l. 16.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, l. 16.

‘bourgeois’ attention to profit, to a worker able to take pride in the development of his skill and productivity.

Labour, therefore, represented the opportunity not just of emancipation, but of self-transformation. In an echo of the utopian rhetoric of the time, deaf people were considered able to overcome their disability, in effect to become ‘normal’, by learning labour skills. This could be seen in theoretical discussions of the benefits conferred by Soviet society on the deaf: in an article from 1925, D. Riol’f suggested that through work, ‘physiological invalidity is disappearing, giving way to the healthy flow of labour energy, inculcating psychological equality in all sensations’.⁶² Through labour, the deaf could become equal. This utopian idea was borne out in the organisational texts and decrees produced by deaf organisations and the state: in a set of resolutions on the development of work for the blind and deaf, the All-Russian Congress of Provincial Social Welfare Departments stated that, ‘on the question of the welfare of the blind [and, by extension, the deaf], the Soviet government proceeds from the position that a blind person is not an invalid, in need of charity; a blind person is just as capable of work as a healthy seeing person, only in need of special preparation.’⁶³

Labour thus represented both a practical means for deaf people to achieve independence and a symbolic means of inclusion in the ‘normal’ ranks of the Soviet body politic. In its engagement with the Soviet ideal of ‘consciousness’, deaf organisation repeated this tension between pragmatic use and ideological inclusion. In conjunction with their emphasis on labour, deaf societies in this period strongly promoted the education and cultural enlightenment of their members. From the outset, the Petrograd and Moscow organisations held lectures, literacy classes and cultural evenings. According to the historian Viktor Palennyi, the lectures of the Petrograd ‘House of Labour and Education’ were initially received with some impatience: the audience ‘whistled, stamped their feet and threw frozen potatoes at the lecturers’.⁶⁴ It can be presumed that members soon got used to these events, as

⁶² D. Riol’f, ‘Na perelome zhizni’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 15th March 1925, p. 3.

⁶³ ‘Rezoliutsiia po dokladu o trudovom ustroisve slepykh i glukhonemykh vynesennaia vserossiiskim s’ezdom zav. Gubsobezami’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 1st June 1925, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 30.

they played a consistently dominant role in the activities of the deaf club. Despite this commitment to education, however, deaf individuals showed a particular, and sometimes ambivalent, attitude to the broader Soviet ideal of promoting a rational, enlightened ‘consciousness’, which reflected specific concerns about deafness and the role of education in the promotion of deaf autonomy.

The most prevalent form of educational endeavour in this period was that of the *likbez*, or club for the liquidation of illiteracy. These clubs formed part of a country-wide programme to eradicate illiteracy, instigated by Lenin in 1919.⁶⁵ For the deaf, the problem of illiteracy was particularly acute. As the majority of deaf people had not been taught to speak, written Russian was their primary method of communication with the hearing. The extremely high level of illiteracy amongst provincial deaf individuals thus presented an obstacle to labour: without the ability to read instructions, a deaf person could not communicate with line managers and colleagues, or study a trade in technical college. The involvement of deaf societies with the *likbez* programme was enthusiastic, and the VSG even sent its chairman, Sergei Ivanovich Sokolov, to head the deaf-mute section of the central *likbez* administration.⁶⁶ Yet this focus on illiteracy as an obstacle to labour demonstrated the attitude of deaf organisations to education at this point. General education, or an abstract idea of ‘enlightenment’, was rejected in favour of specific goals to achieve integration and independence within hearing society. In 1921, Udal’ looked back at the founding of the Petrograd organisation: ‘We needed to create a type of establishment that was in no way reminiscent of the pre-revolutionary “godly” enterprise [...]; the task was to find a means to give illiterate and so-called “backward” deaf-mutes access to literacy, or, at the very least, to search out means and methods to strengthen the development of their emotional life and the widening of their mental capabilities with the goal, after such preliminary preparation, of giving them the possibility of access to social preparation, access to social life, and, in addition, helping them to master to the maximum the ability to *work*.’⁶⁷

⁶⁵ For more information on the *likbez*, see Charles E. Clark, *Uprooting Otherness: the Literacy Campaign in NEP-Era Russia* (Selinsgrove, 2000).

⁶⁶ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 61.

⁶⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 5, l. 12 (my italics).

Education was thus configured as a means to achieve social integration and the emancipation of labour. This privileging of labour over education was further evinced in 1921, when deaf activists met with state representatives to discuss the formation of a new national organisation for the deaf. In a clash over deaf education, deaf representatives argued against the use of the oral method in schools, suggesting that it took far too long (six to seven years) to teach speech, time that could be better spent on imparting basic literacy and labour skills.⁶⁸ The urgency of the need for autonomy, it would seem, made the rejection of oral speech a necessary sacrifice in favour of the primacy of labour training. One could also read this argument, described by the Moscow based deaf activist Pavel Alekseevich Savel'ev as a 'fundamental divergence of opinions' with state educators, as a reaction to the pre-revolutionary emphasis on spoken Russian as the sole means to gain legal autonomy.⁶⁹ By relying on labour, the deaf could achieve autonomy on their own terms.

In their organisations and activities, therefore, deaf people interacted with the Soviet project to transform the individual and society. Labour, the acquisition of literacy and skills, and the cooperation of deaf people were all refracted through the prism of Soviet ideology, and situated deaf organisation within the utopian rhetoric of liberation. This interaction, however, was driven by the particular needs of the deaf: to overcome the disabling effects of their deafness, and to gain individual and group autonomy. In their engagement with the political structures of Bolshevism, this dialogue between belief in the utopian potential of socialism and the particular desires of the deaf was again brought to the fore. The first deaf-mute cell of the Communist Party was established in Moscow on 14th August 1920. Its membership consisted of the chairman of the VSG, Sokolov, alongside four other prominent deaf activists. Later that year, students training in the workshops belonging to the Arnol'do-Tretiakov School established a cell of the Party's youth organisation, the Komsomol (Communist Union of Young People) and elected as its secretary a young typesetter named Kanakin. The notion of political consciousness situated this party activity in the narrative of individual transformation. The *Bulletin of the*

⁶⁸ Ibid., 1. 19.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Conference of Deaf-Mutes, published to coincide with the Conference of Active Deaf Workers in 1921, announced that ‘all conscious deaf-mutes must in their turn take an active part in the propaganda of the ideas and views of the Soviet government amongst their backward [*temnye*] deaf-mute comrades, enlightening them in their clubs and organising them in strong nuclei (cells), in order that, at the first call by the Soviet government, they will fight [*stat’ grud’iu*] to defend her...’.⁷⁰

In the context of Civil War, this emphasis on defence of the revolution formed a central part of party activities. On the fifth anniversary of the deaf Party cell, members described its foundation as a response to the Civil War: deaf members wanted to join the Party in order to go to the Polish front and ‘fight the Whites’.⁷¹ Yet this desire to defend the revolution was also presented as a means for the deaf to symbolically integrate themselves into the Soviet collective, and to safeguard the gains made by deaf people since the revolution. Savel’ev later wrote that they hoped to fight, ‘on the one hand, in order to prove the devotion of the Soviet government, who, regardless of the contingencies existing in tsarist Russia, had given deaf-mutes full rights on an equal basis with workers, and, on the other hand, to defend the victory of October together with hearing people.’⁷² Inclusion within the Party structures was thus a way to consolidate and propagandise the achievements of deaf people under Soviet power.

In their engagement with Soviet ideals, therefore, the deaf displayed complex motivations. On the one hand, the Soviet regime was presented as a utopian opportunity for the deaf to overcome their disability and integrate themselves into society. On the other, the pre-revolutionary drive for autonomy and independence led the deaf to privilege certain facets of the New Soviet Person over others, and to negotiate, sometimes literally – as in the case of meetings between deaf activists and state officials – over the ways in which deaf people functioned within Soviet society. For the most part, these negotiations were easily resolved. On occasion, however, the divergent views between what the deaf expected from the new social structures, and

⁷⁰ *Biulleten’ Vserossiiskoi Konferentsii Glukhonemykh*, 27th May 1921, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia VOG* p. 57.

⁷¹ P. A. Savel’ev, ‘Istoricheskii obzor raboty Moskovskoi iacheiki RKP(b) glukhonemykh’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 14th August 1925, p. 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*

what the state proposed, caused latent tensions to break into the open. One such occasion was the closure of the first national deaf society, the VSG, in 1920. In a decree published by Sovnarkom in December 1919, followed by a similar decree in 1920, the state declared that the needs of deaf people would be met by three government departments: children up to the age of three by the People's Commissariat for Health (Narkomzdrav); children from 3 to 15 by the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros); and adults incapable of work by the People's Commissariat for Social Protection (Narkomsobes). Adults capable of work would undergo training under Narkompros.⁷³ In light of these provisions, which sought to integrate deaf people into the structures of Soviet governance, the state began to refuse to register local deaf organisations and to actively campaign for the closure of the VSG.

This drive to close deaf organisations formed part of a general trend in the lead up to the tenth party congress of 1921 to close down independent proletarian or revolutionary organisations. As Lynn Mally has pointed out, organisations such as Proletkult were targeted, and ultimately subsumed into government organisations, as a result of their autonomy: 'members of the Communist Party's central leadership, and Lenin in particular, distrusted any institution that demanded independence, from trade unions and party factions to opposing political parties.'⁷⁴ Attacks on the VSG, as exemplified in an article from *Izvestiia* in 1920, echoed the rhetoric of the day in criticising the organisation, which was 'created in the era of Kerensky and is now unnecessary ballast'.⁷⁵ This challenge to deaf organisation, however, highlighted the divergent views of autonomy on the part of the state and the deaf. For the former, an autonomous deaf organisation represented an obstacle in the integration and transformation of deaf individuals into Soviet citizens. For the latter, the VSG represented their best chance to achieve this transformation: 'deaf-mutes, on the strength of the awareness of their isolation from other citizens, and as a result of the difficulty in communication with them, on all questions require uniting in Unions.'⁷⁶

⁷³ Narkomzdrav Semashko, Narkomsobes Vinokurov and Narkompros Lunacharskii, 'O sotsial'nom obespechenii glukhonemykh i slepykh', *Izvestiia*, 26th November 1920, p. 4.

⁷⁴ Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkul't movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 227.

⁷⁵ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia VOG* p. 52.

⁷⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 3, l. 129.

The closure of the VSG, announced on the final day of the II All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes, was not solely the result of state pressure. As a report of its activities from 1917 to 1920 made clear, the chaos of the Civil War and a chronic lack of funds had made the continuation of VSG activities on a national scale almost impossible.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the event provoked a furious response, most notably from the Petrograd department of the VSG, headed by Maria Sergeevna Mintslova-Piotrovskaiia. On her initiative, members of the VSG signed a petition in which they declared that they ‘protest categorically against all attempts to violate our will, which is directed towards the collective cooperation with the authorities of the Workers’ and Peasants’ republic. We protest against the attempts to force onto us and onto our Union the remnants of a gendarme ideology, according to which an association of free citizens is harmful and unnecessary to the state’.⁷⁸ For Mintslova-Piotrovskaiia, the actions of the state were not intended to help the deaf: on the contrary, they were indicative of the state’s fear of deaf ‘self determination’. While the activities of the Petrograd department could not save the Union, the incident generated considerable debate on the nature of deaf organisation, and of state involvement with deaf people.

The debates around the closure of the VSG and subsequent attempts to form a national organisational body for deaf people served to highlight ambivalence on the part of deaf activists towards state control of provision for deaf people. This ambivalence focused on two particular areas: a perceived misunderstanding of deafness by the state, and its adoption of a charitable or tutelary role towards the deaf. In their discussion of these areas, members of the VSG echoed much of the pre-revolutionary rhetoric of liberation from oppression and the rejection of guardianship. This was perhaps unsurprising: the VSG had retained its core membership since the Congress of July 1917, and as such, a mere three years since the revolution, the memory of tsarist tutelage remained fresh. One such activist was the ex-chairman of the VSG, Sergei Ivanovich Sokolov. Born in 1888 in Kamyshin, Saratov Province, Sokolov was a typical example of the educated, pre-revolutionary deaf organiser. Educated at the Arnol’do-Tretiakov School in Moscow, he worked as

⁷⁷ Ibid., ll. 130-132.

⁷⁸ Ibid., l. 107.

an accountant before becoming actively involved in the Moscow Deaf Society. In the aftermath of the closure of the VSG, Sokolov produced a document, *Theses on the Question of the Position and Unification of Deaf-Mutes*, in which he argued the need for deaf organisations to facilitate the development of deaf individuals.⁷⁹ In this document, Sokolov focused at length on the misunderstanding of the deaf by the hearing: the surrounding world, especially those who ‘have been bureaucratised’ (*obiurokrativshchie*), he argued, had a ‘scornful’ attitude towards deaf people. Should they happen to meet an ‘abnormally developed deaf-mute’, they believe every deaf-mute to be the same: ‘this results in a misunderstanding on the part of the state in their attitudes to deaf-mutes.’⁸⁰ Point sixteen, which is crossed out in the archival draft, complains that ‘the general opinion regards deaf-mutes as people who can only be dealt with by Social Protection, and in these cases conscious and work-capable deaf-mutes are refused work amongst normal people [*normalnye*]’.⁸¹

The heart of Sokolov’s complaint, it seemed, was the state’s tendency to regard deaf people as invalids, rather than as normal, ‘work-capable’ people. This complaint was borne out in government legislation. The Sovnarkom decrees of 1919 and 1921 had made a distinction between deaf-mutes capable of education and labour, and those ‘incapable of education, weak-minded, adult- and child- idiots, and groups of backward deaf mutes’, who were to be given over to Narkomsobes, the People’s Commissariat for Social Protection.⁸² Similarly, an Explanatory Note produced by the Trades Union in 1925, detailing methods of working with deaf people, stated that ‘deaf-mutes, as a result of their physical lack, which complicates their communication with the hearing, their mental and professional education, have a different psychology, a lower cultural and professional level, and therefore must be transferred into groups with those invalids with a lowered work-ability’.⁸³

This tendency to regard certain deaf people as ‘backward’ and incapable was deeply reminiscent of tsarist attitudes. Its presence in state legislation was thus vociferously

⁷⁹ Ibid., l. 129.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Semashko, Vinokurov and Lunacharskii, ‘O sotsial’nom obespechenii glukhonemykh i slepykh’, p. 4.

⁸³ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 3, d. 1, l. 4.

challenged by the deaf. As Udal' argued at a meeting of deaf representatives and state bodies in 1921, the division of deaf people into 'capable' and 'backward' groups was impracticable: 'it is not specified which deaf-mutes should be counted in this "backward group" and which not. The result of this lack of specificity [*nedogorovennost'*] for deaf-mutes making a living from their own labour is not hard to imagine, if you consider the fact that, relying on this lack of specificity, Narkomsobes plans to deprive deaf-mutes of the right to lead and manage enterprises for deaf-mutes, founded on the selfless strengths of the best representatives of the Union of Deaf-Mutes.'⁸⁴ As Udal''s words demonstrated, however, the rejection of this label was now framed in the language of Soviet subjectivity: defining deaf people as 'backward' and incapable denied them the chance to 'make a living from their own labour', and thus to become an integrated part of the Soviet working masses. In a similar manner, Sokolov rejected the definition of 'invalidity' using the class language of the 1920s, arguing that deaf people without the ability to labour were forced into 'parasitism': sponging off the Soviet state.⁸⁵

According to Sokolov's *Theses*, the significant point was whether the deaf should be defined as invalids, or as a distinct social group with the potential to overcome their physical lack and become integral members of the body politic. In another point to be crossed out in the archival draft, Sokolov suggested a different mode of definition for the deaf: 'these conditions in several details are similar to the conditions of foreigners, who know only their mother tongue.'⁸⁶ He sought to liken the position of deaf people to that of the foreigner, capable of learning the dominant language and actively integrating, not as invalids in need of welfare. Whilst this nationalistic paradigm of deaf identity did not become widespread, its presence in Sokolov's draft pointed to the search for new definitions of deafness that did not negate individual and collective agency.

The desire to define deaf people as invalids was thus presented by the deaf community as a fundamental misunderstanding of deafness on the part of the state, which impacted negatively on the lives of deaf people. As such, deaf activists

⁸⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 5, l. 41.

⁸⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 3, l. 129 ob.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

argued, the affairs of deaf people should be in their own hands. In the *Bulletin of the All-Russian Conference of Deaf-Mutes*, Udal' argued that deaf-run enterprises were necessary 'in light of the numerical predominance of hearing people, who on top of everything else have entirely vague impressions of deaf-mutes and deaf-muteness, and are therefore inclined to foist their norms and models on deaf-mutes, not considering to what extent these norms suit deaf-mutes'.⁸⁷ Sokolov, in turn, argued that 'the interests of deaf-mutes are more clear and dearer to the hearts of deaf-mutes and those who work and live in their world'.⁸⁸ However, the closure of the VSG, and the failure to establish a new national deaf body in the mid-1920s, demonstrated definitively that provision for the deaf was to be kept firmly in the hands of the state.

From the state's perspective, this integration of deaf affairs into Soviet governmental structures was not an attempt to deny deaf agency. In fact, provision for marginal and disenfranchised peoples was central to the Soviet state's self-image. As Juliana Fürst suggests, the care of marginal members of society 'was supposed to right the wrongs of the tsarist regime, and at the same time to signal to the capitalist world the moral and social superiority of the Soviet system'.⁸⁹ For the deaf, however, this provision, with its emphasis on welfare and pensions, seemed merely to return them to a system of guardianship not dissimilar to that of the tsarist era. In 1921, in a meeting held between deaf activists and state representatives to discuss the formation of an organisational body under VTsIK, debates repeatedly returned to the problem of tutelage and the denial of agency. 'Why do the representatives of the People's Commissariats wish to keep this affair in their hands?' asked Alexei Valerianovich Mezhekov, a deaf party activist from the Kursk region. 'They don't trust us. We can work, we have sufficient strength; in this affair we must do the work ourselves.'⁹⁰ Udal' complained that 'they talk to us as if we were children'.⁹¹ The discussion touched on concrete areas of policy on which the state and deaf activists differed, such as the disagreement over sign language, and the need for specialised labour training. However, at the end of the meeting, the deaf educational theorist F. A. Rau

⁸⁷ *Builleten' Vserossiiskoi konferentsii glukhonemykh*, 25th May 1921, p.3, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia VOG* p.62.

⁸⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 3, l. 129.

⁸⁹ Juliane Fürst, 'Between Salvation and Liquidation: Homeless and Vagrant Children and the Reconstruction of Soviet Society', *SEER* 86, no. 2 (2008), (232-258) p. 234.

⁹⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 5, l. 19ob.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, l. 19.

conclusively rejected the proposal for a special department: ‘I don’t doubt that you deaf-mutes have heads that work well, but the People’s Commissariats must control this work, [...] a separate department is not necessary.’⁹²

By denying the deaf the ability to organise themselves as a group, and to determine their own provision, the state was seen to be setting up a new system of tutelage, albeit with a new ideological guise. Looking back, Savel’ev commented on this meeting: ‘This was the second mistake made by deaf-mutes: to allow hearing people into their world and not show them that they can themselves work independently, without the need for guardianship.’⁹³ Within this continued rhetoric of autonomy and the rejection of tutelage, therefore, Soviet attempts at social welfare and philanthropy, although ideologically set up as a rejection to the ‘bourgeois charity’ of tsarist times, was seen by the deaf to be a different mode of the same disabling system. This strong resistance to charity on the part of the deaf was recognised as a danger by the state: in an article in the newspaper *Izvestiia* in November 1925, the People’s Commissar for Social Protection N. A. Miliutin argued that an organisation dealing with the deaf ‘cannot by its very character have a flavour of philanthropic aid towards deaf-mutes, even if this is on the part of the organisation, and not individuals. In addition the reasonable resolution of the problem of the welfare of invalids, including deaf-mutes, lies solely in the plane of the development of their independence and initiative’.⁹⁴ Yet in adding that ‘Deaf-Mutes must not stand aside from the social movement of the invalid masses’, the Commissar merely reinforced the state’s tendency to align the deaf with the ‘invalid masses’, rather than the masses in general. For the deaf, this remained a denial of their agency.

It would be tempting to interpret this moment as resistance on the part of the deaf to an overbearing Soviet state. However, as their interaction with the Soviet transformative project demonstrated, the deaf did not reject the utopian potential of the Soviet system. Even at the official closure of the VSG, its members declared: ‘All people must be in one Union, called Communist Society, and not separated from each other by fences with the name of such and such a union [...] Protect deaf mutes

⁹² Ibid., p. 19 ob.

⁹³ P. A. Savel’ev, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 15th February 1925, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 64.

⁹⁴ N. A. Miliutin, ‘K voprosu ob organizatsii glukhonemykh’, *Izvestiia*, 20th November 1924, p. 2.

– from whom? The laws of the Soviet republic are just as equal for us as for hearing people.⁹⁵ It was a case, they argued, of ‘all for one and one for all’ in the new Soviet order.⁹⁶ Yet in demanding autonomy, group identity and self-determination, the deaf invoked the revolutionary spirit of 1917 for support, and employed Bolshevik and revolutionary rhetoric to advance their claims. In the concluding report of the II All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes, after the announcement of the closure of the VSG, the committee claimed that ‘if Marxist theory states that “the emancipation of the proletariat is the work of the proletariat”, then we say “the renaissance of deaf-mutes and their awakening to conscious, creative life is work for the hands of deaf-mutes themselves.”’⁹⁷ Deaf artels, workshops, clubs and party organisations were framed in the language of Marxist ‘cooperation’. The revolutionary anthem of 1917, the Internationale, was called upon to reinforce these claims: ‘No one will grant us deliverance/ Neither god, nor tsar, nor hero/ We will win our liberation/ With our own hands.’⁹⁸

In their push for a central, deaf-run organisation, therefore, the deaf claimed the revolutionary banner in opposition to the state and insisted on the liberation promised in 1917. Their language supported the goals of the Soviet state: to transform the deaf into conscious, politically active workers who engaged fully in the Soviet body politic. Yet they insisted that such transformation was only possible on their own terms, and under their own organisation. In the wake of the closure of the VSG, its members took pains to point out how the event damaged the ability of the deaf to become New Soviet People. In a speech in May 1921, Sokolov described the situation thus: ‘I ascertain the impossibility in the current circumstances of creating an apparatus of widespread, mass labour of deaf-mutes.’⁹⁹ Udal’ concurred: ‘Whoever is in the least bit close to deaf-mutes, their everyday lives, their language, their psychology, he must inevitably agree that, with the liquidation of the Union, the state lost a valuable partner in the field of creating deaf-mute citizens.’¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 3, l. 136.

⁹⁶ Ibid. l. 136.

⁹⁷ Ibid., l. 3.

⁹⁸ Anon., ‘Nashi zadachi’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 15th March 1925, p. 1.

⁹⁹ *Biulleten’ Vserossiiskoi konferentsii glukhonemykh*, 24th May 1921, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ GARF f. 511, op. 1, d. 5, l. 11.

With the closure of the VSG, and in subsequent interactions with state departments, competing interpretations of the role of the deaf in Soviet society were played out. Yet these ideological tussles happened on a small scale, within the small circles of deaf activists campaigning for a national deaf organisation. With the establishment of the first national deaf newspaper, *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* (*Life of Deaf-Mutes*), the forum for these debates was widened. First published in February 1924, during the days of mourning for the death of Lenin (whose portrait adorned the front page of the first issue), *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* was a joint publication of the Deaf-Mute Section under VIKO and the Deaf-Mute cell of the Communist Party. With an initial run of 500 copies, it was widely distributed amongst provincial deaf organisations.¹⁰¹ As such, the newspaper represented a space in which the fundamental questions of deaf organisation could be debated more widely, and the concrete problems facing local deaf individuals could be highlighted and discussed. In the very first issue, an article by Kuznetsov spelled out how the theoretical tension between categories of 'invalid' and 'normal' was preventing unemployed deaf individuals from either finding work or claiming unemployment benefits from the state. 'One after the other during October and November [deaf-mutes] were deprived [of benefits] on the pretext that, as invalids, deaf mutes had the right to state welfare from MOSO [the Moscow Department of Social Protection], and MOSO in its turn rejects them as educated workers.'¹⁰² In a later issue, the paper highlighted the problem of invalid artels, which the Deaf-Mute Section had sought to champion as a means of integrating deaf people into the workforce. Such artels, they argued, tended to restrict their membership to victims of war or labour accidents, and rarely took deaf people without some form of financial incentive.¹⁰³ The competing categories of 'invalid' and 'normal' were seen to have a real, practical impact in the administrative reality of the urban workplace. With *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, therefore, the practical impact of Soviet definitions of deafness was explored.

Individuals in deaf organisations further used the newspaper as a space to agitate and complain about concrete issues. In October 1925, the chairman of the Moscow Deaf-

¹⁰¹ GARF, f. 511, op. 1, d. 12, l. 1.

¹⁰² E. Kuznetsov, 'Glukhonemye na birzhe truda', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, February 1924, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 75.

¹⁰³ 'Rezoliutsiia po dokladu o trudovom ustroisve', p. 3.

Mute Cell of the Communist Party, P. A. Savel'ev, writing under the pseudonym B. Volgin, published an article entitled 'Shadows on the Sun'.¹⁰⁴ In it, he argued forcefully against the recalcitrance of the Moscow Department of Social Welfare (MOSO), which had failed to lend support to the deaf in setting up their own artels, as provided in the government circular of 1925. The article described unused factory buildings and machine equipment lying idle, which could be productively used by the many unemployed deaf individuals in the capital. In a mishmash of metaphor, Savel'ev compared MOSO in turn to a sun, refusing to shine rays of light on the deaf in its orbit, and to a husband refusing to pay alimony to his former wife. In a similar article by Savel'ev (again writing as Volgin), the decision by the Moscow branch of the Invalid Cooperative Association (MOSGIKO) to close deaf artel No. 393 was described as a 'bull-fight' between the deaf and the state.¹⁰⁵ The reason given for the closure was that the artel had not developed strong work practices, and as a result was not making any money. According to Savel'ev, however, MOSGIKO had not been honest about its motives, and in fact had wanted to use the premises for other projects. This hint of secrecy and intrigue only compounded the sense of injustice: 'There you have it. There's deaf-mute cooperation for you in the capital of the USSR.' Besides, Savel'ev argued, the ideological imperative of developing labour skills should surely trump the need for profit: 'You surely don't think that artels must be organised by capitalists, able to bring in shares and acquisitions, and not those in need of job development. It's stupid.' These articles allowed local individuals to point the finger of blame at government organisations for thwarting the initiative of deaf groups. In the case of artel No. 393, a change of personnel in the Moscow branch of the department of Social Protection led to the artel being kept open.¹⁰⁶ However, this only underlined the arbitrariness of the provision for deaf people, dependent on the presence of sympathetic individuals in the relevant departments.

Having such a newspaper thus allowed deaf individuals to protest and publicise their struggle for initiative. On the pages of *Zhizn' Glukhonemykh*, cases of state heavy-handedness against the deaf were frequently discussed, and by 1925 the issue had

¹⁰⁴ P. A. Savel'ev (as B. Volgin), 'Teni na solntse', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 1st October 1925, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ P. A. Savel'ev (as B. Volgin), 'Byki', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 1st December 1925, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

spilled over into the hearing press. On 1st October 1925, the newspaper *Rabochaia Gazeta (The Worker's Newspaper)* published an article titled 'The Bunglers' (*Golovotiapy*) by Vasilii Kumach, which discussed the closure of a literacy club in Ekaterinoslav.¹⁰⁷ The club had enjoyed great success in teaching the deaf of the region to read, the article argued, only to be liquidated 'on the basis that the education of deaf mutes must be under the control of the Sobes'. Kumach suggested that this decision was down to 'paper formalism', which did not take into account either the success of the club or the needs of deaf-mutes in the area. Kumach's article is headed by a description of deaf people that suggests a growing awareness of their ability to work alongside the hearing: 'In general, they are not a bad lot. Practical, energetic, industrious. The only thing they lack is quickness of wit and comprehension.' Yet despite this potential, he argues, it was proving difficult to develop cultural work within the deaf community. This process needed support, and yet 'the bunglers think otherwise'.

Zhizn' glukhonemykh, therefore, functioned as a space in which the state's attitude towards deaf individuals could be interrogated. The newspaper's critical gaze was not turned solely towards the state, however. From the outset, the pages of *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* were used to debate and consolidate the ideal of Soviet deafness, and to critically assess the successes and failures of deaf organisation to date. Articles portrayed the deaf as communal, capable people with initiative, able to integrate themselves into the Soviet body politic, but thwarted both by the problematic attitude of individuals in state organisations, and by the failure of deaf organisations to seize the initiative and help themselves. As the drive to create a national deaf organisation, VOG, began to gain momentum, the newspaper became a forum to discuss the lessons learned over the last eight years. In his article 'History is Repeating Itself' (*Istoriia povtoriaetsia*), Savel'ev focused on the liquidation of the VSG as the decisive moment.¹⁰⁸ By allowing control to be wrested from them, Savel'ev argued, the deaf had left themselves at the mercy of state organisations, with provision and legislation fluctuating with changes in personnel. The lesson, therefore, was that 'the

¹⁰⁷ V. Kumach, 'Golovotiapy', *Rabochaia gazeta*, 1st Oct 1925, cited in *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 15th October 1925, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ P. A. Savel'ev, 'Istoriia povtoriaetsia', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 1st October 1925, p.1.

affairs of deaf-mutes are their own' (*delo glukhonemykh, est' delo ikh samykh*).¹⁰⁹ In the build up to the creation of VOG, the pages of *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* were used to agitate for this initiative on the part of deaf people: 'Organise yourselves locally, establish links with each other, maintain close links with the central organisation, as only by means of organisation and mutual effort by local and central organisations will it be possible to carry out work to develop culturally, educate and find work for deaf mutes.'¹¹⁰

VOG

On 23rd June 1926, the Deputy Chairman of Sovnarkom, A. P. Smirnov, published his 'Position on the All-Russian Association of Deaf-Mutes', setting out the details of a national deaf organisation. The 'Position' declared that 'the All-Russian Association of Deaf-Mutes (VOG) is a social organisation, which fulfils its tasks and goals through the work placement of deaf-mutes in all branches of industry accessible to them, uniting them in artels, associations [*tovarishchestva*], communes and other such collectives on the basis of autonomy, mutual aid and individual initiative'.¹¹¹ According to this document, the proposed organisation would have a wide remit: tasks would include carrying out a national census of deaf people, training deaf individuals in labour skills and finding them work placements, participating in education and political-cultural work, establishing activities to promote the cure and prevention of deafness, and working to regulate the legal position of the deaf in the Soviet system.¹¹² As had been the case with the Deaf-Mute Section, VOG was to function under the administration (and budget) of the People's Commissariat for Social Welfare. However, as deaf people had demanded for so many years, the proposed body spanned the activities of all the People's

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Anon., 'O sviazy glukhonemykh', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 15th June 1925, p. 1.

¹¹¹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 95. It is unclear why the state finally capitulated to deaf demands and agreed to the formation of VOG in 1926: by this point, however, the state's refusal to countenance the prospect of a national deaf organisation would have been undermined by the existence of the All-Russian Society of the Blind (*Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo slepykh*), founded in 1923. See Bernice Madison, 'Programs for the Disabled in the USSR', in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, ed. William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum (Pittsburgh, 1989), (167-198) p. 188.

¹¹² Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 95.

Commissariats which dealt with deafness, uniting them under one, deaf-controlled organisation.

Smirnov's 'Proposal', with its emphasis on 'autonomy, mutual aid and individual initiative', portrayed the creation of VOG as the inevitable culmination of a developing sense of Soviet deaf identity. Yet in many ways, the organisation pointed to the legacy of pre-revolutionary deaf organisation. Membership was restricted to deaf-mutes (by birth and late-deafened), and a maximum of 25 per cent of hearing members who worked closely with the deaf community. The organisation functioned as a self-contained deaf interest group, not unlike pre-revolutionary voluntary associations such as the St. Petersburg Society. Organisationally, VOG retained the traditions of the voluntary association, with an official charter, approved by Sovnarkom in September 1926, and a democratically elected council and president.¹¹³ Delegates voted unanimously for their president, Pavel Aleksandrovich Savel'ev, by holding up their hands and making his sign name, 'trifles' (*pustiaki*), with their right palm facing forward and their left hand forming a fist around their right thumb.¹¹⁴

Although the old traditions persisted, the creation of VOG also attested to the dramatic shift in deaf identity over the previous nine years. At the III All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes (later known as the First Congress of VOG), held from 21st to 25th September 1926 in Moscow, it became clear that the old guard of deaf activists had begun to cede their position to a new generation of Soviet deaf people. This could be clearly seen in the election of Savel'ev over his old friend and mentor, Sokolov. Savel'ev had been born into a peasant family in the village of Andreevka, Saratov province.¹¹⁵ He was not born deaf, but at the age of eight had fallen through the ice whilst skating, contracted meningitis and lost his hearing. As a result, he could speak well, read and write. At thirteen, his father had taken him to Saratov and found him a position as an apprentice metalworker. He did not have any contact with the deaf community until around 1910, when, whilst standing in a queue for cigarettes, he met Sokolov, who introduced him to the local deaf society. Having

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 93.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ivan Isaev, *Mnogogolos'e tishiny: Iz istoriia glukhikh Rossii* (Moscow, 1996), pp. 23-25.

learned sign with some difficulty, he moved to Moscow in early 1920 and became actively involved with the 'House of Deaf-Mutes', before forming the first deaf-mute cell of the Communist Party. Thus, whilst Sokolov was of the old, elite circle of deaf activists, Savel'ev was a skilled worker from a poor background, much closer to the proletarian Soviet ideal. The list of delegates from this conference also demonstrated this shift: whereas at the All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes in 1917 the majority of delegates were graduates of the local schools in state or private service, the delegate list for the 1926 congress included metalworkers, boot makers, seamstresses and machine operators.¹¹⁶ The delegate information forms also showed how working on behalf of the deaf community had become more prestigious: one delegate, G. P. Vaganov, had listed his profession as 'deaf-mute activist'.¹¹⁷

With the creation of VOG, therefore, the struggle by deaf individuals for their own autonomous organisation was finally successful, and the role of VOG within the broader transformative project of Soviet society, with its emphasis on proletarian roots and personal initiative, was enshrined in legislation. However, the debates during the first VOG Congress showed that not all deaf activists were behind the new organisation. Again, it was the delegates from Leningrad, namely Zhuromskii and Mintslova-Piotrovskaiia, who were vocal in their opposition. According to Zhuromskii, the creation of VOG would only serve to undermine efforts at integration: he 'considers Savel'ev's report unsatisfactory, and VOG dangerous for deaf-mutes: they will fire deaf-mute labourers from their jobs, alleging that they have their VOG to look after them'.¹¹⁸ Having a separate organisation for deaf people, he argued, would only reinforce the impression that they needed special treatment and care. He proposed that VOG should only take as members those deaf individuals who cannot work, and therefore need welfare protection, whilst leaving qualified deaf workers within the state system.¹¹⁹ For Mintslova-Piotrovskaiia, the problem centred on the fact that, with the creation of VOG, those local organisations set up under the Deaf-Mute Section would necessarily be liquidated: 'with the abolition of the deaf-mute section under GIKO, all that has been achieved during its

¹¹⁶ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, pp. 93-94.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹¹⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 8, l. 6.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 6.

existence will disappear in vain.’ ‘We expended so much energy on creating local organisations, and for what? [...] As if VOG can instantly give as much as is needed even for our House of Deaf Mute Enlightenment in Leningrad, or for the salaries of VOG workers? The Deaf-Mute Section under Leningrad GIKO must continue to work, in order that everyone can prepare for the moment when LOG [the Leningrad branch of VOG] strengthens.’¹²⁰

For the Leningraders, therefore, VOG was ‘dangerous, as it is beautiful from the outside’, yet lacked the funds and organisational experience to replace the Deaf-Mute Section.¹²¹ Again, the arguments returned to the notion of agency and autonomy: without a strong organisation, deaf individuals would be reduced to living on welfare payouts from the state. However, for Savel’ev, such arguments were hollow: ‘Comrade Zhuromskii has surprised me. I consider him my teacher. How can he think such nonsense?’¹²² For Savel’ev, VOG represented the resolution of deaf struggles for autonomy: ‘VOG includes all facets of the lives of deaf-mutes – that is what we need.’¹²³ Splitting the organisation between VOG and the People’s Commissariat of Social Welfare would thus be a retrograde step. In the subsequent debates, the position of Zhuromskii and Mintslova-Piotrovskaiia was overwhelmingly rejected by delegates, and VOG’s charter was agreed for submission to the People’s Commissariat of Social Welfare, which approved it on 19th October 1926.¹²⁴ In the concluding remarks of the Congress, the significance of VOG in the fight for deaf independence was definitively stated: ‘With the formation of VOG, deaf-mutes have been given every possibility to build their own lives and demonstrate autonomy.’¹²⁵

Conclusion

The period between the revolutions of 1917 and the creation of VOG in 1926 saw a reconceptualisation of deafness in the Soviet context, and a discovery of alternate models of selfhood, informed by Soviet ideology, which shaped the ways in which

¹²⁰ Ibid., l. 18.

¹²¹ Ibid., l. 6.

¹²² Ibid., l. 7.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 94.

¹²⁵ GARF, f. 1, op. 1, d. 8, l. 14.

deaf people functioned within society. This shift was not unproblematic. Deaf organisation, and engagement with notions of Soviet identity, was fundamentally shaped by the pre-revolutionary experience of deaf people. Resistance to tsarist structures of charity and tutelage shaped deaf responses to Soviet notions of welfare and ‘humaneness’. Similarly, the desire for autonomy and independence led to the privileging of the Soviet notions of labour and initiative, and the use of proletarian rhetoric to support calls for equality and rights. The creation of VOG, with its strong emphasis on labour and its structures of deaf control, gave this uneasy balance between Soviet integration and a distinct deaf group identity concrete form. Whilst situating themselves firmly within the Soviet transformative project to remake the individual and society, deaf individuals had asserted their right to ‘do it themselves’.

Even by the creation of VOG, however, these changes had affected a very narrow group of deaf people. The progress described so vividly in the Saratov deaf Komsomol had been experienced by a very small number of urban deaf individuals. By the mid-1920s, deaf activists had begun to turn their attention to those individuals not yet served by deaf organisations. In the same year as the foundation of VOG, the All-Union Population Census of the USSR counted 112,000 deaf-mutes, with 78,400 in the RSFSR alone.¹²⁶ Estimates by deaf organisations put the figure significantly higher, at 250,000.¹²⁷ Articles in *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* discussed the plight of the 98 per cent of deaf people living in the country, with no access to education, training, or a deaf community: ‘Deaf-mutes are illiterate, scattered in ones and twos in all settlements, without trade, the poorest of the poor, beggarly shepherds and farm-hands’.¹²⁸ Despite advances in urban centres, in both attitudes and practical organisation, for deaf peasants, ‘the revolution passed them by’.¹²⁹

The creation of VOG thus represented a moment of potential, rather than of resolution. It would be in the subsequent decade, as VOG began to involve deaf individuals on a ‘mass’ level, that the possibilities of deaf autonomous organisation, and the contours of Soviet deaf identity, would be fully explored. Yet in 1926, within

¹²⁶ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh*, p. 14.

¹²⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 6, l. 22.

¹²⁸ N. Minakov, ‘Ne zabivaite derevni’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, 22nd July 1925, p. 1.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

the limited circles of deaf organisation, VOG was seen to represent the best opportunity for the deaf to fulfil the 'promise of October' and work together for their common liberation: from tutelage, from charity, and from the social impact of their disability.

2 *Making the Deaf Soviet*



figure 2
May Day Parade, 1933

On 1st May 1933, amongst the columns of Soviet athletes that made up the traditional May Day parade in Moscow, one particular group stood out. Dressed in orange t-shirts and navy blue shorts, under a two-sided banner emblazoned with the word ‘Deaf-Mutes’ (*Glukhonemye*), 350 deaf sportsmen and women marched in ‘enigmatic silence’ towards Red Square. As they approached Lenin’s mausoleum and saluted the Soviet leaders atop the structure, these deaf *fizkul’turniki* symbolically claimed their place amongst the ranks of the Soviet masses. As *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* commented, ‘with their cheerful appearance, the deaf-mutes testified

to their readiness to fight alongside the working class of the USSR for the general line of the party and its leader, comrade Stalin.’¹

Through their enthusiastic participation in the mass celebrations that characterised Soviet life under Stalin, the deaf in the 1930s thus bore witness to their own transformation: from ‘backward’, illiterate invalids into the ‘first ranks’ of the Soviet industrial working class. This transformation process both echoed the tropes of, and borrowed the techniques from, Stalin’s industrialisation drive, with the utopian goal of ‘overcoming deaf-muteness’ tackled through forward planning and the setting of targets. Conceived in these terms, the transformation of the Soviet deaf became the ultimate ‘Soviet project’. Yet this ambitious undertaking raised certain questions that undermined its utopian overtones. In the first instance, these questions were organisational in nature, as deaf and hearing alike sought to find institutional structures and systems of service provision that could best facilitate the transformation of the deaf. Through these debates, however, more fundamental and disturbing questions surfaced. Could the deaf really be integrated into Soviet society? Did they even want to be?

This chapter examines the events of the 1930s, as deaf organisation moved from the limited grass-roots activity of the 1920s into the mass politics of the Stalin era. Through their participation in the industrial and political life of the country, the deaf strove to demonstrate their ability to march alongside their hearing Soviet comrades towards the ultimate goal of a communist society. As mass celebration and enthusiasm gave way to the fear and violence of the purges, however, faith in the ability of the deaf to integrate into Soviet society, both on the part of the deaf and the hearing, was sorely shaken. 1937, the most violent year of Stalin’s purges, saw two significant events rock the deaf community: the ‘deaf-mute affair’ in Leningrad, which culminated in the execution of 35 deaf people by the NKVD for ‘espionage’, and the so-called ‘Buslaevshchina’, an internal VOG dispute which saw one individual, Nikolai Alekseevich Buslaev, expelled from the organisation for insisting that the deaf should not be institutionally isolated from the broader Soviet collective. Both of these ‘purges’, although demonstrably different in scale and direction,

¹ Anon., ‘Na prazdnike fizkul’turny’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 1, no. 2 (1933), p. 15.

revealed the tensions between the ideal Soviet transformation of the deaf and the complex reality of its implementation in practice.

Techniques of Transformation

As the historian Moshe Lewin has pointed out, the years 1929-1933, the period of the 'Great Break' and Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, were characterised by a social transformation of 'incredible intensity and scope'.² Fashioning an industrial economy in a predominantly peasant country entailed a wholesale transformation of society, as 'backward' peasants developed into the technically and politically literate vanguard of the Soviet working class. For the deaf, the imperative to turn themselves from 'backward invalids' into productive members of the Soviet masses was considered particularly urgent. At the end of the 1920s, according to information compiled by the newly-formed All-Russian Unification of Deaf-Mutes (VOG), the majority of deaf people stood outside the structures of Soviet economic and social life. Figures for the first quarter of 1927 had shown that only 3,526 of an estimated 80,000 deaf people in the RSFSR were members of VOG. Of those, 608 worked in a branch of state or cooperative industry, 1,002 in VOG workshops, 1,460 in rural handicraft workshops, and 483 were unemployed.³ A mere 74 were members of the Communist Party.⁴ The rest were illiterate, unemployed and scattered in isolation throughout the villages of the RSFSR. Members of VOG, and those state bodies that dealt with the deaf, thus faced the task of transforming this predominantly illiterate, atomised group of deaf individuals into collectively-minded members of the Soviet working masses.

To that end, over the course of the first Five-Year Plan, VOG and several state bodies published a succession of decrees, instructions and informational circulars setting out methods for identifying, employing and acculturating the deaf in the mould of the New Soviet Person. In the first instance, members of VOG sought to identify deaf individuals (a process referred to as *uchet*, or 'census') and convince

² Moshe Lewin, 'Society, State and Ideology during the First Five-Year Plan', in *Cultural Revolution in Russia 1928-1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington, 1978), (41-77) p. 41.

³ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 15, l. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 2.

them to join the newly-established VOG (*okhvat*, or ‘inclusion’).⁵ In urban centres, where the tradition of deaf organisation was already well-established, this task was relatively simple. Deaf grass-roots organisations established in the 1920s were converted into departments of VOG and used their existing links within the deaf community to draw local deaf people into the work of the Unification.⁶ Finding the large numbers of rural deaf people proved harder. In the countryside, VOG activists worked alongside the Peasant Societies of Mutual-Aid and the organs of the People’s Commissariat of Social Welfare (Narkomsobes).⁷ In the absence of official data on the number and location of deaf people, workers had to rely on information gleaned through word of mouth and the occasional letter of enquiry from relatives to *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*.⁸ The high rate of job turnover amongst Narkomsobes workers made the task particularly difficult. VOG activists frequently complained that these workers had little or no knowledge of the needs and requirements of the deaf; the majority did not even know sign language.⁹ However, even deaf members of VOG found communication to be difficult, as deaf individuals in the countryside usually communicated through some form of primitive ‘home sign’ which VOG activists found hard to comprehend.¹⁰ In addition, the ‘scatteredness’ of these rural deaf individuals made it extremely difficult to establish a form of VOG organisation in the countryside that could successfully unite them: with distances of hundreds of kilometres between villages, trying to establish a local deaf club often seemed futile.¹¹

Over the course of the late 1920s and early 1930s, VOG developed a set of strategies to combat these problems. In order to identify rural deaf people and draw them into VOG, the Central Soviet, its ruling body, sent established members of the

⁵ Membership of VOG was not automatic for deaf people: a deaf (or hearing) individual had to choose to join and pledge to pay both a joining fee and a yearly membership fee. See *Polozhenie o vserossiiskom obshchestve glukhonemykh* (1932), VOG collection, p. 8. At the beginning of the Five-Year Plan, VOG pledged to achieve an *okhvat* of 22,300, of which 17, 595 (79 per cent) was actually fulfilled. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 21, l. 5.

⁶ For example, in 1927 the Ivanovo deaf organisation ‘Pomoshch’ glukhonemym’ became the central VOG department of the Ivanovo *guberniia*. V. A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiskogo obshchestva glukhykh* (Moscow, 2007), p. 99.

⁷ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, pp. 130-131.

⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 11, l. 1 ob.

⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 31, l. 8.

¹⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 29 ob.

¹¹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 253.

organisation into the countryside to make personal contacts with local deaf people. Viktor Palennyi records one such example: in 1932, a certain Valentina Kovaleva was sent from Leningrad to Pskov to head the local branch of VOG established there. Upon her arrival, she set about contacting local regional and agricultural soviets to request information on the deaf people in the area. Having established the location of deaf individuals, she visited many of them in person, speaking to their relatives when communication was difficult and persuading them of the benefits of joining VOG. This technique was evidently successful: before her arrival, the Pskov branch of VOG recorded a total of 55 members, but through her efforts, the number quickly rose to 270.¹² Kovaleva clearly approached her work with enthusiasm, but others appear to have been less eager: during the II All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes in 1929, N. N. Minakov, a delegate from Rostov on the Don, stormed that ‘the strictest measures must be taken against the reluctance of certain activists to go out to the provinces to work, even as far as to exclude them from the party and from VOG’.¹³ Minakov’s proposal to make the transfer of VOG activists to the countryside compulsory was ultimately rejected by the Congress, though the practice was kept up throughout the 1930s on a voluntary basis, with VOG’s chairman Pavel Alekseevich Savel’ev personally making regular trips to locations throughout the RSFSR.¹⁴ With such perseverance, the number of VOG members began to rise, from 5,143 in 1929 to 16,198 in January 1932, and reaching 39,000 by 1937.¹⁵

The question of how to unite such individuals in VOG also proved an intractable problem. With such huge distances separating the tiny rural residences of these deaf people, it was impossible to establish a deaf organisation along the lines of those found in urban centres. VOG’s response was to instigate a system of rural ‘rally-conferences’ (*slety-konferentsii*), at which groups of deaf villagers could congregate. The purpose of these rallies, according to a 1934 article by Savel’ev, was ‘the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ N. N. Minakov, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 157.

¹⁴ Savel’ev was even known to have broken off from his holidays to chase down deaf people in the remotest of locations. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 29. Also see GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 11, l. 1 ob.

¹⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 21, l. 6. This process is markedly reminiscent of collectivisation: as Lynne Viola points out, by grouping peasants together in collective farms, the state hoped to overcome the ‘primordial muzhik darkness’ and ‘plant’ socialism in the countryside. Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 13-29.

establishment of a vital link [*zhivaia sviaz*] to the deaf-mutes of the countryside, the study of each, individually, from the point of view of his political literacy, his potential to be assigned to study [...] or to work'. Having established such facts, the rallies could then be used to provide specific services for the deaf, such as 'legal consultation, medical assistance, placement in studies, work etc'. The article went on to give advice on how to carry out these events, from the choice of location, the hiring of premises and the organisation of refreshments to the establishment of links with local state organisations, such as Peasant Committees of Mutual Aid and Machine Tractor Stations.¹⁶ The VOG department in the Central-Volga *krai* was the first to make such events a central part of their work, carrying out rallies in six regions in the early 1930s and thereby establishing links with 180 villagers.¹⁷

Through their experiences in the villages, VOG activists became increasingly convinced that the 'scatteredness' of rural deaf people hindered their ability to access the services they needed to become good Soviet citizens.¹⁸ VOG rally-conferences in the provinces thus sought to bring the deaf together, to 'concentrate' them, in order to facilitate their transformation. Yet for the unemployed, illiterate rural deaf, a twice-yearly gathering in a regional town was not considered sufficient to overcome the combined obstacles of deafness and rural isolation. As a *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* article from 1930 pointed out: 'The life of these unfortunates is truly pitiful. The vast majority of them live 'on charity' [*iz milosti*] with their relatives, and for their labour (and they work no less than the hearing) they receive only a subsistence and ragged clothes [*da plokhuiu odezhonku*].'¹⁹ A more serious change was therefore necessary in order to lift these people out of their dire situation. As a result, VOG began to look to the more traditional locus of early Stalinist transformation: the factory. By involving the deaf in labour on a mass scale, and grouping them together in order to provide the services necessary to help them, VOG members believed that the forging of the new deaf person could be more easily achieved.

¹⁶ P. A. Savel'ev, 'Polnyi okhvat glukhonemykh derevni – boevaia zadacha kazhdoi vogovskoi organisatsii', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* 2, no. 13 (1934), p. 3.

¹⁷ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 255.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁹ Anon, 'Nizhegorodskii krai', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 15th August 1930, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 258.

Initially, VOG workers and government officials focused on developing the system of small-scale, deaf-only artels and workshops that had been established in the 1920s, which, according to a speech made by Savel'ev at the II All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes in 1929, would allow the deaf to '[stand] together with all adults in the general cooperative ranks and [begin] to fulfil the great plan of Il'ich, which he bequeathed after his death'.²⁰ The majority of these artels were handicraft based: according to figures for the RSFSR from 1927, there were sixteen sewing and leatherwork artels, seven bread-making artels and six printing shops.²¹ In addition to these, a small number of deaf-only Soviet farms (*sovkhozy*) were created by VOG following Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture after 1928.²² One such enterprise, the *sovkhaz* 'Kolos', was located in a former Trinity monastery on the banks of the Sheksna River outside Leningrad. The land was not ideal for farming: of the 2,500 hectares of land, only 250 could be used for crops, whilst the rest was forest and bog in need of drainage. Despite its problems, however, the Leningrad *oblast'* branch of VOG settled approximately one hundred and sixty deaf workers there in 1931.²³ Also within the VOG system was the vine-growing *sovkhaz* 'Vogovets No.1' in the Northern Caucasus, the livestock *sovkhaz* 'Vogovets No. 2' in Armavir, and the *sovkhaz* 'The Deaf-Mute Proletariat' in the Rzhevsk *oblast'*.²⁴

As the pace of Soviet industrialisation picked up, however, both the VOG leadership and state departments began to change their tactics; from focusing on deaf-only artels, workshops and farms, to including the deaf in the large-scale industrial projects that characterised the first Five-Year Plan. A joint circular, published in 1929 by the Supreme Soviet of the Economy (VSNKh) and the People's Commissariat of Labour (Narkomtrud), set out the procedures for the hiring of deaf people by state industrial enterprises. According to the circular, those deaf individuals who had previously worked in industry, or who had the necessary labour skills, 'taking into account their social position and property [*sotsial'no-*

²⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 33.

²¹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 284.

²² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 31.

²³ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 20, l. 49 ob.

²⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 17, l. 13; d. 22, l. 40; and d. 24, l. 41.

imushchestvennoe polozhenie]’, could be accepted for work.²⁵ The circular set out a proposed system of *putevki*, or labour vouchers, similar to those issued to unemployed hearing workers by the Labour Exchange. These *putevki* would be issued by VOG and certified by the Labour Department, to be presented to prospective employers as proof of an individual’s eligibility to work. In 1930, VOG and Narkomtrud published a further Instruction that refined this system, establishing concrete links between VOG and specific factories and setting out measures to plan deaf job allocation rationally throughout the RSFSR.²⁶

As a result of these measures, by the III All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes in 1931, a qualitative change had taken place in the membership of VOG. Of approximately 14,000 members, over 6,000 were working in general industry, with significant numbers working on the ‘gigantic’ construction projects of the Five-Year Plan, such as Moscow’s ‘Elektrozavod’, Gor’kii’s ‘Elektrostroi’, the Cheliabinsk and Stalingrad Tractor Factories and the factories of Magnitogorsk, among many others.²⁷ In the majority of cases, the involvement of deaf workers with these great construction projects began on a modest scale, with groups of four or five rural deaf people hired as unskilled labourers (*chernorabochie*) to work on the construction of the huge factory complexes.²⁸ As the factories went on line, however, the deaf moved inside, training on the job and ultimately achieving the status of skilled workers. In Gor’kii, for example, four of the five deaf workers originally hired were unskilled, but after proving their worth in construction, they took courses in metalwork and obtained work in the completed factory.²⁹ Traditions of hiring the deaf in these factories soon became established, and by 1933, groups of over 100 deaf people could be found working in ‘concentrated’ groups in several enterprises, including ‘Elektrozavod’ and Rostov on the Don’s ‘Rostsel’mash’.³⁰

²⁵ VSNKh i Narkomtrud RSFSR, Tsirkuliar № 213, ‘O poriadke registratsii i napravlenii na rabotu v proizvodstv glukhonemykh i oglokhshikh’, 31st October 1929, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 118.

²⁶ VOG i Narkomtrud RSFSR, Instruksiia № 39, ‘O vovlechenii glukhonemykh v obshchuiu promyshlennost’’, 2nd January 1930, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 119.

²⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 1

²⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 30. Stephen Kotkin points out that such a progression – from unskilled construction labourer to skilled factory worker – was a commonplace during the first Five-Year Plan. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 203.

