

Wrong Hand, Wrong Children? The Education of Left-Handed Children in Soviet Latvia

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Abstract. Left-handers have always been surrounded by stigma and controversy, and attitudes toward this group have always been rooted in the ideas and traditions of power relations existing in a given society. Thus, the goal of this study is to describe the retraining of left-handers as it was conducted in Soviet education. The impact of political power on an individual's body-mind interaction is a significant problem in research on the creation of the "New Soviet Man." The teaching of left-handed children in the Soviet Union is a noteworthy example of the totalitarian regime's illusory endeavors to change human nature. The Soviet education envisaged neither a special attitude nor any particular pedagogical strategies for the work with left-handed children. The Soviet science was based on the anthropological understanding of man as a *tabula rasa*, which made it possible to explain the omnipotence of Soviet pedagogy as well as the unswerving belief that it was possible to educate every child into a true member of the socialist society. The present study provides insight into the disciplining of the left-handed children's bodies and minds using pedagogical tools that was being conducted in Soviet Latvia.

Keywords: education of left-handed children, disciplining of the body and mind, Soviet education, project of the "New Soviet man."

Ne ta ranka – ne toks vaikas: kairiarankių vaikų ugdymas sovietinėje Latvijoje

Santrauka. Kairiarankiams nuolat tenka susidurti su stigmomis ir prieštarais požiūriais į save, be to, nuostatos apie šią žmonių grupę visada būna susijusios su konkrečios visuomenės galios santykiais ir tradicijomis. Todėl šio tyrimo tikslas – aptarti kairiarankių permokymą, kaip tai buvo daroma sovietinėje švietimo sistemoje. Politinės galios įtaka žmogaus kūno ir proto sąveikai yra dažnai nagrinėjama problema tyrimuose apie „naujojo sovietinio žmogaus“ kūrimą. Kairiarankių vaikų mokymas Sovietų Sąjungoje yra puikus iliuzinių totalitarinės valdžios siekių pakeisti žmogaus prigimtį pavyzdys – sovietiniame švietime nebuvo nei atskiros priegios, nei konkrečių pedagoginių strategijų ugdant kairiarankius vaikus. Sovietinis mokslas buvo grindžiamas antropologiniu žmogaus, kaip *tabula rasa*, supratimu, leidžiančiu paaiškinti sovietinės pedagogikos visagalybę, ir nepajudinamu įsitikinimu, kad iš kiekvieno vaiko galima išugdyti tikrą socialistinės visuomenės narį. Šis tyrimas supažindina su sovietinėje Latvijoje vykusiu kairiarankių vaikų kūno ir proto disciplinavimu pasitelkiant pedagogines priemones.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: kairiarankių vaikų ugdymas, kūno ir proto disciplinavimas, sovietinis švietimas, „naujojo sovietinio žmogaus“ projektas.

Received: 20/04/2019. **Accepted:** 30/05/2019

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1. Introduction

The education of left-handers is considered an underresearched field everywhere in the world (Bertrand 2001; Kusher 2017), and historians call this group “a people without a history” (McManus, Nicholls, Vallortigara 2010).

Left-handers appear to have always been surrounded by controversy and stigma, the group being hated, tolerated or admired in different times and cultures (Bertrand 2001). In Western culture, left-handedness has traditionally been hated, this hatred reaching its peak in the last decades of the 19th century (Sattler 2000). So, researchers have turned to learning the specifics and educational support of left-handers quite recently (Smits 2017).

The history of the education of left-handers in the Soviet Union is *terra incognita* in that it is an unexplored field. No specific attitude nor any pedagogical techniques had existed to work with children with the so-called “right-hand defect” (Studenkins 1978). Moreover, the mass retraining¹ of left-handed children had lasted until 1985 and the so-called perestroika (1987–1991) (Arestova 2012).

The tolerance to left-handers serves as a barometer for the broader assessment of tolerance: as a rule, any society and culture where left-handedness is discriminated against is also less tolerant to any other form of diversity (Kusher 2017). The retraining of left-handedness in the history of Soviet education is a vivid example of disciplining the child’s body as a tool for unification, normalization, and social adjustment dictated by the political power. The retraining of left-handers in the Soviet school was part of the “New Soviet Man” project, the plan most directly reflecting the close ties of Soviet pedagogy to Soviet politics and ideology.

Education in Soviet Latvia (1944–1991) was similar to that in the rest of the Soviet Republics, as the system of education everywhere in the USSR was organized according to a single, ideologically implicit, politically determined and dictated plan (Plakans 2011). Nevertheless, the story of the education of left-handers in Soviet Latvia is very difficult to write – there are scarcely any primary sources, while the existing ones are compromised by censorship. There is no evidence of any legislative and regulatory documents concerning the education of left-handed children until Mikhail Gorbachev’s rise to power in the USSR in 1985. The peculiarities of left-handed pupils, their teaching and learning specifics are not even mentioned in Soviet pedagogy, psychology, physiology, or other textbooks for teachers. Even a year before the collapse of the USSR, the Soviet mass media disseminate information that is predisposed to schizophrenia, alcoholism, delayed puberty, and other illnesses (Lediņš 1990). In the Soviet society overall, the dominating belief was that left-handedness is a defect that must be corrected using various disciplinary tools of the body and mind. To successfully blend into the united, centralized Soviet educational system, left-handed pupils had to be “normalized” as quickly as possible.

¹ In their studies of the phenomenon of left-handedness, scholars use various terms to address the process of disciplining left-handed children – *umerziehung* and *umschulung* in German, *reeducation*, *retraining* or *forced switching* in English. For the purposes of this research, the authors use the term *retraining*.

