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## Education—Soviet Style

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## **Education - Soviet Style**

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A [responses](#) to this article has been written by **Natasha Artemeva** and has been published in the [next edition of AE-Extra](#)

**T**he nature of the Soviet educational system has been developing in accordance with the Soviet Union's 70-year history. During these years that the Soviet Union was controlled by the communist party, it developed an ideology centered on communist party doctrine. Also, under the leadership of different rulers the system of Soviet Education passed through many changes and reforms. Consequently, it is difficult to describe the entire history of soviet education in brief since it is such a broad topic and comprehensive from its political and ideological perspective.

The purpose of the present article is to provide a glimpse of the system of education in the former Soviet Union so that American educators, administrators, and policy makers will better understand the background of the students that are coming from this part of the world to receive American diplomas. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought many changes including those that affected education and brought new opportunities for students to study abroad. This was a very marked change because during the Soviet time it was virtually impossible for Soviet citizens to study abroad. Since 1991, many Soviet students have come to study in America and are participating in student and faculty exchange programs. This new phenomenon presents the American postsecondary educational system with new students who may bring unique perspectives and backgrounds to their new educational environments. Since the changes have been relatively recent and abrupt, faculty and others may not be familiar with the backgrounds and experiences that students from the former Soviet Union bring.

Education in the former Soviet Union was free and guaranteed to the citizens by the Soviet Constitution. It was mandatory for students to attend school through the tenth grade. The education system provided excellent schooling in mathematics, foreign languages, and the

physical sciences. The main purpose of education in the Soviet Union was to produce socially motivated and technically qualified people who were able to serve the state-run economy.

The system of education of the former Soviet Union consisted of 5 levels of education: 1) kindergarten-nursery and kindergarten, 2) primary school, 3) general secondary school, 4) two-year upper secondary school (senior high school), and 5) post secondary or higher educational institutions. The kindergarten-nursery took care of very young children from the ages of 1 to 3 years while the kindergarten cared for the needs of children from ages 3 to 7 years.

These two levels of education and care were not compulsory; however, was attended by the majority of young children in the country. In addition to their educational roles, the kindergartens were also seen as day care centers for the parents who spent their days at their jobs. Historically, the children who attended the optional kindergarten classes performed academically better in later education than did students who did not attend.

The eight years of general school consisted of two major parts; primary schooling covering the first three years and secondary schooling for the next five years. Children generally were admitted to primary schools at the age of seven years and entered basic secondary school at the age of ten years generally studying until the age of fifteen. Thus, the completion of secondary school coincided with the mandatory portion of Soviet education. The majority of graduates of basic secondary school continued to complete two more years of secondary comprehensive school, the equivalent of the United States' senior high school. These 2 years of secondary comprehensive school had two different forms. Children could either complete their schooling in the secondary comprehensive school or they could go to the institutions known as secondary vocational-technical school. These schools were primarily vocational in their orientation and provided more technical rather than academic skills. Students typically were tracked such that the more academically able students were sent to the comprehensive school while those that were more academically challenged were sent to the vocational school. Academic performance was graded on a five-point scale. A 5 was given for an excellent work, 4 for good work, 3 for average or acceptable work, a 2 was given for poor work, and a 1 for unacceptable work.

There was another kind of special post-secondary educational institutions known as the "technicum". This institution was designed to train technicians of various kinds; nurses and doctor assistants, teachers for kindergarten and primary school, librarians, secretarial, retail trade workers, and artisans. The courses of training offered by the technicum varied in length from 2 to 3 years. Although technicum students were eligible for stipends, they were typically lower than those provided for students in the university system.

Upon graduation from secondary (comprehensive) school at age seventeen some graduates entered the higher educational institutions in order to complete a five-year higher educational degree. Although Higher Education was free and all secondary graduate could apply, admission was granted only to those who scored well on admission exams. Unlike the U.S., admission exams were by specific subject matter. In other words, if a student wanted to major in mathematics, he/she must pass the admission tests in mathematics. The logic behind

this system is that a student cannot be successful in the study of higher math without a good grasp of math fundamentals such as algebra. The term VUZ (Visshee Uchebnoe Zavedenie -- Higher Educational Institution) was used to identify this level of education with its strict entrance requirements. The entrance exams were normally held in August and designed to be highly competitive. The exam covered the areas of Russian language (both written and oral), and two other disciplines, depending on the student's majors. For example, a science major might be tested on mathematics, physics, chemistry or biology. On the other hand, the humanities major would be tested on history, geography or a foreign language. Although the results of oral exams were given immediately, students had to patiently wait a few days to hear the results of their written exams. Students receiving 'unsatisfactory' mark failed the process and were not permitted to re-take the exam (Matthews, 1982).