²⁹ The four workers in question were given new suits in recognition of their achievements: Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 234.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

The hiring of deaf workers in state industry did not always proceed on an equal basis with that of the hearing. The 1929 Circular by VSNKh and Narkomtrud included a particular caveat: that the hiring of deaf people should be carried out on the basis of a ‘concrete list of positions for which a deaf-mute’s labour can be accepted, and also a list of positions that may not be taken on the strength of the necessity of hearing or the threat of the loss of sight’.³¹ In other words, there was a perception that the deaf could perform some jobs, but not others.³² Conversely, however, from the early 1930s, efforts were made to use the labour of deaf people in certain jobs which, thanks to their high noise levels, threatened the hearing of ordinary workers. Placing groups of deaf workers in the ‘noisy shop’ – a designation which covered the majority of workshops involving heavy machinery, including boiler rooms and foundries – was adopted as policy by VOG and the central administration of the trades union (VTsSPS) in 1931.³³ This ‘rational’ approach to hiring policy coexisted harmoniously with VOG’s policy of ‘concentrating’ the deaf in the workplace, with brigades of deaf people, sometimes several hundred strong, to be found working together in the noisiest parts of the Soviet factory throughout the 1930s.³⁴

By the early 1930s, therefore, the use of deaf labour in state factories had become widespread, with VOG acting as a type of job centre, placing individuals in suitable factories. For those seeking work in state industry, however, it was not always enough to show a willingness to work. Whilst many of the earliest deaf workers in state industries had found opportunities to move from unskilled construction work to skilled labour, this opportunity to learn on the job was not open to all. The majority of deaf workers were required to demonstrate some skills and literacy to be accepted

³¹ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 118.

³² As part of the widespread attempt to scientifically rationalise labour practices in the USSR, an Institute for the Study of the Labour of Invalids (*Institut po izucheniiu truda invalidov*, or ITIN) was established in Moscow in 1930. Within the Institute, a Department of Deaf-Muteness and Deafness focused its attentions on the science of deaf labour and the prophylaxis of deafness. However, despite this attempt to codify the prospects (and limits) of deaf workers’ abilities, conclusive lists of ‘acceptable’ or ‘banned’ professions for deaf people were not drawn up until the 1960s. (see Chapter Five for a fuller discussion of the scientific study of deaf labour.) *Glukhonemye (trudoustroistvo, obuchenie i kul’trabota)*, ed. Ts. K. Ambrosius (Leningrad, 1933), pp. 3-4.

³³ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 8, d. 2, l. 116; f. A-511, op. 1, d. 21, l. 11.

³⁴ See A. F. Raikh, ‘Glukhonemykh – v shumnye tsekha’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 2, no. 14 (1934), p. 23.

to work.³⁵ In light of this, VOG and Narkomsobes made the decision in 1929 to reform the system of VOG enterprises, turning existing workshops and artels into Educational-Industrial Workshops (*Uchebno-Proizvoditelnye Masterskie*, or UPMs).³⁶ Both deaf adults and school leavers could enter these workshops and receive the training necessary to master technical work and the use of specialist machinery (as well as basic literacy) in order to make the transition to state enterprises. By 1931, the VOG system had a total of 75 UPMs, in which 2,424 individuals were working and 827 studying.³⁷ Over the course of the 1930s, many groups of deaf individuals successfully made the leap from studying at the UPM to working in state factories.³⁸

Yet in labour education, too, the deaf had begun to make the transition from a narrow focus on practical literacy and skills to an aspirational desire to be included in the most prestigious worker education programmes of the ‘cultural revolution’: the workers’ faculties (*rabfaki*) and the Higher Educational Institutes (*Vysshie uchebnye zavedeniia*, or *VUZy*).³⁹ At the II All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes, E. N. Mokhonov, a delegate from the Crimea, complained to the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment A. V. Lunacharskii about the lack of educational opportunities for deaf people: ‘Now, amongst speaking people, there are *rabfaki*, *VUZy*, technical schools, they go to schools of ballet and drawing, are supplied with millions in funds, and deaf mutes are supplied with nothing.’ ‘Why’, he asked, ‘can’t we organise groups in *rabfaki* and *VUZy* to work with translators? They will not admit us – deaf-mutes are not allowed [*glukhonemym nel’zia*].’⁴⁰ In response,

³⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 33.

³⁶ According to a Sovnarkom Decree of 26th October 1929, it was proposed that ‘in order to facilitate the allocation of jobs to deaf-mutes [...] to stipulate that a portion of the enterprises of local departments of the All-Russian Unification of Deaf-Mutes be given for the organization of artels and educational-industrial workshops for deaf-mutes.’ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 291.

³⁷ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 293.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

³⁹ Education was seen to play a central role in the Soviet transformative project: according to Gail W. Lapidus, education ‘would inculcate the scientific knowledge and practical skills that would transform a backward agrarian society into a modern industrial order. It would serve as a channel of social mobility for previously disadvantaged groups, undermining traditional hierarchical and ascriptive patterns of social organization and facilitating the creation of an egalitarian community. Finally, education would transform the values, attitudes and behaviour of the population itself, creating the new men and women, the future citizens, of a modern socialist society’. Gail W. Lapidus, ‘Educational Strategies and Cultural Revolution: the Politics of Soviet Development’, in Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution*, (78-104) p. 80.

⁴⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d.13, l. 44.

Lunacharskii promised that, if a group of deaf people could be organised to work with a translator, he would personally find a *rabfak* to take them.⁴¹

On this basis, a group of 18 students entered the Bukharin *rabfak* in Moscow in September 1930. By 1931, one of their number, M. L. Shorin, could proudly tell the III All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes that deaf students were studying in all faculties of the *rabfak*: ‘It has become an everyday occurrence, not an exception.’⁴² All 18 of the original class graduated and went on to study at the *VUZ*. In September 1931, a group of 26 students entered the Rykov *rabfak* in Leningrad.⁴³ In addition to the deaf workers studying in hearing *rabfaki*, 1931 also saw over 100 deaf people begin their studies at the Frunze Professional-Technical School, a newly opened higher educational establishment for invalids in Leningrad.⁴⁴ Following this initial watershed, groups of deaf students studying with translators became commonplace in many hearing *rabfaki* and *VUZy*, and soon spread to other forms of worker education, such as the system of Factory-Plant Studentships (*Fabrichno-zavodskoe uchenichestvo*, or *FZU*). According to a report by *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* in 1933, which described in some detail the experiences of the first group of deaf students to study on the *FZU* programme at the 1st Kaganovich State Ball-Bearing Factory, these students would ‘provide qualified cadres for socialist industry’, which represented the ‘urgent task of VOG’ in the run-up to the XVII Party Congress of the CPSU in 1934.⁴⁵

By the time the first Five-Year Plan drew to a close, therefore, the basic contours of the deaf community’s path to transformation, and VOG’s role within it, had been drawn. According to the ‘Position on the All-Russian Society of Deaf-Mutes’, published by VOG in 1932 and approved by the Soviet of People’s Commissars, VOG had certain ‘fundamental tasks’: the ‘exposure, census and unification’ of deaf people in VOG, the carrying out of cultural-educational work and the raising of their level of political and technical understanding. Yet the organised transformation of

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 17.

⁴³ Ibid., l. 18.

⁴⁴ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 170.

⁴⁵ A. K., ‘Dat’ kvalifitsirovannye kadry dlia sotsialisticheskoi promyshlennosti’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 1, no. 14 (1933), pp. 12-13.

VOG members into industrial workers was particularly stressed: ‘the industrial training and re-training of deaf-mutes and those who have become deaf or mute, both in specialised educational-industrial workshops, the professional-technical schools and *tekhnikumy* of the People’s Commissariat of Social Welfare, and in general state educational establishments of all types’, was to be followed by the ‘planned placement of deaf mutes [...] in work in state and cooperative enterprises’. These aims formed the basis of VOG’s work throughout the 1930s. Their achievement was, in practice, a little more ad-hoc and fragmentary than the talk of ‘plans’ suggested: although attempts were made to establish a ‘general VOG plan’ along the lines of the Five-Year Plan, the nature of VOG planning was usually confined to individual discreet targets set in agreement with Gosplan, the Trades Union and the People’s Commissariats of Labour and Social Welfare.⁴⁶ However ad-hoc the organisation, by 1937 VOG could report that, of 39,000 members, approximately 17,000 were working in state industry, 9,000 in industrial cooperatives and 18,000 studying.⁴⁷

The decision to move from the deaf-only artels and invalid cooperatives of the 1920s to the large-scale industrial shops of state industry was in part a pragmatic one. Deaf-only artels in the 1920s suffered from organisational isolation; neither within the system of invalid cooperatives, nor industrial organisations within the Trades Union, they had few sources of ready credit and their managers found it very difficult to procure raw materials or achieve any degree of profitability.⁴⁸ A decision in 1928 to hand the artel system over to the All-Russian Cooperative Unification of Invalids (*Vserossiiskoe kooperativnoe ob’edinenie invalidov*, or VIKO) did little to improve matters. According to reports from *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh*, deaf workers soon began to be pushed out of the transferred artels: ‘In Novosibirsk [...] by the sweat of their brow, deaf-mutes had built an artel. They elected a deaf-mute manager. But the deaf mute manageress didn’t please the IKO workers. They removed her, and brought in a speaking manager. [...] They hired a lot of healthy people, kicked the deaf-mutes off the machines and made them make buttonholes, sew on buttons, and seated speaking

⁴⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 16, l. 33, and d. 13, l. 49.

⁴⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 37, 40.

⁴⁸ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 284.

workers at the deaf workers' machines.⁴⁹ Deaf members of these artels had lower wages than their hearing workmates, and no social insurance in case of injury in the workplace.⁵⁰ By contrast, deaf individuals in state industry were automatically granted membership of the Trades Union, with all of its associated benefits, and the concentrations of deaf individuals in the 'noisy shops' of large factories made it possible for VOG to establish factory-based 'cells' that were easily accessible and well attended.⁵¹

If placing the deaf in state industry was thus a practical choice, it was also a deeply symbolic one. As Stephen Kotkin has suggested, 'work served as both the instrument and measure of normality' during this period of intense social transformation.⁵² As the experience of deaf organisation after the revolution had shown, the Soviet deaf community desired above all to prove their 'normality' and capability within the new symbolic frameworks of Soviet society. In the era of socialist industrialisation, this proof lay in industrial labour. By showing themselves able to work alongside their hearing comrades, the deaf could demonstrate their 'normality' by their ability to integrate into the Soviet working masses. At the same time, through labour, the deaf individual was seen to 'forge' himself in the mould of the New Soviet Person. This desire to achieve 'normality' – integration and equality with the hearing – was tangible in discussions of the period. As the Deputy People's Commissar for Social Welfare, Samsonov, commented in 1929, the task of VOG and the Soviet state was 'to accustom the deaf-mute masses to the construction of our Soviet Republic; that is, to accustom deaf-mutes to labour, on an equal footing with the healthy, in all forms of industry'. According to Samsonov, the excellent results produced by the deaf were ample proof of their equality: 'already in the Red Capital more than a thousand proletarian deaf-mutes work side-by-side with the speaking and the

⁴⁹ B. Volgin, 'Na fronte invalidnoi kooperatsii ne vse ladno', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 28th October 1929, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 287.

⁵⁰ A. Fedot'ev, *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 28th October 1929, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 288.

⁵¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 21, l. 11.

⁵² Kotkin's argument is made in relation to convicts: 'Everyone had the right to work; no one had the right not to work. Failure to work, or to work in a 'socially useful' manner, was a punishable offence, and the chief punishment was forced labour (*prinuditel'naia rabota*). Convicts were required to work not merely to make good their 'debt' to society but above all to be able to rejoin that society as transformed individuals.' Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 202.

hearing, and their salary, work discipline and industrial labour are no lower, and in some cases higher, than the speaking and the hearing.’⁵³

The inclusion of the deaf in industry, therefore, was seen as proof that ‘there are no fortresses a Bolshevik cannot storm’, even if the Bolshevik happened to be deaf, and the fortress happened to be the ‘gigantic towers of the factory-fortress Electrozavod, the child of the first Five-Year Plan’.⁵⁴ Having stormed the industrial fortress, these deaf Bolsheviks then had the opportunity to become truly ‘Soviet’ through their experiences within the factory. In 1934, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* published an article about one Mikhail Gurov, a blacksmith at Elektrozavod. For ten years, the article explained ‘he worked as a hammerer in an invalid artel, where only one thing was asked of him: physical strength and a precise strike’. Once he had found work at Elektrozavod, however, ‘he encountered new demands. He was asked to study, to become conscious, to grow’. By raising his qualifications, studying mathematics, technical drawing and political literacy, he was able to become a blacksmith in his own right, a valued member of the factory. In the words of a party worker: ‘We need more Leninists like Gurov.’⁵⁵ Experience of the factory thus forged the deaf in the Soviet mould, and proved their ability to be counted amongst the labouring masses.

Yet, as the words of Deputy Commissar Samsonov had hinted, with the instigation of the first Five-Year Plan, equality for equality’s sake had ceased to be the ultimate goal. In the context of breakneck industrialisation, new attitudes to labour were being fostered that placed pressure on workers to exceed their norms and to beat the records of their peers. This phenomenon was initially known as ‘socialist competition’ or ‘shock work’ (*udarnyi trud*), a system in which gangs or brigades of workers would issue written challenges to each other to beat existing records in speed and volume of production. In 1935, this competitive attitude to labour gained a figurehead in the person of Aleksei Stakhanov, a Donbas miner who, in a record-breaking shift on the night of 30th August, mined 102 tons of coal, exceeding his

⁵³ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 31.

⁵⁴ P. Liteinyi, ‘Perevooruzhit’ tekhniku obsluzhivaniia glukhonemykh za bashniami elektrokombinata’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 1, no. 1 (1933), p. 12.

⁵⁵ K., ‘Rastet zavod, rasut liudi, im vospitannyye’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 2, no. 1 (1934), p. 8.

quota fourteen times over.⁵⁶ In the aftermath of this feat, workers were encouraged to become ‘Stakhanovites’: to exceed their ever-increasing production quotas, and to surpass the records of other workers. In this context, it was no longer enough for the deaf to demonstrate their equality. In order to prove their worth, they now had to excel.

Deaf workers were thus encouraged to participate in socialist competition and Stakhanovism throughout the 1930s. As one of the slogans of the VOG electoral campaign of 1931 declared, ‘the lack of hearing and speech must not serve as an obstacle to being in the first ranks of shock workers.’⁵⁷ Similarly, VTsSPS made it their goal, in a decree of 8th March 1933, to ‘get deaf-mutes involved in shock work’.⁵⁸ Stories began to surface of individuals such as Sergei Rodionov, a deaf metalwork-assembler at the State Liuberetskii Factory who gained the title of ‘shock worker’ having fulfilled his yearly plan by 127 per cent, or Alla Paramonova, a deaf car-fitter from the Gor’kii Factory who organised an uninterrupted shift and fulfilled her norms by 130 per cent.⁵⁹ The significance of these achievements was clearly spelled out: Sergei guarded his shock worker ticket ‘like a banner, like a document, attesting to the deaf-mute’s usefulness to this great country’ and was permitted to lead his brigade during the 7th November demonstrations; Alla’s name was hung proudly on the wall. Shock work was not confined to industrial workers: in 1931, groups of students from the Rykov and Bukharin *rabfaki* announced that they had begun socialist competition with each other, and that ‘five brigades, in honour of the III All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes, declared themselves to be shock [students]’.⁶⁰ The students were not only competing amongst themselves; the Bukharin *rabfak* was also in competition with ‘normal hearing *rabfaki*’. According to their representative, Shorin, the deaf students were ‘not only not lagging behind, in many subjects we are ahead of [the hearing]’.⁶¹

⁵⁶ A discussion of the impact of Stakhanovism on labour practices can be found in Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge, 1988).

⁵⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 20, l. 30.

⁵⁸ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 8, d. 2, l. 116.

⁵⁹ B. Ulanov, ‘Sergei Rodionov’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 1, no. 11 (1933), p. 8; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 32, l. 2.

⁶⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 18.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, l. 17.

This ability to excel was considered all the more significant in light of the perceived ‘backwardness’ of the deaf before their Stalinist transformation took place. As the VTsSPS decree of 1933 declared, the deaf, ‘in their masses, on the strength of their specific characteristics [*spetsificheskie osobennosti*], are the most backward group of workers’.⁶² Overcoming this backwardness and entering the ‘first ranks’ of the Soviet masses thus suggested a transformative leap that surpassed that of the average, hearing worker. This narrative trope, from ‘backwardness’ to ‘first ranks’, is repeated again and again in meetings, articles and documents: ‘deaf-mutes have for a long time been able to show that their social importance is very high, that they are in no way backward, and sometimes they even surpass normal people.’⁶³ In many respects, the status conferred on the deaf by this ‘overcoming’ of backward roots was reminiscent of the Stalinist celebration of the socialist transformation of ‘uncultured’ peasant women: as Choi Chatterjee suggests, ‘The conversion of the *baba* [the illiterate and superstitious peasant woman] to a civic subject constituted a revolution of unique social dimensions, and was represented in Soviet ideology as one of the more triumphant results of Stalinism.’⁶⁴

The existence of deaf Stakhanovites thus demonstrated that the deaf were not only as capable as hearing workers, but they were in fact more exceptional, by virtue of their ability to overcome difficult circumstances and excel. This ‘overcoming’ was not merely attributed to the efforts of deaf individuals, however: it was seen as a direct result of the opportunities for individual growth provided by the Soviet regime. In 1936, *Molodoi Stalinets* (*The Young Stalinist*), a newspaper produced by the Saratov Komsomol, told the story of Petr Spiridonov, a deaf man from the Volga region who found success as a Stakhanovite safe-maker in Saratov. Spiridonov, the article made

⁶² GARF, f. R-5575, op. 8, d. 2, l. 116.

⁶³ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d.18, l. 71.

⁶⁴ Chatterjee argues that ‘backward’ roots were an important narrative trope in the creation of Stalinist ‘heroine myths’: ‘the traditional social and cultural stigma surrounding Russian women was especially useful. The creation of a Soviet hero was less miraculous in a society long accustomed to the myths of strong male rulers and valiant knights. But the transformation of the illiterate, uncultured and counter-revolutionary Russian woman was an achievement of far greater magnitude. The capacity to create the Soviet heroine not only conferred legitimacy on the Soviet regime, but through association with the heroines, Stalin, and by extension the Soviet Union, was granted immortality.’ Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture and Bolshevik Ideology 1910-1939*, (Pittsburgh, 2002), p. 156.

clear, had suffered a most tragic loss in becoming deaf: ‘Fate played an evil trick on him: she deprived Petr of voice and speech [...] she doomed Petr to a wretched existence.’⁶⁵ Yet whilst this defect would have been devastating in other circumstances, ‘Petr had the advantage that he lived in the land of socialism, the land that takes care of a person like a mother’. Having travelled to Saratov from his trans-Volga village, Petr found work in the VOG UPM and learned literacy and labour skills. He mastered the complex metalwork techniques and soon became Stakhanovite, leading the best brigade in the factory.

As this article made clear, this transformation was down to Petr’s hard work – ‘his inexhaustible persistence, all his amazing diligence’ – but it was also a uniquely Soviet success story. Without the opportunities afforded by the Soviet state, such as the chance to study literacy and labour skills at the UPM, Petr would have been condemned to a life surrounded by ‘general shame and scorn’: ‘But... it happened differently.’ The author recorded a lively conversation with Petr, conducted through a sign-language translator, in which he described his successes and the benefits he enjoyed as a successful industrial worker. Yet the link between these successes and benefits and the beneficent role of the state (and, by extension, Stalin) was firmly underlined: ‘And in conclusion, the Brigadier-Stakhanovite, with special expressiveness, gesticulated: “Life has become better, life has become more joyous.”’ Having made sure that we understood him, he headed for his brigade in the depths of the workshop, from where the clatter and clang of metal could be heard.’ Reference to Stalin’s famous speech to a Stakhanovite conference in 1935 thus linked Petr’s victory to the general progress of the Soviet people as a whole, a progress that was clearly attributed to the generosity of its leader.

By 1936, therefore, the tenth anniversary of VOG’s creation and the year of the new ‘Stalin’ constitution of the USSR, the deaf could claim a great transformative victory. Their own ‘socialist project’ – their inclusion in the ranks of the Soviet working masses – had, for significant numbers of deaf people, been achieved. In a letter to Stalin, composed in honour of VOG’s anniversary, the Central Soviet declared that ‘at the present time amongst the deaf-mutes included in our

⁶⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 34, l. 72 ob.

organisation there is not one unemployed. Every deaf-mute capable of work has the opportunity to become a qualified worker, to receive a general and professional education, to stand in the first ranks of Stakhanovites, the distinguished people of our socialist motherland, and to live a happy life, of which the working deaf-mutes of those countries in which capitalism reigns dream unrealisable dreams'.⁶⁶ This inclusion was not confined to industrial labour: the deaf were active members of the Communist Party, marched in parades and demonstrations, collected funds for women and children caught in the Spanish Civil War and worked to make their living space 'cultured'.⁶⁷ Yet despite this narrative of literal and symbolic inclusion, the picture of the deaf 1930s was somewhat more contradictory and fragmented. For many of the deaf, and for those who worked with them, the path to transformation was a difficult one. In a dominant narrative of successful 'Sovietisation', what happened to those who struggled?

Deafness as Obstacle

Whilst the 1930s saw the creation of a dominant narrative in which deaf people transformed from isolated, backward individuals to exceptional members of the Soviet collective, the reality was more complex. As deaf individuals fought to enter the factory and the classroom, their deafness represented a unique obstacle that threatened to hinder their Soviet transformation. This obstacle was practical in nature, yet over the course of the 1930s its effects were interpreted in increasingly political and ideological ways. In a period defined not only by aspiration and utopian progress but also by social fears and political stigma, deafness began to take on new and more troubling meanings.

In the first instance, deafness manifested itself as a problem of communication: the deaf found it consistently difficult to communicate effectively with the hearing, either through speech, or through the use of written instructions. Despite the promotion of literacy by VOG and Narkompros, the statistics had not improved

⁶⁶ Ibid., l. 15

⁶⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 41. On cultured living space, see David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, 2003), pp. 17-26; on political engagement and the 'loan drive' see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 229.

greatly: in 1925, 51 per cent of the general population and 10.5 per cent of deaf people were literate, yet by 1933, whilst 90 per cent of the general population were literate, the figure for the deaf had only risen to 15 per cent.⁶⁸ Similarly, even with advances in the education of deaf children, the designation ‘deaf-mute’ was the reflection of a lived reality in the 1930s: deaf individuals – especially adults – were not expected to be able to speak.⁶⁹ This communicative isolation caused many problems, both symbolic and literal, as deaf people attempted to enter the workplace.

In many cases, these problems were at the level of small, everyday misunderstandings. A 1933 VTsSPS report listed several such examples: a deaf worker named Novikov, for example, was short-changed on his pay packet and was unable to communicate with the factory accountant in order to resolve the problem.⁷⁰ In this instance, the trade-union representative stepped in and the shortfall was quickly made up. Yet these small misunderstandings could prove devastating: one deaf individual was late for work after losing his factory pass, was unable to explain what had happened, and was subsequently fired for absenteeism.⁷¹ In another instance, a deaf sweeper at the Projector Factory was reassigned to a post he was not physically capable of holding: ‘in response, without comprehending, he nodded his head, which the administration took as a sign of assent. When he was placed in his new work he finally understood and refused the post, in light of his inability to carry out heavy physical labour due to his state of health, at which the administration made the decision to fire him for shirking his work [*kak za otkaz ot raboty*].’⁷² It appears that such incidents were commonplace, and the trades union noted the resultant high turnover of deaf workers in industry.⁷³

Whilst misunderstandings in the workplace could be overcome through the intervention of trades union representatives and VOG translators, some problems caused by deafness proved more fundamental. The groups of deaf students who had fought for their right to study in the *rabfaki* and *VUZy* alongside their hearing peers

⁶⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 32, l. 3.

⁶⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 12 ob.

⁷⁰ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 9, d. 1, l. 9.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., l. 8 ob.

⁷³ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 9, d. 1, l. 7 ob.

found their deafness a bigger obstacle than they had expected. Much emphasis in these courses was placed on ‘independent study with a book’, which ‘demanded [...] of the deaf student a far greater expenditure of time on individual work’.⁷⁴ For those deaf individuals just beginning to master literacy, the reliance on the written word in these classes represented an obstacle that many could not easily overcome. As the report concluded, ‘all of this has placed deaf-mute students in a particularly difficult position, as a result of which at the present time a series of students have been obliged to abandon their studies.’⁷⁵ Even the decision to teach the deaf in groups and use sign-language translation did not always make the educational process easier. With students from a variety of educational and family backgrounds, a variety of communication methods was evident: ‘in our classes students differ. One reads lips and does not know finger-spelling or sign language. Another does not lip-read but knows finger-spelling and sign language, a third only knows sign language. And there are those who come from rural areas with their peculiarities, with their non-speak. It is natural that in one and the same class they do not understand each other.’⁷⁶ As a result, whilst deaf people were seen to be able to learn practical skills with ease, it was increasingly recognised that they found higher education, with its emphasis on theory, difficult to master.⁷⁷

Yet despite their practical skills, the particular nature of their disability proved problematic even within factories. In the 1930s, as Stephen Kotkin has pointed out, it was not enough to be a skilled labourer: ‘the leadership was no less concerned about workers’ political attitudes and allegiance. New workers had to be taught how to work, and all workers had to be taught how properly to understand the political significance of their work. Soviet style proletarianization meant acquiring industrial and political literacy, understood as the complete acceptance of the party’s rule and willing participation in the grand crusade of “building socialism”.’⁷⁸ The ‘life of the factory’ in the 1930s thus encompassed much more than just the process of labour:

⁷⁴ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 10, d. 1, l. 20 ob.

⁷⁵ Ibid., l. 20 ob. This report also noted that the system of concentrating deaf people in urban centres, far from their family, had an adverse effect on their studies: ‘it is necessary to take into account the circumstance that deaf-mutes are gathered from all corners of the Union, torn away from their homes, and placed in restricted material conditions.’

⁷⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 45, l. 10 ob.

⁷⁷ Ibid., l. 14.

⁷⁸ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 203.

cultural activities, political activism, leisure and education were all carried out within the factory walls. In many cases, difficulties in communication caused the deaf to be excluded from these activities. At the 8th March Factory, the factory committee refused to carry out labour education work amongst deaf people: ‘they announced that they were not in a position to carry out such work because they didn’t know how to talk to deaf-mutes.’⁷⁹ Whilst many deaf workers did try to attend the workers’ clubs with their hearing colleagues, their inability to grasp what was being discussed meant that most did not stay long: ‘we have a good club in the print shop but we never go there, because special conditions are not created for us there. We feel ourselves to be isolated there and prefer to go to our own club.’⁸⁰ As a result, the majority of deaf people chose to return to the VOG cell, which, according to B. A. Mikhailov, a teacher from the Frunze Professional School, was failing in its duty to politically educate deaf individuals. Of 30,000 VOG members in 1931, Mikhailov stated, only 25 per cent were involved in any kind of cultural work: ‘this means that 75 per cent of deaf-mutes will stand outside political life, outside society, will remain illiterate.’⁸¹

For many deaf people, therefore, their disability, and its resultant communicative isolation, proved a concrete obstacle to becoming ‘Soviet’ in the fullest sense: not just a labourer, but a highly educated, politically conscious individual. For VOG, and for the trades union, the task of the 1930s was to find ways to overcome this obstacle. Yet at various points during this transformative period the question was raised: could this obstacle be overcome at all, or did deafness in fact *prevent* an individual from becoming Soviet? This troubling question was first fully aired by the People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, A. V. Lunacharskii, in his speech to the II All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes in 1929. Whilst he acknowledged the latent potential in all deaf individuals, Lunacharskii viewed deafness as a defect that stymied that potential: ‘As an individual, the deaf-mute, in his entire organism, can be good and responsive to the highest degree. In other conditions he could have been a better socialist than all those around him. But, by birth, he was deprived of that immediate thing that nature gives every person, the possibility to hear another’s

⁷⁹ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 9, d. 1, l. 9 ob.

⁸⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 32, l. 3.

⁸¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 79 ob.

speech and to use speech oneself.’ Without that speech, Lunacharskii argued, ‘it is as if [the deaf-mute] falls from the living cloth of society.’⁸²

This isolation – despite its physical cause – was viewed by Lunacharskii in strictly political, and ideological, terms. The Soviet state, he argued, ‘fights above all against individualism, [...] wants to achieve it so that people unite, merge with each other, understand each other and help each other’. As a consequence of his defect, however, the deaf individual was unable to ‘enter into real relationships with others, to extend those telegraph lines that are speech between people’. In this respect, his defect made him an individualist, and as such, politically suspect. The parallels between deafness and political fallibility were made abundantly clear: according to Lunacharskii, ‘if some shopkeeper or some kulak limits his property from others, then he is an egoist.’ The inability of deaf people to communicate with the world, it was implied, represented an equivalent tendency to ‘limit’ themselves from the wider community, and was thus similarly egoistical and anti-Soviet. Turning the comparison on its head, Lunacharskii argued that ‘in this business, in our fight against muteness, I see a sort of sign, a symbol of our general battle against human unresponsiveness. [...] He who thinks only of himself is deaf. He who does not unite in a single thought and action with his brother people is deaf’.⁸³ Being deaf, whether literally or metaphorically, could not coexist with being a good Soviet citizen.

For Lunacharskii, deafness led to an isolation from the collective that found parallels in the behaviour of such anti-Soviet figures as kulaks and speculators. In stark contrast to the positive narratives of the 1930s, in which this isolation could be overcome through diligent labour and study, Lunacharskii’s description of the plight of the deaf cast doubt on their capacity to transform. He made reference to the recent advances in deaf education, ‘when, taking a deaf-mute from childhood, we give him the ability to understand speech directly from the lips of the speaker, and when he himself, not hearing even his own speech, clearly and fully articulates his thoughts, so that if one didn’t know that he was deaf, one would not realise’. Yet this ‘fight

⁸² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 41. The transcript of this source, contained in the VOG archive, is riddled with grammatical errors (presumably as a result of being translated via sign language into written Russian). The citations made here have been corrected, where necessary, for clarity, but I have attempted to remain as close to the original as possible.

⁸³ Ibid., l. 42.

against muteness' would not necessarily enable the deaf to become Soviet: 'We must act, so that if nature provides (and of course, it will provide) born deaf-mutes, we must educate them so that they can hear another's speech and speak themselves, like real people [*kak zhivye liudi*].' Addressing the Congress directly, he concluded: 'I wish from my heart that you not only begin to master real speech, to a greater extent than now, but also that, as a result of this, you are able to fully master the great ideas of our teacher Lenin and that you turn out to be our fellow travellers in the great battle with that human deafness and muteness which, to this point, has made people not brothers but enemies.'⁸⁴

In Lunacharskii's eyes, therefore, whilst education could 'bring a deaf-mute close to [being] a normal person', it could not completely overcome the isolation that distanced them from the Soviet collective. The deaf could be nothing more than 'fellow travellers' in the march towards communism. Echoes of this correlation between deafness and anti-Sovietness were evident throughout the 1930s, as deaf and hearing alike grappled to understand the difficulties faced by the deaf as they attempted to transform. One such example was the controversy surrounding the activities of deaf postcard-sellers in the railway stations of Russia's major cities. The selling of postcards, which often featured photographs of city sights or a line drawing of the 'deaf-mute alphabet', was a tradition stretching back to before the revolution, when local deaf clubs would sell charity cards to raise money for their activities. Yet the continued presence of deaf postcard-sellers well into the 1930s was problematic for VOG. As Savel'ev commented at the III All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes, 'It is a source of shame for deaf-mutes that in the fourteenth year of the revolution they travel the railways, selling, etc. In order that this stops, I request that, if you notice these travellers, you throw them out and hand them over to the police, so that such an outrage ceases'.⁸⁵ For those illiterate deaf people who did not succeed in making the transition to industry, such work represented a much-needed means of subsistence. From 1936, the activity was even legalised.⁸⁶ Yet in ideological terms, deaf postcard-sellers merely reinforced the correlation between the 'backward' state of the illiterate deaf and the anti-Soviet activities of traders and

⁸⁴ Ibid., l. 43.

⁸⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 149.

⁸⁶ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 331.

speculators, the spectre of which had carried over from the end of the NEP era: ‘Only inveterate loafers, lovers of “easy profits”, go in for such begging.’⁸⁷

In many respects, the fight against deaf postcard-sellers represented another facet of the ‘backwardness to first ranks’ narrative, in which these poor, illiterate individuals merely required some training and political education to see the error of their ways and become good Stakhanovites. Yet discussions of these individuals also hinted at fears that deaf individuals, by virtue of their lack of education and isolation, could be easily corrupted by more sinister anti-Soviet elements. An article from 1936 explained that ‘often, behind ordinary postcard-sellers, those straightforward workers, stands a more powerful figure, calmly taking a cut from his “agents” without risk to himself’.⁸⁸ Such discussions emphasised the naivety of deaf people in allowing their disability to be exploited. Elsewhere, however, the perceived tendency of deaf people to turn to crime was emphasised. An editorial in *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* from 1935 lamented the rise of hooliganism amongst deaf people. The administrative organs and the justice system, it argued, “let them go in peace”, saying, a deaf-mute is a defective person, not completely of sound mind, what can you expect of him?’⁸⁹ This article made clear that such an ‘allowance for deafness’ was unacceptable and that such a ‘throwback to tsarist legislation [...] should be decisively rejected’.⁹⁰ The perception that deaf people were more inclined to anti-Soviet behaviour, however, remained strong.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Zakharov, ‘Pokonchit’ s “otkritochnikami”’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 4, no. 4 (1936), p. 11. It is worth noting that this campaign against anti-Soviet elements was being carried out within VOG itself, and demonstrated an attempt by self-defined Soviet deaf individuals to eliminate the last vestiges of the old, ‘backward’ deaf. In this respect, the fight to put an end to deaf postcard selling is reminiscent of the campaign against *byvshie liudi*, or ‘former people’, in the 1930s, as discussed by Lynne Viola: ‘Soviet society in the 1930s was far from a classless society. It remained a society acutely – and pathologically – conscious of pre-revolutionary and NEP social categories and the personal political histories of its members. The campaign against *byvshie liudi* sheds light on the pervasiveness and persistence of antipathy toward the old enemies.’ Lynne Viola, ‘The Second Coming: Class Enemies in the Soviet Countryside, 1927-1935’, in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, ed. J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning (Cambridge, 1993), (65-98) p. 80.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸⁹ Anon., ‘Usilit’ bor’bu s khuliganstvom’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 3, no. 7 (1935), p. 2.

⁹⁰ Sources are not currently available to establish the prevalence of deaf begging and criminality and the motivations of those who chose not to follow the ‘Soviet path’. One can only assume that some deaf individuals may have had good reason not to want to be Sovietized, and such an alternative perspective would add greatly to our understanding of the dynamics of deaf inclusion (or otherwise) in Soviet society.

⁹¹ This discussion of deaf hooliganism and crime also engages with historical literature on the cleansing of ‘socially harmful elements’ as a key component of the purge dynamic of the 1930s. Paul



figure 3
A 'Deaf' Postcard Seller:
Drawing from *Zhizn' glukhonemykh*, 1934.
The card reads: 'Buy a postcard and envelope
from a deaf-mute'

In the light of these fears, many began to argue that the only truly Soviet way to overcome deafness was to eliminate it entirely, through medical prophylaxis. In his speech to the Congress, Lunacharskii had announced, to loud applause, that 'we must act, so that in some ten years, or fifteen at the most, there will be no more deaf-mutes'.⁹² This aspiration was shared by many in the deaf community, not least Savel'ev, who told a plenum of the VOG Central Soviet that 'yes, we have achieved many things, yes, we have caught up with the hearing fighters of the Five-Year Plan. But comrades, if you ask any one of us, for example myself, Savel'ev, if he wants to be and remain deaf-mute, then Savel'ev would answer no, I don't want to. We want to fight deaf-muteness, we want to make it so that in the second Five-Year Plan the causes of deaf-muteness are pulled out by the roots'.⁹³ To that end, from 1930 onwards, VOG began to organise a yearly three-day event known as *Beregi Slukh!* (*Take Care of your Hearing!*), the aim of which was 'chiefly, propaganda of the

Hagenloh argues that 'the Terror was [...] the culmination of a decade-long radicalization of policing practice against "recidivist" criminals, social marginals, and all manner of lower-class individuals who did not or could not fit into the emerging Stalinist system.' Paul M. Hagenloh, 'Socially Harmful Elements and the Great Terror', in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London, 2000), (286-308) p. 286. See also Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin's Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926-1941* (Washington D.C., 2009).

⁹² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 42.

⁹³ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 265.

prophylaxis of deaf-muteness in order that society produces, not defective descendents, but completely healthy fighters and builders of communism'.⁹⁴ During each three-day event, VOG members, with the help of Narkomzdrav, put up posters, produced brochures and special newspapers, held lectures and discussions and collected funds for the work of the Society.

The prevention of deafness was considered particularly urgent in the 1930s. Few concrete statistics exist, but it appears that approximately half the deaf adults in this period were not born deaf, but rather deafened by epidemic illness or accident.⁹⁵ Diseases such as scarlet fever, typhus and meningitis frequently led to complications of the ear and some degree of deafness, especially in young children.⁹⁶ Similarly, as the decision to place deaf workers in the 'noisy shop' attested, state bodies at the time were acutely concerned about the long-term hearing damage caused by the noise of industrial machinery.⁹⁷ In order to combat these threats to hearing, the activities of VOG during *Beregi slukh!* had a twofold aim: to educate ordinary workers about the dangers of noise pollution and epidemic illness on the hearing, and to fight to make more specialist doctors available.⁹⁸ The III All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes in 1931 had noted that there were only ten professors of audiology and 327 doctors of the ear for a population of 100,000,000 in the RSFSR – 'that won't do at all!' – and that the number of deaf people was growing as a result.⁹⁹ Through the efforts of VOG workers during *Beregi slukh!*, the situation began to improve: by 1935, there were 1,041 outpatient surgeries for patients with illnesses of the ear in the RSFSR, and over 20 university departments for the study of the ear, nose and

⁹⁴ Sovnarkom RSFSR, Polozhenie 'Po dokladu Vserossiiskogo ob"edineniia glukhonemykh o ego deiatel'nosti', 26th October 1929, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, pp. 260-261.

⁹⁵ For example, a report from Narkomsobes in 1939 stated that, of those deaf people studying in Professional-Technical Schools, 44 per cent were deaf from birth, and of those studying in the UPMs, 55 per cent were born deaf. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 45, l. 8.

⁹⁶ V. I. Voiachek, 'Novye sposobi bor'by s glukhotoi', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* 1, no. 14 (1933), p. 19.

⁹⁷ According to research by Lewis Siegelbaum, 'the problem with respect to hearing defects was not so much accidents as the cumulatively debilitating effects of noise. Among workers employed for ten or more years in the flyer-frame division of several large textile mills, 24.8 to 42 percent were found to have had partially or completely damaged cochleae. Studies of railway workers and telephonists revealed that "reduced hearing ability" was widespread.' Lewis Siegelbaum, 'Industrial Accidents and Their Prevention in the Interwar Period', in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, ed. William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum (Pittsburgh, 1989), (85-117) p. 99.

⁹⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 31, p. 20 ob.

⁹⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 40.

throat.¹⁰⁰ During the lifetime of *Beregi slukh!*, which ran yearly from 1930 to 1937, over 46,400 lectures were held and 7,900,000 brochures, leaflets and posters printed.¹⁰¹

Through *Beregi slukh!*, members of VOG thus sought to make links with state departments (particularly Narkomzdrav) and to popularise information about the causes and problem of deafness. The events helped to raise significant sums of money for VOG activities: from 1930 to 1933 over 5,000 roubles in donations were collected.¹⁰² Yet these events were deeply contradictory. Palennyi has pointed to the irony of making the prevention of deafness the task of VOG: ‘Let the state itself take care of the health of its citizens – oh no, people already deprived of hearing must “ring the bell” in order to “mobilise the people to fight against epidemic illnesses which cause deafness”...’¹⁰³ During *Beregi slukh!* deaf people were obliged to perpetuate the notion that deafness was a relic of the past, and that the deaf had no place in Soviet society: as one slogan from 1931 put it, ‘we lose our hearing as a result of our ignorance and unculturedness. Sanitary education through the explanation of the causes and cures of deaf-muteness is on the agenda of VOG work’.¹⁰⁴

The dominant utopian narrative of deaf transformation was thus consistently undermined by references – foreshadowed by Lunacharskii – to the deaf as criminals, hooligans and relics of the pre-revolutionary era. These undercurrents of suspicion came out into the open in the context of Stalin’s terror. Deaf people, especially those in industry, had been subjected to the purging process since its inception, and many of those who came before the factory purge committees in the early 1930s passed the test with flying colours. Mikhail Gurov, for example, the blacksmith and shock-worker from Elektroavod, had been called before the purge committee in 1934. His reputation as a hard worker and a good party member, however, was enough to convince the committee: ‘when, during the purge of the factory party collective, Gurov was called, and when he calmly approached the table

¹⁰⁰ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, pp. 265-266.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

¹⁰⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 20, l. 30.

behind which sat the commission, a thousand pairs of working hands together applauded him. That said it all.¹⁰⁵ In 1937, however, VOG was shaken by an event that decimated one of its most successful organisations: the purge of the Leningrad *oblast'* branch of VOG, known as the 'Deaf-Mute Affair' (*Delo glukhonemykh*).

Sources for this event are difficult to access, yet thanks to research conducted by two historians, D. L. Ginsburgskii and A. Ia. Razumov, the facts of the Affair have become known.¹⁰⁶ Between August and November 1937, fifty-four members of the Leningrad *oblast'* branch were arrested by the NKVD on charges of 'participation in an anti-Soviet, fascist terrorist organisation, created by an agent of the Gestapo, Albert Blum, amongst the deaf-mutes of Leningrad'.¹⁰⁷ Postcards bearing the image of Adolf Hitler had been found in a flat shared by Albert Blum, a deaf German immigrant, and the deaf Leningrader A. S. Stadnikov. The subsequent investigation had implicated the elites of the Leningrad deaf community, including E. M. Tot'mianin, the chairman of the VOG branch, and M. S. Mintslova-Piotrovskaia, a founding member of VOG and former chairwoman of the Leningrad House of Enlightenment. After prolonged interrogation, thirty-five of those arrested were condemned to death by shooting, a sentence which was carried out on 24th December 1937.¹⁰⁸ The remaining nineteen were sentenced to ten years' convict labour, but were released in 1940. Those shot were posthumously rehabilitated in 1956.¹⁰⁹

The accusation that Leningrad deaf people had conspired with a German fascist spy was difficult to definitively refute. Albert Blum, along with a few other members of a German workers' organisation, had arrived in Leningrad in the late 1920s and been welcomed with open arms. Having been presented with a flag from the Leningrad

¹⁰⁵ K., 'Rastet zavod', p. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Ginsburgskii, a deaf contemporary of those killed in Leningrad, conducted research in the KGB archives on behalf of VOG. His findings have been published as part of the 'Leningrad Martyrology' series and in works by the Moscow Symposium on Deaf History. Razumov, a member of the St. Petersburg centre 'Vozvrashchennye imena', has collected information on the Deaf-Mute Affair as part of a broader project to chronicle the events and victims of the political repressions of the Stalin era. See D. L. Ginsburgskii, 'Pomniu tragicheskii 1937-i', and A. Ia. Razumov and Iu. P. Gruzdev, 'Delo leningradskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh', in *Leningradskii martirolog 1937-1938, Tom 4*, ed. A. Ia. Razumov (St. Petersburg, 1999).

¹⁰⁷ Letter from S. V. Chernov, 2nd December 1993, cited in D. L. Ginsburgskii, 'Khotelos' by vsekh poimanno nazvat'', in *Materialy pervogo moskovskogo simpoziuma po istorii glukhikh*, ed. Ia. B. Pichugin (Moscow, 1997), p. 119.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

organisation at the II All-Russian Congress of Deaf-Mutes, ‘as a sign of our brotherly solidarity with the German workers’, Blum and others were found jobs in VOG enterprises and they enthusiastically joined in the cultural and social life of the organisation.¹¹⁰ The welcome accorded to these German workers was imbued with particular significance after 1933, in the context of the rise of National Socialism and the widely publicised law of July 1933 which had introduced the sterilisation of the congenitally deaf in Germany.¹¹¹ Yet this positive attitude towards the German ‘refugees’ had soured by 1937, when the threat of war had made association with those of German origin politically suspect. In some respects, it is unsurprising that this particular group of deaf individuals raised suspicions: many were former students of the Petersburg School of Deaf Mutes, and thus members of a pre-revolutionary elite whose position in the workers’ state had become untenable. Yet in other ways, the ‘Deaf Mute Affair’ represented the culmination of more general fears about the political reliability of deaf people.

According to Ginzburgskii, the purge began as a result of a new VOG crack-down on deaf postcard-sellers on Leningrad’s railway network. Tot’mianin, he recounts, had informed the NKVD ‘as an honest communist’ that members of VOG were selling postcards at the railway station, and that they should be arrested as ‘persistent speculators’.¹¹² When these individuals were arrested and searched, amongst the piles of postcards were found several images of Hitler, ‘standard enclosures from the cartons of German cigarettes smoked by Blum’.¹¹³ Such a combination of deaf speculation and fascist memorabilia was more than enough to start the machine of arrest and denunciation. As this process unfolded, the issues surrounding deaf communication also began to play a role. Excepting Tot’mianin and P. T. Byshkevich, a twenty-five year old deaf man from Gatchin, all of those arrested were deaf from birth or early childhood (and, by extension, mute).¹¹⁴ Of the thirty-five

¹¹⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 36.

¹¹¹ L. Kait, ‘V fashistskoi germanii: zakon o prinudetel’noi sterilizatsii i kastratsii’, *Izvestiia*, 27th July 1933, p. 1. Members of VOG held meetings to protest the passing of this law, see M. Iuzhnyi, ‘Protestuem protiv fashchistskogo terrora! Na mitinge protesta’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 1, no. 5 (1933), p. 6.

¹¹² Ginzburgskii, ‘Pomniu tragicheskii 1937-i’, p. 675.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 676.

¹¹⁴ Ginzburgskii, ‘Khotelos’ by vsekh poimenno nazvat’’, p. 122.

shot, only fourteen were literate.¹¹⁵ The majority of these deaf individuals were thus unable to communicate effectively with the hearing, and were seen to count amongst those who, in Lunacharskii's phrase, had 'fallen from the living cloth of society'.

It remains unclear whether deafness was indeed a decisive factor in bringing state suspicion to bear on this group of individuals. What is irrefutable, however, is the way in which deafness was used by members of the NKVD during the process of interrogation and confession. According to Viktor Palennyi the NKVD relied on three translators, A. N. Perlova, T. D. Simonova and L. L. Ignatenko, who had worked with the Leningrad VOG branch for many years. These women were used to question those arrested on behalf of the NKVD, and to persuade them to sign written transcripts of what they had 'said' on the understanding that they would be subsequently released.¹¹⁶ The exploitation of the communicative difficulties of deaf people to extract false confessions was perhaps not surprising in the context of the purges, but it is indicative of the marginalised position of deaf people in this period.

It is important not to overstress the significance of the Deaf-Mute Affair: in the context of the mass executions of the late 1930s, the fact that there exists only one documented case of the organised repression of a group of deaf people suggests that deafness was not systematically used as grounds for arrest and execution. Palennyi does cite anecdotal evidence of other arrests during this period: 'veterans of the Society remembered that so-and-so was arrested because, referring to Stalin, instead of using the sign "moustaches" [*usy*] or "steel" [*stal*'], they used the sign "to pull the trigger" [*nazhimat' na kurok*].'¹¹⁷ Such arrests, however, seem representative of the hyper-vigilance of the period, especially with regards to anecdotal references to Stalin. The Affair itself was officially brought to an end in 1940 by Lavrentii Pavlovich Beria, the head of the secret police from 1938, who had received a petition for clemency from the wife of I. M. Solomonov, one of those sentenced to hard labour. Beria, it transpired, had a deaf relative, and 'this circumstance evidently played a role in the release of I. M. Solomonov' and the subsequent release of the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

¹¹⁶ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 341.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 343.

other nineteen prisoners.¹¹⁸ In 1939, all those who had participated in the arrest and interrogation of the deaf prisoners, including the three translators, were also arrested and sentenced to death.¹¹⁹

Throughout the 1930s, therefore, the utopian rhetoric of the transformation of deaf people into model Soviet citizens was tempered both by the very real difficulties faced by deaf people as they entered the school and the workplace and by the interpretation placed on these difficulties by the state and Soviet society. These factors, despite the extraordinary events of 1937, did not curtail the transformation project: for many, the obstacles caused by deafness merely made it necessary to work harder in order for the deaf to be fully integrated into the Soviet masses. As Savel'ev announced in 1939, 'we cannot accept that our deaf-mutes are at the tail-end of the victorious procession of workers towards communism. Deaf-mutes need to catch up.'¹²⁰ Yet a third dynamic at play further complicated this picture. For certain deaf people, transformation and integration remained secondary to the goal of creating a distinct community that was Soviet, but first and foremost deaf.

Deafness as Identity

In their engagement with the transformative project of the 1930s, deaf members of VOG were caught between the imperative to work towards the broader goals of 'socialist construction' in the Soviet Union, and the more limited need for the construction of their own organisation. The work undertaken over this period to locate rural deaf individuals and draw them into the industrial life of the Soviet state had the secondary function of developing VOG as an institution: whilst in January 1929, VOG had 8,624 members, 64 local departments and 29 social clubs and red corners, by the tenth anniversary of VOG in 1936 there were over 30,000 members, 400 departments and 228 clubs and red corners.¹²¹ At the III All-Russian Congress of Deaf Mutes, members had announced that 'at this congress, the foundation stone will be laid for the close collaboration of all united deaf-mutes of the USSR on an

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 342.

¹¹⁹ Ginzburgskii, 'Khotelos' by vsekh poimenno nazvat'', p. 117.

¹²⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op, 1, d. 45, l. 20.

¹²¹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, pp. 114, 209.

organisational basis', and over the next few years, VOG established the concrete lines of this organisation.¹²² A localised administration developed, with regional departments in major cities and regional centres across the RSFSR and other republics of the Soviet Union. Managers and workers of these local departments made up the VOG Congress, held every two years, which elected a Central Soviet to establish the 'general line' of VOG's activities.¹²³ Decisions of the Central Soviet were scrutinised by an Inspection Committee, also elected by the Congress, and both bodies made a yearly report on their activities to the People's Commissariat of Social Welfare, to which institution VOG remained subordinate.¹²⁴

The simultaneous transformation of VOG and its members had the result of rhetorically tying the development of deaf people to the development of their organisation. VOG existed to 'serve' deaf people and to facilitate their transformation and inclusion in Soviet life, and the fruits of this inclusion were seen to reflect on VOG as an institution. As Savel'ev put it in his speech to the III Congress, 'if before, two years ago or so, about 1,200 were working in general industry, then now 7,000 people are working. You will remember how at the II Congress you said that we, deaf-mutes, need to have our own [*svoiu*] deaf-mute intelligentsia, to open a department at the Bukharin *rabfak*, and today, comrades, we can say that we have two departments in the *rabfak* and our *rabfakovtsy* study there.'¹²⁵ The successes of 'our' deaf-mute individuals, in industry and in education, thus reflected on the deaf mute collective as embodied by VOG. Yet as the transformation of the 1930s progressed, the links between deaf people and VOG began to weaken. The VOG leadership had anticipated that those deaf individuals who had entered the *rabfaki* and *VUZy* would become a true 'deaf-mute intelligentsia' and would return, educated, into the ranks of VOG to transform new generations of deaf people. The *VUZ* thus represented the source 'from which VOG will receive its red specialists'.¹²⁶ In reality, however, almost all those who successfully completed the *VUZ* courses made the decision to find jobs in industry,

¹²² *Na vovgovskom fronte, Biulleten' 3-go s"ezda VOGa*, 16th Nov 1931, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 167.

¹²³ See *Polozhenie o Vserossiiskom Obshchestve Glukhonemykh (1932)*, pp. 8-10.

¹²⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 26, l. 70.

¹²⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 3.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 18.

shunning the organisation that had developed them.¹²⁷ Without them, VOG's activities were seriously compromised. This issue was discussed at length at the III Congress: 'Where do we get our cadres from, in order to send workers to the regions?'¹²⁸ In the absence of an educated deaf elite, it was feared, 'the old biddies [*baby*] make do'.¹²⁹

The lack of qualified cadres was not the only problem facing VOG in this period. As an organisation, its activities were diverse, encompassing work placement, industrial education, cultural and leisure activities, sport, and legal and medical advice. Its sources of funding were thus also disparate: Narkomsobes provided money for cultural work and the *likbezy*, the UPMs were funded by VIKO, educational work was funded by Narkompros and *Beregi Slukh!* by Narkomzdrav.¹³⁰ It proved particularly difficult for VOG to obtain the necessary funds from relevant departments: for example, in 1929, the VOG plenum noted that VIKO had not provided any money for the deaf artels it had taken over, and the II Congress complained that there was not enough money from Narkomsobes for job allocation and training.¹³¹ By 1935, as Palennyi has pointed out, VOG clubs were in dire financial straits: 'VOG collected funds for the support of "their" clubs from the *profsoiuzy*, invalid cooperatives and departments of popular education [*narodnoe obrazovanie*]. It still was not enough.'¹³² Similarly, problems were encountered when liaising with government departments such as the People's Commissariat of Trade, with whom arrangements needed to be made to provide raw materials for the UPMs. As a result of these difficulties, by the mid-1930s, VOG members had begun to recognise the urgent need to reform the organisation.

This call for reform did not merely involve VOG. As the industrialisation drive had progressed and deaf workers had entered the factory, the burden of providing

¹²⁷ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 175.

¹²⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 28.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 36 ob. The word *baba* had particularly negative political connotations in this period of social transformation. An illiterate and superstitious old peasant woman, the *baba* represented the stereotype of the 'backward', pre-revolutionary Russian female, soon to be replaced by the politically conscious Soviet woman. See Elizabeth A. Woods, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, 1997).

¹³⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 44 and d. 16, l. 22.

¹³¹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, pp. 156, 290.

¹³² Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 200.

services for deaf people had shifted onto other worker organisations, in particular the trades union (VTsSPS). In 1931, the VTsSPS Secretariat had published its first ‘Decree on Work amongst Members of the Union of Deaf-Mutes’, which proposed, in collaboration with VOG, to expand the number of deaf people in industry, establish factory-based deaf clubs which would encourage deaf people to participate in the ‘industrial life of the enterprise’, and encourage literacy and cultural activities amongst the deaf.¹³³ In 1932, VTsSPS established a new position of ‘instructor for work amongst deaf-mutes’, for which the Central Soviet of VOG put forward one of its most energetic workers, Nikolai Alekseevich Buslaev. Over the course of the next few years, the Secretariat of VTsSPS proposed taking over more and more of the activities previously conducted by VOG, such as *likbez* work, technical education and labour training, propaganda and political education.¹³⁴ The first *profkom* for deaf people was established in the Elektrokombinat factory in 1933, shortly followed by *profkomy* in the Gor’kii Car Factory, the Stalingrad Tractor Factory and the Ordzhonikidze Heavy Machinery Factory in the Urals.¹³⁵ These organisations ran technical training and political education. In 1933, the newspaper *Zhizn’ glukhikh* was re-launched under VTsSPS, with Buslaev as editor, and in its first issue made the organisational shift clear: ‘the task of VOG is not to stand in for the trades union or the cooperatives, but to help the trades union and the cooperatives to organise the service of deaf-mutes.’¹³⁶

The shift away from VOG and towards the trades union made sense in the context of the transformation of deaf people: the change of institution mirrored a change in the social identity of deaf people. As an article from 1931 made clear, ‘if even during the period of the New Economic Policy the deaf-mute was considered an invalid, then in 1931 [...] the figure of the deaf-mute shock worker, catching up and overtaking his hearing comrades [...] has come to the fore.’¹³⁷ As deaf people ceased to be ‘invalids’

¹³³ GARF, f. R-5575, op. 8, d. 2, l. 116.

