

# LEGITIMATION OF VIRTUE EDUCATION IN TEACHER TRAINING DISCOURSE DURING SOVIET LATVIA

**Manuel J Fernández González**

Scientific institute of Pedagogy, Department of Education, Psychology and Arts, University of Latvia, Latvia

**Abstract.** *Soviet virtue education had a relevant place in the discourse of the founders of communism and in the Communist Party's documents. Virtue education played a central role in the construction of the future Soviet society and the raising of the New Soviet Man, a conscious communist, productive worker and soldier. This paper addresses two research questions: how was character and virtue education conceptualized, legitimized and implemented in Soviet Latvia? What elements of the Soviet approach to character education facilitated the consolidation of totalitarianism in Latvia?*

*This research is based on written academic sources published in Soviet Latvia about virtue education and intended to school teachers: two teaching manuals for teacher training (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948; Iljina, 1971), and three collections scientific papers written by the leading educational academics of the Soviet Latvia published by the Latvian State University in 1962, 1964 and 1967 within the series "Questions about Upbringing in the Soviet school".*

*The findings highlight the understanding of virtue education during this period, and how it was ideologically, socially and pedagogically legitimized in the academic discourse and pedagogical literature addressed to school teachers.*

**Keywords:** *legitimation, Soviet Latvia, Soviet virtues, teacher education, virtue education.*

## Introduction

There is an ongoing academic discussion about the benefits and shortcomings of character education and citizenship education. Even if both fields are "intimately connected" (Arthur, 2003, 2), relevant differences exist regarding their understanding of the relations between 'the good and the right', their conception of pluralism, and the way they conceive the connection between morality and politics (Kristjánsson, 2004). Character education was recently criticized (Suissa, 2015; Kisby 2017) for being supposedly 'narrow and instrumental', emphasising the 'individual, moral dimension of character', psychologising problems 'rather than politicising them', presenting a 'depoliticised notion of good citizenship', and educating people for being 'compliant, not political'. In its turn, critics of citizenship education question its

(supposed) rejection – or at least downplaying – of transcultural moral values, its uncritical inculcation of democratic values, a frequent political bias, and a lack of attention to cultural diversity (Kristjánsson, 2004, 210-211).

This paper aims at contributing to this ongoing dialogue from the perspective of history of character education. It has been often argued that history is a mirror for reflection, and that historical knowledge helps to understand human beings and society, is a source of new ideas, and helps to evaluate current societal processes (Kestere, 2005, 6-9). The social and political dimension of character education was central in Soviet society. Since the beginning, Soviet leaders gave virtue education a central role for construction of socialism, placing propaganda at the heart of education (Fitzpatrick, 1969, 25). A better knowledge of the kind of personality education Soviet totalitarianism promoted, legitimated and implemented could shed light in the debate about education of character and citizenship.

For convenience reasons (author's language knowledge and document availability), this research was limited to Soviet Latvia (1945-1991). The overarching research question of this study was: how was character and virtue education conceptualized, legitimized and implemented in Soviet Latvia? What elements of the Soviet approach to character education facilitated the consolidation of totalitarianism in Latvia? The scope of this research was limited to Latvian academics' writings intended for school teachers. Other relevant sources, such as the document of Congresses of the Communist Party and the Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, were not analysed.

Some conceptual and historical background about the Soviet ideology and Soviet history of education may be useful. According to Hannah Arendt (1976), "an ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea ... Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction" (Arendt, 1976, 470). Therefore, in totalitarianism any 'different idea' is a real enemy: "Any society has a certain ideology... [but] the Soviet ideology was permanently active; it was constantly waging war against other ideologies. The Soviet value system... had to be acquired and accepted by everyone" (Kestere, 2003, 294). "Totalitarian regimes communicate with their citizens in two ways: 1) through coercion, power and fear and 2) through propaganda that legitimizes their actions" (Kestere, 2017, 29). Soviet ideologists such as Anatoly Lunacharsky saw propaganda as the 'enlightenment of the people' (Fitzpatrick, 1969, 236).

