

# H-Net Reviews

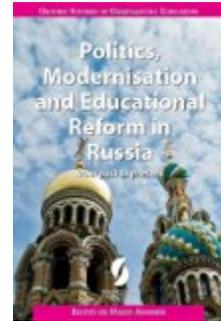
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Johnson, ed. *Politics, Modernisation and Educational Reform in Russia: From Past to Present*. Oxford Studies in Comparative Education Series. Oxford: Symposium Books, 2010. 176 pp. \$48.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-873927-41-0.

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Access to education is a hallmark of modernity. *Politics, Modernisation and Educational Reform in Russia*, the latest volume from Oxford Studies in Comparative Education, provides readers with a wide range of enlightening essays concerning educational reform in the former Soviet Union. Bringing together scholars in various stages of their academic careers, this book provides an excellent overview of the history of educational reform in Russia as well as studies of current challenges to traditional institutions and practices. David Johnson and his collaborators succeed in questioning the very function of educational reform and its relationship to the proposed modernization of post-Cold War Russia. Finding roots in the writings of nineteenth-century scholar K. D. Ushinsky, who introduced the notion of “comparative education” to Russia, this work highlights many long-disputed debates over Russia’s engagement with both Western Europe and the wider world. In doing so, the authors question not just the success of educational reform in bringing about modernity but the very forming of modernity and its effects on Russian society.

In examining education reform in Russia, this volume engages contentious debates over the nature of Russian society. In “Society and the Individual,” Robert Harris provides an excellent historical account of how private education functioned as an alternative to state authority, arguing that from the establishment of the first state-run educational institutions under Peter I to the founding of the Soviet Union, private education offered a space in which individuals could define themselves in opposition to government authority. Privately educated students were disproportionately represented among anti-tsarist activists who came to prominence in student circles in

the late nineteenth century. Theorized as a mechanism of state control, the university became a hotbed of political protest. The growth of student populations in the early twentieth century increased progressive demands on the state. Upon the establishment of the Soviet Union, this focus on individual liberties was reconceptualized as a focus on the common good to bring the writings of the intelligentsia in line with communist notions of collective rights.

The tension between “top-down” authority and individual autonomy figures strongly into many of this volume’s essays. Olga Fedotova and Oksana Chigisheva’s essay, “Restructuring the Governance and Management Structures of Higher Education in Russia,” examines institutional changes in education reform from the reign of Peter I to the present. They pay particular attention to reforms initiated under the reign of Catherine II to reproduce an elite class of citizens focused on Russia’s political and military endeavors. The restructuring of the university system during the nineteenth century reflected decreasing tsarist power and growing democratization in higher education. The advent of the Soviet regime saw a rapid increase in the number of trade colleges offering worker-specific curricula. The authors end their essay by discussing the relationship between the market economy and present-day educational restructuring. Overall, their essay provides an impressive amount of statistical information concerning the historical trajectory of Russian education and its ties to central authority.

An equally important theme is the struggle between rationalists or so-called Westerners and Slavophiles or cultural nationalists. This struggle is evident in both

writings from the past and current studies. At the heart of this debate is the relationship between modernization and cultural preservation. This struggle extends beyond debates over languages and practices to encompass the very tools of education itself. Elena Minina's essay on the unified national test illustrates a modern example of this phenomenon. Analyzing the arguments for and against the implementation of the unified national test, Minina highlights an articulation of the pro-Western and Slavophile struggle. Debates over curriculum and evaluation emphasize the ambivalent nature of today's Russian society. Modernization, while a shared goal of many, often comes at the expense of traditional institutions. Margarita Pavlova emphasizes these tensions. In examining current Russian theories on education, Pavlova argues that specific knowledge rather than general competencies is seen to provide the structural framework for understanding the wider world. This "worldview" distinguishes Russia from other states. In achieving the twin goals of socializing a person into a national culture and preparing a person to live and work in a market society, Russia struggles to incorporate cultural traditions into international discourses of modernity.

While historical essays emphasize the struggle between cultural preservation and modernity, the essays focusing on current issues in Russian education provide details concerning the accessibility of higher education and the motivations of students. In the essay "The Democratization of Higher Education in Russia," Judith Marquand analyzes the results of a set of studies conducted in Siberia from 1994 to 2002 and 2002 to 2008 gauging Russian attitudes toward educational democratization. Marquand found that after the signing of

the Bologna Accords in 2003, Russians were presented not just new curricula but new processes of pedagogy, including student-centered methods, a nearly unheard-of concept for many educators. Moving beyond pedagogy, Charles Walker examines class and gender in vocational and higher education. Tracing the experience of young Russians, Walker examines the trajectory of Russia's transformation into a "knowledge society," in which access to education is part of the social base. Walker finds that social identities often determined the academic ambitions of students. While access to education may have increased, gendered responsibilities and class affiliations still play strong roles in determining the amount and type of education young Russians pursue.

*Politics, Modernisation and Educational Reform in Russia* gives readers an engaging set of essays concerning the past and present function(s) of Russian education, as well as its relationship to notions of modernity. Scholars of the post-Cold War era are likely to find the most value in this work, as many of the essays focus on the recent history of Russian education. Though there are historical allusions in many of the essays, this volume, in its majority, is an examination of the current state of Russian society. Those who wish to find in-depth examinations of pre-twentieth-century institutions have to look elsewhere. Some essays feel a bit underdeveloped and given the current nature of the research included in this volume, few provide readers with in-depth conclusions. Nevertheless, most contributions are based on excellent sociological research; and are therefore, likely to be of great use to those who study post-Cold War Russia or education as it pertains to international politics and economic development today.

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