¹³⁴ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 231.

¹³⁵ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 239.

¹³⁶ N. A. Buslaev, ‘Novaia stadiia organizatsii glukhonemykh’, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* 1, no. 1 (1933), p. 7. The fact that VOG membership was voluntary also had an impact on this institutional tussle: members of the VOG *aktiv* described a VTsSPS rally in Rostov on the Don, at which deaf *profsoiuz* members threw away their VOG cards, saying that ‘VOG wasn’t necessary’. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 27, l. 37.

¹³⁷ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 231.

and became industrial workers, it made sense for them to no longer be grouped together with their ‘comrades in misfortune’, but instead to be included with the wider mass of industrial workers.¹³⁸ On a purely practical level, too, entrusting the service of deaf people to the trades union would solve the chronic problems of funding experienced by VOG clubs and services. On that basis, Buslaev, amongst others, began to argue that the activities and organisation of VOG should be fundamentally reduced and its provision of services handed over to VTsSPS. VOG, he suggested, should confine itself to working with rural and as yet unorganised deaf-mutes in order to attract ‘new deaf-mute cadres to the factory’, and to organising ‘mass sanitary-educational work in enterprises, for prophylaxis and the fight against diseases of the ear’.¹³⁹ Once in industry, deaf workers should be served by VTsSPS, the only organisation able to ‘realise the political management of the mass movement of the proletariat’.¹⁴⁰

Buslaev’s comments, however rationally argued, unleashed a storm of protest within VOG. At a particularly lively meeting of the Central Soviet (now renamed the Central Directorate) on 29th December 1935, Buslaev’s attack on VOG, and his proposals for reform, were debated. His criticisms of VOG’s work – that it was not meeting its targets for inclusion, that people were leaving VOG for the trades union, that VOG clubs were poorly funded and managed – were challenged point for point. Yet it was the perception that Buslaev favoured the limitation, or perhaps even the abolition, of VOG that caused the most violent reaction: ‘Comrade Buslaev, I think that you need to stop this disgraceful attitude towards VOG. We need VOG. Without VOG, nothing can be done. We need the *profsoiuzy*. Without the *profsoiuzy* nothing can be done. We need to coordinate our work. [...] Everybody, as they say, needs a slap on the wrist.’¹⁴¹ In its defence, Savel’ev aligned VOG with other worker’s organisations: ‘For now, we have a dictatorship of the proletariat, mass organisations of the proletariat, trades union, soviets, cooperatives, the Komsomol, plus a multitude of mass unifications of workers – these are necessary. Necessary.’¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 175.

¹³⁹ Buslaev, ‘Novaia stadia’, p. 8.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁴¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 27, l. 43.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, l. 31.

This passionate defence of VOG's activities was unsurprising in light of the experience of the 1930s. Attempts to transfer services for deaf people to other government bodies in this period had proved to be a resounding failure. In 1929, the transfer of VOG artels to VIKO had led to the bankruptcy and closure of many enterprises; their subsequent incorporation into the Narkomsobes system in January 1933 had seen such organisational chaos that salaries had not been paid.¹⁴³ More recently, in March 1935, the All-Russian Conference of Social Welfare Workers had decreed that, 'for the purpose of eliminating the excessive demarcation of functions within the Social Welfare system', VOG's regional departments should be liquidated, to be replaced by a system of voluntary workers under Narkomsobes. This decision, in part an attempt to reduce costs, was ratified by Sovnarkom in August of that year.¹⁴⁴ Over the following months, 390 VOG workers in the region were fired and 92 VOG departments liquidated. The result was chaos. The abolition of VOG's paid *aktiv* in the regions 'entail[ed] the flight of the fired *aktiv* from non-industrial and sparsely populated regions into industrial centres and cities to find work, as the work offered to them in red corners [could] not support them materially: this means that the common masses of deaf-mutes in the stated regional centres [were] left without service or management'. Regional Social Welfare inspectors were unable to carry out cultural and educational work amongst deaf people 'in light of the sharp turnover [of workers], the constant workload of all manner of campaigns and mobilisations, and, most importantly, the fact that they don't know the deaf-mute language, sign'.¹⁴⁵

In the eyes of many deaf leaders, therefore, the chaotic liquidation of approximately half of VOG's organisational structure had conclusively proved that 'we need VOG. Without VOG, nothing can be done'.¹⁴⁶ The passionate defence of VOG seen in the Central Directorate plenum was not merely a question of practicalities, however, but also a question of identity. Members of the plenum dwelled particularly on Buslaev's point that the 'difference between deaf-mutes and the speaking [should be] erased': 'How are we to understand this? The difference between deaf-mutes and speaking

¹⁴³ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 297.

¹⁴⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 31, l. 6.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 7.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 43.

workers was erased in October 1917; you and I received equal rights to vote, to work, etc. Perhaps comrade Buslaev is implying the abolition of differences in communication. Then he needs to say so. To erase the differences in communication is very hard, because *you* hear and *I* do not, and it is hard for me to communicate with the speaking.’¹⁴⁷ Whilst keen to establish economic and cultural equality between the deaf and the hearing, therefore, deaf members of VOG were clearly reluctant to subsume their identity as deaf people into the broader identity of the Soviet collective.

Whilst the transformative process of the 1930s was intended to integrate the deaf into Soviet society, it had also had the paradoxical effect of strengthening the nascent deaf community identity that had developed in the 1920s. The decision to concentrate deaf people in industry, to teach them in small groups, and to provide them with sign language translators, had encouraged deaf people to band together. This community identity was intimately bound up with language; although state policy considered sign language to be inferior to spoken and written Russian, the immediate needs of industrialisation had caused that language to be increasingly institutionalised. Deaf people coming from the countryside to the towns were taught sign language first, in order to allow them to enter the factories and be taught labour skills: ‘if a person comes from the countryside, it is necessary to teach him sign language first, so that he knows city sign.’¹⁴⁸ Translators were provided for all encounters with the hearing community, including visits to the doctor.¹⁴⁹ Symbolic integration was therefore accompanied by a growing sense of a deaf community, united by a common language, but isolated from the hearing world.

At certain points, this developing deaf community was even conceptualised in nationalist terms. At the IV Plenum of the VOG Soviet, Savel’ev explicitly ‘drew a parallel between a nation [*natsiia*] and VOG, although he admitted that VOG was

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. l. 31.

¹⁴⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 45, l. 27.

¹⁴⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 41. In the early years of VOG, translators were usually the children of deaf parents who had learned sign language in childhood. From the early 1930s, however, in light of the pressing need for translators in industry and education, VOG began to run regional courses to train individuals in sign language translation. Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 175; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 46, l. 35.

not a nation'.¹⁵⁰ The comparison was drawn in both positive and negative ways: whilst Savel'ev suggested that VOG's national characteristics aligned it positively with other republics of the Soviet Union, which were 'national in form and socialist in content', the local VOG manager E. Mokhonov was not convinced. In 1935, he wrote that 'deaf-mutes have lost touch with life, having locked themselves up in their club, in their own circle, they avoid and ignore the speaking, having created their own nation, so to speak, and even developed their own form of deaf-mute chauvinism'.¹⁵¹ Such parallels were rarely drawn, and the notion of the deaf community as a nationality did not become widely discussed in this period. Yet these nationalist comparisons, however rare, bore witness to the growing distinctiveness of the deaf community during this period.¹⁵²

The development of VOG and the inclusion of deaf people into Soviet industrial life thus had the effect of developing a deaf community identity, including the notion of the 'deaf-mute masses' (*glukhonemaia massa*). As in the 1920s, this identity was not seen to sit at odds with the broader goal of becoming 'Soviet people'. The grouping of deaf people together was interpreted in collective terms: 'the deaf-mute proletariat, by virtue of their physical lack, are always drawn towards mutual unification and collectivism.'¹⁵³ VOG members stressed that the broad goals of their organisation were the same as those of Soviet society as a whole; that is, the transformation of society and the transition to communism: 'it is absolutely natural that we must not have some sort of special general line of VOG; on the contrary, VOG must walk, as must all other organisations, along the path that is drawn by the

¹⁵⁰ 'Doklad predsedatel'ia tsentralnogo pravleniia VOGa t. Savel'eva ob itogakh perestroika raboty VOGa', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* 4, no. 7 (1936), p. 8.

¹⁵¹ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 336. The notion of a deaf-mute 'nationality' did not carry the same implications of cultural uniqueness as seen in the American model of deaf identity, however; in the discussion following Savel'ev's comments, a 'voice from the floor' cried out that 'Specific conditions do not mean a different culture [*Spetsificheskie usloviia ne est' osobaia kul'tura*]! We deaf people are divided amongst ourselves by nationality and are obliged to familiarise ourselves with the culture which exists in each nation, not to create our own culture'. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 30, l. 40.

¹⁵² At the same time, the question of transcending nationality to create an All-Union Society of Deaf Mutes was raised at the III Congress. The goal to create a 'united family' of deaf people was ultimately prevented, however, by organizational considerations, namely the subordination of the various republican deaf societies to their respective national organs of Social Welfare. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 42 ob.

¹⁵³ V. Karunii, 'U starogo geroia truda est' chemu poluchit'sia molodym udarnikam', *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* 2, no. 3-4 (1934), p. 10.

Party.¹⁵⁴ Yet when tensions arose between the needs of the country (for cadres in industry, for example) and the needs of the deaf community, VOG workers always sought to put the deaf community first.

In these moments of tension, VOG's members fought for the needs of their own contingent, the 'deaf-mutes' against those of the 'other', that is, of the hearing. Over the course of the 1930s, however, the notion of the 'other' expanded. Deaf people began to talk scathingly of the 'speaking', a group that encompassed not only normal hearing people but also late-deafened members of VOG. As *Beregi Slukh!* highlighted, a significant proportion of VOG's members had lost their hearing in adulthood as a result of illness or accident, after they had mastered spoken Russian. This contingent of late-deafened people had proved invaluable in the early years of VOG: they liaised between VOG and state departments, using their language skills to overcome the communicative difficulties that hampered VOG's work.¹⁵⁵ Yet these individuals, unconstrained by the lack of language that stymied their deaf-mute peers, were on the whole reluctant to work for VOG, choosing instead to find better paid and more prestigious jobs elsewhere. At the III Congress, an activist from Leningrad, O. Z. Kessel', commented that 'you all know perfectly well that the late-deafened are the leading party of our *aktiv*, but they themselves are completely uninterested'.¹⁵⁶

It was not only the reluctance of late-deafened people to work for VOG in the provinces that upset deaf-mute members. Late-deafened people were similarly reluctant to socially identify themselves as 'deaf-mute'. Their refusal to learn sign language caused particular offence: 'the late-deafened can't communicate with deaf-mutes. This is shameful, they need to learn sign language and finger spelling, but the late deafened can't speak in either and they are often proud of this fact. I repeat, this is very shameful of them.'¹⁵⁷ As an article from 1931 explained, these 'lip-readers' (*gubisty*), a term used pejoratively, were engaged in a 'covert battle' with the organisation of deaf-mutes: 'the lip-readers propose to get rid of sign language, to

¹⁵⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 79 ob.

¹⁵⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 329.

¹⁵⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 18, l. 72 ob.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 102 ob.

get rid of the finger alphabet in special situations and in everyday life, to carry out social work and to socialise amongst themselves – solely through the medium of oral speech. And in conclusion they promise heaven – “we will enter hearing society”.¹⁵⁸ For the author of this article, however, lip-reading represented ‘political death’. He made the decision to ‘break with lip-reading and go where the duty of each conscious citizen calls him – to help the backward, to transfer my knowledge to deaf-mutes. And I went to the deaf-mutes, having denied myself the right to a personal life, because the masses call and the party demands that I go’. In this analysis, being a ‘speaker’ rather than a ‘deaf-mute’ was ultimately an anti-Soviet act.

These dynamics – the privileging of a ‘deaf-mute’ identity and the denigration of the ‘late-deafened’ as ‘other’ – came to the fore in the debates over the reform of services for deaf people. The desire to transfer VOG’s duties to other ‘hearing’ state organisations and out of the hands of deaf people was considered unacceptable by VOG members, for practical as well as symbolic reasons. The backlash against these proposals was directed personally at Nikolai Alekseevich Buslaev. Born in 1906 in Astrakhan, Buslaev had lost his hearing at the age of fourteen as a result of meningitis. Having studied at the Arnol’d-Tretiakov School (now the 1st Moscow Institute of Deaf Mutes), he trained to be a typesetter before entering the Frunze Professional-Technical School in 1925. In 1926 he began working for VOG as an organisational instructor, and in 1931 he became a member of the VOG Soviet. He retained this post when, in 1932, he became the first ‘instructor for work amongst deaf-mutes’ in VTsSPS. He carried out this work with considerable efficiency and notable success: the concentration of deaf people in industry, the inclusion of deaf people in factory-based schools and the opening of the first deaf health resort in Gelendzhik were largely down to his efforts.¹⁵⁹ His continued advocacy of the downsizing of VOG, however, made him numerous enemies amongst the VOG leadership. The 1935 Plenum of the Central Directorate, discussed above, was one of many meetings held to debate Buslaev’s proposals, and in many instances the criticisms were directed personally at him. On one particular occasion, in a fit of

¹⁵⁸ Byvshii gubist, ‘Kuchka alkimikov ili bortsy za piatiletku?’, *Na vogovskom fronte: Biulleten’ 3-go s”ezda VOGa*, 18th November 1931, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 180.

¹⁵⁹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 509.

rage, the Orenburg-based activist Udal' called Buslaev a 'Trotskyist', a slur for which Udal' was formally reprimanded.¹⁶⁰

In the context of the purges, however, Buslaev's reluctance to toe the 'VOG line' was imbued with particular political meaning, and on 14th August 1937 a special evening session of the VOG Party Group was held to discuss his conduct. The meeting took the form of a 'special purge meeting', as described by Oleg Kharkhordin: following a formal denunciation, the individual was brought before a special commission which questioned him at length. Having made their decision, the commission then published their findings to the society at large.¹⁶¹ In this instance, the charges against Buslaev were twofold; first, that Buslaev, on behalf of the VTsSPS, had been illegally distributing passes (*putevki*) to the deaf health resort in Gelendzhik, and second, that he had been using *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* and other forums to 'prematurely sing the funeral song of VOG'.¹⁶² After a heated debate, the party group decided to expel Buslaev from the VOG Soviet for 'violation of party discipline' and to recommend that VTsSPS replace him as an instructor.¹⁶³

Again, the discussion centred on the deaf community's desire to be in control of their own services. The controversy over the distribution of *putevki* echoed these concerns: only VOG, Tot'mianin argued, should have the right to control access to a health resort for deaf people.¹⁶⁴ This argument was couched in the language of 'democracy' and 'mass control', yet at the same time it emphasised the unique social identity of deaf people. This identity was intimately bound up with the nature of their disability: according to Romanchuk, a member of the party group, 'Buslaev believes that deaf-mutes are not invalids, that they are equal to physically healthy people. Is that really so? I believe that deaf-muteness is the most negative type of invalidity.'¹⁶⁵ This invalidity was best served, it was implied, by those who shared and understood

¹⁶⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, l. 37, l. 75 ob.

¹⁶¹ Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, 1999), p. 140.

¹⁶² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 37, l. 74 ob.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, l. 87.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 73.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 74 ob.

its specificities. Buslaev's suggestion, therefore, that 'VOG isn't necessary' was seen to deny the particular identity, and particular needs, of this invalid group.¹⁶⁶

In this debate, VOG members were quick to acknowledge the faults in their own organisational work. Yet Buslaev's constant criticism of these faults on the pages of *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* was considered 'a disgrace' (*bezobrazie*) that threatened services for all deaf people. As members of the party group made clear, this discrepancy stemmed from the fact that Buslaev criticised VOG from the point of view of an outsider; not only as a representative of the VTsSPS, but also as a 'speaking' person. At the various meetings involving Buslaev, archival notes make clear that he was contributing to the discussion in spoken Russian, which was then being translated into sign for the benefit of the deaf-mutes present.¹⁶⁷ Savel'ev, one of Buslaev's sternest critics, consistently referred to him as outside the deaf community: 'As a VTsSPS instructor, comrade Buslaev does not want to work with the collective [...]. There are the deaf-mute masses, which Buslaev does not want to take into consideration.' Savel'ev's wife, Sof'ia Ivanovna Lychkina, was even more cutting: 'he is no friend of deaf-mutes.'¹⁶⁸

These particular criticisms had been raised with Buslaev before, but by 1937, his supposed 'distance' from the deaf community and his rejection of the idea of separate services for the deaf had taken on new meanings. Criticisms of his position had become couched in the language of the purges, and his arguments began to be interpreted as 'a line against the party, a line against VOG'.¹⁶⁹ Lychkina again raised the spectre of 'Trotskyism': 'I was surprised that in a previous plenum Udal' was reprimanded for calling Buslaev a Trotskyist. And why should he not say that, if what Buslaev is putting into practice looks like the Trotskyist line?'¹⁷⁰ Udal' took this even further: 'Like all Trotskyists, Buslaev conceals his true face, plays a double game, says one thing and does another. That's a fact [...]. In his head he has a different plan, to carry out his destructive propaganda against VOG from within the very masses of deaf-mutes. Why? In order to fulfil his plan – to throw off the only

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., l. 79.

¹⁶⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 27, l. 66.

¹⁶⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 37, l. 75 ob.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 75 ob.

drive [*privod*] that links our deaf-mute masses to the party, and that is the plan of an enemy. Buslaev is not a Communist, he's an enemy.'¹⁷¹ By arguing for the integration of deaf services into the trades union, therefore, Buslaev had shown himself to be an enemy of deaf people, and perhaps even an 'enemy of the people'. In the face of these charges, however, Buslaev remained unrepentant. He refused to be judged by the VOG party group, announcing that 'if I have a line that is coordinated with VTsSPS, and I act as an instructor of VTsSPS, you can't hold me to account for it. You can inform VTsSPS of your opinion, you can demand that VTsSPS take your opinion into consideration, but you cannot punish me for my work along the VTsSPS line'.¹⁷²

In response to this recalcitrance, the party group made the decision to expel Buslaev from the Central Soviet and from VOG. The report of their decision, 'Protocol No. 5', echoed the classic tropes of purge discourse: 'Comrade Buslaev, abusing his position in society (member of the VOG Central Soviet) and in service (editor in chief of *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* and instructor of VTsSPS), has committed in his activities a whole series of acts [*postupki*] directed at the slanderous attack against the Central Directorate of VOG [...] Opposing the Society and, in addition, not revealing his "principal" line, comrade Buslaev has caused obvious disorganisation in the work of VOG.'¹⁷³ Yet in light of these charges, his punishment was relatively mild. He was ejected from the Central Soviet and from VOG, but his position in VTsSPS was never put in serious jeopardy, and the threats of party group members to 'convey our conclusions to the party organs, not only of the Palace of Labour, but even further' and to inform the procurator of the *putevki* affair came to nothing.¹⁷⁴ Given what had happened in Leningrad, this leniency was surprising. In fact, after a brief period in the wilderness, Buslaev was reinstated as a member of the VOG Presidium on 21st September 1941, and continued to serve the deaf community until his death in 1998.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 78 ob.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 78 ob.

¹⁷⁵ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 510. It is hard to find concrete information about Buslaev's reinstatement: the few short biographies that exist tend to ignore the *Buslaevshchina*, or dismiss it as an isolated incident in an otherwise spotless record of service. See Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 193; Ivan Isaev, *Mnogogolos'e tishiny: Iz istoriia glukhikh Rossii* (Moscow, 1996), pp. 32-34.

Whatever its outcome, the *Buslaevshchina* demonstrated that by 1937, it was no longer acceptable to advocate for the institutional integration of deaf people into the state system. The particular needs of the deaf community, and their developing identity as a social group, made it imperative that they be served by VOG alone. This was not a rejection of the Soviet project, or an attempt to isolate the deaf from the broader collective; on the contrary, members made clear that VOG was their direct line to the party and their only hope to become truly Soviet people. Yet the decision to privilege VOG as the representative body of the deaf community was to decisively shape the history of deaf people for the remainder of the Soviet period. Over the next few years, VOG would regain control of those services and organisational functions that had passed to other state departments, and become not only the sole provider of services for the deaf, but also the locus of their institutional identity.¹⁷⁶ This process was helped in no small measure by the violent rupture of the Second World War, which placed acute pressures on central state departments, and moved the issue of provision for the disabled to centre stage. These issues will be explored more fully in Chapter Three.

Conclusion

In their discussion of the changes wrought amongst deaf people since the revolution, deaf writers often cited Ivan Turgenev's short story *Mumu*. The hero of this tale, the deaf-mute porter Gerasim, was held up as an example of the poor existence of deaf people in tsarist Russia: 'the dumb, gloomy and serf-like peasant-giant [...] has become the model in Russian literature of the universally-recognised deaf-mute "type".'¹⁷⁷ Yet the fundamental transformation of self and society engendered, not only by the revolution, but by Stalin's Five-Year plans, had consigned this 'type' to history. The 'new hero of deaf-mute society' was the shock-worker, the

¹⁷⁶ To take an example, the provision of political education, an activity dominated by VTsSPS in the 1930s, was decisively reclaimed by VOG over the 1940s. The VOG Charter of 1941 identified the 'raising of the ideological and political level of deaf people [...] included in the ranks of active builders of communism' as one of the central tasks of VOG. The society began to run courses and evening activities in their social clubs, with VTsSPS merely offering 'practical help'. See V. G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh: Istoriia, razvitie, perspektivy* (Leningrad, 1985), pp. 130-131.

¹⁷⁷ Karunii, 'U starogo geroia', p. 10.

Stakhanovite, who demonstrated the capacity of deaf people to integrate into society and to excel. Literature of the new era would reflect the great change wrought in deaf people, and showcase their potential to the world at large.

The period of Stalin's industrialisation and the Five-Year Plans did indeed see the wholesale transformation of tens of thousands of deaf people. Systems put in place by VOG and state bodies allowed for the systematic identification and inclusion of deaf people, and facilitated their transfer to the gigantic factories of the new industrial age. For many, this transformation was fundamentally liberating: translation and training freed them from the constraints of their 'defect' and allowed them to show their talents. Yet for others, the transformation proved hard to accomplish. The utopian rhetoric of 'overcoming' was undermined by painful individual struggles which raised doubts about the ability of deaf people to integrate into Soviet society. Not only that, but the institutionalisation of a separate deaf community and the privileging of a unique deaf-mute identity served to further divorce the 'deaf-mute masses' from the masses at large.

The Stalinist period thus consolidated the separate deaf-Soviet identity that had been born in the post-revolutionary decade. The deaf community was given institutional shape; not only in VOG, but in the brigades of deaf in the factories, the groups of deaf in *rabfaki* and *VUZy*, and the constant presence of translators and mediators. Soviet deaf people were thus deeply invested in their own Soviet transformation, but that transformation was carried out at arm's length from the hearing.

3 *War and Reconstruction*



figure 4
Moscow, 22nd June 1941

On 22nd June 1941, the war photographer Evgenii Anan'evich Khaldei captured the scene as anxious Muscovites listened to the announcement that the Soviet Union was at war. To the left of the photograph, raising her hand to her face, is the figure of the deaf woman Nina Borisovna Zvorykina. Years later she remembered the moment:

The radio was broadcasting, everyone stood in silence with worried faces and, although I could not hear, the worry transmitted itself even to me. I still did not understand what was happening, but I was immediately afraid for my son.

Zina didn't know sign language, so she whispered it all to me, clearly articulating the words. 'Molotov is speaking,' she said, 'Hitler has deceived us.' And then: 'War! Kiev has already been bombed.'

I was terribly frightened: what would become of us all, I - a deaf woman, and now with a son?¹

Zvorkina's fears were justified. The Great Patriotic War was a violent rupture in the history of Soviet society in general, and of the Soviet deaf community in particular. The deaf, and the institutional structures that surrounded them, were displaced and fragmented by the events of 1941-1945, and the ongoing process of individual transformation and Sovietisation begun during the 1930s was put on hold. In the aftermath of war, therefore, the need for reconstruction was paramount. Even before hostilities had ceased, VOG and the Soviet state were working to re-establish the networks of education, labour training, cultural and social life that had surrounded the deaf before the war.

Yet the post-war period did not merely see the recreation of the Soviet deaf community as it had been before Hitler's invasion. The legacy of war, in particular the large numbers of disabled and deafened veterans who returned from the front, raised the status of disability. The rehabilitation of disabled individuals and their return to active labour was transformed from a marginal concern of the disabled community to the imperative need of Soviet society as a whole to reconstruct a healthy body politic. As such, institutions dealing with disabled people, such as VOG and its sister organisation VOS (*Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Slepikh*, or the All-Russian Society of the Blind), were strengthened and raised in profile over the first post-war decade. At the same time, the theories and methods of the rehabilitation of the deaf were subject to renewed debate. In the field of education in particular, the question of what deafness really was, and how it could successfully be overcome, became a subject of intense argument, as rival theoretical organisations fought for control over deaf schools. In a rare occurrence, this debate about the

¹ Cited in V. A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhykh* (Moscow, 2007), p. 399.

nature and treatment of deafness spilled onto the pages of central Soviet newspapers, as society grappled with the problem of disability.

For the deaf, therefore, as for other parts of Soviet society, the late-Stalinist era was ‘as much about reinvention as it was about reconstruction’.² In this respect, the experience of the deaf corroborates the findings of historians such as Juliane Fürst, Mark Smith and others, who see the post-war period as the source of many of the social and political changes that would reach their zenith during Khrushchev’s ‘thaw’.³ The desire to heal the wounds of a country torn apart by war provoked new ways of seeing and treating deafness. These new ideas were often highly theoretical and not matched by the contradictory practices of post-war Soviet life. Yet their elaboration and implementation would shape the existence of deaf individuals until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Deaf Experience of War

The experience of the Second World War both reinforced and undermined the deaf-Soviet identity that had been developing since the revolution. At a time when individual commitment to the Soviet cause was demonstrated by eagerness to ‘staunchly defend the Motherland’, the deaf were, for the most part, confined to the home front. Despite their enthusiastic participation in pre-war military training programmes, such as the GTO and *Osoaviakhim*, deaf men were not permitted to

² Juliane Fürst, ‘Introduction – Late Stalinist Society: History, Policies and People’, in *Late Stalinist Russia: Society Between Reconstruction and Reinvention*, ed. Juliane Fürst (Abingdon, Oxon., 2006), (1-19) p. 2.

³ The notion of post-war reconstruction as an impetus for change challenges the traditional periodisation of Soviet history, which views Stalin’s death in 1953 as the decisive break between the era of ‘high-Stalinism’ and the dramatic reforms of de-Stalinization and the ‘thaw’. The post-war origins of some of the Khrushchev-era policies have been discussed by many scholars: in housing (Mark Smith), in public opinion and social expectations of change (Elena Zubkova), in science (Ethan Pollock) and in youth culture (Juliane Fürst, Mark Edele). See Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb, Ill., 2010); Elena Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments, 1945-1957*, trans. and ed. Hugh Ragsdale (Armonk, N.Y., 1998); Ethan Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars* (Princeton, 2006); Juliane Fürst, ‘Prisoners of the Soviet Self? Political Youth Opposition in Late Stalinism’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 3 (2002), 353-76; Mark Edele, ‘Strange Young Men in Stalin’s Moscow: The Birth and Life of the Stiliagi, 1945-1953’, *Jarbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50, no. 1 (2002), 37-61.

serve in the Red Army.⁴ The desire to fight appears to have remained strong: many hard-of-hearing and late-deafened individuals managed to conceal their deafness from the army medical commissions and be sent to the front. These included Ivan Andreevich Zav'ialov, who served as a member of the 639th rifle division and was wounded in combat on the Briansk front, and Viktor Mikhailovich Sharshutin, who took part in the liberation of Estonia.⁵ The twenty-year-old Komsomol activist Ivan Samusenko, turned away by the military on account of his deafness, sent a letter to army commander Marshal Zhukov begging to be allowed to fight: he perished as a machine-gunner in the defence of Leningrad.⁶ The vast majority of deaf men, however, did not have the necessary language skills to deceive (or persuade) the medical commissar, and were forced to remain in the rear.

Deaf people may have been unable to fight on the front lines, but in the context of 'total war', they soon found other ways to participate. In August 1941, at the House of Unions in Moscow, a city-wide meeting of deaf people and state representatives, including individuals from the People's Commissariat of Arms (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vooruzheniia SSSR*), was held to discuss how best to aid the war effort. At the conclusion of the meeting, the participants published a resolution: 'At this terrible hour, when our Motherland is in mortal danger, our duty is to increase tenfold our efforts in our work. We are exempt from military duty and must show all the more selflessness and persistence in labour, conscious that every component produced above the plan is a blow to the enemy'.⁷ This resolution was transmitted

⁴ Article 23 of the 1939 'Law on Universal Military Duty' stated that deaf people could not join the army on the grounds of their 'physical lack, impeding the performance of military service'. Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR, 'Zakon o vseobshchei voinskoi obiazannosti', 1st September 1939, in *Pravda*, 3rd September 1939, p. 1. GTO ('Gotovy k trudu i oborone', or 'Ready for Labour and Defence') referred to a system of physical culture training widely used by deaf physical culture organisations. Osoaviakhim (an acronym of the words 'defence', 'aviation' and 'chemical') was a voluntary defence organisation joined by many deaf individuals in the 1930s. See 'K trudu i oborone byt' gotovym!', editorial in *Zhizn' glukhonemykh* 3, no. 3 (1935), p. 2.

⁵ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 414, A. Shvedov, 'Gvardii riadovoi', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 11, no. 2 (1958), pp. 7-8.

⁶ E. Volkova, 'Po zovu serdtsa', *VES* 28, no. 5 (1975), p. 13. Thanks to the organisational chaos of war, archival sources for this period are scarce. From the 1970s onwards, however, the magazine *V edinom stroiu* began to collect and publish the personal testimonies of deaf individuals who had participated in the war effort. These sources are coloured by the glorification of the Great Patriotic War that began under Brezhnev; the information contained within them is nevertheless useful.

⁷ Cited in M. A. Evseeva, 'Sud'by, opalennye voinoi', in *Materialy Pervogo Moskovskogo simpoziuma po istorii glukhikh*, ed. Ia B. Pichugin, (Moscow, 1997), p. 123.

across Russia, with similar meetings being held in Sverdlovsk, Nizhnii Tagil, Kazan', Cheliabinsk, Ivanovo, Ufa and Kuibyshev, amongst others.⁸

In response to this call to labour, deaf people threw themselves into the work of supplying goods to front-line troops. Under the slogan 'All for the Front, All for Victory!' they formed 'front brigades' (*frontovye brigady*) in armaments industries and laboured to raise production levels.⁹ These efforts took the same form as pre-war labour initiatives, seeking to over-fulfil planned targets through shock work and Stakhanovism. In 1943, for example, a collective of deaf workers from the Vladimir Il'ich Factory in Moscow published a call to all deaf-mute workers of the USSR to begin socialist competition amongst themselves. The Arkhangelsk department of VOG was the first to heed the call, and by 1944, 56 collectives in twelve regions were participating.¹⁰ Significant numbers of deaf people were awarded the title of Stakhanovite during the war: 169 of the 183 deaf workers at the Vladimir Il'ich Factory were Stakhanovites by 1944. Similarly, a great number of deaf people were awarded state orders and medals for their labour, including the lathe-turner Kabanov, who was presented with the Order of Lenin in recognition of his wartime efforts.¹¹

Whilst relegated to the ranks of the 'disabled' by their ineligibility to fight, the deaf sought to reclaim their place in Soviet society through that core component of Soviet ideology: their participation in labour. In fact, the experience of war did much to cement the particular deaf-Soviet identity emergent in the 1920s and 30s, defined by industrial labour and commitment to the Soviet cause, but also by a distinct deaf community. The evacuation of large numbers of deaf people from the occupied zone to the Urals region facilitated the urbanisation and 'concentration' of deaf people. Often, the workforces of several factories from the west of Russia would be amalgamated with local factories in the evacuation zone, allowing the few deaf workers from each to join together and form larger deaf brigades.¹² Through the

⁸ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 401.

⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 1.

¹⁰ This number was in fact rather low: according to the report, there were 665 deaf collectives in total in the USSR. The 56 collectives that did take part were from small enterprises, whilst collectives in large factories, such as the Cheliabinsk Tractor Factory, refused. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, l. 2.

¹² This was the case in Cheliabinsk, where evacuated workers from Leningrad's Kirov Factory and Kharkov's Diesel Motor Factory were subsumed into the Cheliabinsk Tractor Factory, which was

combined efforts of VOG activists, VTsSPS and the evacuation points (*evakopunkty*), deaf individuals, families and schools were moved east and placed in industry.¹³ Representatives of the local VOG departments maintained a constant presence at the railway stations, greeting evacuated deaf individuals and directing them to factories and hostels.¹⁴ Nikolai Buslaev was a key figure in this wartime concentration effort; sent to the Cheliabinsk Tractor Factory on the orders of VTsSPS, he used his pre-war experience of placing deaf individuals in work to establish large and successful deaf brigades in local factories.¹⁵ As a result, by the war's end, over 20,000 deaf people were working in industry, of which 5,000 were members of deaf brigades in evacuated factories in the Urals.¹⁶

Deaf engagement in the war was not merely confined to labour activity. Throughout the war, VOG continued to unite deaf people in local deaf clubs and to provide cultural and social services. Many of these services sought to prepare the deaf for the practical realities of war: during the first year of the war, the Leningrad House of Enlightenment held classes on the use of domestic and 'trophy' firearms in case of the invasion of the city, and several city-based VOG organisations taught their members basic defence drills in case of air or gas attack.¹⁷ In addition, through their club activities, VOG sought to ensure that the deaf community understood the purpose and political significance of the war. In Moscow, the local VOG club organised lectures, discussion circles and readings of literature and news reports to keep over 350 deaf members informed of the battles in progress.¹⁸ The fourteen members of the Moscow Drama Collective performed 'antifascist' plays almost daily until the end of the war, for which efforts they were each awarded the medal, 'For the Defence of Moscow.'¹⁹ Local deaf clubs also held collections of funds to help the war effort, an activity which had begun during the late 1930s: VOG funded the

converted to the production of tanks during the war. At 'Tankograd', as it was commonly known, over 240 deaf people performed skilled work in deaf brigades, overfulfilling their norms by as much as 300 per cent. Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 419.

¹³ Ibid., p. 418.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 423.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 418.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 407- 408.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 402; E. S. Il'ina, 'Samye luchshie oba – mama moia i otets', *VES* 49, no. 1 (1996), p. 11.

¹⁹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 407.

building of a tank, 'Vogovets', and a squadron of aeroplanes, as well as making presents of money and books to individual soldiers.²⁰

The war thus provided an opportunity for deaf people to prove their 'Sovietness' and to fight, in different ways, for the defence of their nation. As a poem by the leading VOG member I. K. Labunskii, the 'March of the Deaf-Mute Stakhanovites', declared, 'A deaf-mute cannot be a soldier/ But he may beat the enemy with his labour!'²¹ In fact, the experience of war provoked a strengthened commitment to the Soviet cause in many deaf people: Ianina Vinkent'evna Kovalevskaia, who as a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl had worked an armaments factory in the Urals, remembered that 'during the war we lived with only one idea in our minds: all for the front, all for victory'.²²

At the same time, however, the war proved deeply traumatic for the deaf community. It is difficult to estimate the number of civilian deaf casualties; pre-war records of deaf people were far from complete and data on deaf casualties was not collected by any central body. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that casualties were numerous. According to a VOG report from 1945, many died in the occupied zones 'at the hands of the fascists (especially Jews)', and 883 VOG members perished in Leningrad.²³ The deaf peasant Fedor Shul'zhennikov was shot to death because he could not answer the questions put to him by German officers.²⁴ Another deaf-mute man, an industrial worker from Bezhitsk, had his eyes put out after being accused of espionage.²⁵ Nine members of VOG were killed in Rostov on the Don, and the chairman of the Stavropol *krai* department of VOG was shot alongside his wife and three children.²⁶ VOG membership, which could prove indicative of wider trends in the deaf community, sharply dropped from 46,404 in 1941, to 21,757 in 1943.²⁷

²⁰ Ibid. p. 402.

²¹ I. K. Labunskii, 'Marsh glukhonemoi stakhanovtsev', cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 421.

²² S. Kulikovskikh, 'Deti voennogo tyla', *VES* 48, no. 5 (1995), p. 9.

²³ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 2.

²⁴ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 440.

²⁵ I. Falin, 'Etot den' my priblizhali, kak mogli', *VES* 48, no. 5 (1995), p. 10.

²⁶ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 452.

²⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 4.

The drop in VOG membership should also be attributed to the chaotic nature of the evacuation process. Whilst some semblance of order could be found in the organisation of labour brigades in the Urals, the majority of deaf people found evacuation to be a confused and chaotic experience.²⁸ The deaf communities of major cities were divided up and sent to different locations, often with little idea of what was waiting for them upon arrival. From Novgorod, for example, some deaf workers made for the Urals, whilst others joined fellow hearing residents to travel *en masse* to the city of Borovich.²⁹ Little attempt was made to direct deaf people to places where their labour was needed, or to keep track of where they were going. After the war, the VOG activist I. B. Dubovitskii from Zlatoust took Savel'ev to task for his lack of planning and control during the occupation: 'It was necessary to direct deaf-mutes. A workforce was needed. But there was no organisation [*organizovannost'*], they fled to Tashkent, to the countryside, and we had no manpower'. As a result, argued Dubovitskii, at the end of the war 'many deaf-mutes came to us. They were louts [*bezobrazniki*], hooligans, thieves, murderers, drunkards. From Smolensk, Ukraine, etc. During the war they went to Alma-Ata, Saratov, Tashkent, they didn't want to work in the factories'.³⁰ Amidst the chaos, local organs of VOG had lost track of their members. In its first post-war report, Savel'ev stated bluntly that from Leningrad, 'over a thousand left, it is not known where to'.³¹

This loss of control was unsurprising in light of the damage caused to the VOG system by the war. Whilst the Moscow City Club and the regional organisations in the Urals had continued to work, the network of clubs and local organisations throughout the country was all but destroyed. The number of functioning VOG organisations in the regions dropped from 461 in 1941, to 200 in 1943, and VOG

²⁸ In the Leningrad region, for example, the 86 schoolchildren who could not be returned to their parents at the beginning of the war were sent to the Stalin Pioneer Camp in Iaroslavl' *oblast'*, which housed 700 children in total, 100 of whom were below the age of seven. GARF, f. R-2306, op. 75, d. 2557.

²⁹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 458.

³⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 119, l. 62. Like the deaf postcard-sellers that so troubled the VOG leadership in the 1930s, this evocative description of 'anti-Soviet' deaf behaviour hints at an alternate history of the deaf. Whilst the development of the deaf-Soviet community and identity promoted by VOG is possible to trace archivally, the history of those who remained outside of VOG, whether through choice or circumstance, is much more difficult to document.

³¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 2.

primary organisations fell from 730 to 286.³² In the occupied zones, club buildings were flattened and property was stolen.³³ Imminent danger of Nazi attack provoked the closure of some clubs, such as the Leningrad House of Enlightenment, which was suspended by order of the Leningrad *ispolkom* on 1st June 1942.³⁴ Frequently, however, the needs of the deaf were subordinated to the greater needs of the war effort. Deaf clubs were closed by order of local state bodies in order to use the premises as ‘organs of the war office’: a two storey VOG building in Kuibyshev, built by the local VOG department before the war, was taken over by a driving school, and the club building in Kirov was commandeered by the regional bureau of *Zagotskot* (the state body in charge of livestock).³⁵

The chaos in the primary and local organisations was mirrored in the VOG leadership. During the first few years of war, the work of the Central Directorate had ground to a halt. In the winter of 1941-1942, with Moscow under attack, members of the Central Directorate fled independently to safety: the chief accountant Fedot’ev travelled with his family to Sverdlovsk, and the deputy chairman N. M. Krylov was evacuated with his family to the city of Molotov. Only nine VOG members, including Savel’ev, remained in the city.³⁶ As a result, the plenum of the Central Directorate, which before the war was held yearly to discuss questions of planning and organisation, did not meet again until September 1943.³⁷ The lack of centralised management had an immediate impact on the work of VOG as a whole: as Dubovitskii commented, ‘during the war everyone scattered and didn’t know what to do. For something [...] was lacking in VOG – great responsibility’.³⁸ As Dubovitskii’s words suggested, the lack of direct responsibility within VOG for deaf people’s care during wartime was a point of serious complaint in its aftermath.

This lack of infrastructure did not only have an impact on the existing deaf community. As Beate Fieseler has pointed out, ‘the war left not only 27 million

³² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, ll. 2-3.

³³ *Ibid.*, l. 2.

³⁴ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 408.

³⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 2.

³⁶ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 477.

³⁷ V. G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh: Istoriia, razvitie, perspektivy* (Leningrad, 1985), p. 19.

³⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 119, l. 63.

dead, but also millions of widows, orphans and invalids'.³⁹ Approximately 2.5 million soldiers were discharged as invalids by war's end, a figure which represented about 7.46 per cent of the entire Red Army.⁴⁰ Amongst these invalids were approximately 3,000 men who had suffered permanent hearing loss as a result of combat.⁴¹ Most of these men were rank-and-file (*riadovye*) soldiers, though several hundred were from the officer corps. In addition to their deafness, the majority of these men were also physically disabled. Amongst the 1,649 deafened invalids who were in contact with VOG in 1947, only 188 men were classified as group III invalids, signifying a 'loss or impairment of one limb or organ' (the standard classification of a deaf individual), whereas 934 were group II (loss of more than one organ, able to work only in special conditions) and 470 were group I (severely disabled and unable to work).⁴² This group of individuals was thus extremely varied, in terms of their social background, the extent of their disability, and the nature of the services they required to aid their return to civilian life.

The experience of war thus added a small but significant minority group to the Soviet deaf community: that of deafened veterans. For these men, the loss of their hearing and their transition to the status of 'invalid' represented an end to the lives they had had before the war. As the veteran N. M. Parkhomenko explained in 1946: 'Participating in the battle for the defence of Stalingrad, I received a severe concussion and lost my hearing. I thought that it was all over for me'.⁴³ This sense of dislocation was magnified by the 'scatteredness' of these newly deafened men: approximately 80 per cent lived in the countryside, far from the focal points of the Soviet deaf community, the organisations of VOG. Deafened veterans were thus suspended between two states: no longer members of the 'healthy' body politic, they had yet to be integrated into the deaf community.

³⁹ Beate Fieseler, 'The Bitter Legacy of the "Great Patriotic War": Red Army Disabled Soldiers Under Late Stalinism,' in *Late Stalinist Russia*, ed. Fürst, p. 46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46-47.

⁴¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, l. 12. Classification according to these categories of disability was carried out by the labour-medical boards (VTEK). Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society* (Oxford, 2008), p. 82.

⁴³ Cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 435

Beyond the ‘front brigades’ and VOG club activities, therefore, there was a secondary deaf experience of war: one that represented alienation from the Soviet collective. With the lives of deaf people so intimately bound up in the deaf community fostered by VOG, the disintegration of the VOG apparatus within the first few years of war had the effect of cutting the links that bound deaf individuals to each other, and to the Soviet body politic as a whole. Given the central role of labour in the Soviet identity of deaf people, the results of this fragmentation, in particular the phenomenon of deaf hooligans roaming the countryside, appeared to negate the transformative efforts of the 1930s. The newest members of the deaf community, the deafened veterans of the conflict, were similarly alienated from Soviet society as they struggled to come to terms with their disability. As the German advance was halted and reversed and the Soviet Union began to reconstruct its shattered infrastructure, therefore, the need to reconceptualise and rebuild the ranks of the Soviet deaf was paramount.

Reconstruction and Reinvention

The Soviet response to the upheavals of war began long before hostilities had ceased. As Juliane Fürst has stated, ‘as soon as the first shock of the invasion had waned off, the Soviet administrative machinery started rolling to deal with the most immediate damage and initiate a programme of reconstruction’.⁴⁴ Amongst the deaf, this reconstruction began as early as 1942. As cities were liberated from the German occupation, members of the VOG *aktiv* began to return and re-establish their local organisations. In January 1942, the chairman of the Kaluga city department of VOG set up a sewing workshop on October Street, to replace the UPM on Kirov Street that had been bombed during the invasion.⁴⁵ In Voronezh *oblast’*, the VOG department resumed its work on 27th March 1943, electing a new chairman and finding new premises for their club and workshop.⁴⁶ New departments of VOG were established in areas which had seen an influx of deaf evacuees during the war, such as the Novgorod *oblast’* department of VOG, founded in Borovich in 1944.⁴⁷ This

⁴⁴ Fürst, ‘Introduction,’ p. 6.

⁴⁵ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 428.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 441-2.

⁴⁷ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 458.

reconstruction was swift and organised: by 1946, VOG could claim that, except in the territory of Kalinigrad, the pre-war network of city, *oblast'* and republican departments had been re-established.⁴⁸

The work of reconstruction was not simply a matter of recreating the deaf community that had been established before the war, however. The re-establishment of VOG as an organisation was seen as a key tool in the rehabilitation of deaf individuals after the war, and the drawing of deaf people into the work of constructing a socialist society.⁴⁹ This task was, of course, not new: from the revolution, the Soviet state had stated its purpose to 'return to working life each person who has dropped out of the working track [*kazhdogo vybitogo iz trudovoi kolei*]'.⁵⁰ After the war, however, the physical damage inflicted on the Soviet population invested this task with new significance. Whilst before the war, as Beate Fieseler has pointed out, 'the reintegration of disabled people into the working process (*trudoustroistvo*) [had] gained enormous priority in all institutions charged with social welfare', the principle finally 'achieved mass application during and after the Second World War when millions of ill or wounded demobilised soldiers returned from the battlefield, the majority of whom suffered from injuries to the spine or from damage to or loss of limbs'.⁵¹ The return of the disabled to working life thus represented a vital step in the reconstruction of Soviet society in the aftermath of war.

Deafened Veterans

This increased priority was initially directed at those individuals newly deafened by the conflict. As the war progressed, the Central Directorate of VOG began to focus significant attention on the rehabilitation of deafened veterans. According to Palennyi, members of the VOG *aktiv* visited injured soldiers in hospital, providing them with moral support, teaching them the finger alphabet and basic sign language,

⁴⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 2.

⁴⁹ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 78.

⁵⁰ F. K. Ambrosius, 'Sovmestnye zadachi LITIN'a i VOG'a', in *Glukhonemye (trudoustroistvo, obuchenie i kul'trabota)*, ed. Ts. K. Ambrosius (Leningrad, 1933), p. 3.

⁵¹ Fieseler, 'The Bitter Legacy', p. 47.

and helping to find them jobs in industry.⁵² In June 1943, on the initiative of Savel'ev, the brochure 'Instruction for Deafened Invalids of the Patriotic War' was published, containing details of Soviet laws applicable to the deaf, the addresses of hearing-aid workshops, and information on VOG and the availability of labour education through the Society. The brochure also included a copy of the finger alphabet.⁵³ In a similar brochure, published in 1947 by the Kirov *oblast'* department of VOG, deafened veterans were informed that 'the loss of hearing must not plunge you into despair. Deafness is a grave physical lack, but it does not prevent a person from living a full, industrious life [*polnotsennaia trudovaia zhizn'*] in a socialist society and being a useful member of our society. The All-Russian Society of the Deaf will help you to obtain a qualification or re-qualification, to find a use for your strengths and abilities, to help you enter into the life of the collective'.⁵⁴

Through publications and hospital visits, therefore, VOG members sought to draw individual veterans into VOG during and after the war and, through the work of the society, into the social and industrial life of the country. In light of the need to reintegrate disabled veterans into the workplace, however, such positive propaganda was not considered sufficient. VOG was expected proactively to 'take charge' of all deafened veterans and assist their restoration to productive health. As such, in 1944, VOG began a census of deafened veterans, carried out by 39 local departments of VOG.⁵⁵ The census was to establish the level of invalidity of each veteran, their educational background, their ability to work and their need for treatment, training, work placement and the like. With this information, it was hoped, VOG would be able to direct its work more quickly and effectively.

This method of working with deafened veterans had mixed results, however. The census was initially carried out by sending questionnaire cards to veterans' homes, with instructions to return the information to the local department of VOG. In many cases, invalids were reluctant to admit openly that they had been deafened, choosing instead to 'keep quiet about their condition'. As a result, the data collected by VOG

⁵² Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 434.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

⁵⁴ *Oglokhshim-Invalidam Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny*, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 453.

⁵⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 1 ob.

was far from complete: in Voronezh *oblast'*, for example, of the 105 individuals identified by the state as having been deafened by war, only 13 were counted by VOG. Only 417 came forward in total in the RSFSR.⁵⁶ Another attempt was made to collect information in 1946, with considerably more success: 1,649 of the 2,926 deafened veterans provided their details to members of the VOG *aktiv* who visited them in person.⁵⁷ According to the data, 23 were in need of work placement, 206 of some form of industrial education, 39 of general educational training (including literacy), 185 of medical treatment (*lechenie*) and 213 of material assistance.⁵⁸

This knowledge may have been useful, but it was not a guarantee of VOG's success in integrating deafened individuals into the Society. The 1946 census data showed that 73.3 per cent of those deafened veterans interviewed had families, and 79.5 per cent had returned to their pre-war place of residence in the countryside.⁵⁹ As a result, it was extremely difficult to implement the same techniques of work placement and education that had been used by VOG in the 1930s, which had relied primarily on the urbanisation of deaf individuals and their integration into distinct deaf communities. At the same time, many deafened veterans proved extremely reluctant to engage with VOG at all, refusing to become involved with the deaf community and rejecting opportunities for education and work placement amongst the deaf. In 1944, for example, VOG identified a group of deafened veterans who had completed their middle-school education before the war, and offered them the chance to study as a group in the local *tekhnikum*. Of the 18 approached, only three expressed an interest.⁶⁰ By January 1947, a VOG report noted, only 994 deafened veterans had joined VOG.⁶¹

Whilst many deafened veterans were thus reluctant to identify themselves as deaf and engage with the deaf community through VOG, the post-war period did see many veterans taking advantage of their disability to become senior figures in the deaf society. The vast majority of deafened veterans were literate and retained good

⁵⁶ Ibid., l. 1 ob.

⁵⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 12.

⁵⁸ Ibid., l. 13.

⁵⁹ Ibid., l. 13.

⁶⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 1 ob.

⁶¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 14.

speech and were thus able to perform a valuable role liaising between VOG and state departments. As a result, they were quickly able to secure appointments to senior positions in the VOG apparatus. By 1947, 56 deafened veterans were working for VOG as managers: five were chairmen of *oblast*' or *krai* departments of VOG, and six were directors of UPMs. Seven war veterans were members of the Central Directorate.⁶² Furthermore, the special status awarded to deafened veterans of the Patriotic War went some way to neutralising the animosity usually felt towards late-deafened members of VOG. During the V Congress of VOG, held from 30th June – 2nd August 1951, members debated the candidacy of A. Ia. Vostrikov, the chairman of the Astrakhan department of VOG, for membership of the VOG plenum. At the beginning of the discussion, a 'voice from the crowd' had shouted out that 'he doesn't know sign language; how will he help the work of the plenum?' After having established that Vostrikov had fought in the battle of Stalingrad, however, the mood changed. 'He was a participant of the battles near Stalingrad! He decided the fate of the Motherland! He has to stay', another 'voice' commented. The Congress, it was announced, had rejected 'the opinion that war veterans [*frontoviki*], having lost their hearing, are given a hostile reception because of their ignorance of sign language. How could they know it?'⁶³

In the aftermath of war, therefore, the rehabilitation of deafened veterans was considered one of the fundamental tasks of VOG. Whilst not all deafened veterans chose to engage actively with VOG, those who did join the organisation found that they were accorded an elevated status within it. As literate and, for the most part, educated individuals, deafened veterans were able to function as successful managers of VOG organisations. At the same time, their status as 'defenders of the Motherland' singled them out from amongst their deaf peers, making their return to a successful, working life all the more symbolically significant. The presence of deafened veterans in VOG had a further, secondary impact. The importance accorded to the rehabilitation of war invalids elevated the status of VOG, and placing

⁶² Ibid., l. 14. Amir Weiner also notes the political power of veterans in the post-war period: 'Five years after the [Vinnytsia] region was liberated, the war generation had established itself as the single largest group in the regional *nomenklatura*.' Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, 2001), p. 62.

⁶³ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 227, l. 48.

renewed emphasis on its work, not just with deafened veterans, but with all deaf people.

Serving the Deaf

In the post-war years, the state began to place new demands on VOG, not only to rehabilitate those deafened by war, but also to continue to establish the community of Soviet-minded, labouring deaf people that had begun to emerge in the late 1930s. On 16th May 1945, the Ministry of Social Welfare (Minsobes), charged VOG with the task of carrying out a census of all deaf people in the RSFSR, to be completed by 1st April 1947.⁶⁴ On this basis, VOG was to analyse the needs of each deaf individual and establish how best to return them to labour.⁶⁵ By 1947, the partially completed census had uncovered a total of 82,600 deaf people in Soviet Russia, of which 20,279 were VOG members and 31,589 worked in some form of industry or agriculture.⁶⁶ On the basis of these figures, Minsobes began to set ambitious targets for VOG membership and job allocation.⁶⁷

As the experience of the war had shown, vast numbers of deaf people were able to work to extremely high standards and levels of productivity, and those individuals continued to work in state industry after 1945. Yet the transformative process begun in the 1930s was far from complete, and the obstacles, though familiar, had been magnified by war. The conflict had disrupted the education of over 15,000 children, many of whom, by the war's end, had reached the age of fourteen and were thus no longer eligible for places in the Ministry of Enlightenment (Minpros) network of special schools.⁶⁸ Similarly, VOG's system of *likbezy*, or literacy classes, had ceased to function during the war. In 1946, therefore, 31,300 deaf people were still illiterate and lacking the necessary skills to enter state industry.⁶⁹ Despite the attempts of the 1930s to draw deaf individuals into the cities, over half of those included in the VOG

⁶⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 32.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 5.

⁶⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 154, l. 2. In 1948, for example, Minsobes stipulated that by 1949, VOG membership should reach 56,000, or 70 per cent of the total number of deaf people in the RSFSR. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 171, l. 5.

⁶⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 3.