As regards the historical background of the research, in 1931-1934 there was an official educational turn that put educational achievement and proper conduct and discipline as the centre of Soviet education. Progressive education, in fashion since the October revolution (1917), was dismissed by the regime, and Paedology,

the science of child development, was declared anti-Marxist (Brickman & Zepper, 1992, 34-35). In 1935-1936 Makarenko, the most influential educational theorist in the Soviet Union, reinforced this new trend. Between 1946 and 1948, the work of Zhdanov, secretary of the Central Committee, in the field of education resulted in the establishment of the so-called “iron curtain of the mind” (Brickman & Zepper, 1992, 37). After the death of Stalin (1953), the focus on discipline education at school continued till the end of the Soviet period.

This research is based on the written academic sources published in Soviet Latvia, mentioning explicitly character and virtue education, and intended to school teachers. Two teaching manuals for teacher training (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948; Iljina, 1971) and three collections of scientific papers fulfilled these criteria. Jesipovs's & Gončarovs's book ‘Pedagogy - a teaching book for pedagogical schools’ (1948) was used for teacher training in Latvia for more than two decades. Its section 11 (pp. 246-305) was named ‘Contents and methodology for virtue education’. This work was replaced by Iljina's book ‘Pedagogy’ in 1971, which was used for teacher training till the end of Soviet system. The title of its section 6 (pp. 93-111) was ‘Virtue education’, and section 7 was called ‘Soviet patriotism and proletarian internationalist education’ (pp. 112-123). The scientific papers analysed were written by the leading educational academics of Soviet Latvia, members of the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology of the Latvian State University, which published them in 1962 (6 papers), 1964 (9 papers) and 1967 (9 papers) within the series “Questions about upbringing in the Soviet school”. 14 out of these 24 scientific papers addressed explicitly character and virtue education.

### **Character education under soviet Latvia**

In the sources analysed, the term 'upbringing' referred to “the development of knowledge-based communist convictions in the future generation, and the creation of character features of personality that are appropriated in communist society” (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 12). The expression ‘Soviet virtue education’ appears very often and refers to the education of the Soviet personality as a whole, whereas the word ‘character’ was almost always understood as ‘personal strength’ or ‘willpower’.

For Soviet educational theorists, educating a flourishing personality would be possible only after the new Soviet society will be established: “The radical improvement and development of humanity through upbringing will be possible only after the socialist system will replace the exploitative society through revolution, creating the conditions for a truly comprehensive development and upbringing of human beings” (Iljina, 1971, 41).

From the perspective of Soviet anthropology, virtue education was necessary because virtues and moral qualities are not inherited: “Marxist pedagogy and psychology categorically deny the idea that persons could have inherited moral properties” (Iljina, 1971, 93); but “with proper education and under conditions of positive influence, it is possible to ensure the formation of moral qualities corresponding to the goals and tasks of communist education” (p. 94).

Five concrete virtues were particularly relevant for a Soviet citizen: Soviet patriotism, socialist humanism, collectivism, discipline, and strength of character. Among them, patriotism, discipline and strength of character were the most important, and, in the sources explored, Latvian academics put a great deal of effort to explain them in detail (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 246-306).

As regards patriotism, it is important to note that “the notion Latvian patriot was never used; consequently, it was installed in people’s memory that patriotism is Soviet and socialist.” (Kestere, 2003, 294). “Soviet patriotism manifests itself in the confidence to the Communist Party, in an unselfish willingness to serve the Lenin-Stalin’s case” (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 29). Soviet patriotism considered itself as a “patriotism of a higher level” (Iljina, 1971, 114), and it was conceptually close to nationalism. In this context, intolerance was legitimated as a Soviet virtue resulting from patriotism: the ‘Moral Code of the Builder of Communism’, included in the Communist Party’s New Program of 1961, prescribed to be intolerant towards the violation of the social interests, injustice, social parasitism, unfairness, careerism, acquisitiveness, racial and national dislike and the enemies of communism.

