

THE RUSSIA/YAROSLAVL' PRIMARY HISTORY PROJECT

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Perestroika and The Yaroslavl' Initiative

It was against the background of the unravelling of the Soviet State and its replacement with a Russian polity that the Yaroslavl' Russian Primary History Project has developed. From 1989, during the period of perestroika, the University of Exeter and the Ushinskii Pedagogic University had established close links, growing out of a twinning arrangement between Exeter and Yaroslavl'. The Yaroslavl' province has a population of nearly 2,000,000. Yaroslavl' itself is situated some 300 km. north east of Moscow. It is one of Russia's oldest cities and for several centuries was a key trading and trans-shipment point on the Volga. Today Yaroslavl' is an industrial city of some 700,000 and the administrative capital of the region.

Following a number of individual visits of Yaroslavl' and Exeter historians, in April 1992 a party of seven Exeter historians went to Yaroslavl' to participate in an international academic seminar on European Historiography of the XXth Century in relation to Russia (Sokolov, 1992). The seminar was wide ranging, including papers on the teaching of Russian history in British schools (Laver, 1992, Nichol, 1992). There was a subsequent visit in December 1992. I had been

invited to take part in an inservice conference. Inservice with a difference - two hundred teachers were packed into a hall and subject to an unbroken sequence of lectures that lasted for three hours. The morning was an insight into both the apparently Russian passive acceptance of authority and the strength of Russians' bladders. In January 1993 we received Nuffield funding for a Russian investigation of the Teaching of History in England and an English investigation of the Teaching of History in Russia. The following is based upon the project's published report (Lewis, 1993). The purposes of the investigation were :

To review all aspects of the teaching and learning of history in Russia in the changing post-communist world, with specific reference to the Yaroslavl' Province.

To draw up an action programme for all aspects of history teaching in Yaroslavl' and its province.

To identify elements of the Russian experience which would be of value to British practice.

The investigation

In March a party of ten Russian history teachers and lecturers came to Exeter and followed an extensive programme of visits to schools, colleges and museums. The Russian programme involved a review of the Nuffield Primary History project, and a visit to the project school. In May eight Exeter-based historians visited Yaroslavl' and followed a similar programme, one historian travelled earlier and carried out a separate study. The programme included visits to the teacher training college at Uglich, which trains teachers for the 7-15 age range, and the

college in Rybinsk which trains kindergarten teachers (2-7 age range). We also visited four schools. Two of these were state schools for the 7-17 age range - one in Yaroslavl' and one in a rural area just outside the city. Of the others, one was a kindergarten and one was a private school in the city, which is partly funded by a bank. School lessons were observed in art, music, dance, mathematics, food hygiene and history [three lessons]. The historian who travelled earlier was an LEA and OFSTED inspector who conducted an inspection along OFSTED lines. As an academic expert on Russia who had visited the country on numerous occasions he was able to carry out a rigorous assessment of provision in schools.

The investigation's findings and recommendations

Because of a common pattern of teaching and learning throughout the system, generalisations were made with some confidence. Judgements related to the team seeing 'state of the art' teaching and training, as visits were designed to present the most favourable face of Russian teaching (Hawkey, 1994). While accepting that we were being 'Webbed', it was clear that children were not intimidated. They behaved in a perfectly natural and relaxed way, we spent hours with them. If they were acting they collectively deserved an Oscar. Subsequently we have spent time in schools on a more informal basis, including teaching children for circa two days. These visits confirmed our earlier conclusions in terms of the overall teaching pattern and ethos, the underlying methodologies and the relationships between the teachers and the taught. In relation to primary schools:

'The following are the strengths of Russian teaching methodology:

Teachers carefully guide and manage learning in a highly structured manner. The system is built around a pattern of teacher-centred direction and control of the learning. The teacher is the sole medium for the transmission of information, its explanation and the posing and resolution of questions.

In terms of student attitudes and behaviour, there are many overlapping elements which contribute to effective learning:

- i On task behaviour: nearly all pupils were engaged throughout the lessons observed. The amount of off-task behaviour was minimal.
- ii Pupil concentration: the levels of pupil concentration were very high. All lessons showed most pupils sustaining a high degree of concentration.
- iii Listening skills: pupils showed effective listening skills, clearly comprehending instructions and engaging in their specified tasks.
- iv Positive attitudes: most pupils had a positive attitude towards their learning. There was little or no sign of restlessness in even the longest session.
- v Pupil articulateness: we were struck throughout by the high level of skill which pupils showed in publicly expressing themselves. Pupils have to demonstrate their understanding to the whole class. They are trained to address a class fully and fluently, and with confidence.