For understanding the process of retraining left-handers and its consequences, Latvia can definitely serve as an example, for the USSR had a unified system of education, i.e., pedagogical theories and methods were exported from the state's center to all Soviet republics (Plakans 2011). By analyzing the education of left-handed children in Soviet Latvia, the results of the study can be generalized for the overall situation in the USSR.

However, the situation in Soviet Latvia was also special. Latvia was incorporated into the USSR only in 1940, and, being too Western, too sophisticated, too prosperous, it remained a "suspect" in the eyes of true communists. Although the fear in the minds of Latvian citizens had diminished by the 1960s, the memory of recent deportations, arrests, and executions was still fresh, and ethnic Latvian families demonstrated signs of wariness (Kestere, Kalke 2018). On the one hand, parents and teachers in Soviet Latvia were very careful about fulfilling the requirements of Soviet power; on the other hand, non-compliance was one of the forms of non-violent resistance (Jundzis 2006). Thus, in Soviet Latvia, the education of left-handers may have derogated from the strict rules dictated by the official ideology.

The adopted attitude toward left-handers in the Soviet period has not lost its power in contemporary Latvia. The first traces of the state's stance on the education of left-handers appeared in the second half of the 1980s. Thus, in 1986, the USSR Health Ministry developed methodological recommendations for detecting left-handed children and their psycho-hygiene (Minzdrav SSSR, 1986), and in 1989, they published methodological guidelines for the organization of activities to protect left-handed children (Minzdrav SSSR, 1989). Nevertheless, the correction of left-handedness in post-Soviet education went on after the collapse of the USSR and, in a sense, has not ended nowadays. It would be tendentious to assert however that the negative attitude toward left-handed children was an exclusively Soviet phenomenon – in Latvia, like in the rest of the world, its roots go deeper into the past. Anyhow, the attitudes toward the left-handed in different societies are characterized by certain traditions and ideas (Sattler 2000); therefore, this article is an attempt to describe the retraining of left-handers as it occurred in Soviet education.

There are hardly any official documents to reconstruct the correction of left-handedness in the USSR – officially, left-handers did not even exist until the ban on genetic research was lifted in 1965. Later, under severe censorship (Strods 2010), the mass media mentioned their existence only in snippets. Given that the USSR's totalitarian ideology sought to gain absolute power, hidden mechanisms were used to violently modify the traditional political and cultural elements (Arendt 1951) and significantly affected the educational process as a whole. In this vein, certain tools were applied for retraining left-handed children in Soviet Latvia. By hiding them from the public eye, ignoring the peculiarities of their development, there was achieved an illusion of the absence of different children, an illusion necessary for the implementation of the unified "New Soviet Man" project. Thus, in this study, oral history plays a special part.

The article comprises an introduction, a description of research methodology, a theory of body discipline used as the theoretical framework, and an analysis of the "New Soviet Man" concept, which served to justify the disciplining of the bodies and minds of

left-handed children in Soviet education. It is followed by an analysis of educational research on left-handers as it appears in pedagogical literature and popular press published in Soviet Latvia as well as using questionnaires and biographical interviews. The article ends with our conclusions.

The study poses and attempts to answer the following research questions:

- How was the disciplining of a child's body and mind achieved in the Soviet Union education?
- How and why was the retraining of left-handed children implemented in the educational system of Soviet Latvia (1951–1991)?

2. Methodology

Our study of left-handers' education is based on Soviet pedagogical literature and popular press as well as a questionnaire and a biographical interview with left-handers who obtained education in Soviet Latvia.

The structured questionnaire was filled by 69 respondents (44 women and 25 men) who received their formal education between 1951 and 1991. The questionnaire aimed to provide a comprehensive view (Cohen, Manion, Morrison 2007) of methods used to discipline the body and mind in Soviet Latvia as well as to exhibit the retraining of left-handers as a mass phenomenon (Arestova 2012). The data obtained from the questionnaire lead to believe that the disciplining of left-handers surpasses few people's memories, individual cases, memory deformation, etc. Respondents were randomly selected by addressing different audiences potentially containing left-handed people who had studied in soviet schools. There were no other selection criteria for participation in the study. The respondents were also contacted through social media. The questionnaire was anonymous, and the obtained results were used only in aggregated form to ensure the reliability of the data. The survey results were entered into SPSS Statistics software for analysis.

At the beginning, the respondents of the questionnaire were asked to give statistical information about their gender, experience of preschool education, the number of years spent in mainstream education, and the year of graduation. This information was necessary for statistical analysis as well as to ensure that the respondents are part of the study group, i.e., that they studied at school during the Soviet period. It also makes possible to ascertain whether or not the attitude of teachers and parents toward left-handed children changed over the period of the Soviet regime.

The next section of the questionnaire was divided in three blocks. Two of them were similar, where the respondents were asked to evaluate the activities performed by teachers and parents to make the child use the right hand. This part was necessary to determine whether the school and family used similar methods of body discipline. In the last part, the respondents were asked to name school subjects in which these activities were implemented. Likert scale questions were used in all three blocks, with 5 for "always" and 1 for "very rarely." The respondents had the possibility of using the answer "never" by evaluating statement with 0.

The last part of the questionnaire included so-called open questions, which the respondents answered freely. This section was necessary, as the questionnaire included the currently known disciplinary techniques, but there might have been different ones used in Soviet education.