Discipline was “a high quality of communist morality and one of the most important traits of character ... Soviet discipline should be conscientious, with self-initiative and strict” (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 276). The main characteristics of ‘personal strength of character’ were purposefulness and self-conviction about one’s capacities together with perseverance (resolution and patience), mindful temperance (attention, inner and external calm, respect for others’ work), manliness (including courage, self-control and bravery), and endurance (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 295-298), as well as initiative (Plotnieks, 1967, 131-143).

Upbringing of socialist humanism included “fostering of love and respect for parents and other adults” (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 264), and the education of the “sense of duty and responsibility, honour and human dignity in children” (p. 267). The education for collectivism included the virtues of “companionship and friendship between children” (p. 269), and the upbringing of children’s collective consciousness (p. 271).

Among other emerging themes found in the sources, Soviet educators understood well the importance of emotional education for developing Soviet virtues in a sustainable way: “if you want to build character, cultivate feelings”

(Stepe, 1962, 94). The emotions to be cultivated at school included admiration of “moral qualities included in the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism” (Anspaks & Zeile, 1964, 240) and proudness feelings about the Soviet system and their school ‘name’ (Stepe, 1962, 90-91), but also “hatred and dislike for students who hinder the regular work and act contrary to school rules and traditions” (p. 94).

### **Arguments for legitimating of Soviet virtue education at school**

Legitimation in social sciences “is often not gained by winning scholarly arguments or excavating empirically incontrovertible ‘hard facts’ but by persuading significant actors in the field that certain discursive themes carry more ‘symbolic capital’ than others” (Walker, Roberts, & Kristjánsson, 2015, 79). Which legitimation arguments did Latvian academics put forward for enhancing the symbolic capital of Soviet virtues and persuading teachers to implement it?

Firstly, and mainly, communist moral education was presented to teachers (and indirectly - to the Soviet censure) as legitim because of its close connection to Marxist ideology and scientific materialism: “Marxism-Leninism science gives it [virtue education] clear goals and beliefs” (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 246). Virtue education was legitimated by reference to communism founders’ discourse and to the Party’s documents: “Lenin gave virtue education a central place in the cultivation of communism” (Iljina, 1971, 93); “attention is given to our courageous men of valour: the government, the Central Committee of our Party, our leaders and, above all, the comrade Stalin, pay homage to such people” (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 298). The above mentioned ‘Moral Code of the Builder of Communism’ (1961) was a reference document for Soviet moral education. It prescribed in the first place “loyalty to Communism”, and also “conscious work for the good of the society”, “care for the collective property”, and “high consciousness of the social responsibilities”.

Virtue education was also legitim as far as it was useful for building the future Soviet society: “Well-rounded and harmonious development of personality is an objective necessity arising from the needs of our society on our way to communism.” (Iljina, 1971). Personality was instrumentally educated for the needs of Soviet society and for taking care of the common good: “A person with virtue education... is someone who subordinates his interests and his actions to the interests of his Homeland, to the interests of the people” (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 246).

Virtue education was legitimated also as a necessity for creating the ‘New Soviet Man’ (hereinafter used in the sense of ‘human being’), who would possess the virtues that make of him/her a self-conscious communist, a productive worker, and a soldier who defends his Homeland (the Soviet Russia, not only Latvia) and

fighters against capitalism for establishing the new Soviet order. Virtue education played a central role in “the creation of communist consciousness”, which was the aim of the Soviet education system (Stepe, 1962, 96). The so-called ‘Soviet critical thinking’ and self-criticism was legitimated as a way of reinforcing the communist consciousness (Zelmenis, 1962, 119) and fostering the establishment of the new Soviet order: “in the struggle with the remnants of the past, with the manifestations of individualism and selfishness ... the development of critique and self-criticism plays a major role” (p. 99). The New Soviet Man was a productive worker: “a fundamental characteristic of the New Man - a member of the communist society - is a new attitude towards work, a communist attitude to work... The work is not done in a forced way, working gives joy... Work, says Stalin, is ‘a matter of honour, a matter of fame, a matter of courage and a heroism’ ” (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 29).