Whole class teaching for all ages is the norm. The high levels of pupil concentration, listening skills and on-task behaviour suggest that the pupils are operating at a higher level than their English counterparts.

These strengths contain within them corresponding weaknesses:

- i The view of knowledge reflected in the Russian system is constricting. There is little or no involvement of the pupils in the processes of a discipline. This has a number of limiting results:

There is little or no problem solving. We saw no evidence of pupils undertaking tasks which required them to reach conclusions through their own investigations. Learning was of a passive receptive kind - the transmission model.

There is little or no pupil discussion at any level. The absence of oral work outside the answering of teacher questions and declaiming is striking.

- ii There is little or no attempt to differentiate tasks to meet the needs of able or slower learning pupils. The lessons are pitched at the level of the whole class.'(Lewis, 1993)

Among its proposals the Russian team recommended the establishment of a Primary History Project to introduce primary history teaching into Russian schools for 7-11 year olds. This project would reflect the main tenet of the Nuffield Primary History project, i.e., the involvement of children in 'doing history' from an early age under the control and guidance of the class teacher. As such, pupils would be involved in

history as an open-ended, problem-solving investigative discipline that would develop a range of high level thinking skills (Nuffield Primary History Project, 1995). The Russian team asked us to concentrate upon pupils' involvement in the processes of historical enquiry, and through this, their development of the skills of historical enquiry.

The proposal for the project received the support of the Yaroslavl' provincial government and backing at ministerial level in Moscow.

Curriculum Development : The Yaroslavl' [Russian] Primary History Project - initial stages

As a result of the investigation developmental work continued within the oblast. Throughout we have followed an Action Research model, following the principles laid down in general (Elliott, 1991, McKernan, 1991) and drawing upon examples of specific practice (Palm/NCET, 1990, Somerset, 1993). In May 1994 we worked closely with the Ushinski Pedagogical University and a team of interested teachers that Andrei Sokolov, Dean of the History Faculty, had convened. During our stay in Yaroslavl' we taught a class of seven year olds for half a day and followed it up with a seminar in which we thrashed out the ideas that underlay a bid to the Nuffield Foundation to fund a primary history project. The aim of our demonstration lesson was to introduce teachers to the Nuffield Primary History approach, with specific reference to the concept of children as investigators with them working as detectives.

Consequently we took the Collingwood metaphor of the historian as a detective. The lesson opened with a mysterious suitcase lying on a table. Immediately we began to ask questions about it, raising issues of

whether we should call the police. One pupil even suggested that it might contain a bomb! At that point a detective [Andrei Sokolov] entered the room, and offered to help the children with their investigation. The suitcase was opened and its contents placed on six tables around. In pairs and threes the children circulated around the room, discussing and recording their findings. They engaged wholeheartedly in the enquiry, moving from asking questions to the listing and classifying of the evidence to the framing of hypotheses and the reaching of tentative conclusions. The lesson ended with one pupil dressing up in the young girl's clothes found in the suitcase. The children used the clues and their imaginations to draw a picture of what girl might have looked like. The teaching and subsequent discussions with the teachers helped us to produce a proposal for a primary history project in the Yaroslavl' region.

In April 1995, on the basis of our developmental work, the Nuffield foundation funded a primary history project in the oblast to last initially for two years. The project is based at the Ushinskii Pedagogical University, Yaroslavl'. It has a Russian director, Andrei Sokolov, two full time curriculum developers, both teachers, a translator and a secretary. The role of the Nuffield Primary History Project in England is advisory, to suggest an overall curriculum development programme based upon its own developmental and operational experience. In September we spent a week in Russia working closely with our colleagues. This involved us teaching a class of Russian children for a morning and lengthy discussions with a group of Russian educationalists and teachers. Accordingly the Russians drew up a provisional primary history syllabus that reflects the skills and processes of historical enquiry. As part of the project's programme, in November the two

Russian project officers and their translator will visit England for two weeks to enquire into the theory and practice of primary history teaching in England. In the next edition of *INFORMATIONS* we will report on their experiences and the construction of a primary history curriculum for schools in Russia.

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