

Wayne Dowler

A History of Education in Modern Russia: Aims, Ways, Outcomes

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 248 pp.

What is the purpose of education and whom should it serve? What is the appropriate balance between the development of individual personalities and larger public goals? Should patriotism be an essential component of schooling — and if so, at all levels? Who should finance learning? What training should future educators receive? What methods of instruction best suit the character and the historical experience of a population? Should moral upbringing be a major concern of the state in education policy? Can an autocratic regime conciliate the obvious need for educated citizens with its instinctive fear that this very education might very well provide them with the tools to challenge it? These are the questions that renowned historian Wayne Dowler answers in his latest book on the evolution of education in Russia from the time of tsar Peter the Great (1682–1725) to the current President of the Russian Federation. The book is divided chronologically into three parts—the tsarist (by far the one that receives the most attention with no less than six out of nine chapters), Soviet, and post-Soviet eras. Each chapter, as the subtitle indicates, is structured around the regime's aims for education, the ways in which learning was delivered, and the results of schooling policies and practices. The author draws from a large corpus of Russian- and English-language scholarship on education. Finally, the narrative is anchored in brief but adequate summaries of the overall historical contexts.

The first part deals with the beginnings of formal schooling in Russia in the eighteenth century and the cultural changes among the political and social elites that education promoted. Deeply influenced by German cameralism, which assigned to the state the leading role in advancing the public good, Peter tied education to service to the state. Since Russia fought fairly long wars with Sweden and the Ottoman Empire, he approved projects for the founding of schools of engineering, mathematics and navigation, artillery, and medicine. Clearly, for him, learning meant the mastery of technology and practical skills. Much more refined than her illustrious predecessor, Empress Catherine II (1762–1796) sponsored a number of educational experiments, like the foundation of the Smolny Institute for Noble Girls in St. Petersburg. As a self-proclaimed disciple of the *Philosophes*, she naturally placed moral upbringing at the heart of her educational reform. Her enthusiasm for experimentalism, however, turned to disillusioned conservatism under the influence of the French Revolution.

The long nineteenth century (1801–1914) witnessed the largely failed attempt to create a ladder system of education from elementary to university levels under the Ministry of National Enlightenment; the restructuring of education to align with the place and roles within the state of each of the social estates, as envisioned by the authorities; the emergence of an intelligentsia that grew critical of the regime's educational practices; the coming to maturity during the reign of tsar Alexander II (1855–1881) of the seeds planted by Catherine II with the opening of higher courses

for women; and the essential contributions of vocational-professional schooling to the development of an expanding industrial economy.

Once in power since late 1917, the new communist regime led by Lenin launched radical experiments in education. Indeed, as Marxists, the Bolsheviks attached great importance to education. In particular, inspired by the latest pedagogical theories from the West, they sponsored the concept of the unified labour school—one that would merge intellectual pursuits and manual labour. The experiment—an attempt to link life to learning through labour—was not successful; actually, it proved to be a hindrance to the fulfillment of the Five-Year Plan. Therefore, in the 1930s, Stalin reordered education in a conservative way; its focus became “material production in which individuals were reduced to objects or cogs in an ideologically driven machine” (152). As a result, initiative and creativity withered under such a regime of routine and duty. Dowler concludes that “schools under Stalin increasingly resembled their tsarist predecessors” (145). Though naturally determined to perpetuate communist rule, Stalin’s successors could not come up with and implement educational policies that met changing social and economic needs.

Not unexpectedly, then, the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 triggered a new round of educational reforms that aimed at decentralizing and democratizing the school system in order “to counter the authoritarianism of the past and nourish a democracy of the future” (195). These initiatives encountered many of the obstacles that had thwarted previous reforms. Under Vladimir Putin, education has been re-centralized and subordinated to the interests of the state—a conscious decision that illustrates the extent to which policies and patterns established by Peter the Great have left their imprint on education in Russia. Dowler ends his last chapter on a somewhat disheartening note, at least for this reviewer, when he writes: “Patriotism fueled by historical memory will remain a mainstay of the state and of the education system that sustains it” (197).

There are two red threads here that tie all nine chapters together. The first one is the remarkable progress accomplished over the last three centuries, both quantitatively and, to a lesser extent, qualitatively. These achievements are all the more impressive, when one considers the many obstacles encountered along the way: insufficient funding, chronic shortage of qualified teachers, nobles’ resistance to sending their children to school with commoners, damages inflicted to the education facilities during the civil war (1918–1920) and the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), opposition among the population to co-education, low teacher pay, teacher burnout and turnover, inadequate teaching aids and textbooks, and passive resistance to unwelcome change on the part of parents, teachers, and local authorities. Dowler neatly summarizes the second one in a passage that encapsulates his main argument and that is really worth quoting in its entirety, in spite of its length: “Successive regimes in Russia have been caught between the need to educate a larger and larger segment of the population, both to compete internationally as a great power and to support an ever more complex economy and internal administration, and the desire to preserve the political and social status quo. At least some social mobility through education was required to meet the first condition, but too much social mobility undermined

the second. The result of the tension between the two imperatives has been a recurrent pattern of educational reform followed by a partial retreat in which some aspects of the reform were kept... The pattern of reform and retrenchment ultimately served both the autocracy and the Bolsheviks badly” (199).

This well-written but quite dry monograph will appeal primarily to bureaucrats, school officials, teachers, and politicians with an interest in the institutional history of education. For that reason, more than one reader will likely lament the lack of more personal testimonies from students and teachers. Their inclusion in the narrative would have further enriched this thorough study.

J.-Guy Lalonde

St. Francis Xavier University

Michele A. Johnson and Funké Aladejebi, eds.

Unsettling the Great White North: Black Canadian History

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. 632 pp.

Unsettling the Great White North addresses the dynamism of Black Canadian history and poses provocative questions about its past, present, and future. Disrupting the view of Canada as a “White place and space” (3), this expansive collection examines Black Canadian experiences as these unfolded across several centuries and around the country, looking beyond Ontario and Quebec, to include lesser-known Black histories in places such as Edmonton, Alberta and Vancouver, British Columbia. This expansive approach reflects the co-editors’ argument that the book “foregrounds the multiplicity of Black experiences in Canada and challenges any conception of Blackness/es as linear, unchanging, homogenous, and recent” (7). While *Unsettling the Great White North* makes a significant contribution to Black Canadian history, it is immensely relevant to Black Studies in its debates about identity, memory, the politics of place and geography, and the unfulfilled promise of emancipation in the afterlife of slavery.

The book is organized into eight thematic sections with twenty-one chapters that span diasporic and transnational Black/African experiences. It foregrounds “resistive-resilience strategies” (7) as a feature of Black life in hostile conditions; and its contributors are among the leading, interdisciplinary scholars and authors working in Canada today. The introduction is followed by a chapter (Bookend I) titled “The Future Has a Past: Canadian History and Black Modernity” (31). Written by historian Barrington Walker, this well-placed chapter draws on the scholarship of early writers of Black Canadian history (e.g., Robin Winks, Daniel Hill, and Fred Landon). Walker recognizes their foundational contributions to a discipline that refused to engage Black histories in Canada while presenting a thoughtful critique of how they told this history (e.g., Landon’s romanticized notions of the Underground Railroad; Winks’s emphasis on “Black subjection and abjection,” 34). Walker presents