As regards the methodological indications for implementation of virtue education at school, the two key elements of successful virtue education at school were the school culture (traditions, slogans and school rules); and the creation and reinforcement of students’ feelings of proudness or shame, according to their behaviour (Stepe, 1962, 90-91). The pressure of public opinion was an important legitimator and regulator of moral education (Iljina, 1971, 98). Social pressure at classroom and school level was particularly relevant for enforcing character education, in particular since Makarenko (1934-35).

Explaining in detail the numerous concrete methodological indications that Soviet academics gave Latvian teachers about how to develop each of the Soviet virtue mentioned above is out of the scope of this paper. In general, the methods described most in detail refer to discipline and behaviour education, and to character strength education. The methods for discipline and behaviour education included external methods, such as coercion and punishments (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 280-290), persuasion and explanation methods, such as ethical discussions, meetings, disputes and debates, etc. (Iljina, 1971, 108-109), and indirect methods, embedded in school traditions (Klēģeris, 1962; Klēģeris, 1964; Klēģeris, 1967; Stepe, 1962) and in collective events (Jesipovs & Gončarovs, 1948, 288-290; Iljina, 1971, 98).

The features of ‘personal character strength’ were developed during the study process, and through slogans and school traditions. Stepe argued that “the school also uses the teaching and learning process in its character education system” (1962, 96). Slogans, frequently used for political propaganda by the Soviet regime (Calhoun, 2014; Musolff, 2017), were also used as an efficient virtue education method at school (Stepe, 1962, 90). Character strength was also educated through work experience (Anspaks, 1962; Anspaks, 1967).

## Reflections on Soviet virtue education and pedagogical implications

A striking aspect of Soviet virtue education in light of classical Aristotelian character education theory is the total absence of any reference to the virtue of *phronesis* (i.e., wisdom or morally good judgement in practical action). In Aristotelian virtue theory, *phronesis* is an integrative virtue which guides the other virtues and enable to perceive, know, desire and act with good sense (Jubilee Centre, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015, 83-103). However, in the Soviet system, the sole criteria of importance/relevance of an idea was its relation to the Soviet ideology: “Under authoritarianism, every phenomenon has an ideological value (positive or negative) and therefore guides everyone towards a “correct” understanding” (Kreegipuu & Lauk, 2007, 50). It seems that in Soviet character education, Soviet ideology replaced *phronesis* as the criteria of ‘good sense’ and in its role of *auriga virtutum*. *Phronesis* was probably considered superfluous and even dangerous, as the ideology provided already univocal criteria for action.

A related question is the treatment of another intellectual virtue in the literature analysed, namely – critical thinking. As mentioned above, critical thinking was legitim when it referred to oneself (self-criticism for enhancing communist consciousness), to comrades (revealing others’ deviances from the ideals of communist society), and to capitalism; but, in a regime of latent terror, it was not even thinkable to question the Soviet regime, its rulers or its ideology. The same phenomenon can be observed nowadays in other authoritarian countries. According to Arthur (2016), in China “students are simply told how to act and what to believe” (p. 66) and in “both Vietnam and China any criticism of the prevailing communist ideology is either ignored or condemned” (p. 67). It could be argued that one of the reasons of an eventual ‘mass support for totalitarianism’ (Arendt, 1976, xxiii) could be found in this abandon of *phronesis* and deep critical thinking as goals of virtue education, which allows for mass manipulation.

In the dialogue between character and citizenship education, one of the pedagogical implications that could be drawn from this discussion is the necessity of embedding *phronesis* and common-sensical critical thinking as an educational priority. Without them, most of the traits of character promoted by citizenship education programs “would be viewed with approval by dictators and tyrants” (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003, 196). This discussion reveals also the importance of avoiding a kind of ‘compliant’ character education disengaged from the societal and political issues. Character education should help students not only to ‘think critically’ about themselves, their classmates or some limited aspects of reality, but to acquire deep ‘critical thinking skills’ embracing the whole spectre of human activity, also the political one (Doyle, 1997, 440).

Another aspect that could be useful to discuss is Soviet moral relativism. Arendt (1976) argued that “the aim of totalitarian education has never been to instil convictions but to destroy the capacity to form any” (p. 468). This view seems to contrast with the (apparent) conviction with which Latvian academics wrote about the importance of Soviet virtue education and the emphasis put on the methods for achieving the formation of the New Soviet Man with its communist consciousness and its readiness to work and fight for the Soviet ideal.

