

# Intrepid thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union

By Frank Brenner  
11 June 1999

*The nature of man himself is hidden in the deepest and darkest recesses of the unconscious, the elemental and the submerged. Is it not self-evident that the greatest efforts of inquiring thought and of creative initiative will move in that direction?—Trotsky*

## Part 1.

For so much of this century, the real history of the Soviet Union has been buried under a mountain of lies. In the years since its collapse, however, some important pieces of the historical truth have been retrieved from the debris. One such piece is contained in a new account of the history of Soviet psychoanalysis, *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union* (Yale University Press) by Martin A. Miller, a professor at Duke University.

That psychoanalysis even had a history in the Soviet Union comes as something of a revelation. Freud's ideas suffered much the same fate under Stalinism as virtually every other progressive trend in science and art—indeed much the same fate as Marxism itself: it was outlawed and every effort was made to erase any trace of its existence in Soviet life. (Of course, for obvious political and historical reasons, Marxism was not officially banned in the USSR; its content and vitality were attacked in another manner, by being transformed into a lifeless state religion.) Sexual puritanism of the most suffocating kind reigned supreme and it was impossible to conduct serious study or discussion about anything that had to do with subjective experience. It isn't surprising that these conditions brought about a terrible debasement in the field of psychology that found perhaps its most graphic expression in the use of psychiatric hospitals such as the Serbskii Institute in Moscow for the internment and "treatment" of political dissidents in the sixties and seventies.

But nothing could be in more striking contrast to this grim repressiveness than the tremendous surge of social and intellectual energy that characterized the first years of the Bolshevik regime. The astonishing creativity of the arts in this period is well known, but every aspect of culture was swept up in the revolutionary ferment, in the struggle—as the saying went at the time—for a "new life." On every front only the most advanced ideas would do, and in psychology that meant, to a great extent, the ideas of Freud. This was the atmosphere in which a Soviet psychoanalytic school flourished for a few precious years. What makes this of more than academic interest today are two things: first, it contributes—as every honest account of Soviet history does—to exposing the great lie that Bolshevism was the same as Stalinism; second, the big issues the Soviet Freudians were grappling with—particularly the compatibility of psychoanalysis and Marxism—are still relevant today.

In reviewing this history, something needs to be said about psychoanalysis itself. Freud effected a sea change in psychology; his impact was as profound as that of Darwin or Einstein in their respective fields. For the first time ever with Freud, psychology overcomes the classic antithesis between mind (or soul) and body, an antithesis which condemned previous psychologies to either metaphysical speculation or mechanical reductionism. This is not the place to discuss the significance

of Freud's discoveries (e.g., the meaning of dreams, the unconscious mind and the psychosexual nature of family relations) or to deal with the current controversies surrounding psychoanalysis. What does need to be said is that psychology is necessarily a dangerous science in a class-divided society: because it deals with the most personal and intimate aspects of life, it inevitably arouses intense ideological resistance. And the fact is that from its inception at the turn of the century, psychoanalysis was a scandal to bourgeois public opinion and Freud was routinely vilified as a pornographer (and a Jewish one, to boot). Today, the line of attack is more sophisticated, but the impulse behind it is still fundamentally the same—outrage at a theory that presumes to shed the light of reason on the dark secrets of the soul. Freud was once quoted as saying that "psychoanalysis demands a degree of honesty which is unusual, and even impossible, in bourgeois society." [1] These days that degree of honesty seems in especially short supply.

Psychoanalysis had already established itself as a scientific movement in Russia prior to 1917, with its own journal and a small but active group of supporters in academia. Not surprisingly, the revolution led to a sorting out within this group, notably the departure of its leading figure, Nikolai Osipov, in 1920. (Osipov was convinced the Bolsheviks would be hostile to psychoanalysis, which turned out to be anything but the case.) Those who stayed were, probably like many other middle-class intellectuals of the time, either suspicious of the revolution or indifferent to it.

