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Based on previously inaccessible sources, this meticulous study of Leningrad students examines how they responded to and participated in the socialist experiment during the first decades of the Soviet Union. Leningrad had a strong tradition of academic and scientific achievement in which students occupied an important place. They were part of a new political and social elite, one that was forged in institutions of higher learning designed to train skilled professionals for positions in the Communist Party, the state apparatus, and the economy. How successfully, then, did the students perform their dual role as active constructors and willing creations of the Soviet socialist system? Were they primarily victims or beneficiaries of the Soviet political culture?

Things did not start off smoothly for Lenin and his comrades. Most students met the Bolshevik revolution with suspicion and hostility and, as a result, the Communist Party had at first only modest successes in penetrating academic institutions. But, as in so many other fields, the beginning of the Stalin years marked a turning point in education. The imposition of strict ideological orthodoxies on the higher-education system not only placed enormous pressures on students and teachers, but it also and inevitably stifled academic initiative and creative thought. In great detail, Konecny, a professor at Carleton University, examines the structural transformation of the higher-education system, including the new admissions policies, the attempts to remove professors who harboured ambivalent or hostile attitudes towards the Communists, the new emphasis (related to the launching of the five-year plans) placed on technical-industrial training, and the substantial changes introduced in the curriculum; as well, he assesses the daily life and the socio-political edifices that defined a student community whose social composition changed as a result of the influx of students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. The author also analyzes the process (statutes, arrests, expulsions, executions) by which the Party reined in independent-minded students and independent student councils and established a new framework for student organizations – the Central Bureau of Proletarian Students – that had, by the mid-1930s, relegated the *studentchestvo* (in particular, its activist component) to the status of a state-sponsored corporate group. As a result, caution, instead of a free exchange of views, became the safest route to success. Predictably, the assignation of particular political and social roles to the *studentchestvo* served to polarize Soviet youth into two clearly delineated categories: "The builders helped construct an imagined community of communist activists, isolating and excising the deserters who threatened the fabric of the community" (p. 141). Nevertheless, though they were subjected to endless instructional decrees and campaigns of ideological indoctrination

designed to ensure their conformity to established conventions, students were not entirely powerless in shaping their own environment; indeed, they actively participated in reshaping the world around them.

For those of us working in a university milieu, this book presents two very familiar issues as they affected student life in Leningrad. The first one regroups students' recurrent complaints about inadequate housing and stipends, improper diet, not having enough time for leisure and exercise activities, arbitrariness in marking schemes, boring professors, assignments in remote and/or rural areas, and practical training on the shop floor or in the countryside. The second theme addresses questions relating to misconduct and deviance (anti-Semitism, drunkenness, vandalism, and suicide), as well as gender roles and sexuality (spousal abandonment, delinquent support payments, child care, and vulgarization of women by Don Juans). Interestingly, the student community had faced most of these problems during the last decades of the tsarist regime. *Plus ça change, plus c'est pareil?* Not really: the difference was that, under the Soviets, the political dimension of this culture of nonconformity could not express itself with the same openness, let alone defiance.

In his conclusion, Konecny draws up a balance sheet of accomplishments and failures: from difficult beginnings, then in fits and starts, the Soviet higher-education system grew and diversified, to the point where it compared favourably with those of the world's major industrialized countries and Leningrad played an extremely important role in this expansion.

Beginning life as a doctoral dissertation, *Builders and Deserters* convincingly, although occasionally in overly dense prose, illustrates the tremendous difficulties entailed in re-educating a generation according to a Marxist-socialist model. This informative book also adds to the historiography of Stalinism: indeed, by illustrating the rigidity of the paradigm of an all-powerful police state, the author joins the choir of social historians who have emphasized the dynamics of Soviet society under Stalin and, consequently, have criticized the reliability of the concept of totalitarianism as an explanatory model.

*J.-Guy Lalande*

*St. Francis Xavier University*

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