⁶⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 21.

census still lived in the countryside, a fact which made these individuals particularly 'hard to serve'.⁷⁰ In addition, VOG also had to deal with those homeless, hooligan youths (*besprizornnye*) described by Dubovitskii at the IV Congress. According to a 1947 report, many such youths were being directed to VOG by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) for work placement and training.⁷¹

In light of these obstacles, the rehabilitation of deaf individuals and their inclusion into Soviet labour appeared fraught with difficulties. Yet, as a VOG report from 1947 declared, 'our organisation must not retreat in the face of difficulties, but fight them, overcome them'.⁷² In the post-war years, the VOG *aktiv* continued to apply themselves to the task of transformation. Deaf individuals continued to be placed in state industry, invalid cooperatives and state farms (*sovkhozy*). If the number of individuals placed in work in 1942, the 'year of crisis', was 1,722, by 1946, that number had risen to 5,332.⁷³ Similarly, in 1946, 1,659 individuals were completing their professional education in factory schools and VOG UPMs.⁷⁴ Rally-conferences (*slety-konferentsii*) continued to be held in the countryside to unite rural deaf individuals and draw them into the work of VOG.⁷⁵ Despite these efforts, however, the targets set by Minsobes for VOG membership were not being met. In the immediate post-war years, the Central Directorate of VOG had anticipated a steady growth in VOG members, but 'the absolute growth of Society members is lower in 1946 than in 1945 by 1,000 people [...] and 1945 was worse than 1944'.⁷⁶

This failure to draw deaf people into VOG at a steady rate was blamed squarely on 'the weakening of the mass-organisational work of relevant departments'.⁷⁷ Yet the decision by deaf individuals to refuse to join VOG, or to allow their membership to lapse, could also be interpreted as the result of a new understanding of the role of VOG in the post-war period. The change in status of disabled people in the aftermath of war was contributing to an emerging new conception of social welfare, one that

⁷⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 154, ll. 2, 14.

⁷¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 26.

⁷² *Ibid.*, l. 24.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, l. 25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 26.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 23.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

emphasised the passive reception of benefits and services alongside the established values of agency and labour rehabilitation. In other words, deaf individuals no longer simply demanded the ability to support themselves through work, they now also desired a better quality of life, material assistance and ‘privileges’ (*l’goty*). Whilst these demands were most often associated with disabled veterans (Fieseler has noted that ‘crippled and injured veterans expected significant improvements in their lives – in exchange for the victory, for which they had fought so bitterly and tenaciously’), the expectation that the deaf should receive some form of material compensation was equally acknowledged by those whose deafness had preceded the war. Four years after victory was declared, for example, a VOG report noted that ‘deaf-mutes from rural areas are extremely reluctant to become members of the Society; this is motivated by the lack of any kind of benefits and privileges for members’.⁷⁸

In the years following the war, VOG reports began to record the increase in ‘everyday social services’ (*sotsial’no bytovoe obsluzhivanie*) provided to members. These services initially sought to facilitate the ‘return to normalcy’ after the upheavals of war: in 1944, for example, the society spent considerable funds to ensure that local clubs and workshops were equipped to survive the winter, providing money to restore hostels and replenish stocks of firewood, alongside a total of 12,000 metres of cotton fabric, 7,000 towels and about 3,000 pairs of socks.⁷⁹ By 1946, however, the parameters of what constituted ‘social service’ had widened considerably. The report of VOG’s Central Directorate for that year noted the variety of work carried out: VOG organisations spent 276,800 roubles in one-off grants to deaf individuals to fund re-evacuation, treatment and the acquisition of necessary clothing to return to work; negotiated with local trade departments to help members acquire flats or places in dormitories (*obshchezhitii*); provided interpreters and legal

⁷⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 171, l. 7. The demand for *l’goty* is viewed by Mark Edele as the central stimulus for veterans’ development into an ‘entitlement community’: ‘Soviet veterans in the first postwar decade formed a socially relevant group because they tended to act alike, as they shared a sense of individual entitlement vis-à-vis the community they had fought for.’ Mark Edele, ‘Soviet Veterans as an Entitlement Group, 1945-1955’, *Slavic Review* 65, no 1 (2006), (111-137) p. 112.

⁷⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 4. The ‘return to normalcy’ is Sheila Fitzpatrick’s phrase: she argues that during the war, Soviet society endured privation and hardship with the expectation that ‘when the war ended, normal life would be resumed’. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, ‘Postwar Soviet Society: The “Return to Normalcy”, 1945-1953’, in *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union*, ed. Susan J. Linz (Totowa, 1985), pp. 129-156.

advice; placed the hearing children of deaf adults in nurseries; and organised places for deaf people at rest homes and sanatoria.⁸⁰

The desire to provide increased services to deaf individuals did not originate within VOG. On 27th February 1946, the secretariat of the trades union (VTsSPS) had published the decree ‘On the improvement of the work of professional organisations in the service [*obsluzhivanie*] of deaf-mute and deaf blue- and white-collar workers, and also invalids of the Patriotic War’.⁸¹ This document repeated many of the ideas of the VTsSPS decree of 1931, including the concentration of deaf people in industrial brigades and the provision of labour education.⁸² In addition to this, the new decree focused on the provision of social services for deaf people: the allocation of separate rooms in factories for VOG clubs; the guarantee of living space, with ‘necessary help [for deaf people] to organise their services, in canteens, shops and laundries, placing children into nurseries, crèches and pioneer camps’; a budget of 200,500 roubles to organise after-school services for deaf children; the provision of sporting equipment; the organisation of cultural and theatrical activities; and the creation of new sanatoria for deaf people.⁸³

Although instigated by the VTsSPS, the notion of providing wide-ranging, everyday services for deaf people was brought to fruition by VOG. In many ways, this was the result of the failure of VTsSPS to fulfil the terms of their decree. VOG members had joined VTsSPS representatives in inspecting the condition of deaf services in state factories, and their report from 1949 noted, for example, that in the Volodarskii Sewing Factory, ‘the factory commissioner [*fabkom*] doesn’t even know how many deaf-mutes there are in the factory. Deaf-mutes complain that no attention is paid to them: despite their Stakhanovite work, not one worker has received any incentives and the *fabkom* has not given them passes [*putevki*] to rest homes or sanatoria’.⁸⁴ Similarly, at the Kolomenskii Locomotive Plant, ‘the plant commissioner [*zavkom*] on his own initiative does not concern himself with questions of work amongst deaf-

⁸⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 27.

⁸¹ GARF, f. 5451, op. 24, d. 374, l. 23.

⁸² GARF, f. R-5575, op. 8, d. 2, l. 116.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, l. 24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 9.

muteness.⁸⁵ As a minority group amongst the mass of workers served by the VTsSPS, the deaf had to fight for their rights to specialised services. In VOG, by contrast, their needs could be placed centre stage. The amount of money devoted to ‘everyday social services’ thus increased rapidly. In 1948, 322,000 roubles were spent on material grants to deaf individuals and families in need, and a vast 3,005,200 roubles on cultural and educational services.⁸⁶

This increase in service provision placed a considerable economic strain on VOG. In 1948, for example, an urgent message was sent to local organisations, exhorting them not to give out individual grants of more than 250 roubles without the express permission of the Central Directorate, and without verifying the material situation of the claimant (Moscow City VOG, it seems, had been giving out grants of 400 roubles to anyone who asked).⁸⁷ VOG’s operational expenses were covered by state grants from government bodies such as Narkomsobes and membership fees, but these sources could not supply the sums required for VOG to provide extended services to its members. In order to be able to afford such significant expenditure, it was soon realised, VOG needed to strengthen its ‘material base’: the Educational-Industrial Workshops, or UPMs.

The VOG UPM had grown out of the grass-roots workshops of the 1920s as a means to allow deaf individuals to support themselves and their families through ‘honest labour’. In the 1930s, the workshops had allowed deaf individuals to learn labour skills before finding positions in state industry. Yet the constant shifting of organisational jurisdiction over the UPMs and the frequent bankruptcy and closure of individual workshops over the 1920s and 1930s had prevented them from contributing financially to the work of VOG. By establishing the UPMs as an integral part of the VOG system, therefore, the VOG *aktiv* could kill two birds with one stone: establish a system of labour education to suit the particular needs of the deaf community, and provide a stable financial base for the cultural and social services provided by the society.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid., l. 20.

⁸⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 154, l. 17.

⁸⁷ Ibid., l. 17.

⁸⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 2.

To that end, over the course of the 1940s, the VOG *aktiv* worked to strengthen the UPM system. As part of the reconstruction of the society following the occupation, a series of UPMs was established in urban centres across Soviet Russia. Given the widespread destruction left by the German army, the establishment of these workshops was difficult and proceeded on an ad-hoc basis: in Kalinin, for example, the VOG activist B. Travin founded the local UPM in the remains of the bombed-out VOG dormitory, which was ‘without a roof, flooded with water to knee level, without windows and without fuel’.⁸⁹ The bookbinding workshop began life as two deaf workers using discarded cardboard scavenged from the snow; the sewing workshop, due to the lack of machines, needles and thread, was forced to hire two hearing individuals who could provide their own equipment.⁹⁰ Over time, however, the situation stabilised. By 1944, the Kalinin UPM employed and trained 55 deaf workers and had a fully restored building, 15 sewing machines, and a separate building for a club work, political and industrial education classes.⁹¹ Its initial capital of 3,000 roubles had grown to 125,000 roubles, with a yearly profit of approximately 65,000 roubles.⁹²

The example of Kalinin was echoed elsewhere. If in 1942, VOG had a total of 18 UPMs serving approximately 850 people, by 1944 that number had risen to 40, and by 1948 had reached 64, employing 3,600 deaf people and producing over 70 million roubles’ of profit.⁹³ In the new VOG Charter for 1948, this significant increase in VOG’s material base was acknowledged: in a new section entitled ‘Means of the Society’, the ‘profits of educational-industrial enterprises’ was listed prominently, ahead of the allocations from state bodies.⁹⁴ This increase in emphasis on the UPMs was not warmly welcomed by all: at the IV VOG Congress, Dubovitskii, in his wide-ranging criticism of the VOG leadership and Savel’ev, complained that ‘Comrade Savel’ev has only one thing in his head: UPMs, money, millions, millions, turnover, and he doesn’t concern himself with work placement in the provinces’. The ‘pigmy’

⁸⁹ B. Travin, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 431.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 431

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 432

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 431

⁹³ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 430; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 3; Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 22.

⁹⁴ *Polozhenie o vserossiiskom obshchestve glukhonemykh* (1948), VOG collection, p. 12.

UPMs, according to Dubovitskii, could never match the state industrial enterprises, either in terms of the quality of industrial education, or in terms of the earning potential of the deaf individual once they had completed the ‘workers’ university’ course.⁹⁵ Yet over the next few years, in a series of state decrees, the UPM cemented its position as the financial and educational heart of VOG.⁹⁶

As a result of the upheavals of war, therefore, the rehabilitation of all disabled individuals had been invested with new status, and the need to provide the disabled with benefits and services was enshrined in legislation. These changes saw an equivalent rise in status of the organisations surrounding disabled individuals, including both VOG and its sister organisation, the All-Russian Society of the Blind (*Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo slepykh*, or VOS), which saw a similar widening of its services for blind people, and strengthening of its own material base, in this period.⁹⁷ The apparent placing of responsibility, both financial and symbolic, for all deaf people onto VOG fulfilled the demands of its members from the 1930s, when they had battled for control of their own services. At the same time, however, the changes it entailed placed particular strains on the organisation, and provoked significant reform of its structures and hierarchy.

Reforming VOG

The reform of VOG began at the height of the war. On 6th December 1943, Narkomsobes published a decree, ‘On the Improvement of the Work of the Central Directorates of VOG and VOS.’ This decree noted that the Central Directorate of VOG managed its work poorly and did not extend sufficient control over the work of the primary and regional organisations. In addition to this, ‘gross violations of the

⁹⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 119, l. 60.

⁹⁶ In 1949, Minsobes approved the ‘Position on the Educational-Industrial Workshops of the All-Russian Society of Deaf-Mutes’, which confirmed the central role of the UPMs in financing VOG’s activities and providing industrial education to its members. Shortly afterwards, the first Conference of UPM Directors was held in Moscow to discuss strengthening the organisation and management of the UPM system. In 1950, the Soviet of Ministers of the RSFSR and the VTsSPS published a decree confirming the establishment of socialist competition between the UPMs of VOG and VOS. As a result of these efforts, the profits of VOG UPMs doubled between 1947 and 1950, and continued to increase into the 1950s. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, pp. 92-93.

⁹⁷ On the post-war growth of VOS, see Bernice Q. Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1968), p. 188.

organisational norms of the Society' had been permitted.⁹⁸ The Congress had not met for eleven years, and the plenums of the Central Directorate and local departments of VOG met irregularly, a fact which had led to the 'liquidation of the election [*vybornost*'] of the leadership of departments throughout the system'.⁹⁹ The Central Directorate was therefore 'invited' to reform the central apparatus of VOG and improve work within it.

The lack of central control was not the only organisational problem facing VOG. The society's cadres were often untrained and lacking specialist knowledge, a problem which became more acute as the society began to expand its membership base and services. As a VOG report from 1945 noted, some workers 'do not demonstrate creative initiative and activity on the question of the development of socialist competition amongst members of the society, on the organisation of cultural-educational work, on the economic strengthening and expansion of the UPKs and UPMs towards the best everyday service of members of the society.'¹⁰⁰ In some cases, such incompetence had a direct financial impact; the large sums of money and raw materials under the control of VOG managers were subject to continuous wastage and stealing. In 1948, for example, during the inspection of 103 VOG departments, clubs and UPMs, VOG inspectors uncovered financial losses of approximately 125,000 roubles.¹⁰¹

To combat these problems, the Central Directorate and the Inspection Committee began to demand greater accountability from its regional organisations. The Narkomsobes decree had stipulated that VOG inspect each of its regional departments twice a year, and action was quickly taken to put this into practice.¹⁰² In September 1945, members of the Central Directorate travelled down the Volga River on a motorboat, from Moscow to Astrakhan and back, inspecting the state of local organisations as they went.¹⁰³ In the years that followed, members of the VOG *aktiv* were sent into the provinces to inspect individual departments, and local VOG

⁹⁸ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 20.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 5.

¹⁰¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 171, l. 19.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, l. 19.

¹⁰³ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 447.

departments were expected to provide full and critical reports of their work on a yearly basis. Occasionally, managers were required to travel to Moscow in person to answer questions and account for their actions. The inspections were often incomplete: in 1944, inspections and checks of financial accountability were carried out only in 18 per cent of departments, and in 1948, reports were completed by 48 departments, partially completed by another twelve, and not completed at all by six.¹⁰⁴ Yet despite their shortcomings, the information gleaned by such inspections was enough to begin making changes.

For the most part, these changes involved the firing and appointment of cadres. The inspection of local departments made it possible to identify the weak links, and such individuals were quickly replaced. In 1946, Rakushin, a member of the Inspection Committee of the Central Directorate, was fired from his post, alongside the senior accountant Frankovskaia who was accused of ‘using her service position for mercenary ends’. Over the course of the year, 74 chairmen of *oblast’* and *krai* departments of VOG were relieved of their positions.¹⁰⁵ Their replacements tended to be deaf workers with a higher education and experience of industry and management. For example, a number of late-deafened graduates of the VTsSPS Higher School of Professional Activity (*Vyshiaia shkola profdvizheniia*) found senior management jobs in VOG during the war and post-war period, including P. K. Sutiagin, who became manager of the Moscow VOG UPM, and G. M Lukinkykh, who became chairman of the Moscow City department of VOG.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, during this period, VOG began to pay increasing attention to the training of cadres, through central and local courses: at the IV VOG Congress, the presidium announced the organisation of courses to train (and re-train) chairmen and instructors for republican departments of VOG, alongside the directors of large clubs and translators.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 76, l. 5 and d. 171, l. 4.

¹⁰⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 29.

¹⁰⁶ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 160.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161. Mark Smith also refers to the emergence of a new generation of bureaucrats in this period: ‘Technocratic cadres were becoming more effective and more deeply embedded in the governing order, and their numbers included some who were more outward looking, more anxious to solve social problems, and better equipped to find technically feasible solutions’. Mark Smith, *Property of Communists*, p. 28.

This was not just a case of reasserting control, however. As VOG began to turn its attention to questions of financial management and the UPPs, the demands it made of its cadres began to change. The wholesale turnover of VOG workers following the war was thus not merely a means to weed out incompetence, but a chance to bring about a ‘changing of the guard’ which would usher in a new era in the life of the Society.¹⁰⁸ According to Palennyi, the desire of the ‘young guard’ to take over the reins of the society was far from hidden, as was their contempt for the working practices of the ‘old guard’: in the post-war period, A. I. Iampolskii, one of the new cadres in the Central Directorate, pointedly refused to work with the chairman, P. A. Savel’ev.¹⁰⁹ In 1949, at a meeting of the Presidium of the Central Directorate, this shift reached its zenith, with the replacement of Savel’ev, the founding chairman of VOG, by Pavel Kirillovich Sutiagin.

Sutiagin was born in Cherkassiiia, in the Kiev *guberniia* of Ukraine, in 1906. At the age of 22, after an incomplete middle school education and a brief period working in the mines in Stalinsk, Sutiagin fell ill with meningitis and completely lost his hearing. He chose to continue his education in the Kiev *tekhnikum* of the Ukrainian Narkomsobes, before finding himself a position as the deputy chairman of the Stalinsk organisation of deaf-mutes and, simultaneously, the director of an evening school for deaf-mute adults. Sent to Moscow to study at the VTsSPS Higher School of Professional Activity in 1934, Sutiagin would later serve five years as an instructor to the Union of Workers of Mid-Sized Machine-Building. During the war, he helped to build defensive structures in the Leninsk district, and then returned to Moscow in 1942 to re-establish VOG’s UPM No. 1 in the city.¹¹⁰ At the sole wartime plenum of the Central Directorate, held from 21st – 23rd September 1943, he was elected as a member of the Presidium.¹¹¹ On 25th May 1949, Savel’ev was relieved of his position as chairman ‘for reasons of health’, and Sutiagin was elected by the presidium to replace him.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Palennyi uses the phrase ‘changing of the guard’ somewhat ironically; he sees the change of leadership as more of a coup d’etat: ‘Pavel Alekseevich [Savel’ev] was in no hurry to retire – he was, as they say “given the push”...’ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 489.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 570.

¹¹¹ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 20.

¹¹² Ibid. p. 22; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 171, l. 2.

Sutiagin's record was not spotless, however. In the early 1930s, just after he had joined VOG, he had been sent as a representative of the Society to assist with the sowing campaign in the Donbas region. During that time, a number of cows died of suspected poisoning, and Sutiagin, alongside the chairman of the *oblast*' department of VOG, was charged. According to Sutiagin, 'the court found nothing incriminating [*otiatgchaiushchii*]', but the pair was nonetheless sentenced to two years' probation.¹¹³ Sutiagin had made full disclosure of this fact upon his entry into the Communist Party, yet questions continued to be raised by members of VOG. At a meeting of the party group at the V Congress of VOG, the first congress to be held after Sutiagin had been elected as chairman, a 'voice from the hall' demanded: 'I would like to hear comrade Sutiagin explain how he was fired from his work in Krasnodarsk *krai*, about his work in the L'vov *oblast*.'¹¹⁴ Sutiagin, however, was unrepentant: 'I will write it everywhere: I was not found guilty. The Supreme Soviet has explained the matter in full.' His defence found support from others in the party group: another 'voice from the hall' added that, 'I am a living witness, I worked with him, I know that he was acquitted.'¹¹⁵ This explanation appeared to be sufficient for the party group, and no further questions were asked.¹¹⁶

Despite this controversy, Sutiagin had established a reputation as a man of authority and managerial experience by the time of his appointment. His sign name gave some indication of this reputation: whilst his original sign name signified 'shoulder belt' (*portupeia*), within a short time of his assuming his new role, the sign had morphed into a gesture meaning 'the general'.¹¹⁷ This authority was manifest in his actions as VOG chairman. In his first year in the post, he increased the activity of the Presidium of the Central Directorate, which began to meet four times per month to discuss questions of planning, with particular emphasis placed on raising the 'executive discipline' (*ispolnitel'skaia distsiplina*) of the organisation. In 1949, 39

¹¹³ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 217, l. 69. The blaming of outside officials for poor harvests and the loss of livestock appears to have been a commonplace of the collectivization period: Sheila Fitzpatrick describes two similar cases from 1937, in which 'officials in raions with heavy livestock losses were accused of intentionally infecting animals with diseases'. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York, 1994), pp. 306-307.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 59.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, l. 69.

¹¹⁶ The case was to come up again, however, when Sutiagin was ousted as VOG chairman in 1971 (see chapter 5).

¹¹⁷ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 490.

local organisations, including UPMs, clubs, and departments of VOG gave reports to the Central Directorate, and two departments of Minpros gave speeches on their work with deaf children and adults.¹¹⁸ Work on the cultural education of VOG members was improved: on the initiative of the Central Directorate, republican meetings of club managers were held throughout 1949, and the Committee for the Affairs of Cultural-Enlightenment Establishments within the Soviet of Ministers of the RSFSR began to offer methodological help to club workers. Political education work was also developed, with the number of political speeches and reports increasing by 50 per cent between 1949 and 1950.¹¹⁹

By the V Congress of VOG, held in Moscow between 30th July and 2nd August 1951, Sutiagin was able to announce that significant reforms to VOG's organisational structures had been carried out. The census of deaf people was completed, the number of VOG members had risen to 61,000, and the number of primary organisations had reached 1,740.¹²⁰ In response to the demands of Minsobes, the management of VOG at all levels had been made accountable to its members; elections were held across the VOG departments in 1950, and closer inspection of work from the centre allowed unsatisfactory workers to be called to account.¹²¹ In this way, Sutiagin argued, the 'collegial nature' (*kollegial'nost'*) of VOG work had been re-established.¹²² There was much still to be done, however. VOG membership had not reached the Minsobes target of 70 per cent of all deaf people, standing at only 66.2 per cent overall, and only reaching 36 per cent in the countryside.¹²³ Work in the countryside remained unsatisfactory, and the 2,465 rally conferences held over the four year period between congresses was considered far from sufficient. The Congress also noted the need to reform the work of the UPMs, to establish norms of work and to refurbish and mechanise the workshops.¹²⁴ Yet in the two years since his appointment, Sutiagin's reforms had already strengthened the VOG apparatus to a significant degree.

¹¹⁸ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 23.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹²⁰ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 492.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 492.

¹²² Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 24.

¹²³ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 492.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

The VOG that was re-established after the war, therefore, was qualitatively different to the Society that had been destroyed by the conflict. A stronger, more disciplined organisation, staffed by educated, managerially trained cadres, it was able to provide services to deaf individuals that went beyond the work placement and training of the 1930s. The expanded network of UPMs provided funds, not only to support the material needs of society members, but also to improve the cultural and educational functions of the Society, including the capital building of workshops, clubs and dormitories. The extension of VOG's ambitions, and capabilities, of providing 'all round service' to deaf people were such that, by the beginning of the 1950s, VOG was in a position to take sole charge of the service and care of Soviet deaf individuals. The VTsSPS Section for Work amongst Deaf-Mutes, engaged for so long in a struggle for power with VOG, was finally liquidated in 1954. According to A. Ia. Iampolskii, a member of the Central Directorate of VOG, the Sector was abolished 'because in its work it virtually copied the Central Directorate of VOG, it dealt with the same questions that are reflected in the VOG Charter and which are dealt with by the Central Directorate itself in its everyday work'. In the future, he pointed out, 'the Central Directorate itself will address the management of VTsSPS without middlemen, and, consequently, no-one will contest the opinion of the Central Directorate of VOG'.¹²⁵

The Great Patriotic War, in its widespread destruction, had thus proved paradoxically constructive for VOG as a social institution. By the early 1950s, the Society had established itself as the sole provider of social welfare services, basic training and cultural activities for deaf people. Yet despite its increased status, VOG's activities still did not involve large sections of the deaf population. As an organisation with voluntary (and paid) membership, the society was dependent on the desire of deaf individuals to engage with VOG. Furthermore, VOG was an organisation of adults: membership was only open to deaf people once they reached the age of fourteen and entered the world of work. For deaf children, integration into Soviet life was carried out through the network of schools for the deaf established and run by the Ministry of Education (Minpros), a network that had been similarly destroyed by the conflict. The 'reconstruction and reinvention' of VOG in the

¹²⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 309, l. 72.

aftermath of war was thus paralleled by a reconstruction and reinvention of this school network, one which called into question the very nature of deafness and its treatment by the state.

Rethinking Deaf Education

The Great Patriotic War had a devastating effect on the Soviet network of schools for the deaf. The contingent of schoolchildren was broken up by the conflict: some pupils from schools in areas threatened by the German invasion were sent home to their parents for evacuation, but in many cases, whole classes of children were evacuated together to the east.¹²⁶ Attempts to continue their education in new locations often proved difficult. In 1941, a group of 86 schoolchildren were evacuated from Leningrad to Iaroslavl *oblast'*, where they were housed temporarily in the Stalin summer camp in Tashchikha, a location without winter lodgings and unsuitable for establishing a school.¹²⁷ In addition, the dire need for workers in war industries forced groups of older schoolchildren to forgo their education and transfer to factories in the Urals, learning the necessary skills on the job: in 1942, for example, a group of 53 deaf pioneers and *komsomol'tsy* from Leningrad were taken by their teacher, Lidiia Sis'ko, to work in the factories of Zlatoust.¹²⁸ As a result, of the 28,100 deaf children in school in 1941, only 7,600 remained in education by 1943.¹²⁹ With the dispersal of their pupils, the need for deaf teachers similarly evaporated: in schools under the authority of the Leningrad Institute of Hearing and Speech, the 45 teachers and 35 care staff (*vospitateli*) who remained after the evacuation of their pupils were fired on 1st September 1941.¹³⁰

Reconstruction of this decimated school network began before the conflict had ended. As in the case of invalid veterans, the war had provoked a rise in the status of education in general, and of special education in particular. An editorial in *Pravda* in March 1942 had declared that 'however preoccupied we may be by war, concern for

¹²⁶ GARF, f. R-2306, op. 75, d. 2557, l. 1.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Kulikovskikh, 'Deti voennogo tyla', p. 8.

¹²⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 19.

¹³⁰ GARF, f. R-2306, op. 75, d. 2557, l. 1.

children and for their education remains one of our chief tasks'.¹³¹ As the war progressed, therefore, the Soviet state took action, not only to restore, but also to widen the scope of Soviet education. On 30th July 1942, Sovnarkom passed a decree which made it compulsory for every child to attend school until the age of 14, a concept commonly referred to as *vseobuch* (*vseobshchee obuchenie*, or universal education).¹³² On 11th August 1944, universal education was extended to the deaf in a decree of the Soviet of People's Deputies of the RSFSR, 'On the restoration of the network of special schools for deaf and blind children', which set out the plan and targets for the reopening of schools in the newly-liberated regions. The concept of *vseobuch* formed a central part of this decree: not only was the deaf school network to be restored, but all deaf children over the age of seven were expected to attend a special school.¹³³

The increased priority given to the education of deaf children was not immediately translated into reality, however. In September 1944, a meeting of directors of special schools from areas previously under Nazi occupation noted that, although a number of schools had again opened their doors, the Sovnarkom decree was 'being fulfilled unsatisfactorily'.¹³⁴ Unsurprisingly, in the aftermath of war, the restoration of deaf schools was ad-hoc and fraught with difficulty. Many school buildings had been destroyed, and those that had been commandeered by state bodies during the war were often difficult to get back, as was the case for two schools in the Gor'kii *oblast'* and another three in the Krasnoiarsk *krai*.¹³⁵ Thanks to the displacement of pupils and teachers and the sharp drop in the number of deaf children in school, many schools were only able to re-open by combining their classes and teaching all age-groups together. For example, at the Biisk school for the deaf in the Altai *krai*, only five of the original sixty pupils remained and were taught in one combined class.¹³⁶

¹³¹ 'Vospitanie detei v usloviiax voiny', editorial in *Pravda*, 24th March 1942, p. 1.

¹³² Rasporiazheniia Sovnarkoma SSSR 'O vovlechenii v shkoly vseh detei shkol'nogo vozrasta i ispol'sovanii shkol'nykh zdaniu po naznacheniiu', 30th July 1942, in *Direktivy VKP(b) i postanovleniia sovetskogo pravitel'stva o narodnom obrazovanii: sbornik dokumentov za 1917-1947 gg.*, Tom I, ed. V. Z. Smirnov (Moscow, 1947), p. 111.

¹³³ GARF, f. R-2306, op. 75, d. 2616, l. 1.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 154, l. 15.

¹³⁶ GARF, f. R-2306, op. 75, d. 2719, l. 1.

Many schools were simply not reopened: in 1947, only 25 of the 49 schools for the deaf and hard-of-hearing in the occupied territories had been re-established.¹³⁷

This chaotic state of affairs was vigorously challenged by state organs and VOG. The meeting of special school directors of September 1944 elaborated both the problems facing the system of deaf education, and the steps needed to resolve them. The establishment of new schools in liberated areas was a central priority, followed by the extension of control by Narkompros on schools themselves, the improvement of teaching quality, and the equipment of schools with textbooks, writing equipment, clothes and shoes.¹³⁸ VOG took a central role in pushing local state bodies to fulfil these tasks: the Society was instrumental in persuading local committees of Sovnarkom to establish schools for the deaf in Moscow, Briansk, Smolensk and Voronezh *oblast'*.¹³⁹ Progress was slow, but by 1949, VOG could announce that 18,646 deaf children attended a special school for the deaf, a number representing 66 per cent of the pre-war level.¹⁴⁰ The post-war period did not merely see the re-establishment of deaf schools, however. As in many areas of Soviet life, the crisis of war provided an opportunity, not merely to reconstruct what had gone before, but to rethink the system of deaf education.

Soviet deaf education had undergone a complex process of theoretical development since 1917. In the immediate post-revolutionary years, in light of the hardships of the Civil War, few attempts were made to alter fundamentally the system of deaf education that had existed during the tsarist period. On 10th December 1919, however, Sovnarkom published a decree, signed by Lenin, that subsumed the education of deaf, blind, deaf-blind and physically disabled children into the system of People's Education (*narodnoe obrazovanie*).¹⁴¹ This decree, which tied deaf education into the state system and made it subject to the broader ideological and theoretical trends in Soviet education, was followed by a series of congresses which placed the education of deaf children centre stage: the All-Russian Congress of Workers in the Fight against Child Defectiveness in 1920, the All-Russian

¹³⁷ Ibid., l. 1-6.

¹³⁸ GARF, f. R-2306, op. 75, d. 2616, l. 3-5.

¹³⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 154, l. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., l. 15.

¹⁴¹ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 174.

Conference of Surdopedagogues in 1921, and the All-Russian Conference on the Social and Legal Protection of Minors (SPON) in 1924.¹⁴²

These congresses saw the emergence, both of the fundamental tenets of Soviet deaf educational theory, and of its principal theorist, the young child psychologist Lev Semenovich Vygotskii. Born in Belorussia in 1896, Vygotskii had graduated in law from Moscow University in 1917. His intellectual interests were not confined to the law, however: after teaching literature and history of art in the early 1920s, he ‘broke onto the academic scene’ in 1924, delivering a paper on consciousness at the Second All-Russian Psycho-Neurological Congress in Leningrad.¹⁴³ On the basis of this speech, Vygotskii was invited to join the Institute of Psychology in Moscow, newly under the direction of the Marxist psychologist K. N. Kornilov. Within the Institute, he established a Laboratory for the Study of Abnormal (*Anomal’noe*) Childhood, which by 1929 became the Experimental Defectological Institute under Narkompros. He also began publishing a scientific journal, *Voprosy defektologii* (*Questions of Defectology*). From this position, the young ‘revolutionary of early Soviet psychology’ set about reforming the Soviet system of special education.¹⁴⁴

Vygotskii’s theory of deaf education stemmed from the premise that ‘every physical lack – be it blindness, deafness or congenital weak-mindedness – does not only change the relationship of a person to the world, but first and foremost affects his relationships with people’.¹⁴⁵ In contrast to previous studies of child defectiveness, which saw physical defect as a purely medical problem – ‘blindness signified simply a lack of sight, deafness, a lack of hearing’ – Vygotskii viewed physical defect as primarily a social issue.¹⁴⁶ This idea borrowed strongly from Marxist theories of the material development of individual consciousness: ‘it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their

¹⁴² A. I. D’iachkov, *Sistemy obucheniia glukhikh detei* (Moscow, 1961), p. 195.

¹⁴³ For a fuller description of Vygotskii’s academic trajectory, see William O. McCagg, ‘The Origins of Defectology’, in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, ed. William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum (Pittsburgh, 1989), (39-62) pp. 51-52.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴⁵ Vygotskii, ‘K psikhologii’, p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

consciousness.’¹⁴⁷ By perceiving and analysing the world around him, the ‘normal’ child could orientate himself towards his surrounding, and develop ‘consciousness and self-consciousness’ through interaction with his peers.¹⁴⁸ Hearing loss, by directly preventing communication and interaction, ‘isolated a person from all interaction with people. It deprived him of speech, it cut him off from social experience.’¹⁴⁹ In this respect, for Vygotskii, deafness represented the most ‘tragic’ of disabilities, because it deprived the individual of the means of mental development: communication and speech.

In Vygotskii’s view, therefore, the problem posed by deafness did not lie in the physical fact of hearing loss. Rather, the consequent inability of deaf individuals to master speech and communicate with their peers prevented their mental development.¹⁵⁰ Deaf education, whilst it could not return hearing to a deaf child, could restore that deaf child to a normal life by providing him with alternate ‘paths’ to perception and communication.¹⁵¹ On the basis of this premise, the Soviet system of deaf education could be elaborated. Yet, although the necessity of returning communicative function to a deaf child was not disputed, the means by which to achieve this end were subject to intense debate. Even within Vygotskii’s own theory, the question remained unresolved. The German theory of ‘pure oralism’, that is, of teaching a deaf child to communicate solely through oral speech, using a combination of lip-reading and learned pronunciation, was definitively rejected. Pure oralism, Vygotskii argued, contradicted the ‘nature’ of deaf individuals to communicate through visual signs, and could thus be only instilled in deaf children through ‘cruelty’: ‘it is necessary to break the nature of the child in order to teach him speech.’¹⁵² Similarly, the ‘pure oral’ method concentrated on mechanically teaching the techniques of pronunciation, rather than emphasising speech as a communicative act. Yet the two other means of deaf communication, the ‘natural’

¹⁴⁷ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaia and ed. Maurice Dobb (London, 1971), p. 21.

¹⁴⁸ Vygotskii, ‘K psikhologii’, p. 24.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁵⁰ For more on the influence of society on the mental development of children, see L. S. Vygotskii, ‘The Collective as a Factor in the Development of the Abnormal Child’, in L. S. Vygotsky, *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky, Volume 2: The Fundamentals of Defectology (abnormal psychology and learning disabilities)*, (New York, 1993), p. 199.

¹⁵¹ Vygotskii, ‘K psikhologii’, p. 9.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

language of gestures (sign language) or the ‘artificial’ language of gestures (finger-spelling or ‘dactylology’) were considered equally unsuitable. Sign language was viewed as a ‘poor and limited’ language, capable of expressing only concrete or literal concepts: ‘sign language often degenerates in to jargon.’¹⁵³ At the same time, sign was seen to isolate artificially the deaf individual ‘in a narrow and intimate little world of the small group of people who know this primitive language’.¹⁵⁴ Finger-spelling, or ‘writing in the air’, on the other hand, was useful as a means of teaching literacy, but had no intrinsic communicative value.¹⁵⁵ Soviet pedagogues were thus faced with the question of how to instil speech, a necessary tool of both communication and ‘consciousness’, in individuals for whom it was ‘unnatural’.

The early 1920s, therefore, was a time of experimentation, when Soviet pedagogues attempted to establish means to teach oral speech to young deaf individuals. At the SPON conference in 1924, after the presentation of several research papers and some spirited debate, the fundamental concepts of deaf education were agreed upon. Deaf children, it was established, should attend pre-school establishments from the age of two, and be transferred to primary school (*nachal'naia shkola*) at the age of six.¹⁵⁶ Such schools should be *internaty*, or boarding schools, taking children from the surrounding *oblast'*.¹⁵⁷ Whilst introducing deaf children to the usual range of ‘general-educational subjects’, such as reading, writing and arithmetic, the central purpose of deaf education should be to instil oral speech through a combination of lip-reading skills, the use of dictionaries to widen vocabulary, and the teaching of logic and grammar.¹⁵⁸ The theorist F. A. Rau also advocated the simultaneous use of oral pronunciation and finger-spelling to aid the learning of words, drawing on the

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵⁶ N. M. Lagovskii, ‘Tipy uchrezhdenii dlia glukhonemykh’, in *Materialy ko vtoromu vserossiiskomu s"ezdu sotsial'no pravovoi okhrany detei i podrostkov i detskikh domov, 26-go Noiabria 1924g*, ed. L. P. Svirskii (Moscow, 1925), p. 93.

¹⁵⁷ Initially, deaf schools fell under the administrative umbrella of the *detdomy*, or children’s homes. They were transferred to Narkompros on 23rd November 1926. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 176.

¹⁵⁸ P. I. Chirkin, ‘Kompleksnoe prokhozhenie bukvaria, nabliudeniia nad formami rechi, upotrebleniia fraz, uskorenogo navyka v analiticheskom i sinteticheskom chtenii s gub, putem zapisi poslednego i primeneniia v summarnykh samostoitel'nykh rabotakh uchashchikhsia’, in *Materialy*, ed. Svirskii, (102-105) p. 103; D'iachkov, *Sistemy obucheniia*, p. 196.

work of the Danish pedagogue Forchhammer.¹⁵⁹ Yet whilst oral speech was the central goal, it should not be learned as an isolated skill, but rather ‘linked to life’. Deaf children should be encouraged to learn practical household and labour skills and then to conceptualise those skills through oral speech.¹⁶⁰ As Vygotskii argued, ‘it is necessary to organise a child’s life such that speech is necessary and interesting to him, and sign language is unnecessary and uninteresting.’¹⁶¹ Only in this manner would oral speech cease to be an abstract skill and become a communicative tool in the fullest sense.¹⁶²

Soviet pedagogues thus envisaged a form of deaf education that prioritised oral speech, but sought to link it intrinsically to the process of child development and education. By learning to communicate with the world around them, deaf children would be able to ‘overcome’ their disability and become educated, conscious members of the Soviet collective. In order to achieve this end, it was further necessary to be aware of the full extent of an individual child’s deafness and to tailor their education accordingly. In the report detailing the conclusions of the SPON conference, an abstract on the ‘types of establishment for deaf-mutes’ stressed the need for ‘differentiation’ in deaf education: ‘For the correct organisation of the educational business (*uchebno-vospitatel’noe delo*) of deaf-mutes, it is necessary, before the admission of the child to school, to examine them, with the purpose of establishing their educational abilities and placing them in the right type of school.’¹⁶³ Schools for the deaf, it was argued, should be divided into five types: schools for deaf-mute children, for late-deafened children with some remnants of speech, for hard-of-hearing (*tugoukhie*) children, for mentally backward (*umstvenno-otstalye*) deaf children, and for deaf children too old for normal school.¹⁶⁴ This

¹⁵⁹ Forchhammer’s theory of the ‘Mundhandsystem’, in which a child accompanies each spoken word with an equivalent gesture, was said to help eliminate the natural errors experienced by deaf children when reading lips. F. A. Rau, ‘O manoral’noi sisteme Forkhgammera’, in *Materialy*, ed. Svirskii, (106-107) p. 107.

¹⁶⁰ At the II Moscow Institute of Deaf-Mutes, for example, children were encouraged to ‘serve themselves’, with older children helping the younger to fulfil basic household tasks. V. M. Tkachenko, ‘Opyt raboty II Moskovskogo institut glukhonemykh po organizatsii detskoii sredy’, in *Materialy*, ed. Svirskii, (93-94) p. 94.

¹⁶¹ Vygotskii ‘K psikhologii’, p. 26.

¹⁶² Many of these communal activities were common to both deaf and hearing schools: see Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven, 2007), pp. 495-569.

¹⁶³ Lagovskii, ‘Tipy uchrezhdenii’, p. 93.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

differentiation would be the cornerstone of Soviet deaf education, enabling teachers to tailor their classes to the abilities of their pupils, and thus making it easier for deaf children to learn.

This, then, represented the ideal of Soviet deaf education as envisaged in the mid-1920s. By the late 1930s, however, it had become clear that this ideal was not being realised. Whilst the contingent of schoolchildren had grown exponentially, the introduction of new educational methods was confined to the cities of Moscow and Leningrad. According to a history of this period, written by the director of the Institute of Defectology, A. I. D'iachkov, in 1961, the majority of teachers continued to believe that their only goal was to teach deaf children to pronounce their words correctly. As a result, 'the formation of other forms of speech (written speech, dactylogy) was ignored, and the life and activity of deaf pupils was run in fact on the basis of sign-and-gesture [*mimiko-zhestikuliatornye*] forms of communication.'¹⁶⁵ Without developed oral speech or adequate literacy, deaf children were unable to study more complex subjects: 'the system of study did not allow for their language development, necessary for mastering knowledge [...]. The lack of appropriate knowledge in arithmetic and science did not create favourable conditions for the study of physics, chemistry and other academic subjects.' In 1932, a new plan of study was introduced, which placed emphasis on increasing the knowledge base of deaf pupils and the amount of time spent training them for skilled industrial labour. Yet again, these reforms were barely put into practice.¹⁶⁶ By the late 1930s, the assessment of the education of deaf children was scathing. At a meeting of deaf education workers from Narkompros, Narkomsobes and VOG, held in Moscow in 1938, a certain Ivanova asked desperately: 'How can you talk of the progress of deaf mutes, when pupils of Narkompros institutes graduate illiterate? [...] [The teachers] have no methodology, no education. There are no textbooks. They teach as if they came from tsarist times.'¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ D'iachkov, *Sistemy obucheniia*, p. 203.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-205.

¹⁶⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 45, ll. 27 ob.-28 ob. Other historians of Soviet education have noted the disjunction between progressive theory and traditional practices in the 1920s: Larry Holmes writes that 'Narkompros's curriculum infrequently transcended the paper on which it was written. Narkompros might transform policy; it could not so readily control what transpired in the school. In primary and secondary schools throughout the Republic, teachers continued to teach and students continued to learn by means of the familiar cycle of dictation, memorization, and drill'. Larry E.

The lack of development in deaf education was not simply a matter of organisational mismanagement. The 1930s had witnessed a sea change in Soviet educational theory that effectively curtailed the development of deaf education. The notion of the testing and ‘differentiation’ of deaf children, a cornerstone of deaf educational theory of the 1920s, had formed part of a broader trend in Soviet pedagogy known as ‘pedology’ (*pedologiya*), or the diagnosis of developmental abnormalities in children. The theory of pedology stemmed from Vygotskii’s notion that physical abnormality caused problems of mental development. However, in practice, pedology essentially reversed this notion, using developmental abnormalities in apparently healthy schoolchildren to diagnose assumed physical defects. In the 1920s and early 1930s, throughout the Soviet education system, a complex system of intelligence testing had been elaborated, which sought to identify children with developmental problems and diagnose the physical cause behind it. This tendency to pathologise developmental problems had grown exponentially throughout the 1920s: often, children who found their schoolwork difficult, or were merely disruptive in class, were diagnosed with ‘oligophrenia’, or feeble-mindedness, and sent to special schools.¹⁶⁸ By 1926, the educational psychologist Blonskii had tested 10,000 children in Moscow alone, and by 1936, 7.8 per cent of all school children were in special schools.¹⁶⁹

This tendency to view children as pathologically and developmentally tainted contradicted the utopian Soviet notion that disability could ultimately be ‘overcome’ through education and social life, an attitude that became more dominant in the 1930s. The backlash against pedology was perhaps inevitable and unequivocally fierce. In 1930, Vygotskii was removed from his post as head of the Institute of Defectology, which was renamed the Scientific-Practical Institute of Special Schools and Children’s Homes. In 1931, the journal *Voprosy Defektologii* was shut down.¹⁷⁰

Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917-1931* (Bloomington, 1991), pp. 36-37. See also, Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 43-58.

¹⁶⁸ See Andrew Sutton, ‘Backward Children in the USSR: An Unfamiliar Approach to a Familiar Problem’, in *Home, School and Leisure in the Soviet Union*, ed. Jenny Brine, Maureen Perry and Andrew Sutton (London, 1980), (160-191) p. 176.

¹⁶⁹ McCagg, ‘The Origins of Defectology’, p. 54, and Sutton, ‘Backward Children in the USSR’, p. 164.

¹⁷⁰ Vygotskii was to die of tuberculosis in Moscow in 1934, at the age of 37. McCagg, ‘The Origins of Defectology’, p. 53.

Finally, on 4th July 1936, the Central Committee of the Communist Party published a decree, ‘On pedological perversions in the system of Narkompros’, which condemned pedological testing as a ‘false-scientific experiment’ which had led to ‘a greater and greater quantity of children being counted in the category of mentally-backward, defective and “difficult”.’¹⁷¹ This ‘anti-scientific, bourgeois’ theory, the decree asserted, perpetuated the ‘rule of the exploiting classes’ by establishing ‘the physical and mental doom of the working classes and the “lower races”.’¹⁷² Greatest scorn, however, was reserved for the ‘special’ schools to which these falsely-diagnosed, ‘talented and gifted’ children were sent: ‘As for the organisation of affairs in these “special” schools, the Central Committee of the VKP(b) acknowledges that the education and training work in them is utterly intolerable, bordering on criminal irresponsibility.’¹⁷³ As a result, ‘a great quantity of children, who in the conditions of a normal school would easily yield to correction and become active, honest and disciplined school pupils, in the conditions of a “special” school acquire bad habits (*durnye navyki*) and inclinations and become *more difficult to correct*.’¹⁷⁴

The decree against pedology had a significant impact on deaf education. It condemned the existing system of special education as ‘intolerable’ and incapable of educating disabled children ‘in the spirit of socialism’.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, its suggestions for improvement were vague and contradictory at best. The examination and testing of children for the purposes of educational differentiation was rejected as bourgeois, a ‘law of the fatalistic conditionality of the fates of children upon biological and social factors’. Yet it was unclear how deaf education should proceed in practice without such testing and differentiation. Over the next decade, this confusion was manifest in the decisions made by Narkompros. Whilst the All-Russian Congress of Surdopedagogues in 1938 discussed the means by which deaf schools could widen the scientific and practical knowledge taught to deaf children,

¹⁷¹ Postanovlenie Tsentral’nogo Komiteta VKP(b), ‘O pedologicheskikh izvrashcheniakh v sisteme Narkomprosov’, 4th July 1936, in *Direktivy*, ed. Smirnov, (190-193) p. 191.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 192, (*italics in the original*).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193. On the impact of the decree against pedology in the hearing classroom, see E. Thomas Ewing, ‘Restoring Teachers to their Rights: Soviet Education and the 1936 Denunciation of Pedology’, *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2001), pp. 471-493.

the individual condition of the child, such as the degree of deafness, or the presence of additional developmental problems, was ignored.¹⁷⁶ Many schools were staffed by teachers with no training or experience of deafness, as was the case in the Sverdlovsk Support School for the Deaf.¹⁷⁷ In 1940, a decree of Narkompros reintroduced the principle of differentiation in deaf education, and banned the teaching of deaf-mute, late-deafened and hard of hearing children together.¹⁷⁸ Yet the wariness toward differentiation persisted: of those schools that were not reinstated after the war, the vast majority were schools for the hard-of-hearing (many of which were subsumed into larger schools for deaf-mutes).¹⁷⁹

The period of post-war reconstruction, therefore, represented an opportunity, not merely to reconstruct the system of deaf schools, but to recover from the confusion and theoretical ambiguity that had resulted from the political struggles of the 1930s. In 1946, a new ‘Position on Schools for Deaf-Mute Children’ was published, which set out the basic goals of Soviet deaf education. The purpose of Soviet education, it declared, was to ‘give pupils a general education and professional-labour training’ and to ‘teach children distinct oral speech that is comprehensible to those around them’.¹⁸⁰ The mastering of knowledge and speech skills was to emerge from the ‘activity’ and ‘independence’ (*samostoiatel’nost’*) of the child, and the linking of knowledge to life.¹⁸¹ From the age of twelve, pupils were to be trained in a particular labour skill at the UPM attached to the school.¹⁸² In contrast to the pre-war period, teachers were expected to have either a qualification in defectology or a general qualification in pedagogy and at least five years of experience of teaching.¹⁸³

The ‘Position’ of 1946 thus focused on broad goals and administrative practice. In the years following the war, however, the theory of deaf education was opened up to renewed and intense debate, in the form of a protracted and bitter argument between

¹⁷⁶ D’iachkov, *Sistemy obucheniia*, p. 210.

¹⁷⁷ V. M. Bel’gus, ‘Sverdlovskaiia shkola za piat’desiat let’, in *Sverdlovskaiia opornaia shkola dlia glukhikh detei*, ed. S. A. Zykov (Sverdlovsk, 1970), (9-19) p. 12.

¹⁷⁸ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 206, l. 174.

¹⁷⁹ GARF, f. R-2306, op. 75, d. 2719, ll. 5-6.

¹⁸⁰ GARF, f. R-2306, op. 75, d. 2656, l. 40.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, l. 41.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, l. 42.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, l. 46.

Moscow's Institute of Defectology, under D. I. Azbukin, and Leningrad's Institute of Special Schools (previously the Institute of Hearing and Speech), under M. L. Shklovskii. This argument is documented in two files, both running to several hundred pages, in the archive of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. During the late 1930s and immediately after the war, Shklovskii and the staff of the Institute of Special Schools had been conducting a pedagogical experiment, in which deaf children with some remnants of hearing were trained to use that hearing. Shklovskii worked from the premise that the lack of differentiation in Soviet deaf schools caused children who were not totally deaf, and who thus had the latent ability to learn to hear and speak, to become 'deaf-mute in practice' (*prakticheskie glukhonemye*) by interacting solely with other deaf-mute children and allowing their hearing skills to atrophy. Shklovskii made a study of 3,337 children in schools for deaf-mutes in the Leningrad and Kalinin region, and determined that of those, 1,159 had some degree of residual hearing, and a further 191 could be classified as hard of hearing.¹⁸⁴ These children, argued Shklovskii, could be taught to use their limited hearing with the assistance of hearing aids and to learn to communicate through oral speech, in which case, they would 'not be deaf-mute and should not be taught in schools for deaf-mutes'.¹⁸⁵

For Shklovskii, therefore, the central question in the education of deaf mutes was 'WHO IS CONSIDERED A DEAF-MUTE?'¹⁸⁶ In his theoretical work, he placed himself in opposition to F. A. Rau, a German immigrant and leading figure in late tsarist and early Soviet deaf education. In the *Large Medical Encyclopaedia*, the entry on 'deaf-mutes', written by Rau, considered the following people to be deaf-mute: those deaf from birth or deafened before the age of one; those deafened before the age of 6 and who have subsequently lost what little speech they had learned, those deafened in their early teens who retained limited speech, aphasics with normal hearing who cannot speak, and those 'who before were deaf-mute, but thanks to special education have learned to speak'.¹⁸⁷ According to Rau, any child who could not 'spontaneously' master oral speech, without the assistance of a pedagogue,

¹⁸⁴ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 206, l. 30.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 29 (emphasis in original).

¹⁸⁷ Cited in RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 206, ll. 5-6.

should be considered deaf-mute. Yet for Shklovskii, this lumping-together of individuals with varied capacity for speech artificially prevented them from overcoming their defect and becoming ‘speaking’ individuals. His experiments sought to separate children out on the basis of their level of speech perception and to teach them accordingly, with the goal, for those whose speech abilities allowed it, to transfer them to normal school in the shortest possible time.¹⁸⁸

From the late-1930s, therefore, Shklovskii sought to persuade Narkompros and the Institute of Defectology of the merits of his research. Members of the Institute of Defectology remained unmoved, however, refusing to accept that a new administrative category of ‘deaf-mutes with residual hearing’ was necessary, or that deaf children who mastered speech could be transferred to a mainstream school.¹⁸⁹ In their reaction to Shklovskii’s theory, members of the Institute seized on a peripheral part of his theory: that the inability of some deaf children to master speech was not necessarily the result of a lack of hearing, but due to other physiological defects affecting their speech.¹⁹⁰ This view had been articulated in a paper to the Presidium of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences (APN) in April 1948, and was violently rejected by its vice-president, B. P. Orlov. In a letter to Shklovskii, he made clear that the work of the Institute of Special Schools ‘contradicted the fundamental principles of Soviet pedagogy’.¹⁹¹ Later in that year, according to Shklovskii, the Institute of Defectology, informed Minpros that they refused to engage with the Institute of Special Schools: ‘if they receive something unpleasant from them [relating to Shklovskii’s theory], the Institute of Defectology will not reply, having warned the Ministry in good time.’¹⁹²

By 1949, therefore, the battle lines were drawn, and the argument soon spilled over into the public arena. On 15th January, an article appeared in the bi-monthly journal *Literaturnaia gazeta*, in which V. Krizhanskii and I. Iurevich, two proponents of Shklovskii’s theory, set out his principle arguments and lambasted his ideological opponent, Professor Rau. Entitled ‘The Secret Island’, the article stated that Rau, a

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., l. 12.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., l. 17.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., l. 18.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., l. 22.

¹⁹² Ibid., l. 30.

German theorist of the ‘Fatter school’, had imported the ‘reactionary views’ of his teachers into the Soviet Union.¹⁹³ Followers of the ‘German’ theory, it was argued, ‘indiscriminately place all children with any hearing disorder in the category of deaf-mute, and declare that the hearing they do possess has no social, practical significance.’ On the basis of this theory, and in opposition to the decrees of Narkompros, a ‘secret island’ of undifferentiated schools for deaf-mutes had been established in the RSFSR, ‘to which all children with even insignificant hearing and speech disorders are indiscriminately sent’: of the 176 special schools in the RSFSR, only four catered for hard-of-hearing children. In these schools, children ‘were instructed according to a muddled programme which gave them scraps of primitive knowledge and ideas’. The progressive legacy of Russian surdopedagogues such as Gurtsov and Fleri, who advocated differentiating deaf education and giving deaf children a broad education on the same level as hearing children, was ‘constantly belittled and falsified by F. A. Rau and his followers’. Through his tenacious hold on Soviet deaf education, the article asserted, Rau and his colleagues thus ‘doomed [deaf children] to a life of deaf-mutism’.¹⁹⁴

‘The Secret Island’ thus framed the argument between the Leningrad and the Moscow Institutes as a fight between progressive, Soviet ideas and reactionary, ‘bourgeois’ theories. Three years after the conclusion of the Great Patriotic War, the repeated, pejorative use of the word ‘German’ was clearly designed to stir the sympathies of the reader. According to a later editorial in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, the article provoked an overwhelming response. P. I. Bragin, the chairman of the Kamyshin branch of VOG, wrote: ‘I read with great attention the article “The Secret Island”, which correctly exposed the reactionary theory of education in schools for deaf-mutes. We, the Soviet people, await the renewal of our school on the basis of a new theory of surdopedagogy.’ Liudmila Kondrat’eva, from Leningrad, wrote that ‘for ten years I was considered deaf-mute. Now I can’t believe that [that term] applied to me. I was taught to hear and speak. I was transferred from the special

¹⁹³ V. Krizhanskii and I. Iurevich, ‘Tainstvennyi ostrov’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 15th January 1949, p. 3. The article indicates that ‘Fatter’ was the surname of a German pedagogue with whom Rau studied before coming to Russia. Perhaps intentionally, however, the name evokes the German words ‘vater’ (father) and ‘Vaterland’ (Fatherland), and could not but remind readers of the horrors of the Nazi invasion.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

school to a mainstream [*massovaia*] school.’ Likewise, F. Miroshnaia, a mother from Leningrad, wrote: ‘They gave hearing and speech back to my child, whom the doctors had doomed to deaf-muteness!’ ‘What scientific squabbles could be more convincing than such agitated words!’, the editorial concluded.¹⁹⁵

The Institute of Defectology was not slow to respond, however. Ten days after ‘The Secret Island’ was published, the journal *Meditsinskii rabotnik* (The Medical Worker) published an answering article. Written jointly by Professors V. Preobrazhenskii, A. Luriia and O. Ageeva-Maikova, the article, entitled ‘A Militant Pseudo-Innovator and his Henchmen’, hit back against Shklovskii and passionately defended Rau. Rau, the authors asserted, had at no point argued against differentiation, and ‘was himself one of the authors of a project for a differentiated network of special institutions’. By repeating this slander, they argued, the ‘zealous and ignorant satellites of Shklovskii cynically distort the truth’: ‘Who needs this patent lie? Who benefits by this slander of an honourable Soviet scholar who has helped thousands of people to become able-bodied workers and citizens of the socialist country?’ Preobrazhenskii and his colleagues did not deny that ‘the organisation of work with deaf-mutes is in poor condition.’ However, they insisted that steps were being taken, and that Shklovskii’s ‘perverse and unscientific theories’, if accepted, would lead to further disintegration of that ‘great and noble task’. Besides, they concluded, ‘it is a pity that the editorial board [of *Literaturnaia gazeta*] did not look into the essence of the question and did not concern itself with the personality of the authors, one of whom was removed from an executive position for maladministration of children’s homes.’¹⁹⁶

Shklovskii’s followers made one final effort to convince the Soviet public, in a *Literaturnaia gazeta* article of 19th February 1949. The authors pulled no punches: 35 to 40 per cent of children declared deaf-mute had considerable residual hearing, but thanks to Rau’s theories, these children remained ‘deaf in practice, and hence deaf-mutes’. Rau’s belief in the hereditary transmission of deaf-muteness, they

¹⁹⁵ ‘Ot redaktsii’, editorial in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 19th February 1949, p. 2.