Further, the study made use of nine biographical interviews with people who had received their education in Soviet Latvia. Six women and 3 men aged 47–64 were interviewed. All interviewed respondents experienced prohibitions to using their left hands in their childhood and thus belong to the group of so-called “retrained left-handers.”

The use of interviews in the research is needed, since oral history is regarded as one of the most important tools for researching a phenomenon in a situation where there are no or hardly any historical documents, or if the findings are not reliable due to censorship; in other words, it is required for analyzing the so-called “undocumented” and “unspoken” social history. In educational research, the oral history approach helps successfully analyze the memory of minority groups (in this case, left-handed pupils) – that is, to discover the voices of educational actors ignored in the official discourse (Trofanenko 2017). In this study, the oral history approach was chosen because by using the memories of left-handers who had underwent Soviet education, the biographical perspective allows to reconstruct the past and to understand collective developments in society.

We took into account the fact that the research question is related to the “historical trauma” phenomenon, that is, the affective factor influencing eyewitness memory. It raises the question of critical analysis of the research material during its interpretation (Trofanenko 2017) and points to the need to combine the interview with the questionnaire in order to make sure that the memories of particular people describe the field of research in a given historical period.

3. Theorizing on A Child’s Body Discipline

The study of the discipline of the child’s body in the 1970s is linked with the criticism of the classical discourse of pedagogical anthropology. This discourse is characterized by the view of embodiment as an important medium for education – namely that the goals of the educational process are achieved through the intermediary of an indirect bodily interaction of a student and teacher. In the context of body discipline, the analysis is focused on the phenomenon of the “pedagogical body,” which, in classical pedagogy, refers to the normalization and rationalization of a student’s body. Normalization and rationalization are regarded as tools for overpowering human nature and forging an educated, that is, cultured being (Zirfas 2004). In terms of disciplining the body, punishment is considered to be an educational technology for bodily normalization (Herman, Depaepe, Simon, Van Gorp 2007).

According to the classical discourse of pedagogical anthropology, the understanding of childhood as a special stage in human life is grounded in the ideas of a child’s innocence and adult care (Aries 1962; Baader, Esser, Schröder 2014). The child is characterized by such features as vulnerability and irrationality, and as such is seen as an

unreasonable being. The adult's task is to "take care" of the child, disciplining their body and mind and protecting it from notions and activities traditionally unfitting childhood.

To ensure protection, social structures for strengthening and maintaining the childhood ideal are built. For example, the determination of the age hierarchy helps to separate behavioral patterns appropriate for children from those of adults (Bühler-Niederberger 2011).

In the context of the child's body discipline, it is important to view the physical body as a marker of biological age. The development of the human body is biologically determined, but the body's assessment significantly depends on social norms and societal expectations on how to look and behave at a definite age (Harper, Laws 1995) – or, for example, which hand to use for writing. Thus, a left-handed child's bodily disciplining and the pedagogical rituals associated with it are brought forth by the beliefs of a certain society what the child "should be" like.

In school, the child must be obedient and conform to the social order established by adults, which conceals the reason of the child's need for strict discipline and control. Punishments are legitimate, as children are incompetent and have no notion of what they do (Dinka 2014).

The child's body is viewed ambivalently: on the one hand, it represents a lack of competence; on the other hand, it transmits the sentimental value of abilities and qualities pertaining to the child (James 2004). It is the body that symbolizes infirmity and irrationality; it is the body that makes the child incapable of independent action. Therefore, at school, the body of a child is observed, controlled, and restricted, it is sportively and militarily perfected. Austerity, training, and punishments are important tools for the pedagogical formation of the pupil's body (Zirfas 2004).

Contemporary study of bodily discipline demonstrates that unification, normalization, and social adaptation are the most important activities in children's education and socialization (Zirfas 2004).

An educated body is primarily a disciplined body, and school is an institution disciplining the body. To discipline a child's body, the school establishes a system of penalties and rules enforcing the order and compliance with the norm (Herman, Depaepe, Simon, Van Gorp 2007). Traditions, conventions, and rituals in educational structures are created to promote the bodily conformity to certain social and cultural requirements, as the purpose of education is to create stable, continual, and habitual bodily behavior. That is why Michel Foucault argued that the body is the principle, material, and product of power relations (Foucault 1977).

Punishment as educational technology involves various techniques of discipline and control aiming at normalizing the child in the fight against perversion, pathology, and difference. Thus, punishment is broadly seen as a power mechanism – biopower, which affects society at different levels in an automatic, invisible, and anonymous way (Herman, Depaepe, Simon, Van Gorp 2007).

When analyzing the education of left-handers, it is important to emphasize the Foucauldian thesis that in its relationship with power, the body is not static and unchangea-

ble. Being dynamic and changeable, the body is also divisible, i.e., it may be dismantled and reassembled (Foucault 1977). Thus, the process of bodily discipline applies not only to the human body as a whole, it can be divided into separate parts. For power, it is important to rule over a person in general, managing each separate part of their body. This idea is very important for this study, because the research of left-handed education in Soviet Latvia focuses on the hand as a disciplined part of the body. It was only the right (or appropriate for learning “correct” writing skills) hand that was considered to be the most important part of the body for raising an educated person in preschool and school (Biezā, Kauce, Kromāne, Līduma 1971).

Thus, authoritarianism considers the left-handed child not only a totally unreasonable and incomplete creature – such a child has an additional specific flaw or defect that is subject to discipline. Then, the adult is legitimately assigned to enforce it for the child’s development and improvement.

4. The Concept of the “New Soviet Man” in Soviet School from the Perspective of Body and Mind Discipline

To discuss the education of left-handers in the USSR, it is necessary to turn to the concept of the “New Soviet Man,” which is essentially a goal and an ideological basis of Soviet education.