But a crucial role in keeping psychoanalysis alive during the incredible social turmoil of world war and revolution was played by one of the few analysts politically sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, the psychiatrist Tatiana Rosenthal. The glimpses we get of her life in Miller's account are fascinating: having joined the Bolsheviks during the 1905 revolution, she reads Freud while in medical school, decides to become a psychoanalyst and in 1911 publishes as her first research paper a groundbreaking study on the relationship of psychoanalysis and literature, dealing with the work of a Danish writer, Karen Michaelis. A year later, she is at Freud's home in Vienna attending the weekly meetings of the psychoanalytic society; the next we hear of her she is part of the welcoming committee for Lenin returning to Russia in April 1917. In the midst of a civil war in 1919-20 she is lecturing on psychoanalysis, setting up a new analytic group in Petrograd and a new experimental school for children with neurotic problems; at the same time, she is pursuing her pioneering work on literature with a Freudian study of Dostoevsky. It seems reasonable to assume that the same basic motivation—the same desire to create a "new life"—led this remarkable woman both to Freud's home and to Finland Station. [2]

Another figure worth mentioning, if only briefly, is Sabina Spielrein, Rosenthal's companion on her visits to Freud. Spielrein stayed on in Europe through the war and revolution, developing a career that made her, according to Bruno Bettelheim, "one of the great pioneers of psychoanalysis." Among other things, she was credited by Freud with anticipating his controversial theory of the death instinct. In 1923

Spielrein chose to return to Russia, and her experience and reputation were crucial in consolidating the Soviet movement and gaining it official recognition from the politically conservative members of the International Psychoanalytic Association.[3]

The early 1920s were the high point of the psychoanalytic movement in the Soviet Union. A training institute, an outpatient clinic and an experimental school were all up and running. The movement was engaged in an ambitious program of publishing Freud's writings in Russian and was doing work on several fronts—the psychology of artistic creativity, clinical analysis and the applications of psychoanalysis to education. There was an openness and theoretical daring to much of this activity that can only be appreciated in the context of the international development of psychoanalysis. In most other countries, especially the United States, psychoanalysis was almost exclusively the preserve of the medical profession—analysts were doctors and their focus was on the practical use of psychoanalysis as a treatment for neurosis. The Soviet movement was very different: most of its members came from non-medical backgrounds—philosophy, aesthetics, the natural sciences, education—and their primary interest was in the broader cultural and social implications of Freud's ideas.

Indicative of this were the topics of some of the papers read at the initial meetings of the Moscow analytic society: symbolism in the statues of river gods and Greek vases, melancholia in Albrecht Dürer's paintings, the differing sexual characteristics of boys and girls as revealed in their drawings.[4] The Moscow institute was probably the only psychoanalytic training program in the world to offer a regular seminar on the psychology of art, given by Ivan Ermakov, director of the institute's publishing program and author of an important study on Gogol.

"In front of our eyes, a new and original trend in psychoanalysis is beginning to form in Russia." This was how the Soviet movement was seen in 1925 by Lev Vygotsky, who was to become the greatest figure to emerge out of Soviet psychology, and his closest collaborator, Alexander Luria. It is notable that both were attracted to psychoanalysis in this period and what excited them was this sense of theoretical daring: "Among the great minds of our times," they wrote, "Freud's was probably one of the most intrepid.... Courage is needed for a man of action, but it seems that an infinitely greater amount of daring is required for thinking. At every turn, scholarship is populated by so many indeterminate minds, timid thoughts and spineless hypotheses that it almost seems as if wariness and following in other people's footsteps have become obligatory attributes of official academic work." [5]

The Soviet movement was "intrepid" in its practical ventures as well. The outpatient clinic deserves some mention in this regard. Miller writes that "it guaranteed the practice of psychoanalysis to anyone in the population who volunteered or was referred for the treatment of a disorder." [6] In other countries, psychoanalysis was available only to those who could afford it—which meant the middle and upper classes. It was an issue Freud had raised a number of times (notably in a speech in Budapest on the eve of the Hungarian Revolution of 1918)—the need to provide therapy to the masses, who suffered no less from neuroses than their social "betters." [7]