¹⁹⁶ V. Preobrazhenskii, A. Luriia, O. Ageyeva-Maikova and A. Vlasov, ‘A militant pseudo-innovator and his henchmen’, *Meditsinskii rabotnik*, 26th January 1949, p. 2, translated and cited in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 1, no. 9 (1949), p. 55.

asserted, was based on Mendel's theories of inheritance, and was thus a short step away from promoting outright racism and eugenics: 'We see with particular clarity the deathly, soulless essence of Mendelianism carried into a field which is concerned with the speech of living people.' Moreover, the authors argued, the article in *Meditsinskii rabotnik* had proved that it was not just Rau who perpetuated these harmful theories, but that other senior defectologists, such as Preobrazhenskii and Luriiia, had 'also played a considerable role'.¹⁹⁷ Yet, despite this forceful rhetoric, by the spring of 1949 it had become clear that the tide had turned definitively against Shklovskii. Immediately after the publication of the first article in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, an inspection commission, headed by Professor Leont'ev and including Luriiia and other luminaries of the Institute of Defectology, was sent to inspect the work of the Institute of Special Schools.¹⁹⁸ During the course of the inspection, Shklovskii's notes were removed from the Institute and kept for several days. After the conclusion of their work, the commission informed Shklovskii that his experiment to 'lift children out of the condition of practical deaf-muteness' could 'harm pedagogical practice', and the experiment was shut down. Thus the commission, Shklovskii commented, 'thought it possible, as a result of a two-day, cursory examination of single children, to destroy with a stroke of a pen over fifteen years of pedagogical experience.'¹⁹⁹ From that point on, Shklovskii's theories, when mentioned at all, would be reduced to the notion of 'combined hearing and speech defects' and dismissed as 'false theory'.²⁰⁰

Yet whilst Shklovskii became *persona non grata* in the world of Soviet defectology, a number of his ideas had taken root in the theory of post-war deaf education. In 1948, the Institute of Defectology repudiated its existing system of differentiation, in which children were determined to be deaf or hard-of-hearing on the basis of their

¹⁹⁷ V. Kovalenko, M. Khvatsev and M. Mogilnitskii, 'Eshche raz o "Tainstvennom ostrove"', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 19th February 1949, p. 2.

¹⁹⁸ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 206, l. 32.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, l. 43.

²⁰⁰ According to a review of deaf education in 1959, 'It is only to be regretted that the ideas of M. L. Shklovskii have for so long brought confusion into the development of the field of defectology. Building on the false theory of "combined affection", he ascribed mental inferiority to hard-of-hearing and deaf children'. N. G. Morozova, 'Razvitie teorii doskol'nogo vospitaniia glukhonemykh' in *Trudy vtoroi nauchnoi sessii po defektologii*, ed. A. I. D'iachkov and V. I. Lubovskii (Moscow, 1959), (12-27), p. 15. F. A. Rau did not come out of this spat unscathed, however: he was later to be officially reprimanded for sending anonymous letters, enclosing copies of the *Meditsinskii rabotnik* article, to deaf schools. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 206, l. 41.

speech ability when entering school. Instead, the new system proposed differentiation on the basis of the level of residual hearing.²⁰¹ The use of residual hearing, with the assistance of group hearing aids, to teach deaf children to speak became a fundamental part of the Soviet deaf education system in the 1950s.²⁰² This also had the result of making the doctor's diagnosis of hearing loss a defining moment in the education, and life, of a young deaf child. Yet the most significant impact of Shklovskii's theories was the shift in terminology from 'deaf-muteness' to 'deafness'. The idea that deaf children could not learn to communicate through speech, a view which (despite Vygotskii's efforts) had persisted throughout the 1930s, was definitively rejected. The Institute of Defectology and Narkompros began to refer separately to 'deaf-mute and deaf children' from 1948, and by the late 1950s, the definition of 'deaf-mute' had ceased to be an administrative category, even disappearing from the name of VOG in 1959.²⁰³ Similarly, the view that, without speech, deaf children could not reach the same intellectual level as hearing children was dismissed in 1949 with the introduction of the first unified plan for a standard middle-school education for deaf children, which followed the same syllabus as the mainstream Soviet middle school (with the exception of foreign languages).²⁰⁴

By 1949, therefore, the squabbles amongst the different 'schools' of deaf education had been concluded, and Narkompros and the Institute of Defectology could begin the process of establishing and standardising the system of Soviet deaf education. Deaf children, according to this system, were to be diagnosed quickly at birth or after the onset of deafness and sent to an appropriate pre-school facility, from which they would progress to the eight-year standard middle school for the deaf. Whilst at school, they would be taught to speak, using their residual hearing to the fullest, and aided by hearing aid technology and the use of finger-spelling. Through oral speech, they would then go on to study the full range of academic subjects, alongside gaining labour skills in the school's workshops. Upon leaving school, they would thus have the opportunity to find a job in industry or move on to higher education in the *tekhnikumy*. Explicit in this view of deaf education was the notion that pedagogy

²⁰¹ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 206, l. 25.

²⁰² Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 182.

²⁰³ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 206, l. 24; GARF, f. A-511, predslovie k opisi 1, l. 4.

²⁰⁴ D'iachkov, *Sistemy obucheniia*, p. 212.

could ultimately be curative: whilst deaf-mute adults could work around their deafness with the aid of sign-language translation and a worker identity, pupils of Soviet deaf schools had the opportunity to fully overcome their defect, shedding their identity as ‘mute’ and becoming fully integrated into the Soviet collective.²⁰⁵

The post-war period, therefore, enabled Soviet theorists to elaborate a comprehensive system of deaf education and to take steps to put that system into practice. In a similar manner to the reforms of VOG, these steps involved the training of cadres and the enforcement of standardised methods from the centre. Soviet deaf education would undergo further changes: notably in 1960, when attempts were made to align the teaching practice of schools for the deaf with the December 1958 reforms of general education, and in 1967, when the rise in the profile of sign language amongst the deaf community would provoke educational theorists to consider new ways of conceptualising and teaching speech.²⁰⁶ Yet by 1950, the fundamental notion of what deafness represented in the Soviet context, and how it could be overcome through education, had been definitively established.

Conclusion

The post-war period saw great changes in the institutions and structures surrounding deaf people. Efforts to reconstruct the shattered infrastructure of the Soviet state provoked lasting shifts in that infrastructure, as deaf people and state bodies sought to rethink the nature of deafness and the relationship of deaf people to the state. New ideas of welfare and care became apparent: the presence of disabled veterans of war engendered a new conception of ‘service’, as deaf people began to demand welfare and benefits in compensation for their disability. Concurrently, theorists of deaf education sought to establish how deaf children could be helped to overcome their defect and become ‘healthy’, active members of the Soviet body politic. Both processes presupposed a certain passivity on the part of deaf individuals in the face

²⁰⁵ This view would be strongly held by a later chairman of VOG, Vladimir Anatol’evich Fufaev, who had studied at Moscow School No. 337 for the hard-of-hearing. In practice, however, the discrepancies between the treatment of ‘deaf-mute’ adults and ‘deaf’ children initially caused problems, with graduates of schools for the deaf having to join VOG UPMs after graduating as they had been unable to grasp labour skills without the assistance of sign language. GARF f., A-511, op. 1, d. 104, l. 26.

²⁰⁶ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 181.

of state service and care, one which would grow in significance over the subsequent decades. In addition, both processes provoked a stabilisation of the institutional structures surrounding the deaf. Over the 1940s, VOG became a stronger, more accountable and more centrally-controlled organisation, with an increasingly rich material base. Similarly, the network of special schools under Narkompros fell under stronger practical and theoretical control from the state and from the Institute of Defectology. This stabilisation laid the groundwork for the development of both institutions over the subsequent decades.

Between the declaration of victory and the beginning of the 1950s, therefore, significant changes had taken place within the deaf community. These changes were enshrined in legislation on 9th January 1952, when the Soviet of Ministers of the RSFSR published its first comprehensive decree concerning the treatment of deaf individuals, ‘On Measures in the Fight against Deafness and Deaf-Muteness and the Improvement of the Service of Deaf-Mutes and the Deaf.’²⁰⁷ This document detailed the various services provided to the deaf by the Soviet state. Universal education for deaf children was to be achieved by 1956, with the requisite surdopedagogues trained by the state and new school buildings financed by Minpros. Newly-trained ear, nose and throat doctors were to be hired to work in crèches and children’s homes for pre-school deaf children. The differentiation of deaf schools and the correct placement of deaf children were to be ensured through a new system of diagnosing hearing loss in hospitals. Deaf adolescents were to be found places in factory and plant schools and trained for jobs in all branches of industry, and provided with dormitories, ‘everyday-cultural services’, and trained instructors and translators at their place of work. New VOG clubs were to be built, and demands placed on VOG for the liquidation of illiteracy and the provision of cultural and material services to the deaf.

This comprehensive decree represented the culmination of the changes of the 1940s, and set the scene for the deaf community to develop further. The concrete legislation of the tasks of VOG and the state brought to fulfilment the new emphasis on service and welfare that had been developing over the 1940s. At the same time, the deaf

²⁰⁷ GARF, f. R-259, op. 1, d. 395, ll. 222-234.

community's fight for the right to run their own services, which had raged throughout the 1920s and 1930s, found resolution in the stabilised VOG of the 1950s. Yet the passivity of the reception of these services sat at odds with the desire for autonomy and 'normality' inherent in the deaf community in the pre-war period. The post-war period thus engendered certain tensions in the way deaf people viewed themselves and were viewed by the state. Following the death of Stalin, these tensions would have the scope to develop in new and unexpected ways.

4 *‘Speaking in the Language of Art’*



figure 5
Poster, the Moscow Theatre of Sign and Gesture, 1966

On 15th January 1957, the Soviet of Ministers of the RSFSR approved a proposal to establish a Theatre Studio within the VOG House of Culture in Moscow. Drawing on a tradition of amateur deaf theatre reaching back to before the revolution, the Studio was to train young deaf actors in all aspects of theatre craft, with the intention

of founding, upon graduation, a professional deaf theatre. Despite its inauspicious beginnings – with no premises, the young collective were forced to rehearse in a ticket office, with only two square metres of floor space – the Theatre of Sign and Gesture (*Teatr Mimika i Zhesta*) was officially registered with the state in 1963.¹ Over the following decade, the Theatre staged performances throughout the Soviet Union, thereby establishing its central role in the lives and cultural identities of Soviet deaf individuals.

The foundation of the Theatre formed part of a ‘golden age’ of deaf culture that developed from the late 1940s and continued well into the late 1960s.² In the context of a developing state interest in culture and leisure, a wave of VOG initiatives and state legislation saw the deaf gain improved access to all forms of art and culture; from poetry and dance to fine art and cinema. What marked this period out, however, was not just an increased consumption of culture by the deaf; rather it was the development of cultural forms in which the deaf actively participated and through which they increasingly defined themselves. It is within this story that the Theatre of Sign and Gesture – referred to by activists as ‘our theatre’ – gains particular significance. In the theoretical discussions following its creation and through its professional performances, the Theatre provided a locus for debate on the goals and parameters of deaf engagement with theatre in particular, and with art and culture in general.³

¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 450, l. 1. The Theatre’s name poses particular problems for the translator. The words *mimika* and *zhest* are both used in Russian to refer to gesticulation more broadly: *mimika* to signify gesticulation of the face, and *zhest*, of the body. Both, however, can be used to mean sign-language: *mimika* is the word used colloquially to signify sign, whereas *zhestovoi iazyk* (gesture language) is the term employed by linguists. In this way, much like its performances, the Theatre’s name was both specific to the deaf and universal. See G. L. Zaitseva, ‘O termine “mimiko-zhestikuliator’naia” rech’ glukhikh’, *Defektologiya* 5, no. 3 (1973), pp. 13-21.

² In this respect, the experience of the deaf community supports the assertions of those scholars who, in Stephen Bittner’s phrase, challenge ‘the abruptness of the 1953 caesura by locating the roots of Khrushchev’s reforms in the late-Stalin period, and by belying perceptions that the late-Stalinist regime was fully calcified.’ Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev’s Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow’s Arbat* (Ithaca, 2008), p. 10. See also articles in ‘The Relaunch of the Soviet Project, 1945-64’, special edition of *SEER* 86, no. 2 (2008). Similarly, scholars have also begun to question the assertion that ‘cultural experimentation came to an end in October 1964 with Khrushchev’s fall’, and to identify elements of thaw culture even into the early 1970s. See Nancy Condee, ‘Cultural Codes of the Thaw’, in *Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Abbott Gleason, Sergei Khrushchev and William Taubman (New Haven, 2000), (160-176) p. 162.

³ I am using Anne White’s working definition of ‘culture’ here, employed ‘in the normal English sense to refer to artistic and intellectual life or, by bureaucrats and cultural workers, even more narrowly to mean officially organised cultural activities’. Anne White, *De-Stalinization and the*

This chapter analyses the debates surrounding the foundation of the Theatre of Sign and Gesture as a facet of the development of a particular deaf-Soviet identity in the cultural sphere. At the same time, deaf engagement with theatre can be seen to cast new light on the particular dynamics of culture in the post-war and Khrushchev eras. In their discussions on theatre, deaf actors and activists contrasted the nature of theatrical form, on the one hand, and content or repertoire, on the other. Deaf theatre drew on experimental mime and the theatrical use of sign-language as a means to develop a supremely innovative theatrical form that was both culturally unique and, at the same time, aspired to inclusion within the universal world of high art. This experimentalism in form was counterbalanced by a rather conservative adherence to socialist-realist content. This opposition did not conform to the classical interpretation of the post-Stalin period as polarised between ‘reformers’ and ‘conservatives’, however.⁴ Deaf theatre, as with all areas of Soviet culture, grappled with the ambiguities of the thaw, and sought to engage with the complex nature of Sovietness after Stalin’s death.

Backdrop

The foundation of the Theatre Studio in 1957 was one small part of a wave of legislation and financial investment in deaf cultural engagement enacted in the post-war period. From 1956, this wave explicitly engaged with Khrushchevian rhetoric of ‘communist education’ and the creation of the New Soviet Person, yet it had a longer trajectory, driven by stimuli specific to VOG and the post-war deaf community. The financial position of VOG had changed dramatically in the years following Sutiagin’s election in 1949. ‘The General’, with his strong experience of management in VOG enterprises, had streamlined and mechanised production in the UPMs (now renamed *Uchebnye proizvodstvennyi predpriatii*, or UPPs). The result was an unprecedented influx of money into the VOG system: by 1951, profits had doubled, and in January 1954 VOG formally became financially independent,

House of Culture: Declining State Control over Leisure in the USSR, Poland and Hungary, 1953-89 (London, 1990), p. 19.

⁴ See Stephen F. Cohen, ‘The Friends and Foes of Change: Reformism and Conservatism in the Soviet Union’ in *The Soviet Union since Stalin*, ed. Stephen F. Cohen, Alexander Rabinowich and Robert Sharlet (Bloomington, 1980), pp. 11-31.

refusing any further contributions from the state.⁵ This change had two significant results. On the one hand, increased revenues meant that more money could be spent on work within the society. On the other, the success of deaf individuals in industry, both in state-run enterprises and within the VOG workshop system, was interpreted as evidence that this work no longer needed to focus exclusively on the problems of skills training and work placement. As Viktor Palennyi puts it, ‘questions of job creation for deaf mutes ceased to be a problem: the deaf had proved that their labour was important to the country.’ By 1956, the new VOG charter asserted that the main task of VOG, on an equal footing with the encouragement of ‘active participation [of deaf people] in the political and economic life of the country’, was now the promotion of ‘cultural-educational work amongst them’.⁶

As a result of these changes, the Presidium of the Central Board of VOG began to focus more of its attention on the cultural lives and leisure of deaf members. From 1950, a new post was created in the Presidium: the Deputy Chairman for Cultural-Educational Work. This post was initially filled by N. M. Krylov, previously the head of the Moscow Regional department of VOG, and from 1953 by P. S. Isaev. On their initiative, new proposals to develop cultural provision for the deaf were developed and codified. These proposals focused on clubs and red corners, which formed the primary organisations (*pervichnye organisatsii*) of the VOG system, the point of contact between deaf individuals and cultural services.⁷ The system of clubs and red corners grew over this period, from 314 in 1949 to over 450 in 1956, and new forms of cultural institutions (*kul'tuchrezhdeniia*) were introduced, such as the library and the House of Culture. The first such House of Culture was organised in the former Stanislavskii Theatre in Moscow in 1950.⁸ In 1951, VOG produced a

⁵ V. A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhykh* (Moscow, 2007), p. 505. This transition to full funding by VOG proceeded in stages: cultural-educational work was funded by VOG from 1951, and administrative work from the end of 1953. In 1959 alone, the society spent 270,000 roubles on cultural educational work. Although funding came exclusively from VOG, the yearly budget was still subject to the approval of GOSPLAN, the state planning department. A. S. Korotkov, *50 let Vserossiiskomu obshchestvu glukhikh*, (Leningrad, 1976), p. 46.

⁶ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 495.

⁷ Anne White points to the development of such institutions as a vital step in establishing the nature of culture post-Stalin. She cites the Soviet tendency to define culture ‘in the commonest official sense, to mean those activities which take place in institutions under the aegis of the ministries of culture. Thus the production of a kitchen table *in a house of culture* (not a factory) is as “cultural” as the writing of a novel’. White, *De-Stalinisation and the House of Culture*, p. 20.

⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 228, l. 177.

‘Statute of the Moscow City VOG House of Culture’, later expanded to become the general ‘Statute of the VOG House of Culture and Club’, which set out not only the administrative framework of the club, but also its role in deaf individuals’ engagement with culture. Its general task, the ‘carrying out and instructive-methodological management of all forms of political-educational and mass-cultural work amongst deaf-mutes’, was broken down to detail the various cultural forms this work entailed, from political lectures and thematic evenings to library circles, amateur theatricals, excursions and cinema screenings.⁹

This initiative on the part of VOG reflected a broader concern on the part of the state with developing access to culture and leisure for all Soviet citizens. In the post-war era, this concern had been driven by the need to rebuild a shattered system of clubs and services, and to employ cultural forms to ‘re-socialise’ the Soviet population after the trauma of war and Nazi occupation.¹⁰ Under Khrushchev, this emphasis on culture reflected a growing concern with the nature of leisure. As Anne White explains, ‘according to official doctrine, as Communism approaches, so the working day should be shortened and more time made available to workers for cultural activity’.¹¹ This shift was re-asserted by Khrushchev in 1956, when workers began to transfer to 7-hour working days, with the promise that, under communism, the working day would be 3 hours or shorter. Yet this abundance of free time needed to be used correctly: to eliminate the nefarious influence of Western cultural trends, and to develop the Soviet individual. The rational use of leisure time, and the development of cultured leisure pursuits, was thus regarded as a primary facet of the utopian project to build the New Soviet Person. This emphasis on culture and leisure could be seen in the abundance of state legislation promulgated in the 1950s and early 1960s to improve the lives of deaf individuals, encompassing education, labour, culture and living conditions.¹² Two Sovnarkom decrees set the trend for this period of legislation. The first, ‘On Measures in the Fight against Deafness and Deaf-Muteness and the Improvement of the Service of Deaf-Mutes and the Deaf’, of

⁹ ‘Polozhenie o dome kul’tury moskovskogo gorodskogo otdela vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh (MOSGORVOG)’, in *Sbornik rukovodiashchikh materialov po rabote vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh*, ed. P. K. Sutiagin, (Moscow, 1952), pp. 117-8.

¹⁰ White, *De-Stalinization*, p. 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹² V. G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh: Istoriia, razvitie, perspektivy* (Leningrad, 1985), pp. 274-279.

9th January 1952, included a series of measures to extend cultural provision for the deaf, including the subtitling of films and the refurbishment and equipment of club premises. The second, ‘On the Improvement of General and Professional Education, Work Placement and Services for Deaf Citizens in the RSFSR’, of 25th August 1962, was equally comprehensive.¹³ These documents spawned similar decrees by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health and the Secretariat of the VTsSPS.

As a result of this fortuitous combination of VOG investment and state legislation, increasingly large sums of money were spent on developing VOG’s cultural infrastructure over the 1950s. The Sovnarkom decree of 1952 proposed a comprehensive plan of capital investment in the system of VOG clubs, which had been physically and organisationally decimated during the long years of war and occupation. Permission was given to spend a staggering seven million roubles on rebuilding and equipping social clubs over the following two years, including the building of ten more Houses of Culture, each with a 200-seat auditorium, in cities across the RSFSR.¹⁴ In 1956 alone, five new Houses of Culture, five residential buildings and five industrial buildings were completed.¹⁵ Between 1959 and 1962, 102 clubs were provided with cinema screening equipment, and 210 with televisions.¹⁶ This investment was matched by specific projects by state departments, such as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Cinematography, and organisational changes within VOG, to direct and facilitate the spending of VOG’s money.

In the majority of cases, this new legislation sought to improve access to already existing forms of art and culture. Over the preceding four decades, deaf organisations had developed practices of ‘making do’ in their engagement with art. Beginning in the 1930s, *Zhizn’ glukhonemykh* published detailed descriptions of the plots of popular feature films, so that deaf viewers could follow screenings in mainstream cinemas; in VOG clubs, films would be interrupted so that a sign-language

¹³ ‘Postanovlenie prezidiuma tsentral’nogo pravleniia vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh ot 21 Ianvaria 1952g.’, in *Sbornik rukovodiashchikh materialov*, ed. Sutiagin, pp. 35-42.

¹⁴ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 503.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

¹⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, l. 12.

interpreter could summarise the action to that point.¹⁷ Social clubs would present regular ‘sign-language newspapers’, covering major events in domestic and international politics.¹⁸ Similarly, sign recitals of literature and popular song and sign translations of television programmes were common and popular social events. Such techniques required organisation, however, and many clubs were not able to provide the necessary translators: during a ‘raid’ inspection of a deaf club in 1960, for example, one of its members admitted that ‘it’s boring sitting in front of a television without a translator, many of us have already had enough’.¹⁹

In this period of post-war investment, VOG’s newfound wealth was seen as an opportunity to harness new technologies to improve the accessibility of culture: ‘It is becoming obvious that the creation of a material base is allowing our cultural institutions to make use of all existing forms of mass-cultural work.’²⁰ These attempts, such as the move to increase the provision of films with subtitles to the deaf community, illustrated the push and pull between state-directed cultural initiatives and the demands of deaf individuals. A Sovnarkom order from 1948 had pledged to increase the number of films put through the subtitling process; a pledge made again in the 1951 Sovnarkom decree.²¹ By 1960, the Ministry of Culture of the RSFSR subtitled a total of 40-45 feature films per year, in ten copies each, which were deployed on ten routes around the VOG clubs of the RSFSR.²² This number, which encompassed less than a quarter of feature film releases per annum, was protested vociferously on the pages of *Zhizn’ glukhikh*: ‘[the deaf] are deprived of the opportunity to watch newly-released films not only because they cannot hear, but also because the organisation of film demonstration for them does not employ the great opportunities offered by modern technology.’ Specialists within VOG sought to develop alternatives to the expensive and lengthy subtitling process, which saw feature films reaching the deaf audience at least a year after the film’s general

¹⁷ *Zhizn’ glukhikh* continued this practice well into the 1960s, publishing short synopses of the latest feature film releases. See, for example, A. Shenkman, ‘Na kinoekranakh’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 17, no. 3 (1964), p. 10.

¹⁸ Korotkov, *50 let*, p. 21.

¹⁹ Anon, ‘V bolshinstve klubov skuchno: reid po kul’tuchrezhdeniiam primor’ia’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 13, no. 9 (1960), p. 13.

²⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, l. 12.

²¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 246, l. 30.

²² S. Shapovalov, ‘V piat’ raz bol’she, v chetyre raza desheвле’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 13, no. 5 (1960), p. 14.

release.²³ A prototype system producing subtitles on a separate reel, which were then projected on a small adjacent screen in synchronisation with the film's dialogue, was trialled at the VOG House of Culture in Moscow in October 1957. This system was never approved by the Ministry of Culture, however, and the project did not achieve widespread use: by 1976, only ten such systems were in use in republican VOG organisations.²⁴ It is clear, however, that as their capacity to fund innovation increased, members of VOG were less and less inclined to accept the slowness of Soviet bureaucracy to provide for their particular cultural needs.

As the case of subtitling demonstrates, these technological and organisational innovations were employed to increase access to mainstream works of art by translating them into visible, and therefore accessible, forms. This accessibility was championed as an example of 'Soviet humaneness' (*sovetskaia gumannost'*), in which even those deprived of hearing were not 'unfortunate, denied the opportunity to grow spiritually, enrich themselves with knowledge, take pleasure in art'.²⁵ This paradigm of equal access can be viewed as both a constant of Soviet cultural policy, and as a particular response to the political climate after Stalin's death: whilst Anne White argues that a 'belief in the need to equalize access to culture' was considered one of the basic principles of cultural enlightenment work throughout the Soviet period, Miriam Dobson points out that the growing emphasis on Soviet 'legality' (*zakonnost'*) engendered by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin 'suggested the emergence of a new political culture, founded on the law (rather than a single leader's wisdom) and pride in the state's own "humane" treatment of its citizens'.²⁶ Discussing the significance of the new theatre, this paradigm of equal access to artistic production was frequently invoked: 'The All-Russian Society of the Deaf unites over 98,000 members in its ranks. The majority of these work selflessly in industry and agriculture. Many entertainment events carried out for hearing people are inaccessible to them. Meanwhile, the deaf, like all Soviet citizens, have equal rights to the satisfaction of their cultural and spiritual needs.' In creating the 'First

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Korotkov, *50 let*, p. 21.

²⁵ L. Snezhnitskii, 'Rozhdaetsia Novyi Teatr', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 15, no. 2 (1962), p. 19.

²⁶ White, *De-Stalinization*, pp. 1, 26; Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca, 2009), p. 25.

Deaf Theatre in the World’, both VOG and the Soviet state were expressing the benevolent desire of the Soviet system to provide culture for all.

This notion of ‘humaneness’ was essentially passive, however, with the deaf conceived as consumers of artistic works produced by others. Distinct in discussions of art for the deaf were those art forms which did not involve hearing in their production or reception: namely, visual art and silent theatre. Articles in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* portrayed these art forms as ‘natural’ to the deaf in their reliance on the purely visual: ‘Fine art belongs to the number of creative pursuits that are the most akin to those people who live for the most part through the visual perception of the world.’²⁷ As such, they were regarded as art forms which the deaf could not only access, but in which they could also participate. This period of cultural investment was marked by attempts by VOG to encourage deaf participation in fine arts and theatre, from amateur work in social clubs to the creation of professional educational establishments: the opening of the Theatre Studio in 1957 was followed by the creation of the VOG studio of Fine and Applied Arts in Leningrad in 1960.²⁸

For the deaf, therefore, theatre was not merely an object of cultural consumption, but rather an art form in which they could be actively creative. Indeed, in their engagement with theatre, the deaf could further assert their claim to a unique artistic tradition. This tradition had been long in the making: sign theatre had its own particular history, inextricably entwined with that of deaf organisations. From the earliest years of deaf clubs, theatrical skits performed in sign language had featured in evening concerts and social events.²⁹ Shortly after the revolution, the first officially registered ‘Club-Theatre of Deaf Mutes’, funded by the Theatre Department of the People’s Commissariat of Education, was formed in Moscow.³⁰ Although the closure of deaf organisations in the early 1920s curtailed its

²⁷ V. Sungarin, ‘Prazdnik iarkikh krasok’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 11, no. 6 (1958), p. 19.

²⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, l. 14. Again, Anne White points to ‘the emphasis on the desirability of active participation rather than passive spectating’ as a special feature of post-Stalinist cultural policy. White, *De-Stalinization*, p. 26.

²⁹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 20.

³⁰ D. V. Rebrov, ‘Pervye gody teatra glukhikh’ in *Materialy tret’ego Moskovskogo simpoziuma po istorii glukhikh*, ed. V. A. Palennyi (Moscow, 2001), p. 222. Rebrov uses materials from the Ministry of People’s Education file held in TsAMO (the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defence), f. 966, op. 3, d. 30, along with published books and articles, to build a picture of the first years of the Moscow Club-Theatre of Deaf-Mutes.

development as a professional theatre, the group continued to perform on an amateur basis as the Moscow Theatre of Deaf-Mutes. This amateur tradition grew in popularity; in 1939, VOG held its first All-Russian Review of Amateur Art, a competition for amateur theatrical ensembles, in which drama groups from sixteen clubs took part.³¹ The Review became a major cultural event on the VOG calendar after the war, when investment in clubs significantly increased the numbers participating in amateur dramatics: the first post-war Review took place in 1948, and by 1962 was being held every two years.³² A VOG report from 1958 confirmed that 4,526 deaf individuals took part in amateur dramatics in their local clubs that year, a figure which represented 4.6 per cent of the society's members.³³

By the late 1950s, therefore, amateur theatre had become the central component of cultural activities throughout the VOG club system: 'the principal living nerve of club work.'³⁴ In its involvement of deaf individuals as both actors and spectators, the theatre tradition was increasingly referenced as a factor in the development of a particular deaf-cultural identity at this point. Significant in discussions of amateur theatre was the emphasis placed on performance as a means of uniting the deaf as a group. In an article detailing the history of the Moscow Theatre of Deaf-Mutes, A. L'vov described their first show; a performance entitled 'The Living Museum': 'As if it would be possible to forget that performance, in the intervals of which the made-up actors came out to the audience! Hands pulled at them, they were congratulated... Together they rejoiced in the birth of the deaf drama collective.'³⁵ The notion of having a theatrical tradition that represented the deaf community – 'our theatre', as it was termed by activists – was a vital part of this developing identity politics.³⁶

In the creation of the Theatre Studio in 1957, deaf activists drew on this strong history of amateur deaf theatre at the level of both nostalgic memory and practical organisation. Many members of the teaching staff were veterans of the deaf stage: Pavel Savel'ev, the former chairman of VOG and director of the original Club

³¹ Korotkov, *50 let*, p. 23.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 480, l. 56.

³⁴ Labunskii, 'Pust' ozhivet nemaia stsena!', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 11, no. 1 (1958), p. 16.

³⁵ A. L'vov, 'Schast'e Poiska', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 19, no. 8 (1966), p. 28.

³⁶ Labunskii, 'Pust' ozhivet nemaia stsena!', p. 16.

Theatre of Deaf-Mutes, was appointed director; Elena Nikolaevna Minasova, a founding member of the Moscow Theatre known for her tragic roles, such as the eponymous heroine of Gor'kii's *Vassa Zheleznova*, was brought in as a sign-language consultant.³⁷ Yet the ambition inherent in the creation of the Theatre suggested more than just a desire to continue an amateur tradition. By training in the art of stagecraft and forming a professional sign-language theatre, deaf people sought to assert their capacity to participate in art at the highest level, despite their physical lack. In the article 'Long Live the Mute Stage!' from 1957, I. K. Labunskii boldly claimed that 'in the heart of nearly every non-hearing person lives a keen sense of rhythm, a striving for musicality, for plasticity'.³⁸ Although such sweeping statements were elsewhere contradicted ('They say that deaf-mutes are born actors. That is, of course, nonsense'), the essential argument that, with training, deaf actors could demonstrate the same talents and artistic sensibilities as the hearing, was consistently made.³⁹

On that basis, the Theatre Studio aimed to perfect and professionalise sign theatre as an art form. A 1959 article, 'They Will Be Actors', described the training undertaken by students of the theatre studio in their attempt to become 'real artists'.⁴⁰ Although most of the students had experience in amateur theatre, they found that 'several received ideas of stage play, acquired in amateur theatre, need to be rethought or rejected altogether'. Students were therefore trained in all aspects of stagecraft: stage movement, acrobatics, individual and group acting, and signed and spoken language. They also learned rhythm and dance with the help of large balloons held in both hands, through which they could sense the vibrations of the music played. Alongside theatre training, the students also received grounding in Russian language and literature, the history of the theatre and of the USSR, and the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. In 1961, the management of the Studio was taken over by the Shchukin Theatre School, the educational establishment attached to the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow's Arbat district, then under the leadership of Professor B. E.

³⁷ L'vov, 'Schast'e Poiska', p. 28.

³⁸ Labunskii, 'Pust' ozhivet nemaia stsena!', p. 16.

³⁹ A. Platov, 'Zametki pristrastnogo zritelia', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 13, no. 5 (1960), p. 16.

⁴⁰ A. Kalugina, 'Oni budut akterami: v teatral'noi studii', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 12, no. 9 (1959), p. 22.

Zakhava, People's Artist of the RSFSR.⁴¹ The educational plan was reworked and standardised: the seventeen original students, and the second intake of twenty in 1960, worked towards a four-year higher education (*VUZ*) qualification on a level with other theatre schools.⁴² This contact with hearing theatre professionals served to validate the students' desire to be judged on an equal footing with hearing actors. In the early 1960s, *Zhizn' glukhikh* published several articles by hearing actors on their impressions of the Theatre. In a review of the 1960 examination performance by studio students, Zakhava, who initially admitted to finding the idea of a professional deaf theatre 'unbelievable', declared that 'there was no need to make any allowances' for the work of deaf actors.⁴³ Similarly, the actor L. D. Snezhnitskii, reviewing a performance of Dmitrii Timofeevich Lenskii's vaudeville *Lev Gurych Sinichkin*, concluded his positive comments with, 'are you serious, they're deaf?'⁴⁴ In these articles, vaudeville became symbolic of the surprising capability of deaf actors to perform at the highest level: 'it was completely natural that all waited for the vaudeville with keen anxiety. Vaudeville is a genre of unbelievable complexity, where all is built on couplets, dance, precision and the grace of the performance – and suddenly all this is shown by deaf actors!'⁴⁵

This desire to perfect and professionalise also extended to the amateur dramatic circles within VOG's club system. From the outset, the Theatre Studio was expected to 'concentrate within it the generalisation of experience and methodological guidance of peripheral circles', and to communicate that experience to amateur groups.⁴⁶ The Theatre began to tour in the early 1960s, performing in cities throughout the RSFSR and Ukraine, and giving guidance and advice to local groups

⁴¹ B. E. Zakhava (1896-1976) was a disciple of Vakhtangov initially made famous for his performance in the groundbreaking staging of Carlo Gozzi's *Princess Turandot* in 1922. According to Stephen Bittner, Zakhava was a renowned director and committed communist by the 1960s 'who had distinguished himself directing socialist-realist classics like Maxim Gorky's *Egor Bulychev and Others* and Fadeev's *The Young Guard*'. His reputation was compromised, however, 'by the sense amongst actors that his plays, although highly professional, were "a tad insipid... and simply boring."' Bittner, *The Many Lives*, p. 88.

⁴² Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh*, p. 140.

⁴³ B. E. Zakhava, 'Bez skidok', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 13, no. 9 (1960), p. 15.

⁴⁴ Snezhnitskii, 'Rozhdaetsia Novyi Teatr', p. 18.

⁴⁵ Zakhava, 'Bez skidok', p. 15.

⁴⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 480, l. 55.

after each performance.⁴⁷ These tours were expected to raise the artistic taste of both local actors and the audience: ‘This Theatre is called on to educate the deaf viewer in the best examples of Soviet and world drama, to cultivate a taste for realistic art, and also to help amateur dramatics.’⁴⁸ Regional conferences were established in order for local amateur theatre workers to meet and ‘exchange experiences’, and the Theatre established short courses in Moscow for amateur directors to improve their skills and qualifications.⁴⁹

Distinct in this plethora of methodological initiatives was the magazine *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, which had been re-launched in 1957, and by 1963 had a subscription of 27,250.⁵⁰ Specialists from the Theatre published frequent articles on the basic organisation of amateur plays, from the choice of repertoire to the subtler points of stagecraft. These articles detailed the ‘mastery of the actor’ and the traits seen in ‘highly qualified work’, and reinforced the need for professional guidance in order to achieve the highest levels of performance.⁵¹ A regular column, ‘Director’s Notes’, used examples from the All-Russian Reviews of Amateur Art to demonstrate what to do – and, more importantly, what not to do – on the stage. This advice covered all aspects, from make-up (drawing a beard and moustache on with pen was not acceptable), to stage interaction (dialogue in sign required that the conversationalists should be able to see each other’s hands).⁵² This was not merely education for the artists themselves; the magazine also published reviews of popular plays by the Theatre and amateur groups, in order to explain how best to ‘read’ the performance.⁵³ Theatre was thus seen as a school of artistic taste, as a means to ‘strive for beauty’, for members of the deaf community on both sides of the curtain.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ In 1964, the Theatre completed two tours: to the cities of Ukraine (Kharkov, Dnepopetrovsk, Zaporosh’e and Kiev) and the Ural Mountains (Ufa, Cheliabinsk, Sverdlovsk, Perm’ and Kirov). By 1970, the Theatre performed in 73 cities of the USSR, including towns in the Urals and Siberia. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, l. 13; *Otchet tsentral’nogo pravleniia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhikh za 1967-70 (proekt)*, VOG collection, p. 36.

⁴⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1 d. 887, l. 13.

⁴⁹ K. Chernoiartsev, ‘Na avanstsenu!’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 11, no. 1 (1958), p. 16.

⁵⁰ *Otchet o rabote tsentral’nogo pravleniia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhikh za 1963-66 gody*, VOG collection, p. 28.

⁵¹ L. Soboleva, ‘Luchshie edut v Moskvu’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 15, no. 1 (1962), p. 14.

⁵² E. Blomkvist, ‘Shto i kak igrat’’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 14, no. 1 (1961), p. 9.

⁵³ A. Krakhmal’nikov, ‘Videt’ nado učit’sia’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 20, no. 1 (1967), p. 18.

⁵⁴ F. N. Sofieva, ‘Zadachi teatral’noi studii’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 13, no. 12 (1960), p. 12.

The Theatre Studio, and later the Theatre of Sign and Gesture, was thus placed at the centre of an explosion of deaf interest and participation in art in general, and theatre in particular, during the late 1950s and early '60s. Through its collaboration with the Shchukin School and its strong educational programme, it attempted to establish deaf theatre as an art form and to transmit this artistic knowledge to amateur actors and audiences throughout the VOG system. Yet this process necessitated a profound questioning on the part of actors, directors and theorists into the very nature of deaf theatre itself. In order to 'perfect and professionalise', such parties first needed to establish the form and content appropriate to such a unique theatrical experiment.

Form

For deaf artists and activists, the foundation of the Theatre Studio in 1957 represented a unique opportunity, not merely to build on the traditions of amateur deaf theatre, but to challenge existing conventions in order to develop a self-consciously 'new' art form.⁵⁵ On the pages of *Zhizn' glukhikh*, articles called for a wide-reaching debate into the nature of deaf theatre: 'All those who are interested in the birth of, in principle, a new deaf theatre, must make a great effort, in order that, through creative discussions and practical experiments, the essence and forms of the Theatre of Silence can be found. The first step in this matter is to carry out an impartial discussion of this question on the pages of our magazine.'⁵⁶ This collaborative process of analysis and debate stressed the agency and creativity of deaf people in the formation of a new theatrical tradition.

In many ways, this desire for the new was equally a rejection of the old. Until this point, deaf theatre had been based on the translation of written plays into sign-language, and their performance in the 'natural' style in keeping with traditions of

⁵⁵ The notion of a 'new theatre' can be seen in many articles in *Zhizn' glukhikh*, for example Snezhnitskii, 'Rozhdaetsia Novyi Teatr', p. 18.

⁵⁶ T. Smolenskaia, 'Teatr tishiny', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 11, no. 2 (1958), p. 23. The evocative phrase 'Theatre of Silence' is a 'term used for plays which, like those of Maeterlinck, who is regarded as a founder of the genre, and particularly of J. J. Bernard, are important as much for what they omit as for what they actually say – a theatre, in fact, of pregnant pauses, during which the imagination of the audience supplies the missing ingredient, which is not only unexpressed but perhaps cannot be expressed in words'. 'Theatre of Silence', in *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 4th ed. (Oxford, 1983).

socialist realism. In 1958, however, this form was being questioned. In his article ‘Towards New Forms’, I. A. Sapozhnikov stated bluntly that ‘the limited “deaf method” of expressing thoughts and feelings on the stage has aged [and] is not achieving its goals.’⁵⁷ For Sapozhnikov, the problem lay in the incompatibility of traditional, dialogue-driven plays with the bodily nature of sign language. By literally rendering the dialogue into sign, such plays effectively tied the hands of their actors, hindering any other form of action or gesticulation: ‘The result is not a performance, but a soulless reading of the roles in sign.’⁵⁸ Later articles made a similar distinction between performance (*igra*) and translation (*perevod*), implying that true artistic value was only to be found in the former.⁵⁹ Declaiming dialogue, it was asserted, was not art.

According to deaf theatre specialists, therefore, the attempt to replicate traditional, ‘hearing’ forms in sign language ‘narrows and weakens the composition and execution of stage works’.⁶⁰ Instead, they argued, deaf theatre should seek to develop a new form, which privileged the unique attributes of deaf communication: silence and bodily gesture. To that end, specialists from the Theatre Studio and amateur dramatic circles focused on two particular areas of potential development: the use of an established genre of silent, physical theatre – classical mime (*pantomima*) – and the growth of theatrical forms of sign language.

Mime

The turn to classical mime was perhaps unsurprising in the late 1950s. Mime was very much in vogue in the Soviet Union at the time, following a tour by the world-renowned French mime Marcel Marceau. Marceau’s fame in the Soviet Union derived less from his alter ego Bip, the sad clown, and more from his portrayal of Bashmachkin in a Berlin-based mime production of Gogol’s *The Overcoat*. A film of his performance in this role had been shown during the 6th World Festival of Youth

⁵⁷ I. A. Sapozhnikov, ‘Za novye formy’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 11, no. 2 (1958), p. 23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ F. N. Sofieva, ‘Volshebnoe iskusstvo’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 13, no. 9 (1960), p. 15.

⁶⁰ Sapozhnikov, ‘Za novye formy’, p. 23.

and Students in Moscow in 1957, where it was met with much critical acclaim.⁶¹ Driven by interest in Marceau, and informed by the political reaction to Charlie Chaplin's persecution as a 'left-wing sympathiser' by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the United States, mime as a distinct genre had grown in popularity amongst Soviet audiences. Publications on the theory, history and contemporary practice of mime began to appear in Soviet bookshops, and mime began to warrant study within the theatrical schools of the capital. The Shchukin School was not exempt from this trend: mime was taught as a distinct genre and, during his tour, Marceau visited the School and discussed the art of mime with teachers and students.⁶²

Whilst this broader interest in mime could perhaps be downplayed as theatrical fashion, Marceau's mime had a deeper resonance for the deaf. His performance in *The Overcoat* seemed to prove that deep emotion and meaning could be conveyed through the sole means of the plastic gesture: 'in his performance, the mime retains the genuine sense of Gogol's art, his humanist essence.'⁶³ As a result, specialists of the Theatre Studio turned to mime as a means to imbue the deaf theatrical tradition with the highest values of performance art. 'Dramatic theatre, such as we have grown used to seeing, cannot transmit through the usual means the heroic pathos, the romance, the revolutionary symbolism of these literary characters that have become classics. In our view, they are accessible to one sole genre: mime.'⁶⁴ Articles in *Zhizn' glukhikh* called on the Theatre to 'creatively rework [mime] in the context of our deaf theatre'.⁶⁵ This encouraged experimentation with mime techniques both as a facet of deaf theatre performance, and as a genre in its own right. This mime, it was stressed, was not the 'half-danced mime-miniatures' of the variety hall, but the serious business of 'dramatic mime', the difference between which, according to L. Kalinovskii, the head director of the Theatre, was like the difference between classical ballet and 'Dancing on Ice' (*reviu na l'du*).⁶⁶ 'Dramatic mime' conveyed a serious, sustained subject through the controlled plasticity of bodily gesture: 'The mime must perfectly master his body, his movements, know how to speak through a

⁶¹ Snezhnitskii, 'Rozhdaetsia Novyi Teatr', p. 19.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ L. Kalinovskii, 'K vershinam iskusstva', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 16, no. 9 (1963), p. 21.

⁶⁵ Smolenskaia, 'Teatr tishiny', p. 23.

⁶⁶ Kalinovskii, 'K vershinam iskusstva', p. 21.

glance, a smile, the smallest wave of the hand, the finger.⁶⁷ At the Theatre Studio, the art of mime took a central role in the curriculum and improvised mime-études became a fundamental part of students' training in stage movement.⁶⁸ In 1963, the Theatre performed its first extended mime work, *People Lived*, sometimes referred to as *Sparks from Danko's Heart* (*Iskra ot serdtsa Danko*), based on a short story by Maksim Gorky (figure 6). According to a VOG report, 'the success of this work, which attracted a wide stratum of viewers, demonstrated the correctness of existing opinion, that the collective should devote more attention to the study of mime.'⁶⁹



figure 6
Poster for *Zhili liudi*, 1963

Mime works also began to feature in the repertoire of amateur theatre circles across the RSFSR: during the 1962 All-Russian Review of Amateur Art, third prize was awarded to the mime collective of the Leningrad House of Culture.⁷⁰ The leading role in the development of mime theatre was not taken by Russian theatre groups, however. By far the most enthusiastic proponent of mime theatre in this period was

⁶⁷ Smolenskaia, 'Teatr tishiny', p. 23.

⁶⁸ Kalugina, 'Oni budut akterami', p. 22.

⁶⁹ *Otchet TsP VOG za 1963-66*, p. 29.

⁷⁰ A. Korotkov, 'Iarkii tvorcheskii prazdnik', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 15, no. 4 (1962), p. 12.

the amateur theatre collective of Kiev's House of Culture. According to Sapozhnikov, its artistic director, the Kievan collective had performed its first mime, based on Cervantes's farce *The Caves of Salamanca*, in 1940. The group had continued to develop the genre: in 1959, they received a first-class award from the Communist Party of Ukraine for *It's All Fine! (Vse Iasno!)*, a mime performance derived from Khrushchev's famous cold-war statement that 'the barometer shows fine!'⁷¹ It is clear from *Zhizn' glukhikh* that theatre specialists were looking to Ukraine as a leader in the field of mime: a 1961 meeting of the cultural organisational department of TsP VOG suggested that methodological information on mime should be sent to local theatres, 'using, in particular, the scripts of mimes created by the workers of the Ukrainian Society of the Deaf'.⁷² The VOG archive contains examples of such scripts: they read as extended stage directions, to be interpreted by the performers into movement and gesture.⁷³

In the work of amateur groups and the Theatre itself, deaf artists looked to mime as a means to create a new and unique silent art form. Yet, whilst stressing the essential nature of deaf expression through silence and gesture, specialists maintained that the attributes of 'silent theatre' were in fact innate to theatre art in general. In her article 'The Theatre of Silence', T. Smolenskaia insisted that all theatre collectives 'acknowledge the value of the expressive, plastic gesture, the significance and dramatic weight of stage pauses, the strength of the impact of animated mimicry. These powerful methods of an actor's performance were and are well known by all great masters of the stage, past and present. Actors of any professional theatre are obliged to master the art of the "expressive pause". Not for nothing has this catchphrase, born on the stage, become widespread both in theatre and in life'.⁷⁴ Gesticulation and the silent pause were thus present in the very fabric of 'normal' theatre performance. By emphasising the ways in which 'silent theatre' and 'normal theatre' drew on the same artistic techniques, Smolenskaia underlined one of the central desires inherent in deaf theatre: the desire for inclusion in the universal world of true art. Making a distinctive feature of the silent gesture was not a question of

⁷¹ Sapozhnikov, 'Za novye formy', p. 23.

⁷² V. Sungarin, 'Na perednem krae kul'turnogo fronta: sektsii kul'turno-vospitatel'noi raboty', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 14, no. 4 (1961), p. 19.

⁷³ See GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 902, l. 54.

⁷⁴ Smolenskaia, 'Teatr tishiny', p. 23.

adapting theatre to suit the exclusive needs of the deaf, she argued; on the contrary, through mime, members of the deaf theatre sought to show how their art was already a vital part of theatre, and that they were merely drawing out certain of its fundamental qualities.⁷⁵

The attempt by the Theatre to integrate mime into the fabric of its stage action thus sought to include deaf theatre in the universal art of theatre. In its emphasis on the extreme control and plasticity of the body as a means of conveying emotion and meaning, mime theatre was also seen to hark back to the very roots of theatre itself. Critics and theorists referenced the tradition of mime in ancient Greece in order to demonstrate the solid foundations of this experiment in silent theatre: ‘Long ago, in ancient Ellada, mime theatre eclipsed ordinary, spoken theatre in the perfection of its expression. Mime came into being because of the enormous size of ancient amphitheatres, in which the voice of the actor was lost. On the evidence of ancient historians, the mastery of ‘mimes’ (mime actors) [*sic*] was amazing: it seemed that every finger had a voice.’⁷⁶ Such accounts often contained a barely-veiled snub to spoken theatre; in its essential silence, it was suggested, deaf theatre alone was able to approach the purity of the original art form.

The discussion of links between silent theatre and theatre in general were not limited to ancient forms, however. Articles on mime also drew comparisons with the Soviet theatrical tradition. Citing Konstantin Stanislavskii, F. N. Sofieva, a director of the Theatre Studio, argued that all actors ‘know how to tell what the word cannot, frequently working in silence much more intensively, subtly and irresistibly than speech itself. Their wordless conversation can be no less interesting, convincing and full of substance than verbal discourse’.⁷⁷ Similarly, A. Zvenigorskii, an artist of the Moscow (Gor’kii) Arts Theatre, suggested that silent theatre was in fact the embodiment of Stanislavskii’s famous ‘fourth wall’ theory: ‘the actor must be expressive enough on stage that, if he was divided from the viewer by a glass wall, the viewer, seeing but not hearing the actor, would understand what was happening

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Labunskii, ‘Pust’ ozhivet nemaia stsena!’, p. 16.

⁷⁷ Sofieva, ‘Volshebnoe iskusstvo’, p. 14.

on stage.’⁷⁸ Reference to this ‘master of the Russian theatre’ lent credence to the theory of mime and silent theatre, and thus supported deaf theatre’s claim to inclusion within the larger Soviet tradition.⁷⁹

Beyond Stanislavskii, such articles explicitly referenced certain avant-garde proponents of physical theatre from the 1920s: Evgenii Vakhtangov, and the recently (posthumously) rehabilitated Vsevolod Meierkhol’d. The latter’s theory of ‘biomechanics’, or the reduction of theatre to a limited number of perfected physical movements as a means to convey intense emotion, was described as a fundamental influence on the mime of Marcel Marceau, and thus, indirectly, on deaf theatre.⁸⁰ The avant-garde influence was clearly visible in the staging of the Theatre’s 1963 mime performance *People Lived*: actors wore identical black form-fitting outfits, and performed on a set which strongly recalled the constructivist simplicity of some of Meierkhol’d’s staging (*figures 7 & 8*). This homage to the experimental forms of the avant-garde reflected broader trends of the ‘thaw’ era: in the climate of cultural flux engendered by Khrushchev’s denouncement of Stalin, the ‘impetus to dissociate from the Stalinist stylistic and cultural heritage’ saw Soviet theatre increasingly turn to the legacy of modernism and the avant-garde.⁸¹ Nancy Condee, for example, cites the revival of ‘official interest in the Meyerhold lineage’ in 1964 as one of the key moments in the renewal of theatre during this period.⁸² Despite their insistence on inclusion and tradition, therefore, deaf theatre’s use of mime also represented an experimental break with traditional forms which reflected the particular cultural climate of the thaw.

⁷⁸ A. Zvenigorskii, ‘Vsemernuiu podderzhku’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 15, no. 2 (1962), p. 19.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Snezhnitskii, ‘Rozhdaetsia Novyi Teatr’, p. 19.

⁸¹ Polly Jones, ‘Introduction’, in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones (London, 2006), (1-18) p. 12. See also Stephen Bittner’s chapter on the revival of Vakhtangov’s 1922 production of *Princess Turandot*. Bittner, *The Many Lives*, pp. 75-104

⁸² Condee, ‘Cultural Codes of the Thaw’, p. 162.



figure 7
Zhili liudi, 1963



figure 8
Set design, Zhili liudi, 1963

In their discussions of mime, therefore, deaf artists were making quite radical claims, both for their contribution to theatre and high culture, and for their role in redefining it through experimental forms. Silent theatre was seen as a facet of a universal art form, whose value was no less (or possibly even more) than the dialogue-driven performances of the ‘normal’ stage. This utopian notion of universality was further grounded, in these mime debates, in the idea of universal communication through theatre. One of the severest criticisms of the pre-1956 ‘limited ‘deaf method’’ of theatre was that sign-language dialogue could not be scripted: each theatre group had to come up with its own translation from the written text as part of the rehearsal process. As a result, plays were usually performed in local sign-language dialects, with the expressiveness of the dialogue dependent on the skill of the local translator. Plays performed in Kiev, for example, were incomprehensible to deaf viewers in Moscow, and even between Leningrad and Moscow there arose differences in language. Mime, on the other hand, was seen as a universally comprehensible mode of communication: the ‘intelligibility, popularity of [Marceau’s] performance for any viewer’ made his art form truly international.⁸³

In its reliance on the ‘eloquence of the body’ to convey meaning, mime allowed the deaf to bypass the limits not only of local sign dialects but also of sign itself. In stressing the international, universal nature of bodily gesture, deaf actors stated their intention to perform their art for all viewers, not just the deaf: ‘This “art of silence” is an art for all.’⁸⁴ This desire to bridge the gap between the deaf and hearing audience was consistently stressed in internal VOG documents: according to a 1967 report, ‘the fundamental goal, pursued by the very existence of the Theatre, is the striving of deaf actors to create accessible art, the utmost expansion of the contact between non-hearing people and the world around them. Therefore, the Theatre’s plays must attract deaf and hearing viewers equally.’⁸⁵ Measures taken to advertise the Theatre’s performances reflected this intention: in 1963, Theatre shows were advertised on the radio, in addition to visual (poster) advertisements throughout Moscow and other cities visited on tour.⁸⁶ Similarly, in November 1963, Sutiagin

⁸³ Smolenskaia, ‘Teatr tishiny’, p. 23.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ *Otchet TsP VOG za 1963-66*, p. 29.