The Marxist project of radical transformation and improvement of human beings in order to create a socially and biologically advanced type of man has never been accomplished. However, the creation of the “New Soviet Man” as a better human, that is, a harmonious combination of intelligence, moral purity, and physical perfection (Bardzinski 2014), was the goal and responsibility of the Soviet educational school (Bleiere 2013) throughout its existence.

The “New Soviet Man,” or the *Homo Sovieticus* (Zinovyev 1986), as a project of developing collective subjectivity was not born in Bolshevik-dominated Soviet Russia. The idea of a new, superior type of man was popular in Europe during the second half of the 19th century (Bardzinski 2014). Nevertheless, it was in the authoritarian Soviet Russia that it became a favorable location for testing the concept of the new man – both developing the idea theoretically as well as finding and trying out tools for its technical realization.

Using the full potential of *Homo sapiens*, the goal of the project was to create an ideal citizen-communist. This task became one of the main elements of Soviet ideology. The emphasis was not only on the need for new social and civic virtues; it was also on the amelioration of the biological dimensions of human nature (Bardzinski 2014).

In 1929, the Soviet scientist Trofim Lysenko (1898–1976) advanced his theory, claiming that the inherent properties of plants and organisms are changeable under radical influence (Babkov 2001). In 1940, Lysenko’s theory received its application in the social sphere. It was accepted that dissenters, who have not freed themselves from bourgeois prejudices, can be re-educated after temporary isolation in closed labor camps. It became

the foundation of the GULAG, the USSR's forced labor camp system (Babkov 2001).

The forcible inclusion of Latvia in the USSR in the same year of 1940 (Plakans 2011) led to a broad implementation of this theory, aiming to create a society supportive of the ideology of communism in practice on Latvian territory as well.

The USSR was governed by the firm conviction that human nature was malleable. In its turn, genetic research recognizing heredity was strictly prohibited in the Soviet Union from 1948 (Babkov 2001; McDaniel 2004).

Genetics was considered a bourgeois pseudoscience aiming at strengthening and justifying individual differences, and as such it clearly contradicted the idea of the "New Soviet Man" project on the malleability of collective consciousness. The aim of Soviet ideology was to ensure that citizens consciously recognize the state – i.e., the priority of collective interests over individual ones. Therefore, the study of individual characteristics was deemed undesirable.

The attitude to genetics changed only after Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971) was deposed from the premier office in 1964, and the prohibition on genetics in the Soviet Union was lifted in 1965 (Babkov 2001; McDaniel 2004). Although Khrushchev is known in history as the initiator of the political thaw, the attitude to genetics did not change during his leadership. This can be explained by Khrushchev's vested interest in changing the hereditary characteristics of plants to promote agricultural prosperity in the USSR (Babkov 2001; McDaniel 2004).

The removal of the ban on genetic research in the Soviet Union was immediately followed by popular scientific publications distributed in all Soviet republics and in a comprehensible way informing society about the scientific basis of heredity.

In 1966, the publishing house of the Central Committee of the All-Union Lenin Communist Youth Union released a popular science book titled *Why Do I Look Like Dad?* In this volume, one of the best Soviet genetic scientists, Nikolai Luchnik (1922–1993), who, like most USSR geneticists, had been imprisoned in the Gulag system for several years, explained the essence of genetics to the general public (Luchnik 1966).

In 1968, a popular medicine book *Blood Science. Advancements and Prospects* was published in Moscow and presented a comprehensible view of haematology as related to genetics (Kassirskij 1968).

However, the repercussions of Lysenko's theory generally remain relevant in Soviet education and society long after the ban on genetics was lifted, and it is due to the fact that the denial of genetics was part of the ideological basis of the "New Soviet Man" project.

As the scientific denial of heredity was no longer possible, myths and stereotypes related to diversity manifestations were disseminated in popular literature and press (Kusher 2017). Pseudoscientific explanations of hereditary anomalies and deviations served to sustain the idea of a man as a *tabula rasa*.

Although the changing attitude to Lysenko's theory and genetics found its reflection in Soviet education; non-recognition of heredity in Soviet science had legitimized the omnipotence of Soviet pedagogy and had led to the unquestionable belief that the use of

ideologically relevant methods provided a possibility to raise a genuine socialist society member from each child.

Thus, the textbook for future teachers *Pedagogy*, compiled in Moscow in 1968 and translated to Latvian in 1971, proclaims that in the socialist social order not heredity, but education is of decisive importance in the formation of a personality (Iljina 1971). Further, the textbook *General Psychology*, published in Moscow in 1973 and translated into Latvian in 1978, expresses a firm conviction that social experience refutes beliefs in predetermined human nature, and that predeterminism is used in capitalist countries for the purposes of discriminating working people (Bogoslovskis, Kovoļovs, Stepanovs, Šabaļins 1978).

School was one of the most important incubators for hatching the “New Soviet Man,” i.e., the school produced Soviet citizens with a deeply ingrained faith in the Soviet state as the best form of political and social organization. Despite the acceptance of genetics by Soviet science in 1965, the school in the Soviet Union turned a blind eye to that fact; what really grounded and determined education was not science but Soviet ideology.

Strong social control, or discipline, was a new tool for building a Soviet citizen. The failure to achieve discipline in the classroom was seen as a serious lack in any teacher’s professionalism. Furthermore, discipline was not limited to ensuring silence and order, it also included strict requirements to uniforms, standardized rituals for greeting teachers, rules of conduct at school, supervision of pupils’ after-school behavior, etc. (Kestere, Kruze 2013).