VUZs were located in capital cities of each republic of the former Soviet Union. However, they were highly concentrated in Moscow, Saint Petersburg (Leningrad) and Kiev (capital city of Ukraine). Enrollment was over 5 million students, with nearly 50 percent (2.4 million) attending part time. Women made up 56 percent of the student body. Forty-one percent of the students came from the working (blue-color) class, 9 percent from the rural areas, and 50 percent from families working in the social service sector. (<http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/sutoc.html>).

The VUZ system allowed for two types of students, akin to full and part time. The full-time students were those who entered the VUZ and studied from 4 to 5.5 years depending on the area of specialization. Surprising to Americans in addition to an education free of fees or tuition, full-time VUZ students also received monthly stipends ranging from 40 to 70 Soviet rubles, if the student maintained appropriate grades. This amount of money was sufficient for the single student's basic living expenses. Therefore the vast majority of full-time VUZ students did not maintain employment outside of their studies. The part-time students maintained their employment while studying and working independently. Typically they only attend two short-term periods each academic year for lectures and course exams. In addition they were typically required to write course papers and send them to the university.

The curriculum for the evening students was closely modeled on the full-time program, with some restrictions in the choice of specialization. These students attended an extra year or more as compared to the full-time students. Moreover, evening students were required to be employed in a position that matched their academic major (Matthews, 1982).

It is important to distinguish the difference between evening and part-time curriculums. Not all VUZes offered both types of courses and nor offered degrees in all majors. For example, only the State Universities and the department of Economics and Finance offered evening courses. Young professionals working in the sphere of the state run economy were eligible to study in the evening courses. Two courses were conducted four days a week from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. The idea was to prepare the future specialists by integrating practical training with theory. The only difference from full-time students was that evening students did not qualify for stipends as they were gainfully employed.

To be admitted to the VUZ, a student must be less than 35 years old. If a student dropped out,

readmittance is dependent on the reason for their departure. Students leaving due to behavioral or moral issues would find it difficult to be readmitted. If departure was due to poor academic progress, the student would be given an additional chance to repeat their courses from the beginning.

### **Postgraduate research study**

Graduates who completed five years at a Higher Educational Institution had a choice to apply to the "aspirantura" or graduate school, which led to the degree of Candidate of Sciences. Using U.S. terminology, the Candidate of Science degree would be similar to a master degree but more comprehensive than the American counterpart. The entrance examination for the Soviet highest degree included the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism, the chosen major and a foreign language. This course of study generally takes an additional three or four years. The first two years the "aspirant" or a graduate student prepared himself/herself for a qualifying examination called the "candidate's minimum". The remaining years were devoted to writing a dissertation on a theme approved by the rector and the learned council (Mathews, 1982). The learned council is composed of approximately 10 professors with doctoral degrees.

The final dissertation was defended in front of the learned council and must be published. The majority of graduates of the aspirantura applied to jobs that directly related to their areas of study at the Academy of Science and continued their scientific work there. A minority of graduates chose to teach at the universities.

The Doctor of Science degree is the next step for those with the Candidate of Science degree. A much smaller group of scholars and scientists held a doctor of science degree, the most prestigious and highest degree. The doctor of science, commonly called a doktorat, was awarded on a selective basis to well-established experts whose considerable research and publications represented original major contributions to their specialized areas. Doctoral work was generally part of the individual's professional or teaching activity. A one-year paid leave of absence was granted for the writing and defense of a doctoral thesis. The doktorat was sometimes awarded for outstanding past achievements and considerable years of professional experience (<http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/sutoc.html>)

### **Conclusions**

Over the past 11 years the former Soviet Union countries have undergone profound political, economic and social changes. The collapse of the Soviet Union caused the development of new attitudes toward education both in the former Soviet countries as well as around the world. Now many young professionals and educators from the former Soviet Union have been provided with the chance to visit the United States, participate in exchange programs, or to apply to and subsequently study in American colleges and universities. Thus, American college and university classrooms have become the "meeting ground" where students from the former Soviet Countries can become acquainted, study, and work with American students. It is important that college administrators and others understand the context of international students so that a free exchange of ideas can take place resulting in increased knowledge and

good will for all.

## References

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