⁸⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 902, l. 7.

sent a written request to A. I. Popov, the Minister of Culture of the RSFSR, to include the Theatre of Sign and Gesture on the ‘combined poster of Moscow Theatres’, a move which would have allowed tickets to the Theatre to be sold through the central ‘Box Office’ system.⁸⁷ These measures resulted in a strong bias towards a hearing audience: in the first official tour to Ukraine in January 1963, eighty per cent of the audience for the Theatre’s evening performances were hearing; and by 1967, VOG could report that, whilst regional tours generally catered to local deaf audiences, ‘in Moscow, the Theatre generally serves hearing viewers’.⁸⁸

For some, therefore, mime was conceived as a key to artistic inclusion. It allowed the deaf to create art that had a recognised place within the world of theatre and that, quite literally, spoke to all audiences. In bridging the gap between hearing and deaf creative practices and communication, deaf mime theatre was seen to transcend the limits of deafness: ‘Deprived of hearing, they were given the opportunity to speak in the most difficult and complex language – the language of art.’⁸⁹ To be sure, this utopian rhetoric was not universally accepted. For some, mime did not represent the pinnacle of deaf art, but was instead a gimmick, an attempt to court popularity with the hearing that betrayed the essence of deaf theatre. In an article from 1960, ‘Notes of a Partial Viewer’, A. Platov, an engineer from Moscow, described an occasion when the VOG Presidium ‘invited a newsreel director to the Moscow House of Culture to film an amateur performance of Ostrovskii’s “A Profitable Post.”’ The director arrived, watched, but refused to film: ‘This is a completely ordinary performance, just in the language of the deaf. In the USSR, Ostrovskii is performed in forty languages. I thought you had something more like Marcel Marceau.’⁹⁰ For Platov, mime was merely a ‘fashionable peculiarity’ (*modnaia dikovinka*), but one

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1. 20. It is unclear, however, whether this request was successful.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1. 3, and *Otchet TsP VOG za 1967-70*, p. 36. The absence of sources makes it difficult to reach conclusions on who attended these performances: one could speculate that the hearing relatives of deaf actors would make up a significant proportion of the audience. However, it is clear that the novelty of a deaf theatre was beginning to be recognised even amongst those who had no ties to the deaf community. In 1965, the hearing director Mikhail Bogin produced a short film *Dvoe (The Two)*, chronicling the relationship between a hearing musician and a deaf gymnast. Much of the action is based in the Theatre of Sign and Gesture, and the film includes scenes of Theatre actors Marta Grakhova and Valerii Liubimov in performance. According to Bogin, ‘we understood that here is the possibility of revealing something new to our viewers.’ V. Baulin, I. Razdorskii, ‘Dvoe’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 18, no. 7 (1965), p. 13. In 1965, the same Marta Grakhova would make the transition to ‘hearing’ films, appearing in Vasilii Shchukin’s *Vash syn i brat (Your Son and Brother)*.

⁸⁹ V. Ivanov, ‘Teatr shagaet na ekran’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 18, no. 3 (1965), inside back cover.

⁹⁰ Platov, ‘Zametki pristrastnogo zritel’ia’, p. 16.

that was dangerous to follow, as it denied sign language its rightful place as the true form of deaf theatre. He accepted the links to ancient Greece, but countered with the argument: ‘This is true. But it is also true that long ago, people used a stone axe, bow and arrows. Why hark back to the stone-age? Replace the language of Shakespeare, Gogol and Ostrovskii with grimaces?’⁹¹

Although Platov represented a minority view on the pages of *Zhizn’ glukhikh* – his arguments were passionately refuted by F. N. Sofieva in a subsequent issue – his article revealed a central paradox in discussions of deaf theatre during this period. Whilst it is true that the development of mime theatre was the chief preoccupation of deaf actors and theorists, it was universally admitted that mime had only taken its ‘first timid steps’ as a form of deaf theatre.⁹² Sign-language dialogue, although questioned in print, still remained the most popular theatrical medium, both in amateur circles and in the Theatre itself. In 1965, for example, the experimental mime performance *People Lived* was one of six plays in the Theatre’s repertoire: the remaining five, encompassing drama, comedy and vaudeville, were performed in sign language, with an announcer reading the dialogue aloud for the benefit of hearing members of the audience.⁹³ Consequently, whilst mime was being engaged with as a potential means to bypass the limits of sign language, the presence of sign on the theatre stage provoked a parallel discussion of how, through theatre, it could be renewed and developed as a language.

Sign

The engagement with sign as a theatrical language formed part of a broader debate on the role of sign language amongst the deaf. This debate had been imbued with a new urgency in July 1950 when, in the wake of the publication of Stalin’s theoretical work *On Marxism and Linguistics*, the newspaper *Pravda* had published a series of articles in which Stalin answered readers’ questions. In answer to a question posed by D. Belkin and S.Furer, Stalin dismissed ‘deaf-mutes, who have no language’

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Sofieva, ‘Volshebnoe iskusstvo’, p. 14.

⁹³ Snezhnitskii, ‘Rozhdaetsia novyi teatr’, p. 19.

(*glukhonemykh, ne imeiushchikh iazyka*) as ‘abnormal people’ (*anomal’nye liudi*).⁹⁴ According to Stalin’s thesis, spoken language was the basis of thought, and without that language, the deaf were incapable of thoughts that went beyond the immediate response to sensory stimulus. The bulk of his response, however, addressed itself to the role and significance of sign language. If, he argued, in ‘the history of mankind, spoken language has been one of the forces that helped human beings to emerge from the animal world, unite into communities, develop their faculty of thinking, organize social production, wage a successful struggle against the forces of nature and attain the stage of progress we have to-day’, then sign ‘is not a language, and not even a linguistic substitute that could in one way or another replace spoken language, but an auxiliary means of extremely limited possibilities to which man sometimes resorts to emphasize this or that point in his speech’. Sign and speech were thus ‘as incomparable as are the primitive wooden hoe and the modern caterpillar tractor’.⁹⁵

Stalin depicted sign language in stark terms of progress and backwardness; in a country advancing rapidly towards socialism, there could be no room for a group of people who communicated in such a primitive language of gestures. This view was not initially contradicted by members of VOG. In a private letter to Stalin, Nikolai Alekseevich Buslaev, the deaf representative to the Secretariat of the VTsSPS, accepted that the 50,000 illiterate and 53,000 semi-literate VOG members ‘remain on the level of abnormal and semi-abnormal people’, but blamed this situation on a lack of provision in education and club work for deaf people.⁹⁶ Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, however, the lowly status of sign was vigorously challenged. Much of this was due to the work of linguist I. F. Geil’man, who published the first dictionary of Russian sign language in 1957. In *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, a double-page spread was regularly given over to letters from pedagogues, workers and other interested parties arguing for and against the use of sign.⁹⁷ These views were polemical and strongly held: whilst some believed that teaching literacy and lip reading and formally banning sign language was the only way to achieve the

⁹⁴ I. V. Stalin, ‘Tovarishcham D. Belkinu i S. Fureru’, *Pravda*, 2nd August 1950, p. 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ N. A. Buslaev, letter to I. V. Stalin, reproduced in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, pp. 509-511.

⁹⁷ For example, collections of readers’ letters under the rubric ‘Sign Language – a Help or a Hindrance in Education?’ (*Mimika – podspor’e ili pomekha v obuchenii?*), were published in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 14, no. 12 (1961), pp. 16-17 and 15, no. 7 (1962), pp. 18-19.

education of the deaf, others argued that sign was ‘vitaly necessary’ (*zhiznenno neobkhodimo*) and should be recognised as a language in its own right.⁹⁸

Within this debate, theatre was invoked as a powerful argument in defence of sign language. In the Stalinist vein, those who opposed the use of sign had cited its poverty, its inability to express abstract and complex ideas. Through theatre, however, the expressive ability of sign was underlined: ‘They played without words, but their silence, thanks to the subtle sign performance of the participants, spoke more eloquently than words.’⁹⁹ The notion that sign could be artistic, expressive and ultimately beautiful – a language capable of transmitting high artistic content – underpinned the rhetoric of theatre specialists on the pages of *Zhizn’ glukhikh*. In many ways, this rhetoric borrowed from the discussions on mime art: the expressive value of the silent gesture, established in relation to classical mime, was extended to incorporate sign language itself. According to a review by T. Smolenskaia of a performance by the Theatre, ‘literal sign is, to a certain degree, akin to pure mime. At least because the actor, freely mastering his face, hands, body, accurately and expressively in every movement, is half a mime already.’¹⁰⁰ Such descriptions focused, as in the case of mime, on the performative value of the silent gesture as a mode of expression. However, in stressing this expressive value, these articles indirectly commented on the nature of sign itself. In the same article, Smolenskaia praised the Theatre for the ‘great labour of their transformation of words into gesture [...] which unexpectedly proved to be stronger, more effective and more voluminous [*ob’emnyi*] than speech’.¹⁰¹

As a result of such articles, a new concept of ‘cultured sign language’ (*kul’turnaia mimika*) began to figure in discussions of sign language. Conceived in opposition to the ‘crude, distorted forms of sign’ (*grubye iskazhennye formy mimiki*) that were frequently observed amongst groups of deaf people,¹⁰² ‘cultured sign’ was grammatically correct, rich in vocabulary, and free of the ‘rude, vulgar [...] ugly

⁹⁸ A. Shishkov, ‘Ia golosuiu ‘za’’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 14, no. 12 (1961), p. 16.

⁹⁹ Labunskii, ‘Pust’ ozhivet nemaia stsena!’, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ T. Smolenskaia, ‘Ia uchus’ na volshebника’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 17, no. 10 (1964), p. 15.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² A. Goliagin, ‘Slovo tuliakov’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 15, no. 7 (1962), p. 18.

gestures' that characterised much sign-language conversation.¹⁰³ This ideal language needed to be promoted on a wide scale, however, and proponents of 'cultured sign' looked to theatre as a means to disseminate it. The potential of theatre in this regard had been long recognised: as early as 1933, V. Sungarin had asserted that 'with the lack of coordination and disorganisation of colloquial sign, the theatre serves as the best embodied [*obraznoi*] school of sign'.¹⁰⁴ By 1963, the Theatre's role in promoting sign was included in official reports of its activities, treating it as an extension of the development of mime: 'The combination of mime with work on conversational sign, having at its basis the plastic symbol, can make the language of the Theatre even more expressive and accessible to those who do not know sign language. For those who speak in sign language, the Theatre can become a sort of school of correct, precise and colourful language.'¹⁰⁵ For students and actors of the Theatre, the study of 'clear, distinct sign language; beautiful, flowing gesture' was of vital importance.¹⁰⁶

The desire to foster a 'cultured' form of sign language reflected a broader concern with the development of *kul'turnost'* (culturedness) amongst deaf people. As Vadim Volkov has argued, *kul'turnost'* referred to the 'background everyday practice' of culture in Soviet society, which signified the internalising of cultural values as a key step in the coming into being of an idealised New Soviet Person.¹⁰⁷ In his examination of *kul'turnost'* as a dynamic of the Stalinist 'civilising process', Volkov points to a shift from pragmatic cultural values, such as personal hygiene, dress and labour discipline, to 'higher' forms of culture, such as literature, art and science, as markers of the inner cultural level of the Soviet individual. The discovery and promotion of 'cultured sign language' amongst deaf individuals replicates the emphasis placed on cultured speech and language within this 'higher' stage of the *kul'turnost'* paradigm: according to Volkov, 'unlike material attributes, the "culture of speech" (*kul'tura rechi*) was naturally perceived as inalienable from the

¹⁰³ Letter by E. Sidorov, *Zhizn' glukhikh* 20, no. 3 (1967), p. 20.

¹⁰⁴ V. Sungarin, cited in V. Z. Bazoev and V. A. Palennyi, *Chelovek iz mira tishiny* (Moscow, 2002), p. 580.

¹⁰⁵ *Otchet TsP VOG za 1963-66*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁶ Kalugina, 'Oni budut akterami', p. 22.

¹⁰⁷ Vadim Volkov, 'The Concept of Kul'turnost': Notes on the Stalinist Civilizing Process', in *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (London, 2000), pp. 210-230.

personality, related more to the internal rather than the external qualities.’¹⁰⁸ ‘Cultured sign language’ thus echoed ‘cultured speech’ as an indicator of inner cultural development. The promotion of correct speech and the elimination of ‘vulgarity’ (*poshlost’*) are similarly identified by Miriam Dobson as particular concerns of the 1950s, in the context of gulag returnees and the prevalence of criminal (*blatnoi*) slang.¹⁰⁹ Sign-language theatre performances, with their multiple linguistic layers – the translation of established texts into sign language, and its replication by the announcer during the performance – and their emphasis on ‘correct’ forms of speech, thus actively engaged with the particular concern with speech and language within Soviet culture.

The development of deaf theatre, therefore, despite its ambivalent relationship to sign, had the effect of raising the profile of the language and tying it to broader notions of culture and progress. Indeed, the use of sign on the stage further allowed the language to develop in new ways, to become an artistic language, rather than a basic communicative tool born of ‘bitter necessity’.¹¹⁰ The relative scarcity of sign-language vocabulary was a consistent problem for theatre translators, which was usually overcome by the overuse of dactylogy (finger-spelling) by actors to literally spell out the unknown word. The growth of the sign-theatre tradition thus effectively encouraged theatre groups to push linguistic boundaries and to develop new gestures in order to render complex texts into sign. Neologisms created on the stage found their way into the conversation of artists and audience members, renewing and expanding the language. Nowhere was this process more obviously relished than during the rehearsals for the Cheliabinsk Amateur Dramatic Theatre’s performance of Maiakovskii’s play *The Bedbug* (*Klop*). The process of rendering Maiakovskii’s satirical verse, with its wordplay and invention, into sign proved a new challenge for the group: ‘Maiakovskii’s unusual vocabulary, his neologisms, required us to search for distinctive new signs or to replace the word with a synonym. Geil’man’s dictionary was no use here. Take the word “to unfreeze” [*razmorozit*]. How is that verb to be translated into sign? Say “ice” and “to melt”?’

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁰⁹ Miriam Dobson, ‘Contesting the Paradigms of De-Stalinization: Readers’ Responses to “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich”’, *Slavic Review* 64, no. 3 (2005), (580-600) pp. 590-591.

¹¹⁰ Platon, ‘Zametki pristrastnogo zritelia’, p. 16.

They won't understand. We decided to combine the sign-language gesture "to unfreeze" with "to revive".¹¹¹ Whilst the particular demands of Maiakovskii's verse represented a unique challenge for deaf theatre, the translation of plays into sign represented a constant driving force for linguistic innovation.

In the work of the Theatre and other drama collectives, sign language was thus expanded and developed, and its 'cultured' forms were perpetuated by actors and audiences. As a result, both the language itself, and its theatrical representation, began to function as a marker of cultural identity for deaf people. Discussions of the Theatre in *Zhizn' glukhikh* stressed the 'natural' reliance of the deaf on sign language: 'Sign and gesture are innate to deaf-mutes.'¹¹² As the dominant language within the deaf community, moreover, sign increasingly defined the deaf as a group. Consequently, the use of this communal language on the stage also became a means to represent the group in art. Articles frequently cited the example of national theatres within the Soviet Union to articulate the role of sign-language theatre: the hearing actor E. Polevitskaia argued that her attitude to deaf theatre was 'similar to the attitude we cherish towards national theatres, whose language we do not know, but whose successes we applaud'.¹¹³ Deaf theatre, therefore, not only provided the deaf with a chance to access and participate in art, but also gave the deaf as a group the opportunity to represent themselves within it: 'The existing literal "language" of deaf-mutes has the right to representation even on the stage.'¹¹⁴

In their experimental and innovative engagement with theatrical forms, the deaf claimed their place as producers and consumers of an art that both embodied and transcended the specifics of deafness. The experimental nature of the Theatre of Silence drew on thaw-era engagements with the avant-garde and the innovative use of sign-language to produce a unique theatrical form. In their discussions of theatre, deaf theorists drew explicitly on the notion of *kul'turnost'* and theatrical tradition to

¹¹¹ I. Danilin, 'Kak sozdavalsia "Klop"', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 18, no. 9 (1965), p. 20.

¹¹² Labunskii, 'Pust' ozhivet nemaia stsena!', p. 16.

¹¹³ E. Polevitskaia, 'Za iskrennost' i svezhest'!', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 15, no. 2 (1962), p. 18. This equation of sign-language with minority national languages is reminiscent of the definition of sign by proponents of American Deaf Studies as a 'linguistic subnationality'. This nationalistic definition of sign-language is rarely evoked on the pages of *Zhizn' glukhikh*, however. Most often, as in this case, it is used by hearing writers as an attempt to contextualise the novelty of sign-language theatre.

¹¹⁴ Labunskii, 'Pust' ozhivet nemaia stsena!', p. 16.

assert their claims to inclusion in high art and culture. This striving towards innovation and high culture firmly situated deaf theatre within the utopian rhetoric of the post-war and Khrushchev periods. Yet discussions of form only told half the story. Those involved in deaf theatre also needed to establish the nature of the content this unique form was to convey.

Content

In 1961, F. N. Sofieva, a director of the Theatre Studio, published an article, ‘In Search of its “Face”...’, in which she argued that the Theatre needed to establish a definitive identity, or ‘face’, that would distinguish it from other theatres. In an era which saw the emergence of such ‘celebrity theatres’ as Moscow’s *Sovremennik* and *Taganka* Theatres, and Leningrad’s *Bol’shoi Drama Theatre*, and the growth of auteur theatre (*avtorskii teatr*), Sofieva recognised that the Theatre of Sign and Gesture needed to develop its own particular character: ‘Every creative collective must have such a “face”. And it is precisely the repertoire that defines the “face” of a theatre.’¹¹⁵ For Sofieva, this question of repertoire was intimately connected to the form of deaf theatre: ‘We must find a repertoire that will best correspond to the expressive tools of our ‘mute’ theatre, [and] that would become its “soul”.’ Yet in focusing on the ‘substance of the play’, Sofieva articulated one of the central preoccupations of deaf theatre collectives: what kinds of plays were considered suitable for deaf theatres to perform?

Whilst theatre specialists were discussing the relative merits of mime and sign, a parallel discussion was being conducted on the content of deaf theatre, which likewise formed part of the general move to ‘perfect and professionalise’ in the wake of the foundation of the Theatre Studio. Reviewing the results of the 1954-5 All-Russian Review of Amateur Art in the first issue of the newly founded *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, Labunskii asserted that ‘creative success depends on the correct, considered choice of play’, lamenting ‘how much strength has been wasted on overcoming the poor quality of other roles, of authorial mistakes and other such

¹¹⁵ F. N. Sofieva, ‘V Poiskakh svoego “litsa”’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 14, no. 6 (1961), p. 9. On the theatre scene after 1953, see Birgit Beumers, ‘Performing Culture: Theatre’ in *Russian Cultural Studies: an Introduction*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Sheperd (Oxford, 1998), pp. 100-106.

flaws in unfortunately chosen plays!’¹¹⁶ In order to avoid such mistakes in the future, the Theatre sought to provide guidance for local groups on the ‘correct’ way to choose a play. In its first year, the Theatre began to compile a list of ‘recommended plays, poems and prose works’ to be used in the work of amateur theatre collectives.¹¹⁷ In its role as a ‘methodological resource’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* published articles detailing the process of selecting a repertoire. One such article from 1964 drew on Sofievna’s idea of the ‘face’ of the Theatre: ‘Its “face” is action, movement, silent show [*bezmolvnyi pokaz*]. Consequently, it is necessary to look for plays that are rich in action, in which dialogue does not predominate.’¹¹⁸ Alongside such considerations, this article identified a set of central issues: ideology, artistic merit, a variety of genres and the ‘transition from the simple to the complex’. Those searching for plays were referred to the book, *The Amateur Art Library*, and the magazines *The Young Stage* and *Theatre*.

As a result of such strong guidance, a general uniformity of repertoire emerged, with amateur theatre collectives tending to echo the repertoire of the Theatre. By the opening of the professional Theatre, there were five plays in its repertoire: D. T. Lenskii’s *Lev Gurych Sinichkin*, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, I. S. Shur’s *Factory Lads*, A. N. Ostrovskii’s *Artists and Admirers*, and Goratov’s *Youth of the Fathers* (*Iunost’ otsov*). This balance between established classics and socialist-realist plays was repeated in the All-Russian Reviews of Amateur Art: the 1961 Review saw *Factory Lads* and *Youth of the Fathers* taking the ‘leading role’ amongst amateur groups, with classics such as Gogol’s *The Marriage* and Schiller’s *Perfidy and Love* also widely performed.¹¹⁹ By 1964, the Theatre had added A. N. Afinogenov’s socialist-realist classic *Mashen’ka*, the mime production *People Lived*, based on Gor’kii’s short stories, and the children’s play *Cinderella*, to its repertoire. These plays again found favour with amateur groups in the following years.¹²⁰

This echoing of repertoire choices demonstrated a strong central influence on the work of local theatre collectives. Although articles and methodological writings

¹¹⁶ Labunskii, ‘Pust’ ozhivet nemaia stsena!’, p. 16.

¹¹⁷ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 450, l. 3.

¹¹⁸ G. Baklanov, ‘Kak vybirat’ repertuar’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 17, no. 7 (1964), p. 18.

¹¹⁹ Korotkov, ‘Iarkii tvorcheskii prazdnik’, p. 12.

¹²⁰ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 902, l. 2.

stressed the importance of collective decision-making in the choice of play, local directors were encouraged to bow to the superior knowledge of local theatre professionals: ‘It is important to secure the help of the House of People’s Creativity and the department of the All-Russian Theatrical Society, which will give consultations on the choice of repertoire and lists of recommended plays.’¹²¹ This centralised guidance, however, appears to have been the result of demands ‘from below’ rather than imposition ‘from above’. A desire for help and advice in all areas of cultural work pervaded the articles in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* in this period. In an interview from 1960, Vasilisa Timofeevna Militsion, a mass-cultural activist from Voronezh, demanded ‘consultation’: ‘The newspaper must become a desktop manager for cultural work. It must be our adviser, our friend, showing us the best leading experience of cultural work.’¹²² This need for advice was perceived to be even greater in the case of theatre: according to L. Remizova, an amateur actor from Kalinin, ‘we need an objective assessment of our work, based not on personal taste and the partiality of managers, but on the rules of art, aesthetics, ideological considerations.’¹²³ ‘Professional, methodological management’ was needed in order to achieve an ideal performance.

In these letters and articles, it becomes clear that, for deaf actors, there was perceived to be a ‘correct’ form of art, based on aesthetic rules and ideological considerations, to which they should aspire in their amateur performances. This desire to conform to a central, canonical ideal appears somewhat anachronistic within the artistic framework of the late 1950s and early 60s. According to Susan Costanzo, amateur theatre groups in this period engaged in a practice reminiscent of Michel de Certeau’s concept of ‘making do’ (*bricolage*), in which they ‘sought to change some of the “rules of the game”’ whilst conforming to the dominant cultural framework.¹²⁴ The repertoires of these theatres, Costanzo argues, ‘were diverse and did not replicate plays in local professional troupes’, and they allowed amateur groups to establish an alternative notion of art that ‘helped undermine the hegemony of

¹²¹ Baklanov, ‘Kak vybirat’ repertuar’, p. 19.

¹²² I. K. Labunskii, ‘Razgovor s kul’trabotnikami’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 13, no. 9 (1960), p. 13.

¹²³ L. Remizova, ‘My ozhidali bol’shego!’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 15, no. 6 (1962), p. 15.

¹²⁴ Susan Costanzo, ‘Amateur Theatres and Amateur Publics in the Russian Republic 1958-71’, *SEER* 86, no. 2 (2008), (372-394) p. 374.

socialist realism'.¹²⁵ It is perhaps surprising that, given the strong traditions of 'making do' in deaf approaches to art, and the strength of the cultural identity of 'silent' or sign-language theatre, the 'hegemony of socialist realism' does not seem to have been challenged in this period: on the contrary, both central and amateur theatres sought to reinforce its presence on the stage.

This contradiction can be partially explained by the role attributed to theatre and art within the deaf community. Reports on the work of the Theatre cited the 1963 plenum of the CC KPSS 'On the immediate tasks of the ideological work of the party', which emphasised the importance of theatres in forming the 'new man'. The inclusion of deaf individuals in the 'transition to communism' and the 'education of the man of the future', central concepts during the Khrushchev period, was considered ultimately achievable, and as such, the decrees of the Party were wholeheartedly embraced by VOG. Given the central role of the theatre in the cultural-educational work of the society, the need to choose the most ideologically suitable plays was considered vitally important if the deaf were to fully achieve integration into the cultural identity of the broader Soviet collective. In an echo of the debates on mime, repertoire was seen as a key to this drive for inclusion: 'A play or stage work of any genre must answer communist ideology, serve the goal of the communist education of people. We don't need non-ideological things – only "humorous" or "interesting". They merely waste the creative charge [*zariad*] of the collective.'¹²⁶ This desire to see theatre as a tool to advance the Soviet project can be seen even in discussions of mime: according to an article by Sofieva, Marcel Marceau's performance of David and Goliath 'shows the victory of reason and the purity of the soul over the swaggering and stupid brute physical strength, reminiscent of the fascist military', and as such 'can serve as a visual champion of the ideas of democracy, the fight for peace and communist ideology'.¹²⁷

In their choice of repertoire, therefore, and their emphasis on 'artistic truth' and 'realism', deaf theatre sought to situate itself firmly within the canon of socialist-realist drama. Within those parameters, preferred plays tended to focus on the

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 376, 393.

¹²⁶ Baklanov, 'Kak vybirat' repertuar', p. 18.

¹²⁷ Sofieva, 'Volshebnoe iskusstvo', p. 15.

realities of *byt*, or everyday life. Significantly, however, it was the everyday life of the Soviet people in general, and not of the deaf in particular, that was given room on the stage. Plays about the deaf did not feature in any article or report for this period: although a competition was suggested in the late 1950s to find an author to write a play about the ‘lives and everyday experiences of deaf mutes’ (*zhizn’ i byt glukhonemykh*), this project was never realised.¹²⁸ Instead, the plays chosen represented socialist-realist theatre at its most formulaic.

The boundary between the acceptable and the unacceptable in deaf theatrical content can perhaps best be illustrated by examining the contrasting reception of two plays from this period: the socialist-realist classic *Mash’enka* and the contemporary play *Shadow Boxing*. *Mashen’ka*, from ‘the quill of one of the greatest Soviet dramatists’, A. N. Afinogenov, was premiered by the Theatre in February 1964.¹²⁹ According to a letter sent to the VOG chairman Sutiagin by M. A. Izdon, the deputy manager of the Theatre, *Mashen’ka* tells the story of the fifteen-year-old eponymous heroine, who is sent by her ‘shallow, thoughtless’ mother to live with her grandfather, the old professor Okaemov. Okaemov initially sees the girl as intruding in the peace and order of his scholarly life, but is gradually won over by Mashen’ka’s ‘purity and vulnerability’. Helping her through her first heartbreak, Okaemov’s life ‘takes on new meaning and both he and his quiet home become unthinkable without the sound of young voices within them’.¹³⁰ This last phrase alone, with its emphasis on sound, highlighted the fact that this play was not representative of deaf experience. Despite this, this play became a staple of both professional and amateur deaf theatre, taking a central place in the Theatre’s tour repertoire from 1965.¹³¹

That is not to say, however, that experiments in new, non-canonical theatre were never attempted by the deaf. In 1967, a new play *Shadow Boxing* (*Boi s Ten’iu*), by the young contemporary playwright Valerii Tur, was premiered by the Theatre of Sign and Gesture. Yet in their overwhelmingly negative response to this play, the journalists and readers of *Zhizn’ glukhikh* reinforced the parameters of what was

¹²⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 450, l. 6.

¹²⁹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 902, l. 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, l. 19.

¹³¹ See *Moskovskii teatr-studii mimika i zhesta*, ed. N. Dairedzhieva (Moscow, 1966), p. 40.

considered good ‘deaf theatre’. The play’s main storyline deals with the inner turmoil of a geologist, Victor Semenov, who, during an expedition to the taiga, inadvertently causes the death of one of his workers. Upon realising his guilt, he chooses to remain silent and to pass sentence on himself, renouncing his job, his social position, his wife and friends to become a rootless tramp. He lives like this for three years, before discovering that the worker is alive and well, and that his torment has been for nothing. This play, therefore, obliquely dealt with the ‘dilemmas of de-Stalinization’ inherent in the thaw: that is, how to confront trauma and deal with personal guilt for the crimes of the past.¹³² Yet the play’s review in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* refused to engage with these issues, rejecting it for its failure to ‘spiritually enrich’ the audience.¹³³

In part, this was a result of a disjunction between form and content. The play’s artistic message stemmed from its title, *Shadow Boxing*, an obvious boxing metaphor. Its significance was explained in the play’s script; one of the characters states that ‘in boxing there’s a term, shadow boxing. That’s when a boxer fights with an imaginary opponent; that is, with himself. And believe me, there is no harder opponent’.¹³⁴ The play thus dealt with the inner torment of a character at war with himself. Yet the play’s heavy reliance on dialogue meant that the reviewer, S. Valerin, completely missed the phrase that explained this concept, and thus failed to understand the play. For Valerin, this dependence on dialogue, the tendency to ‘tell’ rather than to ‘show’, as well as the heavy use of allegory that did not easily translate into sign, made the play almost inaccessible to deaf viewers. By far the strongest criticism, however, was directed at the play’s characters, which did not seem to correspond to the expected typology of socialist-realist plays. In an unprecedented move on the part of *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, the review was accompanied by viewers’ letters, which added the voices of the ‘deaf masses’ to the criticisms of the reviewer. An engineer, signing himself Besfamil’nyi (Anonymous), commented that ‘the character of Starover [a wise old fool who counsels the main character] is unclear to me. Why is he needed in the play? And why does his backward philosophy have an

¹³² See Polly Jones, ‘From the Secret Speech to the Burial of Stalin: Real and Ideal Responses to De-Stalinization’ in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization*, ed. Jones, pp. 41-63.

¹³³ S. Valerin, ‘A byl li boi?’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 20, no. 5 (1967), p. 26.

¹³⁴ Valerii Tur, *Boi s ten’iu*, cited in Valerin, ‘A byl li boi?’, p. 26.

influence on the hero?’¹³⁵ Similarly, a pensioner, S. Lychkina, stated confusedly that ‘in his actions, Ivanov is a scoundrel, a coward. But the artist A. Kolomenskii plays him so sympathetically, that you don’t feel hatred towards him. Is that right, an anti-hero and suddenly so charming?’¹³⁶ The lack of a clear ideological message was thus rejected by both reviewer and audience: the concluding paragraph of the official review stated that ‘the collective must take into account the experience of the staging of *Shadow Boxing*, think over the methodology of the work one more time, in order to strengthen the ideological-aesthetic influence on viewers’.¹³⁷

Whilst the form of deaf theatre was experimental and innovative, therefore, and sought to situate deaf theatrical expression within the realms of high culture and art, its content perpetuated the somewhat conservative artistic ideals of socialist realism. In doing so, deaf artists and directors sought to generate and reinforce a particularly Soviet selfhood that the mainstream theatrical tradition had already begun to question. These two identities were not considered contradictory, however: in performing the classics of socialist realism on the stage, deaf artists asserted an ideal of the deaf as equal and participating members of the Soviet collective, and sought to make this ideal a reality through the educative power of theatre. In seeking to reject social as well as cultural marginality, the conservative content of deaf theatre thus demonstrated the same striving towards inclusion. In this respect, the utopian notion of socialist realism, that of portraying ‘reality in its revolutionary development’, found a second incarnation on the deaf stage.

Conclusion

The contrast between form and content in the case of the Theatre of Sign and Gesture demonstrated the problems and ambiguities of cultural engagement in this period. Whilst the impetus to create a deaf theatre, and the engagement with experimental and avant-garde forms, would attest to the relative cultural freedoms of

¹³⁵ Letter by V. Besfamil’nyi, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 20, no. 5 (1967), p. 27.

¹³⁶ Letter by S. Lychkina, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 20, no. 5 (1967), p. 27.

¹³⁷ Valerin, ‘A byl li boi?’, p. 27. Clearly this methodological rethink paid off: *Shadow Boxing* was one of a handful of plays chosen to be performed by the Theatre at the Stanislavskii Dramatic Theatre in Moscow in June 1968. L. Polonskii, ‘Otvettvennost’ pered vremenem’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 21, no. 12 (1968), p. 10.

the thaw period, the desire of the deaf community to find inclusion within the broader Soviet collective both constrained and directed this engagement. Far from being caught between ‘reform’ and ‘reaction’, however, deaf theatre showed that the experimentation and innovation in culture promoted under Khrushchev did not preclude an engagement with Sovietness. On the contrary, for those involved with the Theatre, the turn towards high art and the recognition by deaf individuals of their own cultural potential represented a strain of utopianism intimately intertwined with Soviet ideas of cultural progress.

As such, deaf theatre shows that this period was not just about de-Stalinization, but also about the re-launch of the Soviet project and the rediscovery of the ‘utopian dreams’ of an idealised socialist society.¹³⁸ Far from challenging the nature of socialist realism, in their theatrical experimentation, the deaf sought to enact it. This symbiosis of experimental forms and socialist content is perhaps best illustrated by a scene from *People Lived*, the deaf mime production from 1963, which became emblematic of the ‘essence’ of deaf theatre. The hero, Danko, is trying to lead his people through the forest to escape enemies who wish to enslave them. The forest is dark, and the people become angry that Danko is leading them into danger. ‘And suddenly he ripped open his chest and from it ripped out his heart, and raised it high above his head... It blazed as brightly as the sun and brighter... And then suddenly the forest parted, and the people immediately plunged into a sea of sunlight and clean air, washed by the rain.’¹³⁹ This scene, which was used as the epigraph to a brochure celebrating the work of the Theatre, demonstrated both the intense emotional power of the silent gesture, and the ability of theatre to show the way to a brighter future in communism.

¹³⁸ See Juliane Fürst, Polly Jones and Susan Morrissey, ‘The Relaunch of the Soviet Project, 1945-1964: Introduction’, SEER 86, no. 2 (2008), pp. 201-207.

¹³⁹ M. Gor’kii, cited in *Moskovskii teatr-studii mimika i zhesta*, ed. Dairedzhieva, p. 1.

5 *Cold War in the Deaf Community*



figure 9
**Deaf Students of the Zlatoust Industrial School
Propaganda Brochure, 1963**

On 28th September 1958, in VOG organisations across the RSFSR, a programme of lectures, theatre performances and social events was held to celebrate the first International Day of the Deaf.¹ In an article produced for publication in the central newspaper *Trud (Labour)*, the chairman of VOG, Pavel Kirillovich Sutiagin,

¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 488, l. 16.

explained that the purpose of this international event was to ‘attract the attention of the organs of government and the society of various countries to the improvement of the social position of deaf-mutes and deaf people, whose number, according to the figures of the World Federation [of the Deaf], has reached thirty-two million’. Members of the international deaf community, Sutiagin argued, were united in their desire ‘to be full-fledged members of society’. Yet he drew a sharp distinction between the experience of deaf people in the ‘socialist camp’, who lived a ‘full-blooded life’ (*polnokrovnaia zhizn'*), and deaf people in ‘capitalist countries’, who were ‘hindered in their receipt of the most elementary education’, unable to find work and thus forced to rely on charity which ‘debased their human worth’.²

Sutiagin’s article encapsulated the many contradictions that attended the Soviet deaf community’s entry onto the world stage in the mid-1950s. This period saw the tentative beginnings of an international deaf movement, driven by the newly-founded World Federation of the Deaf, which sought to unite the deaf as a group to lobby for civil rights and social rehabilitation. This ideal of an international deaf community was undermined, however, by the very real political tensions between individual nations in the context of the Cold War. The political rhetoric of the Cold War not only influenced the interactions between national groups, but also shaped, in opposition, how national deaf organisations framed their own conceptions of deafness.

This chapter examines how this awareness of political geography informed the activities of VOG in the international arena. From the mid-1950s, deaf individuals from the Soviet Union came into contact with foreign deaf people and foreign experiences of deafness on a variety of levels: as delegates of the meetings and congresses of the World Federation of the Deaf, as members of tourist groups and sporting teams. This contact allowed them to refine their own views of Soviet (and socialist) deafness in the light of their experiences of the ‘capitalist West’. Similarly, the emergence of an international deaf community provoked a wave of Soviet deaf propaganda, in which narratives of the Soviet deaf experience were constructed to persuade the deaf in the West and the developing world of the superiority of the

² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 489, l. 64.

socialist experience. These narratives were directed towards the wider world, but their construction provoked new ways of looking at the self within the Soviet deaf community. Whilst the notion of the deaf as active and ‘useful’ citizens was stressed, this very agency was undercut by a new representative idea: that of the deaf as passive objects of the beneficence and welfare of the generous Soviet state.

This chapter thus deals with the construction of a narrative of Soviet deaf selfhood: one that was directed at the world at large, but that also revealed much about how the Soviet deaf community was encouraged to understand its own experience. In this respect, it deals more with rhetorical narratives and representations than with the ‘lived reality’ of the deaf community in this period. This is in part a question of sources: VOG internal documents ceased to be filed systematically in the mid-1960s, and the archive file was closed in 1972. Although some documents after this date have been retained by the Society, the majority have been lost. It is particularly difficult, therefore, to get underneath these propaganda narratives and assess the accuracy of their claims. This is not to suggest that these narratives were in some way ‘false’, however. Stories of equal opportunity and agency were borne out of the experience of deaf individuals throughout the Soviet period. Similarly, the growing predominance of notions of passivity and welfare was propelled by broader institutional trends shaping the deaf community as it moved towards the 1970s. The developing influence of science in the understanding and treatment of deafness, along with the growing bureaucratisation of VOG, saw the deaf increasingly objectified in the eyes of social-welfare administrations. Whilst it is not possible to trace the complexities of individual deaf experience, these shifting narratives nonetheless shed light on the rhetorical construction of the Soviet deaf as a distinct social group in this period, and reveal how international and institutional pressures shaped and directed this construction. The shifts in this rhetoric, from the agency and activity of the deaf community, to its passivity in the context of propaganda narratives and institutional frameworks, are the central focus of this chapter.

Encountering the Foreign ‘Other’

VOG and its members took their first tentative steps into the international arena in August 1955, when a delegation comprising the chairman of VOG P. K. Sutiagin, the RSFSR’s Deputy Minister of Social Welfare M. T. Tsvetovaia and the Ukrainian Minister of Social Welfare F. A. Anachenko attended the II International Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf in Zagreb.³ During the proceedings of the Congress, VOG was admitted as a member of the World Federation, and Sutiagin, as its representative, was elected as one of the four vice-presidents of the governing Bureau. Over the following decades, VOG became a keen participant in the workings of the Federation, sending delegations to the quadrennial International Congress, contributing papers and speeches to the meetings of the General Assembly, actively promoting the International Day of the Deaf in local deaf organisations and, in 1962, hosting an ordinary meeting of the Bureau in Leningrad.⁴

The World Federation of the Deaf was a young international organisation, formed in Rome in 1951 on the initiative of members of the Ente Nazionale Sordomuti (ENS), the Italian national deaf organisation.⁵ Cesare Magarotto, the first General Secretary of the Federation, described its foundation as a response to the ‘tragedy’ of the Second World War, in the aftermath of which, those ‘mutilated by nature and by the atavistic faults of society’ could ‘easily, in the name of their mutual sacrifice, cross all borders, hearing only their fraternity’.⁶ As such, the Federation mirrored the idealistic internationalism of other post-war organisations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation, bodies with which the Federation sought to establish close ties. United by ‘faith and love’ (a recurring trope in the speeches of the International Congress), the deaf and hard of hearing could come together as ‘silent brothers’ and lobby their respective governments to improve their lot.⁷ The

³ ‘Krepnut družhestvennye sviazi’, editorial in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 21, no. 9 (1968), p. 1.

⁴ This surge in cultural exchanges with the West was not confined to the deaf community: see Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park, Penn., 2003).

⁵ Resolution ‘For the World Federation’ in *Atti Ufficiali del Congresso Mondiale dei Sordomuti*, ed. Cesare Magarotto (Rome, 1953), pp. 611-613.

⁶ Magarotto, a hearing individual, was the son of one of the (deaf) founders of the ENS. He became General Secretary at the first International Congress, a post he held until 1987. Cesare Magarotto, ‘Preface’, *Atti Ufficiali del Congresso Mondiale*, (v-xix) p. viii.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Federation's Statute declared its aim to be the 'social rehabilitation of the deaf', achieved through international action: collecting data on the status of the deaf in different countries, studying this data in international meetings, organising exchanges of specialists in the field of deaf education and rehabilitation, and defending the civil rights of deaf people worldwide.⁸ Through such action, according to Magarotto, the Federation would become the 'common patrimony of all the deaf of the world'.⁹

The World Federation of the Deaf sought, therefore, to establish an international deaf community, and with it an internationally accepted approach to the social rehabilitation of deaf people, based on scientific data and reasoned debate. Yet the Federation's internationalism, as it was experienced by its members, was far from uncomplicated. At its inception, the Federation counted eleven countries as official delegates, alongside twelve 'observers'.¹⁰ By the V International Congress in 1967, that number had risen to 34, with over 3,000 individual participants.¹¹ For those VOG delegates attending the International Congresses, meetings of the Bureau and General Assembly, the Federation represented their first contact with the deaf of other nationalities and with the 'many ways to be deaf' experienced worldwide.¹² These experiences of foreign 'otherness' were not confined to the official meetings of the Federation. In the corridors of the International Congresses, delegates of different nationalities met and talked (through translators) about the nature of their own societies and life experiences. The host cities for Federation events took delegates on tours of their deaf schools, clubs and workplaces, and often organised meetings with politicians and civil servants responsible for serving the needs of the deaf. From 1957, VOG sent teams of sportsmen to the International Games for the

⁸ 'Statute of the World Federation of the Deaf', *Proceedings of the Second World Congress of the Deaf*, ed. Ferdinand Maslić (Zagreb, 1955), (378-383) p. 378.

⁹ Cesare Magarotto, 'Report on the Work of the Federation', *Proceedings of the Second World Congress*, (38-46) p. 39.

¹⁰ Resolution 'For the World Federation', p. 612. Official delegates included Austria, Egypt, Italy, United States of America, Israel, France, Yugoslavia, Spain, Germany, Turkey and Holland. Observers included Brazil, Chile, India, Ceylon, Venezuela, Mexico, Denmark, Peru, Great Britain, Australia and Canada.

¹¹ E. Vartan'ian, 'Deviz: "Glukhie sredi slyshashchikh"', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 20, no. 11 (1967), p. 24.

¹² The phrase 'many ways to be deaf' was coined by Leila Monaghan and Constanze Schmaling to 'emphasize the variation that exists' between national deaf communities. Leila Monaghan and Constanze Schmaling, 'Preface' in *Many Ways to Be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities*, ed. Leila Monaghan, Constanze Schmaling, Karen Nakamura and Graham H. Turner (Washington D.C., 2003), (ix-xi) p. ix.

Deaf, a quadrennial event organised by the International Deaf Sporting Committee. Furthermore, on the basis of links established within the Federation, independent exchanges of groups of deaf people from different countries became commonplace. In the official report of VOG's activities from 1959-62, for example, a new section 'International Links' recorded seven tours abroad by deaf people, including a 3-person delegation to the III International Congress in Wiesbaden, a team of 39 sportsmen to the IX International Games in Helsinki, and tourist trips to the GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.¹³

In the 1950s and 1960s, therefore, the deaf began to experience the foreign 'other' through personal contact and trips abroad. This shift reflected broader trends in Soviet society: according to Anne Gorsuch, an explosion of foreign travel under Khrushchev allowed Soviet citizens to 'see the foreign' and as such to explore 'Khrushchevian constructs of nation, of self and of other'.¹⁴ This 'deaf tourism' was not a uniform experience: deaf individuals travelled abroad for a number of distinct purposes, as members of sporting teams, official delegations and tourist groups.¹⁵ Yet in each instance, Soviet deaf people met with, observed and experienced the lives of deaf people in other countries, and used these experiences to construct a narrative of the nature of deafness abroad. This first-hand experience was not open to all: delegations to the World Federation of the Deaf and to other international scientific conferences were typically made up of members of VOG's Central Directorate and other government departments; participation in the International

¹³GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, l. 48. First established in Paris in 1924, the International Games for the Deaf (also known as the International Silent Games) have been held every four years, except for a brief hiatus during the Second World War. Now known as the Deaflympics, the games are open to all individuals with a hearing loss of at least 55 decibels in their 'better ear'. The use of hearing aids is not permitted. David Legg, Claudia Emes, David Stewart and Robert Steadward, 'Historical Overview of the Paralympics, Special Olympics and Deaflympics', *Palaestra: Forum of Sport, Physical Education & Recreation for Those With Disabilities* 21, no. 1 (2004), <<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Historical+overview+of+the+Paralympics,+Special+Olympics,+and..-a0114366604>> [accessed 27/08/10].

¹⁴ Anne E. Gorsuch, 'Time Travelers: Soviet Tourists to Eastern Europe' in *Turizm: the Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (Ithaca, 2006), (205-226) p. 206.

¹⁵ VOG had established an account with Inturist, the Soviet state administration for foreign tourism, in 1958. The Inturist account provided VOG with translation services in its correspondence and contacts with foreign deaf organizations. According to their contract, VOG paid 100 roubles per 8 hour day for an interpreter to serve foreign delegations. Written translations cost 800 roubles per page for European languages and 1500 roubles per page for eastern and Asian languages. No reference is made, however, to sign language translation. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 489, l. 58.

Games was dependent on sporting prowess; and the number of ordinary VOG members able to travel abroad was limited. In 1961, for example, no tourist trips abroad were organised by VOG, and letters requesting permission to travel abroad were rejected by the Central Directorate.¹⁶ Yet despite its limited nature, this tourism was a significant factor in the development of narratives of deaf identity in the Khrushchev period. Mediated through official reports to the deaf society and through a particular genre of ‘travel diary’ article (*putevoi dnevnik*) common in the magazine *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, awareness of deafness abroad helped to shape understandings of the nature of deafness in the Soviet Union.

These sources – journalism and trip reports – demonstrate the ways in which experiences of international difference by Soviet deaf travellers were codified and explained. By their nature they are problematic: as Gorsuch has pointed out, official reports of travel were ‘far from private’, and thus did not necessarily accurately reflect ‘experience’ as such.¹⁷ The travel diary article, in particular, became a fixed genre in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* during the 1960s, in which detailed explanations of the lives of deaf people in the country concerned were bracketed by descriptions of travel in technologically superior Soviet aircraft and trains. More personal or revealing sources, such as diaries or travel journals, which break with these official narratives and allow the historian access to the individual experiences and reflections of the deaf traveller, have yet to be found. However, for the ‘armchair traveller’, whose access to abroad was confined to reports and articles read in deaf magazines, the interpretations placed on foreign experiences were as significant as the experiences themselves. From reading these sources, it becomes clear that the dominant interpretation placed on experiences of deafness abroad was that of international politics, and in particular the geographical divisions of the developing Cold War. Foreign experiences of deafness were viewed according to their geographical ‘camps’: the capitalist West, socialist Eastern Europe, and the developing world.

The mapping of Cold War politics onto the international deaf community was not merely a matter of Soviet interpretation. From the outset, the workings of the World

¹⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 681, l. 97.

¹⁷ Gorsuch, ‘Time Travelers’, p. 207.

Federation of the Deaf had been strongly influenced by international politics. Both the ‘socialist’ and ‘capitalist’ nations used the international meetings and the workings of the Federation to advance their respective political ideologies. For example, sustained pressure from the West German delegation, in the form of the refusal of financial support, delayed the acceptance of the Union of the Deaf of the GDR into the Federation for several years, and persuaded the Bureau to hold the III International Congress in Wiesbaden, West Germany, rather than in Berlin, as had been originally planned.¹⁸ In London, during a 1963 meeting of the Bureau, an argument broke out between the Spanish delegate, Marroken, and the Polish representative, Petrikovich, over the ‘evident sympathy’ displayed by General Secretary Magarotto towards Russia.¹⁹ Equally, during the V International Congress, Sutiagin used his speeches to the General Assembly to preach nuclear disarmament, and to protest against the American intervention in Vietnam, claiming that ‘without peace on Earth, it is impossible to hope to improve the lives of the deaf’.²⁰ Political divisions were further exacerbated by the institutional structure of the Federation. To ease its administrative burden, the Bureau had created six Regional Secretariats. One of these, the Regional Secretariat for Eastern Europe and Asia, which included the RSFSR, Poland, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and the People’s Republic of China, was described in a letter of protest by Magarotto in 1958 as a potential ‘bloc of communist countries’ and a threat to the integrity of the Federation.²¹

Although it was rare for overt political gestures to distract from the business of the Federation, the shadow of political division led the Soviet delegation, at least, to explain the differences between the experiences of deaf people in terms of the nature of their national political systems (*stroï*). In the West, the widespread difficulties faced by deaf individuals in getting an education, finding work and achieving civil rights – problems which formed the basis of discussions in World Federation

¹⁸ ‘Mezhdunarodnye sviazi’, editorial in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 12, no. 7 (1959), p. 21.

¹⁹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 40, l. 107.

²⁰ E. Vartan’ian, ‘Deviz: glukhie sredi slyshashchikh’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 20, no. 11 (1967), (24-28) p. 25 Mark Edele has also noted the use of international organisations as forums for cold war propaganda in this period: the Soviet Committee of War Veterans (SKVV) was established, he argues, as ‘a *Potemkin* institution for international propaganda. It was organised because the Soviet leadership wanted to use the terrain of international veterans’ politics within the World Veterans Federation [...] as an arena for cold war propaganda’. Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society* (Oxford, 2008), p. 162.

²¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 483, l. 2.

meetings – were interpreted as a natural corollary of the capitalist system, in which the welfare of the individual is subordinate to the demands of capital. A report by Sutiagin to the VOG Central Directorate explained that ‘The II International Congress noted the social inequality of deaf-mutes in the world [...] In the conditions of capitalist countries, the activities of [deaf] societies can only temporarily evoke sympathy towards deaf-mutes from the side of the ruling classes, in the best case donations, but cannot fundamentally change the position of the deaf, let alone rehabilitate them with civil rights’. By contrast, the positive experience of deaf people in socialist countries was due to the fact that ‘the needs of deaf-mutes are resolved, not in isolation, but in connection with the general raising of the material and cultural levels of the workers [*trudiashchiisia*]’.²²

These descriptions of the nature of capitalist and socialist societies clearly conformed to dominant Soviet ideological narratives of ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the Khrushchev era, experiences of the Western (and predominantly American) ‘other’ were interpreted in terms of a clash between the consumerist well-being of capitalism and the ‘social safeguards’ and welfare of socialism.²³ This ideological dichotomy was reinforced by World Federation reports and the personal experiences of deaf travellers. In these accounts, usually written by VOG delegates to international conferences, the dominant narrative of Western deaf experience was that of widespread unemployment, due to the limited availability of education for deaf people and the unwillingness of hearing employers to take on deaf workers. In 1963, an article on the IV International Congress in Stockholm in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* reported that, according to the representatives of capitalist countries, ‘deaf people experience great difficulties in entering work. For equal work with the hearing they do not receive equal pay. The movement of qualified deaf people to more lucrative positions is much hindered’.²⁴ Personal accounts of visits to Western countries supported this narrative still further. Describing a trip to Paris in 1964, M. Sharapov told of severe difficulties in finding work, even for hearing people, an insight

²² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 484, l. 1.

²³ According to Susan Reid, the notion of the Soviet Union as a welfare state first gained currency during the XX party congress, and thereafter formed part of the Soviet propaganda narrative. Susan E. Reid, ‘Women in the Home’, *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Melanie Ilić, Susan E. Reid and Lynne Attwood (New York, 2004), (149-176) p. 154.

²⁴ Anon., ‘Stockholm, August 1963: vsemirnyi congress glukhikh’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 16, no. 11 (1963), p. 5.

gleaned apparently through conversations with taxi drivers whilst travelling through Paris. As a result, ‘deaf adolescents, upon finishing school, where they have trained for a profession, are forced to work either in their parents’ businesses or look for seasonal work’. The general impression of hardship was vividly evoked: in their travels around Paris, the visitors noticed ‘how badly dressed and downtrodden people sat or stood with outstretched hands, or with hats lying on the ground, into which passers-by threw a few centimes’.²⁵ The notion of foreign deaf people as recipients of degrading charity was repeated in an article on London by I. Tsukerman, which showed a picture of a collection box for the Greater London Fund for the Blind and explained that similar collection boxes for the deaf were placed around the city. ‘Only rarely do passers-by throw money into these moneyboxes’, Tsukerman observed in conclusion.²⁶

Soviet experiences of the West, despite their common tropes, were not uniform or straightforward. Reductive accounts of Western poverty were challenged by the vast difference between the experience of Europe, mired in post-war reconstruction, and the relative abundance of 1960s America. In 1965, Sutiagin visited Gallaudet College, the American university for the deaf in Washington D.C., shortly after its 100th anniversary celebrations. Sutiagin described the campus facilities with clear admiration: ‘The College has a library with 150,000 volumes, a film library with educational films, including some in sign language, a reading room, canteen, male and female dormitories, a club and sporting facilities.’²⁷ He wrote of the established system of education, carried out ‘in parallel’ in spoken language and sign, and of the wide range of subjects on offer. The abundance of money available for deaf people in America, not only at Gallaudet, but in their dealings with international bodies, was clearly a point of some concern for VOG members in the 1960s. In a report on international links from 1963, Sutiagin set out the extent of American spending, concluding that, ‘if we add to this that the X International Sporting Games, taking place in Washington in 1965, will be subsidised [*provodiatsia na l’gotnykh usloviakh*] (full maintenance of one sportsman with travel in both directions for 150 American dollars, that is less than 20 per cent of the actual costs), then the

²⁵ M. Sharapov, ‘Deviat’ dnei vo Frantsii: rasskaz vtoroi’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 17, no. 11 (1964), p.18.

²⁶ I. Tsukerman, ‘London: vstrechi i vpechatleniia’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 19, no. 12 (1966), p. 17.