In effect, the opening of the Moscow clinic was part of an effort to address this problem; in Berlin and Vienna free clinics were established in this period for the same purpose and it isn't surprising that the initiative for them came from analysts who identified themselves as socialists and Marxists. Wilhelm Reich, the most famous of the German Freud-Maxists, cut his analytic teeth in the Vienna clinic in the twenties, an experience that politically radicalized him and shaped his thinking about the primacy of the social causes of neurosis. Later, he worked to greatly expand the accessibility of psychoanalysis, setting up free clinics throughout Vienna and even turning the back of a van into a mobile clinic that he would take into working class neighborhoods,

dispensing therapeutic advice about emotional problems along with a political message about how sexual misery and family breakdown posed the need for socialism.[8]

By lifting the financial barriers to psychoanalysis, the outpatient clinics began a process that had the potential to profoundly change psychoanalysis itself, to draw it out of the cloistered office with its stereotypical couch into the turbulent world of the streets, apartment blocks, factories and bars. It would be helpful to know more about the Moscow clinic—about the extent of its practice and the types of psychological problems it encountered—but the fact of its existence is in itself an indication of the unconventional nature of Soviet psychoanalysis.

A lot more is known about another important undertaking of the Soviet movement—its experimental school. (Actually, there were two such schools—Rosenthal had started one in Petrograd—but the Moscow school seems to have been the more significant.) Known as the "Children's Home," it was a live-in kindergarten located in a magnificent art nouveau building that had been a banker's mansion before the revolution. It began in 1921 with 30 children, ranging in ages from one to five, who came from a variety of social backgrounds: some were from working class or peasant families, some had parents who were intellectuals or leading party activists. (Among them, incredibly enough, was Stalin's son, Vasily.[9] The obvious historical irony of this only underscores how much an accepted part of the Soviet cultural landscape psychoanalysis was in this period.)

The home was run by Vera Schmidt. Her husband, Otto, was a founding member of the Soviet psychoanalytic society as well as being a prominent Bolshevik government official who headed the State Publishing House. Vera Schmidt was what Freud would have called a "lay analyst" in that she had no medical degree. In the Soviet psychoanalytic movement, however, this was no obstacle to her playing a leading role in an audacious experiment, one Reich described as "the first attempt in the history of education to give practical content to the theory of infantile sexuality." [10] That theory held that children are not asexual until puberty, as conventional wisdom would have it, but rather that they have "a very rich sexual life," though one that obviously takes different forms than adult (i.e., genital) sexuality. [11] The implications this had for education were profound.

To start with, there were no punishments in the Children's Home and staff weren't even allowed to raise their voices in speaking to the children. Praise and blame were always directed at the action, not at the child: for instance, if there was a fight, the child who started it wouldn't be chastised, but the pain he had inflicted would be described to him. Children weren't "good" or "bad"—such traditional moral judgments (rooted in notions of original sin) only served to foster guilt and inflicted serious psychological damage, a prime cause of neurotic illness in later life. What adults usually condemned as "naughty" behavior (e.g., masturbation, bedwetting, thumb sucking, playing with feces) were unconscious manifestations of instinct, particularly of sexuality.

At the Children's Home, the attitude to such behavior was one of patience and support. A characteristic case was that of a little girl who enjoyed smearing herself with excrement: she was simply washed and changed, without being blamed in any way. Eventually she was given paints to play with. Over time, the smearing of the paints (and later applying them with a brush) replaced her earlier pleasure, which she gave up without any difficulty. As Schmidt noted, the new pleasure was analogous to the old one, but also "culturally and socially superior." (This is a classic example of what is known in psychoanalysis as sublimation, and, not coincidentally, it also affords us a glimpse of the birth of an artistic impulse.)

To bring about this kind of change in education, the educators had to be reeducated. Obviously Schmidt wouldn't allow harsh and moralistic attitudes on the part of teachers, but it's noteworthy that she was also

opposed to excessive shows of affection, such as warm kisses or tender embraces, which she contended had far more to do with the gratification of the adults than the needs of the children. Essentially, these were two sides of the same coin—teachers allowing their subjective feelings (whether negative or positive) to determine their behavior towards the child.

As Reich pointed out, this swinging back and forth between harshness and excessive tenderness was characteristic of conventional child-rearing: “Anyone who feels justified in beating a child also feels justified in living out his ungratified sexuality with a child.... If one does away with the stern treatment and moral judgment of children, it is no longer necessary to heal with kisses the injury caused by a beating.” What Schmidt demanded from teachers was objectivity, a calm and reasonable attitude which took children seriously. This didn't preclude affection, quite the contrary, but it made the needs and wants of the child, not the feelings of the adult, the determining factor.