The disciplinary requirements of Soviet schools also included strict standards regarding the physical development of pupils: the prescribed and unified requirements to the development of a pupil’s body did not allow for any deviation from the norm. Physical education, considered one of the most important components of the Soviet educational system, was based on a functional theory, according to which any separate organ of the human body may be developed by a purposeful system of exercises. Further on, physical training would develop the human intellectually, aesthetically, and morally (Iljina 1971). Thus, a targeted body discipline was regarded as leading to the discipline of the human mind.

5. Retraining of Left-Handed Children in Pedagogical Literature and Popular Press of Soviet Latvia

The research revealed that left-handedness was not mentioned in academic publications in Soviet Latvia as a phenomenon.

The use of the right hand for writing and its domination in other activities was part of the standardized Soviet educational program initiated by the “New Soviet Man” project. Published in 1971, for instance, a Latvian resource book for preschool and primary school teachers specifies that in the third year of their life, the child should be taught to sit correctly at a work desk, with the desk positioned so that the light falls from the left. The child should take the pencil and brush in the *right hand* and hold it with three fingers

(Biezā, Kauce, Kromāne, Līduma 1971). Thus, the use of the right hand for drawing and writing is clearly marked as the only option from early childhood. Instructional materials for Soviet teachers discuss no other writing alternatives. Since the official educational requirements did not allow for any deviation from the norm, any means of achieving the aim (including violent ones) could be recognized as acceptable and legitimate. However, open praise for violence was not permitted even in Soviet pedagogy, for it would not conform to the official notion of a happy Soviet childhood. That is why the retraining of left-handed children largely happened in hidden form. It is possible that some of the teachers did not really realize that they were harming children, since the officially published guidelines dictated a “correct” right-handed writing, and it had to be obeyed without question.

The Soviet teacher would be punished for nonconformity to this or any other official instruction, because the teacher, like the pupil, was subject to body and mind disciplining (Kestere, Kalke 2018).

However, we managed to find some fragmentary references to the education of left-handed children in Soviet popular science literature for parents and the popular press. The lift of the ban on genetic research in the USSR in the middle of the 1960s began to change public opinion, so parents had to be explained the phenomenon of the presence in their family of a child who prevalently used their left hand in activities.

In the popular press of Soviet Latvia, the first article about family education of left-handers appeared in the popular magazine *Liesma* in 1966, a year after the repeal of prohibition of genetics in the USSR. This article warns parents that it is unnecessary and even dangerous to make their child use the right hand if they are left-handed (Ņerpova 1966). However, it is a separately standing article, which testifies to the existence of an alternative view on the education of left-handers.

The popular scientific brochure *Jaunajiem vecākiem* (“For New Parents”), published in 1978, again argues that left-handedness is a developmental defect, and parents should do everything in their power to change the behavior of their child (Studenķins 1978). Parents are informed that a child might turn left-handed only at the age of 3–4 years old, and that the three potential reasons are heredity, birth trauma, and mistakes in parenting. Consulting a qualified doctor may help clarify the causes of left-handedness in a particular child. And in the case of faulty parenting, the efforts to eliminate left-handedness should be particularly persistent.

Parents therefore are encouraged to teach their child to use the right hand “no matter what” from the very first days, warning that the use of the left hand is often accompanied by other developmental defects. The author also points out that necessary measures to prevent a child’s desire to use her left arm might cause various neurotic side-effects, from stuttering to language loss, but they are transient. It is more important to continue targeted training of the right hand so that in the future, the child can join a team and cooperate successfully with others (Studenķins 1978).

In addition, in 1990, that is, a year after the Ministry of Health of the USSR issued the methodological guidelines on the protection of left-handed children’s health (Minzdrav

SSSR, 1989), the popular Latvian magazine *Zvaigzne* published an anonymous article describing left-handedness as a disease with various side effects such as urinary incontinence, diabetes, sleep disorders, etc. (Lediņš 1990). That confirms that even shortly before the collapse of the USSR, left-handedness was still considered a developmental defect.

Unfortunately, in Latvian education, the tendency to view left-handedness as a defect is noticeable even in the 21st century. For example, in 2007, 16 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by explaining the specifics of teaching left-handed children, the author of a preschool teacher's manual published in Latvia (Golubina 2007) still calls to try all the available methods and change the desire of children to use their left arm as the dominant one. She refers to the already mentioned pamphlet *For New Parents* (Studenķins 1978) and ignores the later research findings on left-handers.

Meagre primary sources about the education of left-handers in Soviet Latvia encouraged us to address the memory of eyewitnesses regarding the disciplining of left-handed children's bodies and minds by the Soviet educational system.

6. Questionnaire Results

All respondents who participated in the questionnaire admitted that they had experienced the prohibition of using their left hand in Soviet schools and that they are the so-called "broken left-handers." Given that some respondents studied at school until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the questionnaire results confirm the fact that the retraining of left-handed children had not been over with the lifting of the ban on genetics in 1965 nor after the methodological guidelines on the protection of left-handed children by the USSR Ministry of Health in 1989.

The respondents who filled in the questionnaire (44 women and 25 men) had obtained their education between 1951 and 1991.

Initially, the respondents were asked to evaluate the specified disciplinary techniques according to the frequency of their use (1–5). If a particular method had not been used, the respondents did not rate it. When making average estimates about the use of a particular disciplinary strategy, only those respondents' answers were included where the particular technique was evaluated, thus, experienced. That is the reason why different techniques are assessed by different numbers of respondents (N).