Arendt point could be better understood considering that, while Soviet ideology replaced Aristotelian *phronesis*, communist consciousness may have replaced the *individual* moral conscience as the compass of moral action. The legitimization of character education in Soviet Latvia was based on the needs of the ideology, not on a common universally and cross-culturally shared understanding of moral values. Soviet Latvian academics were clear about that: “There is not, and it cannot be, any universal human morality. In a society which is divided into antagonistic classes, each class has its own morality” (Iljina, 1971, 95). So, a plausible explanation of the apparent contradiction mentioned above is that, in their writings, Latvian academics emphasized the convictions of the Soviet regime, not their own *personal* ones.

The rejection of transcendence, the ‘scientific materialism’ and the atheism inherent to Marxism-Leninism did not accept any source of morality external to the totalitarian Soviet ideology. However, a number of social scientists and philosophers, based on recent scientific research, claim the existence of a set of cross-cultural universal values (Kristjánsson, 2015; McGrath, 2015) enrooted in human nature. Interestingly, moral relativism is being promoted also in liberal pluralistic democracy, where “every ideal, including our deepest commitments and character itself, is constantly open to change. This contrasts sharply with an Aristotelian conception of character” (Arthur, 2003, 78).

An implication of this discussion for moral education would be the promotion of such versions of character and citizenship education which are based on moral objectivism (Kristjánsson, 2010, 128), recognize the importance of the formation of youngsters’ moral conscience (Devanny, 2018, 4), and are open to the spiritual and transcendent dimension of human beings (Kristjánsson, 2016). As Kristjánsson argued, “the human being is not only a political being ... citizenship education is to be kept in its proper place as a supplement to, but not a replacement of, the ‘moral basics’.” (2004, 217-218).

## Conclusion

Soviet educationist stressed the development of students’ performance virtues, such as will strength, order and discipline, while crucial intellectual virtues were ignored or controlled, moral conscience was replaced by communist

consciousness, and personal flourishing was at the service of the social project of communism (Iljina, 1971). In character and citizenship education, careful consideration should be given to the kind of values (or anti-values) which are supported by education systems that stress the development of performance virtues without a clear moral compass, neglecting the profound cultivation of phronesis and the attention due to each individual person, prioritizing more impersonal societal concerns.

One of the major limitation of this study, which recommend relativizing the scope of its conclusions, is the cultural and temporal distance separating its author from the reality of Soviet Latvia. In addition, in Soviet “self-suppressing society”, in which enemies suppress each other, people gradually started to lose respect to Soviet ideas, widening the gap between official discourse and individual inner convictions (Gielen & Jeshmaridian, 1999, 290). A direction for future research would be to analyse commonalities and differences between teaching manuals and scientific articles regarding content or structure. Another direction would be to explore the explicit school-based propaganda of character education addressed directly to students, such as the Codes of Conduct in the Soviet School System (Maslinsky, 2016), and the “descriptions of students”, containing teachers’ evaluation of students’ Soviet virtues, which were to be produced for admission into Higher education institutions (Klēģeris, 1962, 66).

In this paper, the kind of virtue education promoted by totalitarianism in Latvia was explored, and some pedagogical implications for character education and citizenship education were discussed. However, it would be naïve to think that Soviet virtue education alone explains entirely the atrocities of totalitarian Soviet regime. As Arendt argues, “the fact that totalitarian government ... rests on mass support is very disquieting. It is therefore hardly surprising that scholars as well as statesmen often refuse to recognize it, the former by believing in the magic of propaganda and brainwashing, the latter by simply denying it ... It is quite obvious that mass support for totalitarianism comes neither from ignorance nor from brainwashing” (Arendt, 1976, xxiii). Even if the ‘*mysterium iniquitatis*’ (Pope John Paul II, 2005) which is at the origin of totalitarian regimes remains, this study shed light on the importance of educating phronimous, common-sensical persons and engaged citizens, who care about the flourishing of each person and of society, and resist both authoritarian and liberal totalitarianism.

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