Pedagogically, the approach was to adapt the learning environment to the child (in terms of their needs and age level) instead of the child to the environment. “If the child's adaptation to external reality is to develop without great difficulties,” wrote Schmidt, “the surrounding world must not appear to him as a hostile force.” A simple idea, but one that ran up against all the strictures of conventional education, indeed all the strictures of a hostile world. As Reich noted, it was an idea that could be “applied beyond the kindergarten to all social existence, e.g., economic needs should not be adapted to economic institutions; rather the institutions should be adapted to the needs.” And, it should be added, this concept—basic to socialism since the time of the utopians like Fourier—could only be fully fleshed out once the discoveries of psychoanalysis had opened the way to a materialist understanding of human needs, including the needs of the child.

It is hard for us today to appreciate how radical a departure this school was. In some aspects—for instance, the way toilet-training was handled without provoking anxiety in the child—what was experimental in the twenties became part of the mainstream in the fifties and sixties (at least in the West) due to the work of people like Benjamin Spock. (In a larger sense, of course, the policy of changing a hostile world to meet the needs of the child remains as radical in its implications as ever.) But Schmidt's Home was on the cutting edge of changes sweeping education in this period: it opened its doors the same year that Scottish educator A.S. Neill (also a Freudian and a socialist) was launching the first of his experimental schools, later to be known as Summerhill, on similar principles. And, it should be added, Schmidt was breaking new ground psychoanalytically: Freud and leading disciples like Karl Abraham and Otto Rank showed great interest in the work of the Children's Home when Schmidt and her husband came to visit them in Vienna in 1923. (Freud and his colleagues were particularly interested in the effect of collective education on the Oedipus complex—i.e., on the emotional development of children and especially their relationship with their parents. This would be an issue as much of interest to Marxists as to Freudians, and it seems from Schmidt's report on the Home that the effect was a demonstrably positive one.)

This experiment didn't take place in a vacuum. In the Soviet Union in this period, all sorts of children's communes and experimental schools were springing up, and the Bolsheviks were attempting a massive reorganization of the education system away from scholasticism and learning by rote towards a polytechnical school model that emphasized learning by experience and that was based on the progressive education theories of John Dewey. Indeed, the principle of “no punishment” wasn't unique to Schmidt's school: the policy of the Commissariat of Enlightenment, led by the Bolshevik Anatoly Lunacharsky, was for the abolition of punishments, examinations and homework in all schools. And even in the legal system, the terms “guilt,” “crime,” and “punishment”

were removed from the first Soviet criminal code of 1919 since they functioned to obscure the social causes of crime.[12]

This brings us to the larger question of the attitude of the Bolsheviks towards psychoanalysis. The range of activities of the Soviet psychoanalytic movement in these years would have been inconceivable without the tolerance and active material support of the revolutionary regime. As Miller writes: “An institute with a fully recognized training program was inaugurated, an outpatient clinic was established together with the children's home, all functioning on psychoanalytic principles. The extensive publication of psychoanalytic books and articles was proceeding at a level that was difficult to imagine a few years before. All of these activities were in some measure supported by the state. Indeed, it can safely be said ... that no government was ever responsible for supporting psychoanalysis to such an extent, before or since.”[13]

For Miller, it should be added, the extent of this involvement—making psychoanalysis dependent on the regime and therefore that much more vulnerable to later suppression by Stalinism—is problematic. But that concern only makes sense if one is assuming that Bolshevism and Stalinism were essentially the same thing. The very history Miller records in his book, however, challenges that assumption, because it shows that there was no continuity, but rather a violent rupture, between the Bolshevik policy towards psychoanalysis and the Stalinist one. And the same was true of the overall political character of the two regimes: the violence of the rupture between them is attested to not only by the opposition of Bolsheviks, led by Trotsky, to Stalinism, but also by the tens of thousands of communist workers and intellectuals who fell victim to Stalinist terror.