Respondents acknowledge that various, even violent tools were used to discipline the left-handed pupils' bodies and minds by teachers more often and more intensively than their parents.

Teachers used such disciplining techniques as continual reminders to work with the right hand (57 respondents with the mean of 4.05), moving objects from the left to the right hand (29 respondents with the mean of 3.79), angry looks (36 respondents, the mean of 3.86), angry remarks (32 respondents, the mean of 3.66), slaps on the left hand (23 respondents and the mean of 3.7), and pinching (12 respondents with the means of 4.1). In separate cases, tethering the left hand to the body (6 respondents, the mean of 3) was used as a method, too. In the part where the respondents could freely mention any

additional techniques used by teachers against the left-handers, they listed the following: shaming and mockery of the child's use of the left hand at schools; expelling the left-handed pupil from the class; prohibition of writing the test with the left hand, etc. There was one case when a pupil was publicly flogged for using the left hand in class. The respondents reminisce that teachers treated left-handed pupils with displeasure or even refused working with them.

The broken left-handers remember their teachers' attitudes and actions meant to discipline them at Soviet school. These were as follows:

Since I was a left-hander, at school I felt the displeasure of teachers almost in any class. They treated me more severely and constantly nagged at me, but, still, retrained me into a right-hander (male, 40);

The teacher in home economics refused to teach me knitting, as it was not possible... (female, 44);

The teacher shamed me, saying that no one writes with the left hand... (male, 37).

The results of the questionnaire demonstrate that with time, the attitude to disciplining left-handers in Soviet education was gradually turning more liberal. The analysis of the statistical results shows that the respondents who obtained formal education during the 1950–1970s more often mention different physically violent techniques, such as, for example, tethering the hand to the body, slapping, pinching, etc. In their turn, younger respondents emphasise verbal or emotional disciplining.

If we analyze the techniques used for disciplining left-handers in definite subjects, then the obtained results demonstrate that violent disciplining techniques are most often used in Latvian and mathematics classes, where the mean for the Latvian language (48 respondents) is 4.10, but for mathematics (35 respondents), it amounts to 3.91. This means that disciplining in those classes was used regularly and intensively. Classes of Latvian and mathematics were not only more numerous than the rest – they were also the school subjects where pupils' skills in writing letters and numbers “correctly” would play a key role (Kestere, Kruze 2013).

In the questionnaire, respondents also mentioned home economics (28 respondents), art (22 respondents), Russian (17 respondents), German, and English (6 respondents) language lessons, history (5 respondents), and geography (5 respondents) as classes where teachers implemented various retraining, i.e., disciplining techniques to left-handed pupils.

On the other hand, in PE classes in Soviet schools, left-handedness was often considered to be an advantage. The survey results show that in PE, teachers used definite disciplining methods only against nine out of all 69 respondents, with the mean of 3.44.

One of the respondents remembered that “sports was the most difficult, with the athletic training, hurling the javelin, and throwing the shot put with your right hand” (female, 40).

The fact that the retraining of left-handers happened less often in sports than in other classes can be explained by the importance of competition in the Soviet Union. It was

considered a very significant part of human upbringing, as it formed a team, and in a sporting event, the left-hander may prove to be helpful (Iljina 1971). The use of the left hand can catch the opposing team unprepared, and the left-hander may ensure victory in sporting competitions. It was especially important in international events, with victory demonstrating the Soviet man's physical superiority over participants from other countries.

It can also point at the resistance of certain subject teachers to the official position on the right as the only correct hand to use at school in Soviet Latvia. Even though athletic activities played an important role, writing was the most important part of Soviet education. Thus, teachers of such subjects as, for example, sports, home economics, and art, were freer to operate, as they were comparatively less controlled.

The respondents acknowledge that they did not receive any kind of support from their parents. The fact proves that even if parents did not fully and violently participate in the retraining of left-handed children, they passively supported the process.

In the questionnaire's section on the involvement of parents in retraining left-handed children, the respondents were asked to evaluate the methods used by parents on the scale from 1 to 5. Only the responses with respondents referring to their experience of a concrete retraining method were considered in the analysis.

The respondents were given the possibility to name additional disciplining techniques used by their parents if those were not listed in the structured part of the questionnaire. The analysis of the obtained results allows to conclude that there were parents actively retraining their left-handed children: "The teachers did not participate in retraining; it was mom who strictly controlled that I use [my right hand], and the teachers in kindergarten. Already in the 1st form, I did tasks using the right hand, only at home economics I used my left one, but the teacher didn't tell me anything" (male, 48).

The results of the questionnaire demonstrate that during the Soviet period, parents used less violent and aggressive tools for disciplining left-handed children than those implemented at school. Nevertheless, all tools were aimed at adapting the behavior of the child to the use of the "right hand." In the family, disciplining a left-hander's body and mind most often found its expression in reminding the child to use their right hand (40 respondents, the mean of 4.2), moving objects from the left to the right hand (17 respondents, the mean of 3.71), warnings about the danger of using the left hand (2 respondents, the mean of 2.5), angry looks (12 respondents, the mean of 3.75), and admonitions (15 respondents, the mean of 3.47). However, there were mentioned cases when parents flogged their children for the use of their left hands.

The results of the questionnaire delineate the broad spectrum of techniques for retraining left-handers in Soviet Latvia. The disciplining of the body and mind of left-handed children happened in almost all study subjects, and it was supported and implemented in the family as well. Although a part of the abovementioned techniques are not physically violent, their emotional side is crucial. Angry looks and constant admonitions given by an adult important for the child are emotionally traumatic, as evidenced by some of the comments made in questionnaire and interviews.