²⁷ P. Sutiagin, ‘Po tu storonu okeana’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 18, no. 1 (1965), p. 20.

propagandistic goals of this expenditure becomes clear. This circumstance, and also the widely-advertised acceptance of Kennedy by the leaders of the USA [deaf] society, and his agreement to be honorary chairman of the X Sporting games, undoubtedly arouses the sympathies of the participants'.²⁸

If American spending was a sore point for VOG members, it was not allowed to complicate the portrayal of capitalist hardship. In Sutiagin's report, the impressive nature of the work done at Gallaudet was nonetheless marred by the divisions and inequalities common to all capitalist societies: 'From conversations with students of the college it became clear that the price of an education at the college is 1500 American dollars per year. It is unsurprising that less than one per cent of deaf Americans study at the college.'²⁹ In a similar manner, education in London and France was described as accessible to the very few, through either family wealth or rare charitable bursary: 'In France, with its population of fifty million, there are only four state educational establishments for deaf children, with approximately 1,500 places. Only children of well-to-do parents study there. These schools are inaccessible to poor people [*bedniaki*], as it is necessary to pay at least 120 francs per month for the maintenance of one child.'³⁰ In London, the influence of religious charities on deaf education was noted: 'special education exists generally on the donations of individuals.'³¹ Furthermore, the example of Gallaudet was called upon to emphasise the limits placed on American deaf individuals in their choice of profession. By virtue of being a deaf-only institution, Gallaudet was seen to offer an 'education [...] limited to those professions [deemed] accessible to the deaf'.³² As a result of such limits, Sutiagin argued, 'the capitalists do not recognise the ability of deaf people to work in mechanised industry and on lathes and machines. Discrimination against the deaf is strengthened by the fact that the majority of them are unqualified'.³³

²⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 966, l. 9.

²⁹ Sutiagin, 'Po tu storonu okeana', p. 21.

³⁰ Sharapov, 'Deviat' dnei vo Frantsii', p.18.

³¹ Tsukerman, 'London: vstrechi i vpechatleniia', p. 17.

³² This opinion was expressed by Sutiagin in a letter to an Indian lawyer in 1960. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 595, l. 76.

³³ Sutiagin, 'Po tu storonu okeana', p. 20.

Significant in these accounts of the West was the picture painted of the organisation of educational, professional and cultural services for the deaf. In stark contrast to the centralised nature of VOG, Western deaf organisations were portrayed as fragmented and hence unable to coordinate the necessary measures to improve the situation of deaf people. Meeting with the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) in Washington, Sutiagin noted that its leaders ‘live in different states’, and that the Association had no apparatus or headquarters. This lack of centralisation was seen to impact heavily on the nature of provision for the deaf. For example, according to Sutiagin, only 29 states had sign-language consultants, thus making work with the deaf more difficult. Likewise, the lack of coordination with state administrations had a negative effect. Recounting his conversations with Gallaudet students, he noted that ‘these simple Americans lamented with bitterness how little is still being done for the deaf in the USA. The federal government and state governments have still not resolved the most important problems of deafness. Special schools are in acute need of teachers. Over half of children cannot receive a profession due to a lack of vocational schools’. In France, Sharapov likewise noted that ‘there is no register of deaf children, and therefore no system to serve them’, and that without a centralised system of work placement, ‘deaf people must find work themselves’.³⁴

Narratives of Western deaf experiences thus focused on discrimination and lack of opportunity, with the positive impact of education and technology undermined by its limited availability to a narrow elite of deaf people. In highlighting the failures of organisation, and the lack of provision for the deaf, these articles drew implicit links with the immediate history of Soviet deaf people, on their struggle to establish a society and to organise themselves and their lives effectively. This use of Soviet deaf history to contextualise foreign experiences of deafness can be traced throughout these accounts. In a brief article under the rubric ‘In Capitalist Countries’ (*V stranakh kapitala*), an unknown author played on the symbol of the deaf postcard-seller: ‘Not long ago, some Soviet tourists visited the United States of America. At the port of New York, one of them was handed a card. On it was written: “To the public: kindly pardon my interruption – I am deaf and trying to earn my honest living by selling these alphabet cards. Give what you can ... please. Thank you.”’

³⁴ Sharapov, ‘Deviat’ dnei vo Frantsii’, p.18.

The significance of this moment for the capitalist system was spelled out: ‘The man sells them so as not to die of hunger, to get a piece of bread. There you have it, the true face of the “free” world.’³⁵ For the Soviet deaf community, the historic figure of the deaf postcard-seller had become potently symbolic of their progress since the revolution, representing the pre-revolutionary, ‘backward’ deaf, who, through labour and education, had become enlightened, Soviet deaf individuals. Articles like these thus played on a memory of personal and collective transformation. In this way, Western deaf experience was placed within a Marxist historical teleology: the ‘before’ to the Soviet Union’s progressive ‘after’.³⁶

In their narration of the West, therefore, Soviet deaf travellers explained the experience of Western deaf people in terms of their social system. As such, despite the impact of Cold War rhetoric, deaf people in capitalist countries were configured as victims of the enemy, rather than enemies themselves.³⁷ Articles referred to Western deaf individuals as ‘friends’ and ‘colleagues’. Accounts of the World Federation talked of friendships established over successive Congresses, and described ‘friendly conversations between our delegates and the delegates of other countries’ in the corridors between meetings.³⁸ Indeed, over the 1960s, longstanding working relationships were established between VOG members and representatives

³⁵ Anon., ‘Reklama i deistvitel’nost’’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 13, no. 11 (1960), p. 23.

³⁶ This teleological interpretation was also applied to China: see Anon., ‘Vashe segodnia – nashe zavtra’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 12, no. 6 (1959), p. 23. The ‘forward-USSR’ trope was a widespread one. In her discussion of the American National Exhibition of 1959, Susan Reid points out that this “‘wave of the future” psychology’ was a commonplace amongst the Soviet population at the time: the more widely known propaganda trope of the Soviet Union attempting to ‘catch up and overtake’ America was combined with a belief in ‘communism’s (inherent) superiority as a social system’, which would allow the Soviet Union to progress more quickly to a better way of life. Susan E. Reid, ‘Who Will Beat Whom?: Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008), (855-904) p. 890. Kristin Roth-Ey also makes reference to the ‘vibrant, forward-looking and high-minded populace’ showcased during the International Youth Festival of 1957. Kristin Roth-Ey, “‘Loose girls” on the Loose? Sex, Propaganda and the 1957 Youth Festival’, in *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Ilić et al, (75-95) p. 77.

³⁷ The idea of the deaf as ‘victims of the system’ was a central part of WFD rhetoric. At the II International Congress, Francesco Rubino stated that ‘the responsible government authorities have always neglected the problems of the deaf’, and that ‘the only means of obtaining aid for the deaf from a government is to submit to the authorities – together with clear and verifiable data – the fundamental needs of the deaf’. With this information, the deaf could use the international organisation to put pressure on their own national governments to provide for their needs. Francesco Rubino, ‘International Solidarity of the Deaf as a Pre-Condition for the Development of National Organisations’, *Proceedings of the Second World Congress*, ed. Maslić, (94-96) p. 94.

³⁸ G. Lukinykh, ‘Novye vstrechi, novye druž’ia: zametki uchastnika kongressa’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, 16, no. 11 (1963), p. 6.

of Western deaf societies, such as Suzanne Lavaud, the French representative to the Bureau of the WFD who organised exchanges between France and the RSFSR.³⁹ By virtue of being downtrodden by the ‘capitalist system’ (*kapitalisticheskii stroi*), the deaf of the world were seen to be united, in a manner reminiscent of descriptions of the international proletariat of the 1920s (‘the deaf of all countries, unite!’).⁴⁰ The division of capitalist and socialist, West and East, therefore, was between national systems, rather than deaf people themselves. Western deaf people, it was stressed, ‘feel a sincere friendship towards the Soviet people’, from whom they were divided only by social circumstance.⁴¹

If Western deaf people were configured as ‘friends’ and ‘colleagues’, the deaf of socialist countries were ‘brothers’. Whilst trips to the West were rare and limited to events such as the International Congress, deaf tourism within Eastern Europe was a much more widespread and democratic phenomenon. During the late 1950s and 1960s, groups of deaf people from all over the RSFSR established exchanges with their socialist counterparts to the east of the Iron Curtain. Accounts of such trips played up the familial nature of these exchanges: whereas tales of journeys to the West emphasised the alien sensation of travel in a strange land (delegates stranded at airports, held up at passport control and unable to use public transport due to a lack of the correct currency), journeys to Eastern Europe were marked by the friendliness of travel companions and the large deaf reception committees waiting on station platforms, holding bouquets of flowers.⁴² Such trips usually followed a similar pattern: after being met from the train by members of the local deaf society, the Russian travellers would be shown around local deaf clubs, labour enterprises and schools, where they would stop and chat with deaf pupils and workers. Alongside this ‘deaf tour’, travellers would also visit the local sights and familiarise themselves with locations associated with the history of the Soviet Union, often linked in some way to the life of Lenin.

³⁹ See GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 683, l. 32.

⁴⁰ See ‘28. IX – Vsemirnyi den’ glukhogo’, advert in *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 11, no. 9, p. 1.

⁴¹ Sharapov, ‘Deviat’ dnei vo Frantsii’, p. 19.

⁴² See Sutiagin, ‘Po tu storonu okeana’, p. 20. Reception parties at the train station holding flowers were a common trope: see A. Korotkov, ‘10 dnei v GDR’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 14, no. 3 (1961), p. 16.

Marked by a tone of familiarity and friendliness, accounts of trips to Eastern Europe made much of *ad hoc* personal encounters with socialist deaf individuals. During a tourist trip to Bulgaria, for example, Mikhail Abramov, a VOG chairman from Kursk, was hailed in the street by Stoian Dimitrov, a deaf worker from Tarnova. Having heard of the visit by the Soviet tourists, Dimitrov had jumped on his motorcycle and travelled fifty kilometres, ‘despite the inclement weather’, to meet them at the Shipka Mountain Pass. ‘His eyes shone with such sincere, simple-hearted joy as he eagerly shook our hands, expressing his greetings!’ noted Abramov. ‘He may have been seeing us for the first time, but it was enough for him to know that we were his Soviet brothers.’⁴³ This brotherly feeling was experienced both in Eastern Europe itself, and also during encounters at International Congresses, where ‘members of delegations from the People’s Democracies – Poles, Hungarians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Czechs – with whom we are constantly in contact, gave us friendly smiles’.⁴⁴ Deaf individuals from socialist countries, it seems, were always thrilled to meet members of the Soviet deaf community.

This brotherly bond between socialist deaf individuals was interpreted as a result of the similarity in attitudes and approaches to deafness within socialist countries. Articles and reports on the experience of deafness in Eastern Europe emphasised certain socialist commonalities in the treatment of deaf individuals. Equal rights and equal pay, and a centralised deaf society which focused on developing education, work placement and cultural-enlightenment work, were presented as universal norms in the lives of the socialist deaf. Abramov, for example, described a trip to a boarding school for the deaf in Romania, during which ‘young deaf men and women vied with each other to ask about the life and studies of deaf people in the Soviet Union, and again and again interrupted our explanations with the joyful exclamation: “Just like here! [*Sovsem kak u nas!*]”’.⁴⁵ Encounters with deaf pupils and workers reinforced the superiority of these norms: the differentiated approach to education in Bulgaria, for example, enabled each child to be given personal attention, resulting in the ‘thorough preparation of pupils’.⁴⁶ Deaf enterprises in Yugoslavia, viewed during

⁴³ M. Abramov, ‘Pod zvezdami balkanskimi’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 13, no. 1 (1960), p. 22.

⁴⁴ V. Dmitriev, ‘Moskva-Praga-Tsiurikh-Rim’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 11, no. 1 (1958), p. 21.

⁴⁵ Abramov, ‘Pod zvezdami balkanskimi’, p. 22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

a visit by VOG representatives in 1967, were in the process of relocating from their scattered workshops to a centralised location, in order to make their work easier and to enable closer ties to deaf schools.⁴⁷ The Polish deaf newspaper *Świat głuchych*, in a similar manner to *Zhizn' glukhykh*, 'reflected the problems that interested people with hearing defects, and attempted to accustom them to social life'.⁴⁸

Above all, these accounts of socialist deafness underlined the independence and self-worth of the socialist deaf individual: a free choice of profession and a universally accessible system of education and training enabled individuals to 'find their own place in life'.⁴⁹ This emphasis on personal inclination and pride in one's profession stood in stark contrast to tales of the limited opportunities open to deaf people in the West. Alongside individual fulfilment, the particular social identity of the deaf community, and especially the tendency of deaf people 'amongst themselves [to] prefer [to communicate in] colloquial sign language', both at work and at leisure, was also celebrated and encouraged.⁵⁰ As in the Soviet Union, deaf social activities, in clubs and interest circles (*kruzhki*) allowed the development of cultured tastes and habits, and a striving towards artistic creativity.⁵¹ Theatre, in particular, was a common feature of deaf social life in Eastern Europe.⁵² The life of the socialist deaf, therefore, was narrated in terms of a common striving for individual and collective fulfilment, and the 'all-round development' of the socialist deaf personality.

Despite such commonalities, the relationship of VOG to other socialist deaf communities was not an equal one. The 'brotherly bond' uniting socialist deaf communities had an implicit hierarchy, with VOG configured as an elder brother helping his younger siblings.⁵³ In its relationship with deaf organisations in Eastern

⁴⁷ A. G Antipina and P. K. Sutiagin, 'Na beregakh iadran-moria', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 20, no. 3 (1967), p. 18.

⁴⁸ M. Ol'brikht, 'Tovarshchi po peru', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 17, no. 5 (1964), p. 16.

⁴⁹ See, for example, T. Kondratiuk, 'Zhurnal Pol'skikh glukhikh', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 12, no. 6 (1959), p. 22, and V. Ivanov, 'Soiuz glukhikh Bolgarii', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 12, no. 7 (1959), p. 21.

⁵⁰ Korotkov, '10 dnei v GDR', p. 16.

⁵¹ For example, VOG artists participated in an international exhibition in Warsaw in 1957: T. Smolenskaia and Iu. Khomik, 'Varshava-Praga', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 12, no. 10 (1959), p. 22.

⁵² Ivanov, 'Soiuz glukhikh Bolgarii', p. 21.

⁵³ Anne Gorsuch has also noted that in Soviet accounts of travel to Eastern Europe, 'east European regimes were presented not as Other but as younger, less advanced, versions of a Soviet Self. Indeed, so much was said to be shared between the older and wiser Soviet Union and its younger, less

Europe, VOG acted as methodological guide and benefactor, giving advice on the best way to organise and develop deaf societies, and providing young deaf organisations with donations to establish themselves.⁵⁴ Articles in *Zhizn' glukhikh* emphasised the leading role of the Soviet Union in all aspects of life: an article on the deaf in Poland, for example, stressed that 'the Polish deaf are not just interested in individual facts, but also in the big questions facing Soviet deaf organisations, as the USSR, in all things, represents the Polish People's Republic's central example in the building of socialism'.⁵⁵

This explicit hierarchy was perhaps unsurprising: the events that had established socialism in Eastern Europe had almost all occurred after the Second World War, giving VOG a twenty-year head start in establishing the structures and ideals of socialist deaf organisation. Accounts of deaf organisations in Eastern Europe made much of the historical moments when 'bourgeois governments' were overthrown and the new socialist governments could begin to develop provision for the deaf. An article on the Bulgarian Union of the Deaf, for example, stated that 'only after 9th September 1944, when power passed into the hands of the workers, did the people's government begin in earnest to take care of their silent fellow citizens'.⁵⁶ Similarly, in Bucharest, the establishment of nursery and primary schools for the deaf only occurred 'after the liberation'.⁵⁷ From these moments of origin, the development of these new socialist societies was viewed by members of VOG as a source of some fascination. *Zhizn' glukhikh* regularly printed articles on the organisational structure and activities of socialist deaf societies, and any divergence from the Soviet model was invested with particular significance. The Czech and Polish deaf, for example, had their own social clubs, but were not united in a specific deaf society; instead, they were members of the general 'Union of Invalids'.⁵⁸ In the GDR, deaf people

experienced 'blood brother' that any significant expression of ethnic or national difference was often eclipsed in favour of a shared socialist/working class identity'. Gorsuch, 'Time Travelers', p. 214.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Antipina and Sutiagin, 'Na beregakh iadran-moria', p. 18. According to a VOG report, 'The All-Russian Society of Deaf Mutes has significantly strengthened its links with deaf organisations of other countries, shown practical help to young, still organisationally immature, organisations and unions of deaf-mutes, and strengthened their work through exchange of experience.' GARF f. A-511, op. 1, d. 385, l. 11.

⁵⁵ Kondratiuk, 'Zhurnal Pol'skikh glukhikh', p. 22.

⁵⁶ Ivanov, 'Soiuz glukhikh Bolgarii', p. 21.

⁵⁷ D. Pavlov, 'Khorosho rabotaem, veselo otdykhaem!', *Zhizn' glukhikh*, 14, no. 9 (1961), p. 23.

⁵⁸ Dmitriev, 'Moskva-Praga-Tsiurikh-Rim', p. 20.

were not united into groups in the workplace, nor were they provided with sign-language translators, relying instead on lip-reading and speech.⁵⁹ Within the Soviet Union itself, deaf societies in Ukraine, Belorussia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania followed the model of VOG much more closely. Yet these organisational variations did not obscure the common socialist attitude to the deaf, who ‘could, like any citizen of their motherland, build their bright future and actively fight for peace on Earth’.⁶⁰

The deaf of Eastern Europe were thus placed in the same implicit teleology as the Western deaf. As citizens of socialist states, however nascent, Eastern European deaf individuals were one step closer to the exemplary quality of life achieved by the deaf in Soviet Russia. Yet whilst deaf individuals in the West were seen as passive victims of the capitalist order, socialist deaf individuals were portrayed as being enabled by the system to develop themselves and their communities to the utmost. This view of Eastern European deafness was thus somewhat paradoxical: although deaf people were still conceived as ‘products of the system’, that system was seen to give them agency, common purpose and individual self-worth.

In their accounts and responses to deaf experiences abroad, therefore, Soviet deaf people constructed a narrative of ‘bourgeois’ and ‘socialist’ approaches to deafness through the prism of Cold War politics. Whilst deeply concerned about the enticing power of America’s ostentatious spending, VOG members tempered that power with explanations of the deep divisions and inequalities present in capitalist society. Socialist states, on the other hand, were seen to put the welfare of their citizens before the considerations of wealth, allowing for the development of particular structures and attitudes which supported the agency and creativity of deaf individuals. These competing narratives combined to create an overwhelming impression of the superior quality of life experienced by Soviet deaf people.

That is not to say that these international contacts provoked no practical changes in the treatment of Soviet deaf people. One instance in which Soviet attitudes were

⁵⁹ Korotkov, ‘10 dnei v GDR’, p. 16.

⁶⁰ Kondratiuk, ‘Zhurnal Pol’skikh glukhikh’, p. 22, I. Geil’man, ‘K novym rubezham: s VIII s’ezda UTOG’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, 21, no. 11 (1968), p. 10.

changed by international pressure was in the case of driving licences. From its inception, the WFD had made a *cause-célèbre* of its demands for driving licences for deaf people of all nationalities: the II International Congress had issued a resolution stating that the ‘issuance of driving licences to the deaf should be made possible by special regulations taken by individual countries’.⁶¹ This demand was taken up by members of VOG. In a 1957 article, Ia. Leimanis, a Latvian UPP director, argued that ‘there are deaf-mutes who have 15-20 years’ experience of “illegally” driving motorcycles and cars. And not one of them has had a single accident’, and accused the Ministry of Health of perpetrating ‘an insult to the personality of every deaf-mute citizen of our country’.⁶² Leimanis drew a direct comparison with the USA in particular, where ‘they allow [the deaf] to take the driving test’.⁶³ As a result of pressure by central and local VOG organisations, in the early 1970s, the Ministries of Health and Internal Affairs introduced experimental courses, in cities and regions across the USSR, ‘for deaf people to learn the rules of the road and to master automotive technology’.⁶⁴ The first of these, held in a driving school off Moscow’s Old Arbat Street, saw nineteen eager students (including one young woman) learn basic driving skills.⁶⁵ These experiments did not automatically result in the granting of driving licenses to the deaf: in 1974, the Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that ‘due to the insufficient number of participants in the experiment, it was not possible to draw a definitive conclusion’.⁶⁶ Later in that year, however, the Ministry of Health published a decree ‘On the Procedure of Medical Examination and Clearance to Drive Automotive Transport of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing’, granting deaf people the right to drive cars and motorcycles.⁶⁷

The fight for driving licenses was an unusual event; a tussle with the state which sat at odds with the Soviet narrative of equality and provision. Yet despite this contradiction, VOG members continued to emphasise the overwhelming superiority

⁶¹ ‘Resolution adopted by the Second World Congress of the Deaf’, *Proceedings of the Second World Congress*, ed. Maslić, (367-372) p. 371.

⁶² Ia. Leimanis, ‘Mozhet li glukhoi vodit’ mashinu?’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 11, no. 1 (1958), p. 14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶⁴ *Otchet tsentral’nogo pravleniia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhikh za 1967-70 (proekt)*, VOG collection, p. 42.

⁶⁵ Bazoev and Palennyi, *Chelovek iz mira tishiny*, p. 513.

⁶⁶ V. Mitin, ‘Kto mozhet byt’ voditelem?’, *VES* 26, no. 11 (1973), p. 25.

⁶⁷ Bazoev and Palennyi, *Chelovek iz mira tishiny*, p. 512.

of the Soviet system. In the international arena, the deaf were seen to be grappling to find solutions to problems that had long been solved in Soviet Russia. In the context of the Cold War, however, it was not enough for Soviet deaf people to believe in the innate superiority of their everyday experiences. This superiority also needed to be transmitted on the world stage. Within the WFD, the influence of the USA was to be counteracted, not only within the territory of Europe, but also within a new geopolitical zone: that of the developing world.

By the early 1960s, members of the WFD had become increasingly concerned with the problem of deaf people in the post-colonial nations of Africa, Latin America and Asia, establishing a 'Work-Group for the Help to the Deaf in Developing Countries [*sic*]' in 1963.⁶⁸ By 1971, the issue had become central to the WFD's activities, with the VI International Congress conducted under the slogan 'The Deaf in the Developing World'. According to Cesare Magarotto's opening address to this Congress, whilst great advances had been noted in education, scientific advancement and technology in Europe and North America, 'the situation in developing countries is still unsatisfactory'. In Africa, he noted, only sixty schools for the deaf existed, serving less than 1.2 per cent of the infant deaf population.⁶⁹ Thus, whilst countries in the developed world had established, if differing, attitudes and systems to deal with deafness, the deaf of the developing world remained a *tabula rasa*, on which competing views of deafness could fight for influence.

In comparison to the capitalist West and Eastern Europe, Soviet deaf people had very little contact with the deaf of the developing world in the 1950s and 1960s. Certainly, no tours of Soviet deaf people travelled to countries in this region. However, from the early 1960s, when countries such as Algeria and Uruguay began to join the World Federation of the Deaf, publications such as *Zhizn' glukhikh* began to describe encounters with deaf representatives of post-colonial countries. These accounts focused strongly on themes of poverty and disenfranchisement. For

⁶⁸ See 'Work-Group for the Help to the Deaf in Developing Countries, *Proceedings of the Fourth World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf: Stockholm, Sweden, 17th-21st August 1963*, special edition of *The Voice of Silence* 10, no. 1-4 (1966), pp. 581-582.

⁶⁹ 'Address of Dr. Cesare Magarotto, General Secretary of the World Federation of the Deaf', *Actes du VIe Congres Mondial de la F.M.S./Proceedings of the 6th World Congress of the W.F.D., Paris, 31st July-5th August 1971* (Rome, 1971), (30-33) p. 30.

example, a short article from behind the scenes at the IV International Congress in Stockholm described conversations with Algerian deaf people, who complained that ‘in Algeria, no-one attends to the question of the education of the deaf. Literacy is the blessing of the very few’. Similarly, deaf representatives from Argentina spoke of widespread unemployment, which often forced the deaf ‘to ask for benefits or resort to charity’.⁷⁰

It is clear that, behind the scenes, VOG was very much aware of its ability to compete with America and the West for influence in this region. From the early 1960s, VOG engaged in correspondence with several countries of the developing world, such as Uruguay and India. Letters in the archives from Indian deaf citizens asking for help and support from VOG demonstrate clearly that the deaf in India were more than aware of accounts of Soviet and socialist deafness, framing their requests in the rhetoric of labour and opportunity. A letter from a certain Mohinder Swarup Bhatnager, a hand-loom operative from Delhi, stated that ‘there is not enough work in our country for Deaf and Dumb boys. I have heard that your country has enough work for Deaf and Dumb men. Please give me some work in your country so that I may be able to support my family’. A similar letter from an Indian lawyer asked a number of questions about the nature of work for deaf people in the USSR, and of the possibility for Indian citizens to find employment or be educated there.⁷¹ In these cases, however, the response from VOG was particularly insensitive and starkly contradicted the narrative of universal provision and opportunity: writing to Bhatnager, Sutiagin refused his request for work, but offered to show him around the VOG enterprises if he came to the USSR as a tourist.⁷² The Soviet narrative was thus not always consistent, and its occasional fractures demonstrated the limits of the Soviet deaf community’s international ambitions. Despite these rare lapses, the need to maintain a presence in the developing world to counteract America’s wealth and charity was consistently stressed.⁷³ In an internal VOG report from 1963, Sutiagin noted with concern that ‘it may well be that, with the help of the WFD, the influence

⁷⁰ Lukinykh, ‘Novye vstrechi, novye druž’ia’, p. 6.

⁷¹ The majority of these letters asked about the possibility of the economic migration of deaf people into the USSR. GARF f. A-511, op. 1, d. 595, l. 54.

⁷² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 595, l. 54.

⁷³ See, for example, I. Tsukerman, ‘15 millionov zhdut svoego chasa’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 23, no. 9 (1970), p. 21.

of the USA can spread to the societies of Latin America, where at the present time work amongst the deaf is not yet organised'.⁷⁴

Despite their insistence that the World Federation of the Deaf 'strengthen[ed] the friendship between the deaf of the whole world', therefore, Soviet deaf people viewed international deafness in terms of stark ideological division. Accounts of the experience of deafness abroad established narratives of the capitalist West, whose technological and scientific advances could not make up for the inequalities of society, versus the socialist East, in which equality and prosperity allowed deaf people to overcome their handicap. Yet in the atmosphere of the World Federation, with its incipient internationalism, it was no longer enough for Soviet deaf people to feel secure in their own superiority of experience. In the new international deaf arena, Soviet deaf individuals needed to persuade others of that superiority.

Propagandising Soviet Deafness

In 1963, Sutiagin sent a report to the Department of Ideology and Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. In it, he proposed to 'activate the propaganda of the activities of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf via the distribution of informational-reference materials on VOG and the systematic publication of articles on the lives of the deaf in the Soviet Union in the Federation's magazine "The Voice of Silence". It is necessary also to publish illustrated brochures or booklets on the All-Russian Society of the Deaf (if possible in foreign languages) to be sent to foreign countries'.⁷⁵ As a result, at the IV International Congress in Stockholm, the VOG delegation distributed a glossy, fifty page brochure entitled *Of Those Who Cannot Hear*.⁷⁶ Written by Eduard Vartan'ian and Il'ia Gitlits, two staff writers from the magazine *Zhizn' glukhikh*, the brochure was translated into fluent, colloquial English, and accompanied by eighteen pages of black-and-white photographs, depicting Soviet deaf people at work and play.

⁷⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 966, l. 9.

⁷⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 40 l, l. 110.

⁷⁶ The brochure had a run of a thousand copies, and was printed in Stockholm on the instructions of VOG's Central Directorate. *Ibid.*, l. 155.

Through detailed information and individual case studies, *Of Those Who Cannot Hear* established the foundational propaganda narrative of the Soviet experience of deafness. Focusing predominantly on VOG (with nods to the experience of societies in the other fourteen Soviet Republics), the brochure painted an overwhelmingly positive picture of life in the Soviet deaf community. From the moment of diagnosis, the reader was assured, Soviet deaf children were supported by comprehensive social, medical and educational systems that prepare them for ‘lives of useful activity’.⁷⁷ Free and universal education, unrestricted access to labour training and the provision of jobs, and a full and creative social life were painted as the cornerstones of deaf experience in the Soviet Union. As a propaganda piece, the brochure was framed in response to the complexities of Cold War politics and the particular concerns raised by the World Federation. Yet in its construction of a narrative, *Of Those Who Cannot Hear* was just as revealing of the changes to the Soviet deaf community’s own self-image in the 1960s. In its positive recounting of Soviet deaf experience, the brochure revealed a fundamental shift in the understanding of Soviet deafness: from notions of agency and activity, to passivity and welfare.

From its very first page, *Of Those Who Cannot Hear* highlighted the issue of equality. Whilst the World Federation continued to voice its concerns about the legal position of deaf people throughout the world, the Soviet deaf enjoyed both legal equality and equality of opportunity. In his introduction, Sutiagin made clear that ‘the Soviet Government not only recognised the legal rights of deaf mutes, but also provided every facility for those rights to be realised [...] No discrimination in payment for work is allowed in the Soviet Union; the deaf are guaranteed equal pay for equal work like all other citizens’.⁷⁸ Alongside such legal safeguards, the brochure underlined the lack of limits placed on the personal ambitions of the deaf. In the body of the brochure, the evocatively entitled section ‘From “Mama” to a

⁷⁷ E. Vartan’ian and I. Gitlits, *Of Those who Cannot Hear* (Stockholm, 1963), p. 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1. ‘Equal pay for equal work’ was indeed a guarantee of the 1936 and 1977 Constitutions of the USSR. According to a VOG report from 1970, 83.4 per cent of deaf adults were ‘engaged in socially useful labour, that is, work in industry, in agriculture, in the system of VOG, or study’. 12.7 per cent of deaf adults were old-age pensioners or housewives, and 3.9 per cent were invalids of groups I and II. Over 13,000 VOG members were ‘shock workers’ and many received medals for labour in honour of the 100th anniversary of Lenin’s birth. No mention is made, however, of average salaries. *Otchet TsP VOG za 1967-70*, pp. 11-12.

Master's Degree' explained how, on leaving school, the deaf adolescent had the same variety of opportunity as the hearing: a choice of three hundred special subjects in higher education, or of thirty trades through the VOG system of UPPs. The Theatre of Sign and Gesture was held up as an example of this limitless opportunity: 'Tastes vary, and so do ambitions. What can the society do for the girl who wrote in saying she wants to become an actress? If she is really gifted, it can help her join the school training deaf actors for the Mime Theatre.'⁷⁹ The brochure also included case studies of successful deaf people in higher education, such as Vladimir Domrachev, deaf from the age of five, who worked as a lecturer at the Kazan' Aviation Institute, or Mikhail Scumakov, who won the Lenin Prize for his ground-breaking research into poliomyelitis.⁸⁰

Of Those Who Cannot Hear thus emphasised that deaf people were just as capable as the hearing, and that VOG allowed that equality of potential to be realised. This level playing field was seen to work both ways; the authors make clear that 'to get into college [...] the applicants must demonstrate, in stiff competition with other young people, that they have the necessary knowledge and ability. No concessions are made even to them'.⁸¹ Yet this belief in the capabilities of deaf people opened up new areas of opportunity. In particular, the brochure stressed the ability of deaf people to use modern, automated machine tools. The issue of the 'professional rehabilitation of the deaf in conditions of technical progress' had been discussed at length in the run-up to the IV International Congress in Stockholm, and, in accounts of his 1965 visit to America, Sutiagin would highlight the distinction between the experience of the Soviet Union and the West, where 'the capitalists do not recognise deaf people's capability to work in mechanised industry and operate lathes and machines'.⁸² By contrast, Vartan'ian and Gitlits pointed out, 88 per cent of the 570 deaf workers at the Cheliabinsk Tractor Plant operated automated machine tools, and ten years had passed without a single industrial accident. The chief engineer, Vladimir

⁷⁹ Vartan'ian and Gitlits, *Of Those who Cannot Hear*, p. 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸² RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 40 l. 1. 101, Sutiagin, 'Po tu storonu okeana', p. 20

Preobrazhenskii, was quoted as saying that, after the introduction of new machines, ‘the deaf workers quickly mastered the new techniques’.⁸³

In addition to stressing the equality of deaf people, the brochure underlined the power of VOG to provide for its deaf members. Sutiagin’s introduction referenced the financial might of the society: deaf members of UPPs, he wrote, ‘manufacture articles which they sell, the proceeds of which go back to the deaf in the form of organisational, cultural and educational benefits, or in the form of new housing, in addition to the cultural and industrial premises built by the societies for their members’ use. This year, the RSFSR Society alone has over 13 million roubles to distribute’.⁸⁴ The distribution of this money in the service of the deaf community – and pride about this accomplishment – was evident throughout the brochure. In a section on the UPP system, the reader was informed that VOG not only paid for the education itself, but ‘also provides [students] with hostels, uniforms, free meals, grants, and, upon the completion of their training, with work in any one of its own seventy enterprises’.⁸⁵ Even in higher education, where ‘no concessions’ were made to the deaf, the authors stated that ‘once they pass their entrance examinations, however, they will find everyone is ready to help them’.⁸⁶ This help was both material and academic: hostel accommodation and grants were provided, as well as sign-language interpretation and extra lectures if needed.

In its discussion of the provisions offered to the deaf by VOG, the brochure focused heavily on the social world of the deaf, particularly in their ‘second homes’, that is, their Palaces of Culture and clubs (referred to in English as ‘community centres’).⁸⁷ An ‘imagined tour’ of several such clubs on the night of 15th June 1963 showcased the variety of social and cultural events made available to deaf society members. A lecture by a Hero of Socialist Labour, a dance, at which the name of each song was ‘flashed on the wall by coloured electric lamps’, a sign-language newspaper, a film with subtitles, and a rehearsal by an amateur dramatic group demonstrated the variety of cultural diversions on offer for the deaf, and the ways in which these

⁸³ Vartan’ian and Gitlits, *Of Those who Cannot Hear*, p. 16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

diversions were adapted to suit the particular needs of the community. Throughout this section, however, Vartan'ian and Gitlits emphasised the leading role played by the individual tastes and choices of members: 'Suppose the deaf person does not feel like going to a lecture or film and does not want to take part in amateur arts activities? All leisure pastimes, whether for the mind or body, individual or collective, should be a source of pleasure, and that is a matter of taste.'⁸⁸

This constant concern with the issue of choice could be traced throughout the brochure: in the section on vocational training, choice of profession, the authors asserted, 'is left to the individual'.⁸⁹ 'It may of course happen', they go on to speculate, 'that the speciality a deaf boy or girl has acquired at school is not what he or she would really like to do. That is not so terrible, and no blame is laid at other doors. So, they are given every opportunity to find something more appropriate – not only to make a new choice, but also to procure the proper vocational training in order to put it into effect'.⁹⁰ It is not difficult to imagine the purpose of such statements: the widespread belief in the international community of the 'totalitarian' nature of Soviet society, with power enforced through coercion and control, was a commonplace of the Cold War era.⁹¹ In contrast, the freedom and independence enjoyed by the Soviet deaf was stressed. Yet independence in tastes and choices was not merely a political point. The ability of deaf people in the Soviet Union to lead independent lives was seen as a victory of training and opportunity over the disabling nature of their handicap. During the education process, Vartan'ian and Gitlits pointed out, 'although there are many teachers and attendants to look after the children, care is taken not to pamper them and make them too dependent'.⁹² Similarly, in their adult social lives, the delicate balance between provision and independent agency was stressed: in their social clubs, the deaf 'are not guests, but masters of their "second homes"'.⁹³

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ According to Tony Shaw, British feature films of the 1950s portrayed communism in terms of 'the claustrophobic atmosphere produced by the omnipresent guards, strict censorship, restricted movement, the downtrodden citizens in a state of permanent fear, even interrogation by the secret police'. Tony Shaw, 'British Feature Films and the Early Cold War', in *Cold-War Propaganda in the 1950s*, ed. Gary D. Rawnsley (New York, 1999), (125-144) p. 130.

⁹² Vartan'ian and Gitlits, *Of Those who Cannot Hear*, p. 9.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 24.

In their detailed, accessible account of the Soviet deaf experience, therefore, Vartan'ian and Gitlits painted a picture of a strong social organisation, able to use its resources to turn the potential inherent in Soviet social equality into a reality for deaf people. Through its provision of education, labour training and cultural services, VOG created a social world that allowed deaf people the freedom to develop their own tastes and inclinations, and above all to establish their own agency within society. The utopian overtones of this narrative were by no means underplayed. In a section entitled 'A Partner in Life', the authors told the story of Tasya Shcherbinina, a young deaf-mute woman who, whilst crossing a railway line, 'did not hear the whistle of the oncoming train, and lost both legs. In the hospital, Tasya gave way to despair. "What's the use of living?" she asked herself, "Deaf and dumb, and now – no legs". Whilst recuperating, however, Tasya was given a copy of the classic socialist-realist novel *A Story about a Real Man* (*Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke*) by Boris Polevoi, which tells of the real-life Soviet pilot, Aleksei Mares'ev, who lost both legs in battle but returned to fight, 'shooting down many more enemy planes'. According to the brochure, 'what the doctors had not been able to do was accomplished by this little book. It gave her back her faith in life. During her worst trials, when death seemed almost desirable, Tasya vowed to fight for life'. Through VOG, Tasya found work in a UPP in Kirov and completed her education in evening school. She engaged in correspondence with Mares'ev, who praised her determination: 'I am glad that despite your physical handicaps, you have found a way to live a full life, to direct your efforts and give your energies to the good of the people and our beautiful motherland.'⁹⁴

Tasya's story, and the story of VOG as a whole, thus echoed the tropes of socialist realism. Physical handicap might be a tragedy, but with determination and support, the tragedy could be overcome and the individual could become a fully-fledged, 'useful' member of society.⁹⁵ The brochure emphasised the freedom and agency of

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ The word 'useful', used repeatedly throughout the brochure to describe the active deaf Soviet individual, was a commonplace of the socialist-realist text. According to Lilya Kaganovsky, the desire of the disabled man to return to useful life was typified in Nikolai Ostrovskii's novel *How the Steel was Tempered*: 'the new positive hero emerges from the pages of Ostrovskii's novel as a fantastic figure, blind and paralysed, yet nevertheless yearning for his place in the Stalinist system, demanding

Soviet deaf people and the power of their society. However, this powerful narrative of individual and collective agency was complicated by a competing vision of deafness present in the brochure, and in other propaganda texts of the time, which portrayed the deaf as grateful recipients of the ‘care’ of the state. This picture of state care is present throughout the text, both in overt statements – ‘From the very first days of Soviet Power, the Government took upon itself the care and education of deaf people’ – and in a prevalent use of the passive voice when referring to benefits enjoyed by the deaf.⁹⁶ Deaf people were ‘thoroughly trained’ and ‘given’ work, ‘received’ state pensions and hearing aids.⁹⁷ This narrative strand was echoed in other propagandistic pieces produced by VOG. During the II International Congress, at which VOG made its international debut, for example, Sutiagin gave a statement in which he attributed the positive experience of Soviet deaf people to the ‘instructions’ and ‘decisions of the Soviet Government’.⁹⁸ ‘The deaf-mutes and the deaf of our country’, he announced, ‘surrounded by the protection of the state and the general public, live a full working and cultural life’.⁹⁹ In an article published in the *British Deaf News*, also by Sutiagin, readers were told that Soviet deaf people ‘have received the right to work’: ‘The Soviet State shows great solicitude for their handicapped, including deaf and deaf-and-dumb people. This manifests itself in special decrees issued by the government.’¹⁰⁰

Such statements thus reconfigured the nature of deaf experience in the Soviet Union, from a narrative of agency, to an account of welfare and the passive reception of benefits. Significantly, this tale of State ‘solicitude’ described the power of VOG, one of the central facets of the Soviet deaf experience, as another gift bestowed upon the deaf by the state: ‘The state has now given the societies of the deaf of the Soviet Republics great powers in labour employment, vocational training and provision of cultural facilities for the deaf, which was formerly one of the functions of the state. The proper exercise of these functions of the societies is ensured by the material

always to “return to ranks and to life” and once more to make his life “useful”’. Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh, 2008), p. 21.

⁹⁶ Vartan’ian and Gitlits, *Of Those who Cannot Hear*, p. 8.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 13,31.

⁹⁸ Vartan’ian and Gitlits, *Of Those who Cannot Hear*, p. 63.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ P. Sutiagin (as Soutyagin), ‘The Deaf in USSR’, *British Deaf News* 4, no. 2 (1963), (38-39) p. 38.

facilities that have been placed at their disposal in the form of training-cum-production establishments.’¹⁰¹ Such statements did not negate the agency and activity of deaf people entirely: deaf people were still expected to ‘take an active part, together with the entire Soviet people, in building a new society’.¹⁰² Yet this construction of a relationship of beneficence and gratitude with the Soviet state added a new dimension to the narrative of deaf experience in the Soviet Union.¹⁰³

The desire to configure Soviet deaf experience as a product of the state was unsurprising in the context of the international deaf community. The World Federation continued to talk of the problems experienced by deaf people in terms of national systems, as the result of ‘neglect’ by ‘responsible government authorities’, and to state its aims of ‘obtaining aid for the deaf from a government’.¹⁰⁴ It would seem only natural for the Soviet deaf community to construct a narrative of humaneness and care to counteract these narratives of neglect. Yet this reference to beneficence and gratitude was more than a rhetorical point: it reflected broader tensions between agency and passivity being played out within the Soviet deaf community in the 1960s. As previously discussed, several state decrees were promulgated in the 1950s and 1960s to clarify and improve services for deaf people in the Soviet Union. Whilst these decrees mainly focused on questions of access and the improvement of opportunities for deaf people, certain aspects of these laws portrayed deaf people as individuals in need of state welfare. For example, in 1956, a new law on pensions was introduced, which stated that, as invalids of the III group, the deaf were entitled to state pensions regardless of their employment status.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, many developments within VOG itself suggested the need to ‘care’ for deaf people: the 1960s saw the opening of several homes for the elderly and of two

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ This is a clear extension of Jeffrey Brooks’ concept of ‘moral economy’, in which citizens expressed gratitude to the state for the provision of their ‘well-being’: ‘The effect in each case was to diminish the role of individual citizens as historical actors and shift “agency” – that is, the motive and moving force in daily life – from society to the state and the leader.’ Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank you, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2000), p. xv.

¹⁰⁴ Rubino, ‘International Solidarity of the Deaf’, p. 94.

¹⁰⁵ *Zakon o gosudarstvennykh pensiiakh: priniat Verkhnovym Sovetom SSSR 14 iulia 1956 goda* (Moscow, 1956), pp. 9-15.

holiday resorts for deaf society members in the Crimea.¹⁰⁶ According to the article in *British Deaf News*, ‘In these health centres the deaf people are recuperated physically and mentally, some going through preventive treatment against certain diseases under supervision of experienced physicians, and improve their health.’¹⁰⁷

In *Of Those Who Cannot Hear*, this vision of the deaf as deserving of benefits above and beyond those of hearing people was reinforced: ‘The law states that deaf workers shall receive equal pay for equal work. But the pay packet of a deaf worker is sure to be heavier than that of his hearing comrade. [...] The fact is that the deaf receive a pension from the state over and above their earnings.’¹⁰⁸ The brochure told of the Agulov family, in which father Dmitri and mother Ludmilla, both working deaf individuals, received a 55 rouble ‘deaf pension’ on top of their 150 rouble monthly salary. The family also received material benefits in other forms: ‘Last summer, the whole Agulov family went to a rest home for the deaf situated near Moscow. The parents received a holiday allowance from the state and their accommodation in the rest home was paid by the local branch of the Deaf Society. In 1963, the RSFSR Society of the Deaf is to spend 153,000 roubles for passes to holiday homes for its members.’¹⁰⁹ Similarly, ‘they recently received a new flat, and so decided to buy new furniture for it. Seeing that their savings would not suffice, they turned to the Voronezh branch of the Society for assistance. The Agulovs were given a grant of 100 roubles. In 1963 the Deaf Society will spend about 200,000 roubles on material grants to its members.’¹¹⁰ The deaf were thus materially better off, and entitled to other benefits, purely in recompense for being deaf. This care was portrayed as the universal impulse of Soviet society towards the disabled: ‘Those

¹⁰⁶ The provision of health resorts to deaf people was an example of the occasional disjunctions between the positive narratives of official propaganda and a more complex reality. From 1958, the health resort ‘Krasnaia Pakhra’ outside Moscow had exclusively served deaf people. Next to the resort was the sanatorium belonging to the newspaper *Izvestiia*. Its editor, Aleksei Ivanovich Adzhubei, Khrushchev’s son-in-law, objected to holidaying next to ‘deaf mutes’, and requested that they be relocated. V. A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiskogo obshchestva glukhykh* (Moscow, 2007), p. 543.

¹⁰⁷ Soutyagin, ‘The Deaf in USSR’, p. 38.

¹⁰⁸ Vartan’ian and Gitlits, *Of Those who Cannot Hear*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

who work at their sides consider that such concern for the deaf and physically handicapped is only just, and that it could not be otherwise'.¹¹¹

Propaganda of the Soviet deaf experience was torn between two competing narratives. On the one hand, VOG was portrayed as a strong organisation run by – and fostering through its work – active, independent deaf individuals. On the other, the deaf were increasingly configured as recipients of the care and beneficence of the state. To be sure, these two narratives were often entangled: in an article in *Zhizn' glukhikh* on the legal position of Soviet deaf people, for example, readers were told that 'in response to the care [*zabota*] of the party and government, deaf workers together with all the people are actively participating in the building of communist society'.¹¹² Yet, in contrast to the 1920s, the notion of deaf people as recipients of welfare and material benefits from a beneficent state was no longer seen as harking back to the tutelage and disenfranchisement of the tsarist regime. Instead, welfare was portrayed as the ultimate sign of progress: the deaf were finally in receipt of the full support they deserved.¹¹³

Of Those Who Cannot Hear thus set out the coherent narrative of deaf experience in the Soviet Union that was to form the basis of Soviet propaganda on the world stage. At the same time, however, Soviet delegates to the WFD and other international bodies were very much aware that brochures and articles in the international press were not enough to convince others of the superiority of the Soviet deaf experience. Engaging in propaganda, a communicative process of persuasion, necessitated establishing links with foreign deaf individuals, and attempting to persuade them through personal contact and interaction.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² A. Dobrovolskii, 'Akty zaboty i gumannosti', *Zhizn' glukhikh* 20, no. 10 (1967), p. 31.

¹¹³ Mark Smith also suggests that welfare in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union was configured as a marker of progress: 'the Soviet system of welfare genuinely applied to much of life – not just to specific areas such as education, healthcare, and pensions, but to jobs, leisure and housing; and everyone in principle had access to these goods, not just those who were unable to provide for themselves [...] this depth and universality were founded on the supposition of impending paradise. Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb: Ill., 2010), p. 16.

Techniques of Persuasion

From the outset, the propaganda efforts of VOG delegates were met with a considerable amount of scepticism from foreign members of the WFD. In the context of the Cold War, glossy propaganda brochures produced by Soviet state bodies were given little credence. In response, VOG developed new techniques to ‘show’, as well as ‘tell’, their stories of Soviet deafness. One of the most successful techniques was that of the documentary film. *Oni budut govorit* (*They Will Talk*), a film focusing on the system of deaf education in the Soviet Union, was produced by the film studio *Mosnauchfil'm* in 1962. Shown at the IV International Congress in Stockholm, the film was considered by VOG delegates to be ‘convincing proof and the best method of propaganda of the progressive methods of the education of the deaf in the USSR’.¹¹⁴ On its own, however, the film was not enough to persuade delegates of the veracity of the Soviet claims. According to an article in *Zhizn' glukhikh*, ‘after the showing of our film “Oni budut govorit”, and the meeting with Comrade Korsunskaja [...] who featured in the film and who came to the last day of the conference, many admitted that at first they had not believed all that they had seen, but now that they had seen a real person from the film, they believed definitively’.¹¹⁵ This trope – ‘they didn’t believe it until they saw it’ – was a commonplace in accounts of foreign responses to Soviet deafness, and suggests a widespread disbelief in Soviet propaganda, one that VOG was eager to dispel.

In their attempts to persuade foreign deaf individuals, VOG representatives focused strongly on manifestations of the superiority and prestige of Soviet deaf people. Culture and sport featured particularly heavily in this propaganda offensive. Although Soviet deaf artists had failed to submit pieces for the first art exhibition organised by the WFD, held in Rome’s Palace of Exhibitions in September 1957, by the 1960s VOG had begun to showcase the artistic talents of its members. Delegates of the V International Congress in Warsaw were shown Mikhail Bogin’s feature film *Dvoe* (*The Two*), which told the story of a relationship between a young deaf acrobat and a hearing musician and featured performances by members of the Theatre of

¹¹⁴ RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 40 1, l. 146.

¹¹⁵ Lukinykh, ‘Novye vstrechi, novye druz’ia’, p. 6.

Sign and Gesture; the Theatre itself performed to an audience of 6,000.¹¹⁶ Another documentary film, *Otkryti Mir (Open World)*, which followed members of the Theatre as they rehearsed for their first tour, was also shown at the Congress. Similarly, in sport, the talents of the Soviet deaf community were highlighted. At the VIII International Deaf Games in Milan, the first games in which VOG members participated, the Soviet Union came in ‘overall first place’ with 226 medals, beating the United German team and the USA. VOG’s athletes won 31 medals, and broke 12 world records for deaf sports.¹¹⁷ Alongside the powerful statement made by these results, the Soviet athletes, according to a VOG report, ‘came to the starting-blocks calmly, with the utmost responsibility to the honour and prestige of their collective and the Motherland’.¹¹⁸

In showcasing the talents of its members abroad, therefore, VOG sought to provide evidence of the superiority and prestige of the Soviet deaf community. Having the ‘first professional deaf theatre in the world’ and the world’s best deaf sportsmen was a powerful advert for the individual and collective agency of Soviet deaf people. Still these demonstrations of Soviet superiority were not without some artifice. In sport, in particular, the need to win outstripped all other considerations. An article in *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, detailing the preparations for the IX International Games in Helsinki, openly stated: ‘We are often asked: in which events will our society take part during the IX International Deaf Sporting Games? The answer to that question, which interests many, will be given by the results shown by our sportsmen during the All-Russian Spartakiada in Stalingrad.’¹¹⁹ Clearly, Soviet deaf sportsmen would only enter those events which they had a good chance of winning. According to James Riordan, such tactics were commonplace amongst the Soviet sporting community in the immediate post-war period: ‘Soviet sportsmen moved cautiously into international competition and, before 1952, tended not to enter an event without reasonable expectation of victory. No Soviet team was sent to the London Olympic Games of 1948; in many Olympic events – notably in athletics and swimming (the ‘anchor’ sports of the Games) – it was felt that Soviet standards were still

¹¹⁶ *Otchet TsP VOG za 1967-70*, p. 58.

¹¹⁷ GARF, f. 511, op. 1, d. 425, l. 6.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 5.

¹¹⁹ L. Mukhlia, ‘Do IX Mezhdunarodnykh’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, 13, no. 6 (1960), p. 22.

insufficiently high for the USSR to do well.’¹²⁰ For the Soviet deaf community, the areas in which they showed particular strength were light athletics and swimming, with the addition of Greco-Roman wrestling from the early 1960s.¹²¹ In table tennis and volleyball, on the other hand, Soviet sportsmen were considered to show a ‘low level of technical skill’, and Soviet sportsmen did not compete in these events.¹²²

The gap between the reality of Soviet deaf experience and the artifice of propaganda could be seen at various points in VOG’s interactions with the international deaf community. One instructive example of this artifice was in propaganda of the provision of hearing aids. In 1967, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* published an article detailing the visit to Leningrad of a Mexican deaf woman, Francesca Teresa Marones Cavallero, nicknamed Polia. Arriving in Leningrad, Polia found that her American hearing aid had broken. Sitting dejectedly in the lobby of the Hotel Astoria, she happened to be spotted by a member of the deaf society. Within hours, a new hearing aid had been procured for her, brought to the hotel in person by I. F. Geil’man, a senior member of VOG and a frequent WFD delegate. ‘You should have seen Polia’s face when she recovered the ability to hear. And again, you should have seen the Mexican woman’s face when she discovered that she did not owe a kopek. It took a while to explain to her that in the Soviet Union, hearing aids are provided free of charge.’¹²³ Archival reports suggest that such acts were commonplace: hearing aids were sent to Chinese deaf individuals, such as a ‘Kristall’ hearing aid provided to one Chen Tsin in 1958.¹²⁴ In his letter to J. D. Ghospurkar, an Indian deaf man from Ahmednagar, Sutiagin wrote that ‘when foreign guests, who would like to have hearing aids, visit us, we provide them, with funds from our society’.¹²⁵

Even as hearing aids played a central part in the narrative of Soviet deafness, the emphasis placed on the provision of free hearing aids to all deaf individuals highlighted divisions between the reality of Soviet experience and its narration to the

¹²⁰ James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge, 1977), p. 367.

¹²¹ GARF, f. 511, d. 1, op. 417, l. 84.

¹²² *Otchet o rabote tsentral’nogo pravleniia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhikh za 1963-66 gody*, VOG collection, p. 37.

¹²³ Anon., ‘Sen’ora Polia o sebe’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 20, no. 9 (1967), p. 24.

¹²⁴ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 490, l. 3.

¹²⁵ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 595, l. 76.

outside world. While free access to hearing aids had been guaranteed by the Ministry of Social Welfare since 1953, VOG was somewhat embarrassed about the supposed inferiority of Soviet hearing aids in comparison to Western models.¹²⁶ The uneven system of supply, a product of the planned economy, affected both the production and provision of hearing aids. Not enough small transistors were produced, which hindered the production of compact aids. Until 1958, when a new dispensary system was introduced, deaf people would be advised by their doctor that they needed a hearing aid, at which point they would go to the nearest chemist and be provided with whatever model was currently in stock, often with defects from transport and storage. Individuals were unable to try different models of hearing aid to find one that suited them.¹²⁷ As such, in Soviet Russia, hearing aids were not part of the everyday experience of deaf people.

In the international arena, however, the free provision of hearing aids became a particularly compelling example of the benefits of the Soviet system for deaf people. At the V International Congress in 1967, the propaganda potential of Soviet hearing aid provision was realised. At the Congress, several foreign firms had taken advantage of the opportunity to demonstrate their hearing aids to delegates. According to a report in *Zhizn' glukhikh*, written by Eduard Vartan'ian, delegates were impressed by the 'elegant and small' hearing aids, until 'they were told the price'.¹²⁸ Vartan'ian described the 'tragicomic scene', as the delegates heard with horror that the hearing aid cost almost two hundred dollars. 'It occurred to us', Vartan'ian wrote, 'that some of our domestic hearing aids are no worse than the best foreign models. But if foreign firms consider it possible to fleece the buyer for their hearing aids, then why don't we acquaint the Congress with our [hearing aids], having reminded them at the same time that we give hearing aids to invalids free of charge!' The Soviet delegation thus put on an impromptu exhibition of hearing aids: 'And what is this, if not evidence of the care of the state, of "hearing people", towards their deaf compatriots!'¹²⁹ Yet the gap between such propaganda, which stressed the widespread use of hearing aids, and the reality of everyday experience of

¹²⁶ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 480, l. 71. See Minsobes Order № 586, 10th December 1953.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, l. 67.