It was, of course, necessary for the Stalinists to lay claim to the mantle of Bolshevism in order to legitimize their crimes. Thus, in 1925 Lenin (by then safely dead) was enlisted in the campaign against psychoanalysis: remarks of his quoted in a memoir by the German communist Klara Zetkin, in which he seemed to be critical of Freud's theories, were given feature treatment in the Soviet press.

This was an all-too familiar example of Stalinist distortion. As Miller points out, the passage was ambiguous, the reference to Freud a passing one, and the reliability of Zetkin's memory questionable.[14] The record of Lenin's government—an unparalleled level of material support for psychoanalysis, given, moreover, at a time of great economic hardship in the Soviet Union—is the best refutation of this distortion. In the Bolshevik leadership, Trotsky (whose views will be discussed later) was most closely associated with psychoanalysis, but there were others, including Karl Radek and Nikolai Bukharin, who seem to have taken an interest in Freudian ideas. Indeed, the Bolshevik inner circle included a one-time practicing analyst—Trotsky's close friend and leading Soviet diplomat Adolf Joffe.

Joffe had undergone analysis in Vienna with Alfred Adler in 1908 and apparently worked as an Adlerian analyst himself on his return to Russia. Miller cites a paper he published in 1913 in the Russian psychoanalytic journal discussing the case of a homosexual patient he had treated.[15]

Within broader party circles, especially among the intelligentsia, the interest in psychoanalysis was considerable.

The Bolsheviks' tolerance towards and material support for psychoanalysis raises an important theoretical issue, because clearly implicit in that policy was the belief that the two doctrines—Marx's and Freud's—were compatible. No one was under any illusion that Freud was a Marxist (any more than Darwin had been), but the issue was whether the two theories shared common philosophical ground. In other words, was psychoanalysis compatible, not so much with the politics of Marxism, but rather with its materialist outlook? The issue became a subject of heated debate in the twenties.

Unfortunately, by the middle of the decade the ascendancy of the Stalinist bureaucracy had made for an increasingly hostile environment

for psychoanalysis, the most noticeable effects of which were the cutoff of funding to the psychoanalytic institute in 1926 and the closing down of the Children's Home two years later. As Trotsky complained at the time, much of the heat in the debate over psychoanalysis was being generated, not by the clash of ideas, but rather by sycophancy and kowtowing to the powers-that-be.[16]

Furthermore, the object of criticism in these debates often wasn't Freud, but various interpreters and exponents of his ideas. In the twenties, when Freudianism (of a very superficial kind) became fashionable in the West, such derivative works were legion and the range of quality was vast. Thus, it wouldn't have been hard, in making a case against psychoanalysis, to find any number of hare-brained ideas being passed off as Freudian—for instance, the claim by an obscure analyst (quoted in one of the Soviet polemics against Freud) that the communist slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” was really an unconscious expression of homosexuality.[17] Similarly crude and reductive thinking was evident in a field like literary criticism, where psychoanalysis seemed to involve little more than a hunt for phallic symbols. Nonetheless, a theory as consequential as psychoanalysis deserved to be judged on the basis of its best, not its worst, exponents.

That being said, however, it isn't hard to see that there would be much about psychoanalysis that Marxists would find, at the very least, perplexing. “Pleasure principle,” “reality principle,” a desire to sleep with one's mother and murder one's father (or vice versa), a phantasmagoria of perversions and fantasies—at first glance (which was often also the last glance), all this must have seemed wildly idealist. In reading Freud, wrote one Soviet critic, “we are carried off into the semi-oblivion of a modern *Walpurgisnacht*, with its wild cries and frenzied dances ... on the waves of the unconscious contours of Prussian logic.”[18]

Such reactions were understandable, but also misguided. At first glance the world looks flat: science exists because, for the most part, things aren't as they seem, the truth isn't transparent. And that also holds for the truth about the human mind: we aren't as we seem to ourselves, there is much about our inner life that we are totally unaware of and that, if uncovered by a scientific psychology, would first strike us as bizarre or even absurd. The best proof of this is in our dreams. Every night we go to sleep and a strange world opens up inside us, a welter of emotions, memories, impulses and fantasies, including any number of “wild cries and frenzied dances.”

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**<http://www.wsws.org>**