7. Interview Results

For the participation in biographical interviews, we purposefully invited people who were affected by the prohibition of the use of the left hand in Soviet education. All interviewees admit that with different disciplining instruments implemented, they were forced to use the “correct” hand since an early age. However, many interviewed respondents confess that they “do not really remember” how they were “broken,” which may be explained by the fact that they were too young to remember that, or that retraining had happened in some hidden form in their families.

The interviewed tend to better remember disciplining events at school, which means that in the process of formal education, such actions happened more often and more openly.

Interviews show that to discipline left-handed pupils both in the family and at school, the following techniques were used: manipulations using the “good/correct pupil” image, admonitions, reminders, warnings, smacking the fingers, arms being held behind the pupil’s back or on their knees, tying hands to a chair, replacing a pencil or cutlery to the other hand, pulling by the hair.

There were no punishments, rather admonitions. You know, for a child of that age, it seems that the parents know better... I don’t know, I think I had a feeling that writing with the right hand was as if a necessity, it had to be done that way... (female, 54).

In kindergarten, the teacher always tenderly removed the brush from my left hand and put it in the right one... I thought it absolutely normal and not for a moment did I feel any violence – neither emotional nor physical (female, 54).

All the respondents claim that at school, they accepted body “disciplining” as an indispensable part of learning, i.e., writing with the right hand was deemed a norm, something that “everyone does, so could I,” ostensibly that “parents and teachers know how it should be done,” and, finally, that “I want to be good.”

The respondents admit that for them, one of the most important stimuli was fear, the fear to make a mistake, the fear to be a “bad” or “wrong” pupil and person: “I felt fear [...] I think for a pupil in a Soviet primary school it was quite a logical sensation, for there was an overwhelming great fear of teachers and school, the fear to make a mistake and do something wrong...” (female, 47).

The attempts to behave in conformity with the expectations of what is “good and right” promoted the desire of left-handed children to join and created the model of “obedient” behavior. The Soviet pupil’s tasks as school were to meet the teacher’s requirements and to join the collective, and the use of the “wrong” hand was seen as a serious impediment to their fulfillment. The use of the left hand for writing was simply considered to be wrong and inadmissible – both the children and teachers knew it and never discussed it. “The teachers didn’t think that they were breaking kids! They were just working, for there was no alternative – children had to write with the right hand and that was it...” (female, 47).

With few exceptions, teachers were likewise obedient to the system. Their education and experience did not offer any different approach but the normalization of left-handed

children by means of retraining. To be part of the society and not to differ from the rest was most important for Soviet education.

The respondents acknowledge that they had psychosomatic problems in their childhood, but they never relate those problems to the disciplining they underwent because of using their left hand: “I felt different, [...] somehow bad, yes, bad. [...] As if something was changing in me... I don’t understand why was it happening [...] something was cracked in me [...] and then I shrank into myself...” (female, 64).

In describing their childhood emotional states, all of the respondents admit that they experienced lasting anxiety, internal agitation and anger, sadness, emotional insecurity, and a desire to protest. Respondents acknowledge that they often lied about using the right hand so that they might not feel condemned by parents or teachers.

Similarly to the questionnaire’s results, the interviews demonstrate that in PE, teachers often accepted the use of the left hand. However, four respondents admit to being re-educated both in volleyball and athletics, with the purposeful change of the leading arm or jump foot. On the other hand, two respondents remember that on seeing that the pupil’s leading hand is left, the teacher supported its use. Only in sports might pupils use the left hand to their advantage, for example, “to hang on the pole longer” (female, 54) or for demonstrating their athletic abilities (“I showed them what I can do” (female, 55)).

Two respondents of the interview admit that they experienced a panic fear of sport at school:

I simply hated PE... when in class, for example, they gave the command to “turn right/left,” I always felt horrified... at that moment I could not figure out which side was where... (female, 47).

I had a terrible fear of sports because everyone had to do the right thing, but I could not and I felt inner discomfort all the time (female, 53).

Several interviews highlighted the fact that in art classes, pupils were allowed to work with the hand with which it was more convenient for them:

I cannot even draw with my right hand, so I think the left hand was allowed in artistic activities... (female, 47). I was allowed to express myself in any way in art school (female, 53). When I painted, I did it with my left hand (female, 56).

The Soviet school strongly encouraged pupils to participate in various organized extra-curricular activities, thus enabling further involvement for the pupils in the process of collective education (Iljina 1971), i.e., leaving really limited time for their individual and private life. The retraining of left-handed pupils happened also in such interest groups. One of the most popular activities was participation in folk dance groups. Four interviewees admit that it was in their dance groups that they “drilled” the correct jump foot, and they would dance “turning by the awkward” – or the right – shoulder.

In their interviews, respondents also talk about their experience of what it means to be a broken adult left-hander in society today. Respondents describe their daily life and admit that they have used the left arm both openly and covertly in self-care (combing, holding a toothbrush) and doing household chores: picking berries, weeding, chopping

wood, cutting clothes, knitting, sewing. If the work of the farm was open and public, to promote the use of the right hand, the adults took an ironic and ridiculing stance.

Interviewees talk about what it means to be a broken adult left-hander, how retraining has affected their lives altogether:

I... from today's perspective, I'd say that I feel good and quite happy, and if we focus on this left-handedness, I, for example, I've suffered much less from this left-handedness than from other things... when I was little, I could not eat anything, I did like eating in childhood... and from the fact that I had poor eyesight and had to wear glasses. These were things that disturbed me much more than left-handedness... Now it seems that I have been given the opportunity to see the world differently. Left-handers are such creative people that they are able to generalize and discover new solutions. That is what I often associate with left-handedness – my brain works differently and thus more originally... (female, 47).