¹²⁸ Vartan'ian, 'Deviz: glukhie sredi slyshashchikh', p. 27.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Soviet deaf people, was noted by visitors: an article in the American journal *The Volta Review* stated that, ‘according to the reports of American observers [...] individual hearing aids are not commonly used’.¹³⁰

This employment of propagandistic artifice was not merely a straightforward example of the Soviet Union attempting to beat the West at its own game. Whilst the awareness of American money and technical prestige worried members of VOG, their ‘enhanced’ tales of the Soviet experience sought to shift the narrative from notions of progress and money to those of welfare and provision. Representations of Soviet superiority, in all arenas, were intended to demonstrate the difference between the capitalist West and the socialist East, and the impossibility of comparing the two. Performances by the ‘first deaf theatre in the world’ aimed to convince an international audience that Soviet life alone could allow the deaf the scope to develop as artists. Sporting prowess was configured as an example of the equality of opportunity available to the Soviet deaf: in a speech to the WFD in 1963, Sutiagin argued that ‘the active participation by the deaf in all fields of life of the country – in agriculture, science, sport, art etc – is vivid proof that in Soviet society there is absolutely no kind of discrimination against the deaf’.¹³¹ Soviet deaf propagandists thus posited a different notion of what constituted superiority and prestige within the international deaf community. Whilst winning was still undoubtedly a factor, the propaganda of socialist models of equality, humaneness and welfare was considered paramount.

In their attempts to persuade, VOG members showcased the superiority and prestige of the Soviet deaf community through cultural representations and personal contacts. Yet this personal experience of Soviet deafness, the other side of the ‘deaf tourist’ experience, replicated the same narrative paradox as written propaganda: the tension between deaf self-identification as active citizens and as passive recipients of state provision and welfare. The experience of foreign deaf tourists to Soviet Russia further illustrates this point. When the bureau of the WFD held its meeting in Leningrad in 1962, its members met deaf Leningraders in their House of Culture,

¹³⁰ B. V. Morkovin, ‘Experiment in Teaching Deaf Preschool Children in the Soviet Union’, *The Volta Review* 62, no. 6 (1960), (260-268) p. 268.

¹³¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 40 1, l. 145.

toured VOG enterprises (UPPs) in Leningrad and Moscow and attended a performance of the Theatre Studio; all evidence of the agency and activity of deaf society members. In a VOG report on this visit, however, this trip was seen to have ‘played a significant role in the propaganda of the achievements of the Soviet state in the business of the welfare of the deaf. In their speeches, the Bureau members noted the high level of the organisational work of VOG, the full employment of the deaf in socially-useful labour, the great cultural-educational work carried out among them’.¹³² The trip itself ended with a meeting between Bureau members and the Minister of Social Welfare, thus underlining the source of the positive experiences that had been witnessed. Similarly, a visit by members of the French Confederation of the Deaf in 1968, reported in *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, eschewed the usual tours around the UPP and the House of Culture in favour of a trip to deaf holiday homes in Sochi and Gelendzhik. The head of the delegation, André St. Antonin, reported that ‘We would very much like to organise such cultured leisure amongst the deaf of our country. But at present it is impossible. The government is indifferent to our needs’. He concluded that ‘the Soviet Union stands in first place in terms of social welfare and services for deaf people’.¹³³

Whilst not always wholly truthful, the propaganda of Soviet deafness shown to foreign visitors thus perpetuated the narrative of the deaf as passive recipients of the care and largesse of the state. As such, Soviet propaganda demonstrated a reverse conceptual shift to that being engendered in the international deaf community. In his speech to the II International Congress, Dragoljub Vukotich, the president of the WFD, had declared that ‘while in the past, we were only passive objects [of state care], we have now become active subjects’.¹³⁴ The Soviet deaf community, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly objectified in narratives of their experience and history: objects of state beneficence, the humaneness of society, and the provision of welfare.

¹³² GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, l. 49.

¹³³ Anon., ‘Sovetskii soiuz – na pervom meste’, *Zhizn’ glukhikh* 21, no. 11 (1968), p. 23.

¹³⁴ Dragoljub Vukotich, Speech to the II International Congress of the Deaf, in *Proceedings of the Second World Congress*, ed. Maslić, (26-28) p. 26.

Science and Institutional Frameworks

The developing view of the deaf as passive recipients of state aid and beneficence was not merely a narrative trope produced by Soviet propaganda and the pressures of international politics. It reflected a more fundamental shift in the way deafness was understood in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s. The shift from understanding of deaf agency to passivity was perpetuated, and in some cases driven, by internal changes in the structures and institutions surrounding Soviet deafness. These changes can be traced in two particular fields: the network of scientific institutions studying and regulating the treatment of deafness, and the VOG bureaucracy itself.

Since the Great Patriotic War, the USSR had re-established its tradition of scientific research into disability in general, and deafness in particular. In 1943, the Scientific-Research Institute of Defectology (*Nauchno-Issledovatel'skii Institut Defektologii*, or *NIID*) was re-opened, subordinate to the newly established Academy of Pedagogical Sciences (APN) of the RSFSR, and containing with it four distinct branches of defectological science: surdopedagogy (education of the deaf), tiflopedagogy (education of the blind), oligophrenopedagogy (education of the 'feeble minded'), and logopedia (speech therapy).¹³⁵ Initially under the leadership of D. I. Azbukin, the dean of the defectological faculty of Moscow's Lenin Pedagogical Institute, the Institute was taken over in 1951 by Professor A. I. D'iachkov, an eminent researcher in deafness and deaf education.¹³⁶ According to D'iachkov, 'the theory of the education of deaf children is a complex pedagogical problem which, unfortunately, for a long time was not the subject of scientific enquiry.'¹³⁷ This problem could be solved, however, through meticulous research (*issledovanie*). As a result, under D'iachkov's leadership, the Institute began to establish itself as a centre which, as its name suggested, based its methodological and theoretical conclusions on rigorous empirical research. From 1957 regular scientific conferences were held, at which scientific and doctoral students presented and discussed their latest findings. These

¹³⁵ V. I. Lubovskii, 'Defektologiya', in *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia*, vol. 8, ed. A. M. Prokhorov (Moscow, 1972), pp. 168-169.

¹³⁶ McCagg, 'The Origins of Defectology', p. 61, nt. 51.

¹³⁷ A. I. D'iachkov, 'Osnovnye problemy surdopedagogiki', in *Trudy vtoroi nauchnoi sessii po defektologii*, ed. D'iachkov, (5-12) p. 10.

papers were published by the APN's publishing house and widely distributed. In 1958, the Institute began to publish its own scientific journal, *Spetsial'naia shkola* (*The Special School*), later renamed *Defektologiya* (*Defectology*). This journal was devoted to questions of special educational theory, but also included works from other scientists in related fields, such as psychology, otolaryngology and electronic technology.¹³⁸

This development of a research discipline was, in many ways, influenced by increasing contacts with the international scientific community in the context of the Cold War. According to Martin A. Miller, 'the expansion of the Cold War competition with the United States in international affairs assumed new levels of confrontation. The "theatre of operations" now extended deeply into the scientific professions. It was not longer possible to dismiss or to deny Western ideas which were perceived as antagonistic and threatening. For the new post-war generation of professionals, a comprehensive analysis was necessary. Instead of ideological polemics, a scientific critique was required.'¹³⁹ The leading role attributed to science by the international deaf community was evident: the WFD, from the time of its first charter, had placed considerable emphasis on the role of science in improving the lot of deaf people. A Scientific Section had been mooted in the first Statute of the Federation in 1953, and soon the scientific commissions – on medicine and audiology, pedagogy, psychology, vocational rehabilitation, social life, culture and art, and the unification of sign language ('Gestuno') – had become the centre of the WFD's activities. Similarly, the 1960s saw a boom in international scientific conferences dealing with the problem of deafness, such as the International Congress on Questions of Deaf Education and the International Conference of Experts on Professional Rehabilitation, both held in Washington in 1963, and the International Scientific Conference on the Problem of Deafness in 1957 and 1966.¹⁴⁰ In the field

¹³⁸ Similarly, the scientific journal *Vestnik Otolaringologii* (*The Otolaryngology Herald*) was launched in 1975.

¹³⁹ Martin A. Miller, *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (New Haven, 1998), p. 126. See also G. D. Komkov, B. V. Levshin and L. K. Semenov, *Akademiia Nauk SSSR: tom vtoroi, 1917-1976* (Moscow, 1977): 'From the beginning of the 1960s, the Communist Party has pursued a firm policy of raising the role of science in society. In this, it has acted not only from internal necessity, but also from the fact that science in the contemporary world has become a major springboard for competition between the two opposing socio-economic systems.' p. 275.

¹⁴⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 40 l. 1. 103; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 488, l. 12.

of Soviet science, the awareness of international scrutiny and the resulting need to convince the international scientific community of the validity of Soviet ideas was evident: the journals *Spetsial'naia Shkola* and *Defektologiya* were published with parallel English and Russian language contents pages, and articles on deaf education in other scientific publications, such as *Sovetskaia pedagogika*, were often accompanied by English-language summaries.¹⁴¹ Papers by leading defectologists, such as Professor D'iachkov, the scientist S. A. Zykov, and the linguist I. F. Geil'man, compiler of the first dictionary of Russian sign language, were given at international conferences and the WFD, in both French and English, and published abroad.

At the same time, however, the development of defectology as a discipline reflected more fundamental shifts in the nature of Soviet science that had begun in the final years of Stalin's life. These shifts marked efforts to move away from the politically and ideologically determined scientific tradition that had existed since the late 1920s, epitomised by T. D. Lysenko, the 'peasant scientist' whose ideologically-based theory of vernalisation (a method of seed treatment) was championed by Stalin but proved devastating to Soviet agriculture. According to David Joravsky, Lysenko's works were finally opened up to (limited) criticism in 1951, ultimately leading to Khrushchev's calls for 'creative discussions and free exchange of opinions' in science after Stalin's death.¹⁴² Significant changes followed this watershed moment: in 1956, the Academy of Sciences of the USSR developed new, competitive systems of training and appointing cadres.¹⁴³ A growing emphasis on research and publication – 'the two sides of scientific work' – saw a threefold increase in spending on science and scientific publications, with the result that, by the mid-

¹⁴¹ See, for example, the English-language summary of A. I. D'iachkov, 'Razvitie sovetskoi defektologii', *Sovetskaia Pedagogika*, no. 9 (1967), pp. 12-24.

¹⁴² David Joravsky, *The Lysenko Affair* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 158. Ethan Pollock considers this shift to have originated earlier, with Stalin's editing of Lysenko's speech in 1948, but also argues that 'under Khrushchev scientists became elite members of Soviet society whose status derived from their ability to innovate, not from their ability to repeat Party slogans'. Ethan Pollock dates the origins of this shift slightly earlier, in 1948: see Ethan Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars* (Princeton, 2006), p. 218. Similarly, Bruce Allyn argues that 'during the post-Stalin thaw the Party ceased to attempt to determine the correctness of scientific theories according to a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and Party interference in science declined for a period beginning in the early 1960s'. Bruce J. Allyn, 'Fact, Value and Science', in *Science and the Soviet Social Order*, ed. Loren R. Graham (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), (225-255) p. 239. Yet whilst this moment proved a watershed in science more broadly, Lysenko continued to be influential well into the Khrushchev era.

¹⁴³ Komkov et al., *Akademiia Nauk SSSR*, p. 259.

1960s, the publishing house *Nauka (Science)* was producing around 47,000 pages per year.¹⁴⁴ This boom was accompanied by increased scientific specialisation: gone were the generalised collections (*sborniki*) of disparate articles, to be replaced by publications on narrow, specialised fields of enquiry.¹⁴⁵

In a similar manner, defectology looked to shake off the constraints of the 1930s, when the Stalinist crackdown on educational psychology had stymied the development of the innovative research discipline pioneered by Lev Vygotskii. Within the Institute, D'iachkov fostered a vibrant research community, in which young specialists carried out focused empirical research, based on experimentation and long-term observation of deaf subjects, and debated that research amongst themselves.¹⁴⁶ This research was by no means ideologically neutral: in his articles on defectology, D'iachkov made it clear that the discipline was still predicated on 'Marxist-Leninist methodology and the principles of communist education'.¹⁴⁷ Yet the need for the objective scientific study of all aspects of deaf people's lives was consistently stressed. In the 1960s, alongside work on deaf education, studies were carried out by the Central Institute for the Examination of Work-Capability and the Organisation of the Labour of Invalids (TsIETIN), under the Ministry of Social Welfare, on the capabilities of deaf individuals working in industry and agriculture.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, in 1961 a new research centre was established, the Laboratory of the General and Professional Education of Deaf Adults, within the Institute of Defectology.¹⁴⁹ Throughout the decade, these departments conducted scientific studies on the labour and education of the deaf.

The considerable quantities of research produced by these new scientific-research bodies did not fundamentally change the way that deafness was understood in the Soviet school and the workplace. Long-established approaches, such as differentiation in the education system, the use of finger-spelling in the classroom,

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 265, 391.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

¹⁴⁶ Traditions of empirical research and debate were also encouraged within the Lenin Pedagogical Institute, whose students regularly published scholarly papers. See *Uchenye zapiski MGPI im Lenina. Defektologicheskii Fakul'tet*, ed. I. N. Krasnykh (Moscow, 1947–).

¹⁴⁷ D'iachkov, 'Razvitie', p. 12.

¹⁴⁸ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, l. 20; Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 544

¹⁴⁹ *Otchet TsP VOG za 1963-1966*, p. 44.

the concentration of deaf individuals in work brigades and the procedures for work placement amongst deaf individuals remained essentially unchanged. What these studies did, however, was to subject techniques long-practiced within the Soviet deaf community to scientific scrutiny, and to apply a scientific gloss to established traditions. For example, from 1957, the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences began to publish detailed studies of the experience of successful deaf schools, such as the Kolomenskaia School for Deaf-Mutes, and the Sverdlovsk School for Deaf Children.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, a two year research project by TsIETIN on the theme of ‘Professional Education and Work Placement of the Deaf in Agriculture’, completed in 1962, studied 2,638 deaf individuals working in the Gor’kii, Tambov and Krasnodar *oblasti*, and used the findings to establish general recommendations for work placement among deaf people in the countryside.¹⁵¹

On the international stage, these scientific studies proved compelling. In the WFD, VOG’s UPP system was frequently cited by Magarotto as an example of successful professional rehabilitation.¹⁵² In 1971, during the VI International Congress, the highest category of WFD medal – the Order of International Merit – was awarded to D’iachkov (posthumously), F. F. Rau and Sutiagin.¹⁵³ American experts in special education gave considerable credence to the works produced by the Institute of Defectology; in the 1960s, journals such as *The Volta Review* and the *American Annals of the Deaf* published reviews of Soviet research and attempted to integrate Soviet findings into their own understanding of deaf education.¹⁵⁴ Yet in their international successes, Soviet scientists contributed to the shift in agency away from Soviet deaf individuals. By configuring the deaf as objects of scientific study, rather than individuals in charge of their own lives, science contributed to the growing objectification of the deaf.

¹⁵⁰ See S. A. Zykov, ‘Predislovie’, *Sverdlovskaiia opornia shkola*, (3-8) p. 3.

¹⁵¹ GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, l. 20.

¹⁵² See, for example, ‘Address of Dr. Cesare Magarotto’, p. 32.

¹⁵³ V. G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh: Istoriia, razvitie, perspektivy* (Leningrad, 1985), p. 248.

¹⁵⁴ See Morovkin, ‘Experiment in Teaching Deaf Preschool Children in the Soviet Union’, pp. 260-268, and S. P. Quigley, ‘Language Research in Countries Other Than The United States,’ *The Volta Review* 68, no. 10 (1966), pp. 68-83.

As was the case with international propaganda, the relationship between narratives of deaf agency and state (and scientific) objectification was a complex one. The Institute of Defectology, despite being a state scientific body, was not entirely divorced from the deaf community, and did not establish its scientific views in a vacuum. The Institute was organisationally intertwined with VOG, which used some of its vast resources to pay the salaries of Institute scientists, many of whom (particularly within the teacher training department) were themselves deaf.¹⁵⁵ The Laboratory of the General and Professional Education of Deaf Adults was founded on the initiative of VOG, after Sutiagin sent a request for methodological guidance to the Ministry of Education and the Institute of Defectology.¹⁵⁶ Sutiagin himself was to work at the Institute for several years after leaving the VOG chairmanship in 1970. However, the increasing authority assigned to science imposed particular constraints on the lives of deaf people. Methodologies and objective facts, established through scientific study, could not be easily challenged. Examples of this could be seen in Vartan'ian and Gitlits' *Of Those Who Cannot Hear*. In the section detailing the choice of profession open to a deaf individual, free choice was emphasised, but with a significant caveat: 'Everything depends on what the individual wants to do and the report of the medical commission. If a deaf lad expresses a desire to become a miner (a highly respected trade in the USSR), he will not be encouraged. In fact, the doctors will firmly oppose his choice. That is one of the few trades banned to people with impaired hearing.'¹⁵⁷ Scientific research had decreed that mining was unsafe for the deaf, and deaf individuals could not argue.

The development of defectology as a research discipline, therefore, contributed an additional dynamic to the shift from the deaf as agents, to the deaf as objects, here of scientific study and expertise. This scientific objectification could be further seen in the increasing tendency to send hearing scientists to international meetings, instead of deaf members of VOG. Scientists from the Institute of Defectology, such as D'iachkov, Zykov and Geil'man, and representatives of the Ministry of Social Welfare, including the minister herself, N. A. Korsunskaja, had all become familiar faces within the WFD and the international scientific community by the late 1960s.

¹⁵⁵ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 543.

¹⁵⁶ Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ Vartan'ian and Gitlits, *Of Those Who Cannot Hear*, p. 14.

In return, hearing deaf-education specialists visited the USSR and were shown the trappings of care and scientific research surrounding the deaf, such as the system of schools and the Institute of Defectology.¹⁵⁸ In one famous example, Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of the former American president Franklin D. Roosevelt, visited the USSR in 1957. In the build-up to her visit, VOG's Central Directorate was informed that she might visit the VOG House of Culture in Moscow.¹⁵⁹ However, Roosevelt instead spent her time visiting a prosthetics laboratory and meeting with Korsunskaja. In her newspaper column *My Day*, Roosevelt reported the institutional view from the centre: 'the Moscow ministry [of Social Welfare] employs 380 persons and throughout the country there are 70,000 on the social welfare staff. There is a chief for medical and labor matters and one to look after the invalids and aged. [...] The ministry's budget in 1957 was 34 billion rubles, with a principal expenditure of 32 billions for pensions and help for large families'.¹⁶⁰

The development of the science of deafness thus shifted the balance of agency, away from VOG as a self-representative social body, and towards institutions of welfare and expertise, such as the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Institute of Defectology. At the same time, the internal dynamics of VOG itself during this period were also demonstrating a similar shift: away from the mass, inclusive politics of the early decades, and towards a stabilised bureaucracy that was less and less representative of the deaf community as a whole. These changes built on the reforms to VOG's structure, begun in the immediate post-war period and strengthened with the election of Sutiagin as VOG chairman in 1949. These reforms, which had enabled the boom in production and spending that characterised the cultural 'golden age' of the post-war period, had also produced a more streamlined, stable and hierarchical political system within the deaf society. The 1948 VOG charter had set out a new system of governance for the society: the All-Russian Congress, made up of local, elected VOG managers, would meet once every three years and elect the Central Directorate and the Central Inspection Commission. In

¹⁵⁸ For an example of visiting specialists, see Anon., 'Gosti iz SShA', *VES* 26, no. 3 (1973), p. 24.

¹⁵⁹ Preparations for this visit were discussed in a meeting on 23rd August 1958 between the Deputy Minister of Social Welfare of the RSFSR K. M. Dolgov and representatives of VOG. GARF f. A-511, op. 1, d. 489, ll. 30-31

¹⁶⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, *My Day*, 14th October 1957

<http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1957&_f=md003933> [accessed 28/02/10].

turn, the Central Directorate would elect a Presidium, (through an ‘open vote’) and nominate its chairman and deputy. In the years between the All-Russian Congresses, the Presidium would be the ‘organ of governance of the Society’, meeting three times a month to manage the local VOG organisations, set planning targets and oversee reports, and manage the frequent election campaigns within the society.¹⁶¹ Alongside these structural reforms, Sutiagin had introduced a system of planning and targets, covering all areas of VOG activity, including capital building, culture, education and sport.¹⁶²

Despite the marked rise in revenue from the VOG UPPs as a result of these reforms, the targets set by the Central Directorate were rarely met; a point of some concern in VOG’s yearly reports. In order to facilitate and oversee the fulfilment of VOG plans, new organisational bodies were needed. Between the VII and VIII Congresses, held in 1958 and 1963 respectively, several new departments were created within the Central Directorate and overseen by the Presidium. These bodies included the Department of Industrial Enterprises, to run the UPP system, the Department of Culture and Cadres, to oversee such projects as the Theatre of Sign and Gesture and the VOG social clubs, and the Central Project Construction Bureau, to control the society’s expansive capital building projects.¹⁶³ In 1963, the All-Russian Sports Federation of the Deaf saw the sporting activities of the society come under the combined governance of VOG and the Trades Union. By the mid-1960s, therefore, all of the major activities of the society had been centralised and brought under the control of the Central Directorate and the Presidium.

This development of a centralised bureaucracy within VOG was framed in the same language of democracy and accountability that had characterised the reforms of the post-war period. Yet its results were far from democratic. In his history of VOG,

¹⁶¹ *Ustav vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh* (1948), p. 14. This structure conforms to Mark Edele’s description of a ‘typical’ Soviet organisation, ‘with a larger legitimizing body that had little to say in practice, a smaller “committee” that did not meet often either, and a very small Moscow-based circle of people who did the actual work.’ Edele, *Soviet Veterans*, p. 163.

¹⁶² For example, in 1950, VOG and Gosplan collaborated on a plan for the education of adult deaf and the raising of qualifications amongst VOG workers. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 23

¹⁶³ See GARF, f. A-511, fond summary, l. 6. These changes are difficult to trace archivally, particularly in the late 1960s: documents from the VIII, IX and X Congresses, from 1963-1971, are missing from the archives.

Victor Palennyi argues forcefully that these reforms caused VOG to cease being a ‘voluntary social organisation’, becoming instead a hierarchical ‘state within a state’ which neither included nor represented ordinary deaf people.¹⁶⁴ For Palennyi, the centralisation of the VOG infrastructure, which saw members of the organising departments appointed directly by the Presidium, led to particular biases manifesting themselves within VOG. On the one hand, the money-making UPPs, and their managers, were prioritised: Palennyi quotes I. F. Geil’man, a member of the presidium of the VOG Central Directorate, who noted in 1968 that ‘an analysis of the work of the presidium over the last year shows that, of 91 questions heard by the presidium, 28 were devoted to the activities of the UPPs. Questions of education were heard 4 times, question of culture only 6 times’.¹⁶⁵ Large salaries were paid to directors and specialists within the UPP system, whilst other workers within the society, such as regional managers and translators, received very low pay. On the other hand, the growing presence of hearing people within VOG began to be felt. By the late 1960s, two-thirds of the VOG leadership were hearing, a figure which included 67 of the 70 UPP directors. Many of these VOG leaders were former employees of the Ministry of Social Welfare, a body which, Palennyi argues, had come to see VOG as a ‘sinecure’: ‘MSO “dropped” their old workers, whose usefulness was not great, if not completely negligible, into the VOG apparatus’.¹⁶⁶ Unlike such figures as Geil’man, who, as the son of deaf parents, was considered ‘one of us’ by the deaf, these ex-Ministry workers usually had little or no knowledge of the deaf community.¹⁶⁷

The tensions engendered by these changes came to a head in 1970, when Sutiagin, the principal creator of this bureaucratic hierarchy, was dramatically ousted from his position as chairman. On the initiative of the editor in chief of *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, G. M. Lukinykh, a collection of compromising material on Sutiagin was sent to various state bodies, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs’ Department for the Battle against the Theft of Socialist Property and Speculation, and the office of Leonid Brezhnev himself. This material detailed the myriad failings Sutiagin had allegedly

¹⁶⁴ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 556.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

displayed during his time as VOG chairman. Sutiagin's domineering managerial style was turned against him: he was accused of rudeness and abuse of his position, with no lack of VOG workers willing to testify against him. Two points, in particular, stood out. His abuse of his position for 'personal enrichment' was much resented, and his accusers dwelled on tales of his personal apartment in the Kriukovo Resort and the special delivery of luxury products from around the country. Furthermore, his tendency to appoint hearing specialists to run VOG departments was singled out for criticism. A deaf engineer complained to V. V. Grishin, a member of the Politburo, that deaf specialists were leaving the VOG Central Directorate, and the Central Constructional Bureau because Sutiagin had appointed 'people foreign to our society [i.e. the hearing]'.¹⁶⁸ Finally, and damningly, his opponents brought up his 1934 trial for mismanagement and the poisoning of livestock, during his time as an agricultural worker in Ukraine.¹⁶⁹ Under this onslaught of criticism, Sutiagin was summoned to the Ministry of Social Welfare and relieved of his position.

Although Sutiagin's removal from the chairmanship clearly demonstrated a general frustration at the VOG apparatus's increasing distance from the interests of the deaf community as a whole, his departure did little to change matters. Sutiagin's replacement, the 37 year-old Vladimir Anatol'evich Fufaev (Sutiagin's third deputy for the last three years of his chairmanship), had little experience of management, and did nothing to dispel the impression that the Ministry of Social Welfare was influencing the running of VOG: his appointment over more experienced candidates came on the recommendation of D. P. Komarova, N. A. Korsunskaja's replacement as Minister of Social Welfare. A hard-of-hearing graduate of Moscow's Engineering and Economics Institute, Fufaev was a firm believer in the omnipotence of technology, and was vocal in his conviction that powerful hearing aids would spell the end of deafness as a social issue. Ivan Isaev, the deaf poet, quoted Fufaev as saying that 'science and technology are developing such that soon there will not be

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 559. The VOG Central Constructional Bureau, established in April 1962 to oversee the vast capital building projects instigated by VOG, employed only 12 deaf engineers in a work force of 70. See also Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, p. 98.

¹⁶⁹ This trial was a point of some debate when Sutiagin was elected chairman in 1949. See Chapter 2.

one deaf person left. We will dissolve VOG, and its history will end with it...'¹⁷⁰ After a reshuffle at the 1971 plenum of the VOG Central Directorate, two of Fufaev's three deputies were hearing appointees from the Ministry of Social Welfare. During his chairmanship, none of the directors of VOG's 70 UPPs would be deaf.

By the beginning of the 1970s, therefore, the leadership of VOG had ceased to be directly representative of its membership base. This problem of representation seems contradictory: by the 1970s, VOG had practically achieved its goal of including the entire deaf population in its membership (in 1967, 88.6 per cent of all adult deaf people were members of VOG; by 1978, the figure had reached 98.3 per cent).¹⁷¹ Certainly, on the international stage, VOG was viewed as a synecdoche of the Russian deaf community as a whole. In fact, VOG's recognition on the world stage likely contributed to its development as a high-status organisation into the Brezhnev era. However, the bureaucratic changes in VOG did not mirror those of other 'entitlement communities' which used their international standing to fight for recognition in Soviet society, such as the Soviet Committee of War Veterans (*Sovetskii komitet veteranov voiny* or SKVV). According to Mark Edele, 'the SKVV became an organisation rooted in the localities which legitimized its function as a lobbying organisation for war veterans with service to the regime in the arena of international politics and the cold war.' VOG's activities on the world stage, in contrast, masked an ossification in its bureaucracy and the development of a representative void.

Whilst propaganda brochures and films told stories of a vibrant community, in which deaf people could overcome their handicap and find individual and collective fulfilment through labour, education and social life, the reality contradicted that view. A growing reliance on scientific research to define deafness and shape responses to it, and a developing bureaucracy that saw emphasis shift to the needs of production and a predominantly hearing hierarchy, demonstrated that the

¹⁷⁰ Ivan Isaev, *Mnogogolos'e tishiny: Iz istoriia glukhikh Rossii* (Moscow, 1996), p. 5.

¹⁷¹ *Otchet TsP VOG za 1963-66*, p. 3; Plenum TsP VOG, Postanovlenie 'o sostoianii i merakh dal'neishego uluchsheniia sotsial'no-kul'turnogo obsluzhivaniia glukhikh trudiashchikhsia v svete reshenii XXV s"ezda KPSS', 10th April 1978, VOG collection, p. 2.

conceptualisation of the deaf as passive objects of the 'system' was not merely a narrative trope. By the 1970s, it was grounded in a material reality.

Conclusion

From the moment of VOG's entry onto the world stage, its engagement with the international deaf community was fraught with the tensions of Cold War politics. Foreign deafness was not experienced in an ideological vacuum: the differences between West, East and Developing World were interpreted in terms of their social and governmental systems. Whilst the deaf of the West were seen as victims of the social inequalities inherent to capitalism, the deaf of Eastern Europe were freed by the socialist system to develop fully, both as individuals and as a community. Within this vision of world political systems, the Soviet Union, and particularly the Soviet experience of deafness, was held up as an ideal. In the context of the WFD, the lack of discrimination, the right to work for equal pay, and the lively social and cultural life experienced by the Soviet deaf community was seen to show that a solution to the problem of deafness was possible. Yet the tendency to understand national experiences of deafness in terms of the action (or inaction) of national governments definitively shaped the way in which the Soviet deaf community propagandized this ideal experience. Whilst the vibrancy and activity of their lives were stressed, these were attributed to the freedoms granted by the Soviet government. Material benefits and state care became dominant tropes in the narrative of Soviet deafness. In addition, the growing influence of hearing scientists on the field of deaf education and deaf labour practices, and the developing bureaucratisation of VOG, added to this narrative (and material) paradox. The deaf, it seems, were no longer the lead actors in their own story.

Having grasped the opportunities inherent in the Soviet project, therefore, and having fought so vehemently for their own self-determination as a community, the Soviet deaf failed to transmit the uniqueness of their experience to the world at large. Representing themselves as objects of Soviet humaneness and welfare, the political potential of their own unique social identity was lost. As such, by the 1970s, the Soviet deaf community had begun to lose interest in engaging with the Western

world. Whilst the 1950s had been characterised by intense excitement at the development of internationalism and the building of links with other deaf communities, over the following decades, this excitement waned dramatically. On the pages of *V edinom stroiu* (the renamed and re-launched *Zhizn' glukhikh*), first-hand accounts of 'deaf tourism' to countries of the West almost completely disappeared, to be replaced by formulaic propaganda on the 'hidden reality' of life in the capitalist world.¹⁷² The International Day of the Deaf continued to be celebrated, but its international scope had contracted: VOG celebrations by the 1970s tended to focus on news from the 'Brother Republics' of the USSR and the countries of Eastern Europe.

For ordinary members of VOG, therefore, contact with the Western world, through the 'armchair travel' of deaf journalism, had diminished greatly by the 1970s, to be replaced by a growing focus on the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. In a similar manner, focus shifted from the WFD as a potential forum for international influence to a new body, the International Symposium of the Deaf of Socialist Countries, founded by VOG in 1968. Held every two years, the Symposium brought together delegates from the USSR, Eastern Europe and Mongolia to debate 'the social welfare, cultural provision, [and] professional education of the deaf' in a socialist society. According to a VOG report, the work of the Symposium had a twofold aim; to debate the differing views on the treatment of deaf people, and to reach a consensus that could be applied universally.¹⁷³ Whereas the WFD had failed to be convinced of the wisdom of the Soviet approach to deafness, the political climate of Eastern Europe was seen to be a much more fertile ground for Soviet influence. VOG did remain a member of the World Federation, but it no longer functioned as a forum for Soviet political propaganda on the scale experienced in the first years of deaf international politics.

¹⁷² These crude propaganda pieces appeared under such rubrics as 'Grimaces of the Capitalist World', 'Myths and Realities', and 'Behind the Façade of the Bourgeois World'. The rare accounts of travel to the West in the 1970s tended to focus on scientific conferences and the World Federation of the Deaf, and are often attributed to a 'correspondent' from the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. See, for example, M. Tulisov, 'Mify i realnost: burzhuznoe gosudarstvo i sotsial'noe obespechenie', *VES* 25, no. 9 (1972), p. 20.

¹⁷³ *Otchet TsP VOG za 1967-70*, p. 58.

By the 1970s, therefore, VOG had become markedly more insular in its attitudes to foreign deafness. As a result, when deaf communities in the West began to fight for their own civil and community rights (echoing the rhetoric used by the Soviet deaf community in the 1920s) their actions were not reported in the Soviet Union, and parallels were not drawn. For example, during the 1988 protest Deaf President Now (DPN), when students of Gallaudet College barricaded the site of the university and successfully demanded the reinstatement of deaf college president, *V edinom stroiu* remained silent. A brief note in the party newspaper *Pravda* made mention of the protest, but instead of commenting on the political significance of the situation for the deaf community, the newspaper merely noted that Gallaudet was the ‘only higher educational establishment for the deaf in America’.¹⁷⁴ The standard narrative of Western inequality thus won out, and the Soviet deaf community remained largely ignorant of developments amongst the deaf in the West, an ignorance that would persist until the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁵

In their encounters with foreign deaf individuals and communities, therefore, VOG convinced itself and its members of the inherent superiority of the Soviet system, in allowing the deaf the freedom to overcome their disability and lead ‘useful’ and fulfilled lives. Yet in shifting the emphasis from deaf agency to state action, narratives of Soviet deafness negated the dynamic and active nature of this unique community. The outward gaze of international propaganda turned inwards, revealing a community that was increasingly static and cut off from the world.

¹⁷⁴ ‘24 chasa planeta: SShA’, *Pravda*, 15th March 1988, p. 5. Even more surprising was an article in *V edinom stroiu* from late 1988, detailing a visit to Moscow by the American actress Marlee Matlin. Matlin, the first deaf woman to win an Oscar for her role in Randa Haines’ 1986 film *Children of a Lesser God*, had been an outspoken supporter of DPN, yet the article made no mention of the protest. B. Vasil’ev, ‘Moskovskie vstrechi Marli Metlin’, *VES* 41, no. 9 (1988), p. 26.

¹⁷⁵ On occasion, readers of *V edinom stroiu* reacted against this lack of information about the West. In 1982, a reader wrote that he had read about a new French miracle treatment to cure deafness on the pages of the central Soviet newspaper *Za rubezhom*, and demanded to know why *V edinom stroiu* was not covering such stories. A. Kukoverov, ‘Frantsuzskaia gazeta soobshchila,.. a chto na samom dele?’, *VES* 35, no. 6 (1982), p. 18. Likewise, in 1988, readers complained that hearing newspapers covered news about foreign treatments for deafness which were not reported in *V edinom stroiu*: ‘There is other information about the rehabilitation of the deaf, but the newspaper is deaf to this subject. Excuse my abruptness.’ I. L’vov, ‘Ataka na glukhikh’, *VES* 41, no. 7 (1988), p. 14.

Epilogue

In April 1974, the magazine *V edinom stroiu* published an appeal under the title, ‘We Will Reconstruct Our History’. The short article called on readers to prepare for the fiftieth anniversary of VOG by sending materials from the Society’s history, including newspapers, brochures, documents and photographs, to the Central Directorate in Moscow. ‘It is our duty’, the article declared, ‘to reconstruct the history of our Society, to widely and fully tell of its best people – of those who laid the foundations of VOG, and those who continued and still continue the glorious traditions of the veterans’.¹ In 1976, on the basis of these materials, VOG members opened a Central Museum of the History of VOG in the Republican House of Culture in Moscow and published an accompanying volume of text, entitled *50 Years of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf*.² This volume, divided into thematic sections, was to be used by the VOG *aktiv* in local deaf clubs to lead discussions on the history of their organisation.

Through visiting the Museum and debating the content of *50 Years*, ordinary members of VOG were encouraged to reflect on the history of the Soviet deaf community. The text of *50 Years*, produced by A. S. Korotkov, cogently summarised the history of deaf organisation since the pre-revolutionary period, painting a picture of Soviet deafness that told of the opportunity provided by the revolution and its liberation of the deaf from tutelage and marginality. In tsarist times, Korotkov argued, with deaf people deprived of civil rights and lacking a ‘permanent job or a permanent home, thousands had wandered about the villages and cities of Russia, feeding themselves through charity, hiring themselves out for odd jobs to earn a crust of bread’.³ The October Revolution, however, had conferred ‘civil and political

¹ ‘Vossosdadim istoriiu obshchestva’, appeal in *VES* 27, no. 4 (1974), p. 19.

² V. A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhykh* (Moscow, 2007), p. 602; A. S. Korotkov, *50 let Vserossiiskomu obshchestvu glukhikh* (Leningrad, 1976).

³ Korotkov, *50 let*, p. 5.

rights' upon deaf people, who became equal members of society. Deaf people had grasped this opportunity with both hands, their 'thirst for greater activity' driving them to organise themselves, a process which culminated in the foundation of VOG in 1926.⁴

Korotkov's narrative told of how, after the revolution, deaf people had actively remade themselves as Soviet individuals – those literate, conscious workers, shaped by their interactions with the life of the social collective and on whose initiative socialist society was to be built. He thus recounted the foundation of the first deaf Communist Party and Komsomol cells, the entry of deaf people into the factories and *sovkhozy*, their participation in higher education and their involvement in theatre and sport. Yet his text inadvertently revealed the central tension between the integration of deaf people into the Soviet collective and their isolation within deaf-only institutions. By focusing on the administrative structures of VOG – the separate clubs, educational establishments, work brigades and sporting associations – Korotkov implicitly highlighted the bureaucratic division between the deaf community and Soviet society as a whole. VOG was portrayed as a self-funding, self-sustaining micro-community, founded on the Soviet values of 'democratic centralism' and 'collective management', but also standing apart.

Whilst Korotkov's narrative accurately painted the broad strokes of Soviet deaf history, the text itself still represented a reconstruction of the past. The immense difficulties faced by deaf people, for example, as they tried (and sometimes failed) to master the skills necessary to enter the factory and the classroom, were strikingly absent from the text. Moments when the Soviet state had opposed the organisation of deaf people, painting them as isolated and anti-Soviet individuals, were glossed over. Similarly, the occasionally violent debates within the deaf community on the nature of their engagement with the Soviet project were not discussed. In particular, no mention was made of the ongoing attempt by Buslaev and members of the deaf section of the VTsSPS to counter the expansion of VOG and integrate deaf people into the trades union system: Korotkov merely noted that the VTsSPS had 'played a

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

great part' in serving deaf individuals since 1931.⁵ In sum, the instances of difficulty and the moments of choice which had shaped the development of the deaf society were a part of deaf history no longer told. Similarly, those deaf individuals who chose not to be a part of VOG were blotted out. Instead, deaf history was viewed teleologically, with VOG portrayed as the inevitable culmination of the liberation of deaf people by the state. Korotkov thus produced a version of Soviet history that had been cleaned up, stripped of the moments of tension between the particular needs of deaf individuals and the broader demands of Soviet individual and collective selfhood.

At the same time, Korotkov's narrative revealed much about the changing identity of deaf people over the fifty years since VOG's foundation. As this thesis has shown, the early years of deaf organisation were characterised by demands for agency, independence and self-determination as a community. The desire to reject tsarist frameworks of tutelage and marginality led deaf people to actively engage with the Soviet project to remake man and society, seeking to forge themselves anew as conscious and active labourers, farmers and students. Whilst this process of transformation was often problematic and did not involve all deaf people to the same extent, it provided a means for many to 'overcome' the limitations of their defect and show themselves to be capable and equal members of Soviet society. As the decades passed, however, this agency and independence gave way to new paradigms of deaf identity. The legacy of the Second World War, including the increased social presence of disabled veterans, raised the status of disability and encouraged deaf people to frame themselves as deserving recipients of state welfare. At the same time, the growth of the VOG bureaucracy saw the deaf increasingly defined by institutional structures of service and care. To be sure, this post-war period also saw the development of other modes of deaf-Soviet identity, positively defined through community, language, culture and art. Yet by the 1970s, the dynamism and passion with which earlier generations of deaf people had fought for the right to work, study and play alongside their hearing comrades had given way to a more static and bureaucratised identity politics: deaf people were depicted as privileged members of Soviet society, enabled by the state and the deaf society to live fulfilled lives.

⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

This paradigm of deaf identity, in Korotkov's text, was projected backwards onto the early years of the deaf society, now viewed through the prism of state care. The foundation of VOG, a moment of victory for the deaf community against a state that shied away from 'independent' organisations, was retold, erasing the struggles, the contingencies, the visionary dreams: 'with the support of the party and government the deaf labourers of the RSFSR were given the possibility to unite into an organisation, in order, on the basis of autonomy [*samodeiatel'nost'*], to solve the questions of work placement, general education and mass-cultural work. These tasks were resolved in the shortest possible time with the help of state organs.'⁶

As the text of *50 Years* suggests, the shift from agency to welfare was not purely rhetorical. The section, 'State Care of Deaf Invalids', stressed the passive role of Soviet deaf individuals. Though granted equal rights and the opportunity to work, they were also provided by the Soviet state with various means of support, including state pensions, supplementary student grants, special translators in workplaces and educational establishments, housing, leisure and hearing aids. Again, this welfare and care was presented as a constant theme throughout the Soviet period, rather than as a development of the post-war era. From the moment of the 'Great October Revolution', it seemed, deaf people had the right to expect 'a whole series of privileges and benefits provided by the government and state organs'.⁷ Whilst the 'thirst for greater activity' of the early deaf activists was not negated by this growing reliance on welfare, the passivity of deaf individuals in relation to the state became the dominant mode of identity.

Within this new paradigm of deaf identity, the fiftieth anniversary of VOG in 1976 was viewed as the apotheosis of the Soviet deaf community. Having developed and expanded over its long history, VOG now embodied the dreams of its original founders. Deaf people were no longer downtrodden, backward and unable to support themselves: on the contrary, the volume proclaimed, 'all work-capable deaf people are engaged in socially useful work; illiteracy is liquidated and the law on universal

⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

education is realised'.⁸ Not only had the political and cultural level of deaf people been raised; VOG had also developed a strong financial base of factories and workshops, as a result of which the organisation was financially independent and free of state subsidy. To be sure, the Society was not free of a few 'shortcomings' (*nedostatki*), but these were the result of a lack of activity on the part of its members, and did not tarnish the structure of the organisation. In recognition of this moment of achievement, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR awarded VOG the title, 'Mark of Honour' (*Znak Pocheta*), in a lavish ceremony at the Republican House of Culture in Moscow on 15th September 1976. During the ceremony, the Minister of Social Welfare, D. P. Komarova, fixed the official medal to the Society's flag, and the President of the World Federation of the Deaf, Dragoljub Vukotic, gave a speech on the authority and reputation of VOG in the international arena.⁹ 1976 was thus a moment of celebration and resolution, as VOG and the Soviet deaf community had finally achieved their place within Soviet society.

The VOG Museum and Korotkov's *50 Years* marked the beginning of a period of historical reflection: from the mid-1970s, *V edinom stroiu* published regular articles on major events in Soviet deaf history, and a series of books on the history of VOG was published into the 1980s.¹⁰ Yet despite (or perhaps because of) this self-reflection and focus on the past, it is particularly difficult to find materials to analyse the contemporary experience of the Soviet deaf community in this period, or the extent to which grass-roots members of VOG defined their identities in the terms espoused in its glossy propaganda. The VOG collection of the State Archive, which contains a rich collection of documents stretching back to the first Congress of Deaf-Mutes in 1917, was closed in 1972. In the aftermath of its closure, documents and reports from VOG's Central Directorate and local organisations were stored at the new VOG Palace of Culture, the seat of the Central Directorate and the Presidium, in the Pervomaiskaia area of Moscow. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, much of this documentation was destroyed.¹¹ In the absence of archival

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 601.

¹⁰ See, for example, V. G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhykh: Istoriia, razvitie, perspektivy* (Leningrad, 1985); V. Krainin and Z. Krainina, *Chelovek ne slyshit* (Moscow, 1984).

¹¹ This information was given to me by Viktor Palennyi, historian and current editor of *V edinom stroiu*.

information, therefore, the history of the Soviet deaf community in the late Brezhnev and Gorbachev eras is particularly hard to trace.

Nevertheless, it is possible to glean some insights into the nature of the Soviet deaf society as it moved into the era of *glasnost*' and *perestroika* by examining articles in *V edinom stroiu* and other newspapers, and accounts of contemporary deaf activists. As Soviet society became more open to debate and criticism, it became increasingly clear that the glorified narrative of Soviet deafness exemplified by Korotkov's *50 Years* was not reflected in the experience of many deaf individuals. In June 1980, for example, during the XII Congress of VOG in Kirov, the delegate V. A. Komashinskii was given no opportunity to voice the grievances of VOG members from his region. In a letter to a friend in Moscow, he complained that 'the congress is like a play. Everything is arranged beautifully: the food, the surroundings. But this is hardly a tourist trip [*No ved' eto ne turpoezdka*].'¹² The pomp and circumstance thus provided no room to discuss the discontentment, needs or ideas of ordinary VOG members.

From the mid-1980s, this discontentment became more visible, and the complaints of VOG members more specific. At the VII Plenum of the Central Directorate of VOG in 1988, a member of the Inspection Committee, I. P. Ubogov, raised the question of deaf representation in the upper echelons of the VOG administration. The managing organs of VOG, he argued, were made up almost exclusively of 'staff members', that is, state administrators rather than elected representatives of the primary organisations of VOG: 'In these conditions, the decisions taken by our managing organs do not have a democratic character, they do not take into consideration the interests of all members of the Society: pensioners, students, workers, engineers from state enterprises, the peasantry. [...] Those who will fulfil the decisions should themselves make them. Is that not right, is that not democracy?'¹³ Ubogov thus identified the dominance of hearing specialists and administrators in the VOG administration as a denial of deaf agency: in the absence of deaf leaders, deaf people were not able to be represented.

¹² V. A. Komashinskii, letter to A. B. Slavina, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 604.

¹³ I. P. Ubogov, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 622.

Tensions between the deaf community and hearing administrators had been a perennial problem throughout VOG's history, a problem compounded over the post-war period by the development of a bureaucratic (and often hearing) elite within VOG. The political climate of *glasnost* allowed these resentments to be openly voiced. In 1989, a group of approximately 50 people (primarily from the VOG administration) travelled to America to attend 'Deaf Way', an international conference and arts festival held at Gallaudet University. Shortly afterwards, *V edinom stroiu* published an article, again by Ubogov, who complained that the delegation had not adequately represented the Soviet deaf community: 'On what basis did workers of the apparatus of the Central Directorate of VOG and Minsobes RSFSR deprive deaf people of the ability to speak about themselves and their problems, and consider themselves the representatives of their opinions and interests? It was no coincidence that members of the VOG delegation made no speeches or presentations at the conference. [...] We had something to say, but there was no one there to say it.'¹⁴ According to Viktor Palennyi, the sense that deaf people were alienated within their own society had been developing since the late 1970s: 'it was very strange for deaf people, entering their own Central Directorate [building], to see such a multitude of hearing people, at times with no knowledge of VOG's affairs, but immediately taking for themselves the right to treat deaf people in a didactic manner.'¹⁵ These hearing administrators benefited from the lavish material benefits awarded by VOG to its staff: they travelled abroad on VOG's behalf, took long holidays in VOG's sanatoria and on occasion were awarded flats from the society. Their presence not only deprived deaf individuals of the resources meant for them, but also gave the lie to the notion that VOG was a society governed by its deaf members.

The dominant role of 'didactic' hearing administrators within VOG was not merely a problem of representation. The ability of hearing specialists, particularly within the fields of education and the 'science of labour', to determine the lives of deaf individuals had been growing over the post-war period. In the 1980s, deaf people

¹⁴ I. Ubogov, 'Put' ot glukhikh?', *VES* 43, no. 3 (1990), (25-26) p. 25.

¹⁵ Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 593.

also began to oppose this scientific objectification. Articles in *V edinom stroiu* complained of the dominance of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences (APN), nicknamed the ‘Academy of Fallen Sciences’ on account of its constant failures: ‘The most painful problem is the semi-literacy of graduates of those special schools which follow the programme of the Scientific-Research Institute of Defectology. The method of teaching [...] leads late-deafened and hard-of-hearing children to deaf-muteness.’¹⁶ It was not only the poor methodology that drew criticism, however. From the moment of diagnosis, deaf children were considered the responsibility of the state and were sent away to boarding school at the age of three. For many parents, this meant sending their child thousands of miles away, to see them only during the school holidays. The helplessness of parents in the face of the decisions of doctors and educators was brought into the public eye in 1986, when the newspaper *Izvestiia* published an article by O. Iatsunova, a mother from the city of Gor’kii. Iatsunova’s daughter had fallen ill and lost her hearing at a young age, and as a result was to be sent away to boarding school in Khabarovsk, ‘2,000 versts [approximately 2,000 miles] away from home’. Iatsunova instead chose to teach the child at home, using experimental methods and losing her job as an engineer in the process. Throughout, she complains, her decision to keep her daughter with the family was treated as a ‘whim’ (*blazh*), and she was offered no help by the state.¹⁷

Iatsunova’s article and the complaints of VOG members during the 1980s thus demonstrate a resurgence of the fight for agency on the part of deaf individuals and their families. Using strikingly similar language to that of the deaf activists of the 1920s, deaf people began to call for the right to ‘determine their own fate’, to represent themselves and to organise their own lives. These demands were shaped by the particular concerns of the Gorbachev era: Gorbachev’s calls to ‘democratise’ the Soviet system in the late 1980s and his emphasis on the ‘human factor’ in social interaction encouraged deaf people to frame their demands in terms of democracy, personal choice and experience.¹⁸ Yet the impulse was the same: to free deaf people

¹⁶ M. Grakhova, I. Isaev and I. El’nikov, ‘Otkritoe pis’mo deputatu Verkhnego Soveta SSSR, vitse-prezidentu AN SSSR, akademiku E. P. Velkikhovu’, *VES* 42, no. 4 (1989), p. 12.

¹⁷ O. Iatsunova, ‘Osobyi Sluchai’, *Izvestiia*, 15th April 1986, p. 3.

¹⁸ Stephen Lovell, *The Soviet Union: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009), p. 56. For a fuller discussion of Gorbachev’s reforms, see Moshe Lewin, *The Gorbachev Phenomenon: A Historical Interpretation: Expanded Edition* (Berkeley, 1991).

from the tutelage and care of a state that believed it knew best, and to achieve agency on an individual and group level.

This attempt to revive deaf agency began to achieve some limited changes. In 1990, VOG held its first Conference in Kuibyshev, to which 211 delegates were elected by secret ballot from local organisations. According to a contemporary accounts, delegates discussed a variety of fundamental questions: ‘what should the Society be like, what place should it hold in the system of social organisations, whose interests should it defend, who should lead it...’¹⁹ Shortly afterwards, a draft document entitled, ‘The Fundamental Direction of VOG’s Activities for the Period 1991-1995’, set out a series of reforms, including the ‘study of social opinion, [and] the use of sociological studies in practical activity’, the ‘widening of the rights and activities of primary [...] organisations of the Society’ and the ‘establishment on a voluntary basis of associations in order to assure the more effective protection of the interests and rights of individuals with hearing loss.’²⁰ These changes were reflected in the new VOG Charter, approved by the Ministry of Justice on 31st July 1991.

By 1991, therefore, deaf people were apparently beginning to distance themselves from the Soviet identity that had been developing over the past seventy-four years. Over this time, deaf people had fought to remake themselves as Soviet people and to create an organisational body that reflected the communal values and commitment to labour and activity that characterised Soviet society. That organisation was now viewed as unrepresentative and limiting. By 31st December 1991, when the Soviet Union was formally dissolved, few deaf people appeared keen to retain VOG as a Soviet-style administrative body. As a result, VOG began to fragment. According to Michael Pursglove and Anna Komarova, the first blow to VOG was the loss of its income: ‘the UPPs, hit by the loss of regular orders from the state, declined to send their hard-earned profits up the pyramid [to the Central Directorate] and, instead, kept some or all of it for themselves.’²¹ In light of such financial challenges, the

¹⁹ V. Kuksin, *VES* 43, no. 1 (1990), p. 1.

²⁰ ‘Osnovnykh napravleniakh deiatel’nosti VOG na period 1991-1995’, cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia*, p. 641.

²¹ Michael Pursglove and Anna Komarova, ‘The Changing World of the Russian Deaf Community’, in *Many Ways to Be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf Communities*, ed. Leila Monaghan,

Central Directorate's headquarters, alongside other regional headquarters, were rented out to commercial interests. Finally, VOG's administration split down the middle, 'with a "representative" section staffed by deaf people and an "administrative" section staffed by hearing people'.²² Almost all of VOG's local departments remained open, but the links between them dissolved: since 1991, for example, the Moscow Branch has considered itself an independent organisation, the Moscow Federation of the Deaf.²³

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's fall, the nature of deaf identity in Russia has been the subject of much debate. Whilst many deaf people have been keen to reject the Soviet past and redefine themselves as 'Russian' – notable in the renaming of sign-language (*mimika*) as Russian Sign Language (*russskoi zhestovoi iazyk*, or RZhIa) – there has been no apparent attempt to instil a positive, new sense of deaf identity in post-Soviet society. Many scholars see this as the negative result of years of Soviet oppression: Pursglove and Komarova have emphasised lack and failure, commenting that 'Russian has no established terms for "deaf culture", "deaf awareness", "deaf identity", "deaf pride", or "deaf heritage" [terms largely drawn from the American Deaf movement of the early 1990s]. Interpreters have to resort to elaborate periphrases to render them in Russian or RSL [Russian Sign Language]. Indeed, even the concepts expressed by these terms probably do not exist in Russia today. It is perhaps symptomatic that one eminent hearing specialist on deafness reacted to the term *deaf pride* with the comment, "What rubbish! What is there to be proud about in that?"'²⁴ Yet an understanding of Soviet society and models of identity provides the key to understanding the Russian deaf community, in both its positive and negative aspects, to this day. Testament to this is the recent resurgence of historical interest in the deaf society, encapsulated in the work of the Moscow Symposium of Deaf History, held every two years from 1996 to 2002, and publications by Viktor Palennyi, the current editor of *V edinom stroiu*.

Constanze Schmalig, Karen Nakamura and Graham H. Turner (Washington D.C., 2003), (249-259) p. 251.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p. 252. For an overview of the dramatic social changes experienced during and after the fall of the Soviet state, see Stephen Lovell, *Destination in Doubt: Russia since 1989* (London, 2006); and Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000: Updated Edition* (Oxford, 2008).

²⁴ Pursglove and Komarova, 'The Changing World', pp. 254-255.

As Alla Borisovna Slavina, an eminent deaf archivist and historian of the Soviet deaf society, has perceptively remarked: ‘VOG marched in step with the country’.²⁵ It is precisely this point that underpins this thesis. Engagement with the Soviet project, on an individual and a collective level, shaped the development of the deaf community and the nature of deaf identity. Over the course of the Soviet period this engagement shifted: the liberation and opportunity of revolutionary politics gave way to a view of deaf people as passive recipients of Soviet ‘humaneness’ and welfare. Yet the passivity and stasis of the Soviet deaf community in its latter years should not negate the utopian promise encapsulated in VOG. By joining together as a community and espousing the Soviet values of collectivism, labour and independence, deaf people were able to stake their claim to social equality and agency. This claim was far from universally realised and some deaf people sought to keep their distance from this community and its increasingly bureaucratic structures – a story that available sources do not currently allow scholars to explore in any detail. Nevertheless, its revolutionary roots and its complex and contradictory development represent a unique example of the Soviet project in practice. The Soviet deaf experience thus provides the context necessary to understanding the nature of the Russian deaf community as it moves into the twenty-first century. Moreover, in its successes and failures, the history of this marginal community has much to tell us about the constitution of society and selfhood in the Soviet Union.

²⁵ A. B. Slavina, ‘VOG shel v nogu so stranoi’, in *Materialy tret’ego Moskovskogo simpoziuma po istorii glukhikh*, ed. Palennyi, (240-245) p. 245.

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f. 5 Apparatus of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

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