In their tales, respondents contemplate what their life might have been if they had not been “broken.” They are also satisfied that now there is a choice to do what sometimes was prohibited – for example, to hold the spoon in the left hand.

Overall, the respondents admit that the process of retraining left-handers was part of the Soviet educational system. They emphasize that they try not to blame parents or teachers. All respondents report that nowadays they can use their hands equally well both in everyday life and in professional activities, which can be considered an advantage. However, several mention that from the modern social perspective, they consider the prohibition of using their left hand in childhood traumatic.

8. Conclusions

The study of the education of left-handers in Soviet Latvia confirmed the thesis that the typical efforts characteristic of the modernist paradigm to solve social problems through education (Smeyers, Depaepe 2008) were clearly manifested in the USSR. The assignment of responsibility for extraneous problems on education as well as the ideological justification of blending such concepts as “good citizenship” with those of health, hygiene, moral purity, and normality turned education into a technology of political power (Smeyers, Depaepe 2008).

The disciplining of the bodies and minds of left-handed children in Soviet education was only part of a much broader plan aimed at achieving the ideal of the “New Soviet Man,” a goal envisioning the creation of an ideal “superhero” who does not have any deviations from perfection.

Using Foucault's terms, in the Soviet Union, an educated body meant a totally disciplined body (Foucault 1977). Any form of diversity was recognized as abnormal and unacceptable, for it did not conform to the ideal of the “New Soviet Man” project.

The authoritarian power communicates with its citizens in two ways, namely through intimidation and persuasion (Arendt 1951). The schoolteacher in Soviet Latvia acted as a tool of the ruling power for intimidating and persuading the public. Therefore, the teach-

er was actually endowed with unlimited power over any pupil who had a “developmental defect,” i.e., who had manifested diversity.

Academic literature listed in the official study programs for teachers in the USSR does not mention left-handedness neither before nor after the ban on genetics was lifted in 1965. Furthermore, the politicized ideology prevailed in Soviet pedagogy even when heredity was scientifically recognized.

It should be concluded that throughout the Soviet period, pedagogical literature used such disciplinary techniques as *concealment* and *disregard*, which remained even after the ban on genetics was waived in 1965.

The belief in legitimacy and necessity of breaking left-handers in the USSR is rooted in the attitude of Soviet science toward heredity, or more accurately, its non-recognition. The rejection helped to justify the omnipotence of Soviet pedagogy. The idea of the new ideal Soviet man did not allow any deviations from the norm. Furthermore, in a situation where there is “no heredity,” any such deviation from the ideal can be made null and void. The prohibition of genetics in the USSR substantiated and legitimized the acceptance of different techniques to discipline the left-handed child’s body and mind, of *emotional* and *physical violence* manifested in *subjection, humiliation, coercion, slapping, body restriction*, and other ways.

A few fragmentary references to the existence of left-handers found in popular literature and press published in Soviet Latvia mostly warned parents and the general public about the dangers of supporting left-handedness for the development of a child.

The recognition of genetics changed the situation in popular literature – while left-handedness was acknowledged, its danger and the need for retraining were publicly emphasized, thus promoting the use of such disciplining techniques as *intimidation* and *manipulation*. The use of such techniques is considered to be typical attitude as applied to a stigmatized social group (Sattler 2000).

The negative attitude to the left-handers in the USSR is rooted in cultural-historical prejudices against the use of the left hand as a leading one. In many cultures, the prevailing belief is in the right hand as the “right” one; moreover, the advantage of the right hand is etymologically emphasized (Bertrand 2001; Kusher 2017; Smits 2017).

The policy of Soviet science emphasized the struggle against superstition and prejudices (Camerjans 1965) but did not erase them. On the contrary, the prejudices against left-handed children were further reinforced by Soviet propaganda.

The retraining of left-handers in Soviet Latvia was grounded in the orientation of Soviet pedagogy toward the emphasis on collective, rather than specific, individual interests. The priority of collective interests in Soviet education legitimized the claim to uniform discipline and compliance with the norm. Not only teachers, but also parents consciously or unconsciously participated in disciplining their left-handed children, for total submission to the collective demands was an absolute necessity in the USSR. Thus, standardization and normalization, characteristic of Soviet pedagogy, contributed to the use of such a technique for disciplining the left-hander’s body and mind as *unification*.

Foucault argues that certain types of power correspond to specific body shapes (Fau-

cault 1977). The human body is plastic, it can be manipulated and brought into submission. The utopic desire of the Soviet ideology was to use education in creating a super-human, or the “New Soviet Man,” whose submissive mind and body would fit perfectly into the communist scheme of the future. In reality, this project was never implemented, as evidenced by deviations from forced unification. In Soviet Latvia, there were teachers who ignored the official position on the use of the right hand as the only one at school and thus offered nonviolent resistance to the dominant ideology. However, such teachers were rather exceptions in the system of Soviet education, the system which made left-handed children suffer through massive retraining.

The “New Soviet Man” project resulted in millions of submissive, humiliated, and destroyed people. Left-handed children, retrained by the Soviet educational system, are only a small part of them, but their voices must also be heard if we want to understand the essence of the consequences caused by Soviet ideology. We must not forget that “the duty of the historian of education is to rescue from oblivion those whose voices have not yet been heard and whose stories have not yet been told” (Aldrich 2006).

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