

POLITICS, PATHOLOGIES, AND THE “SCHOOL REGIME”. THE SUICIDE OF CHILDREN IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

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*The school must not take on itself the
inexorable character of life: it must not
seek to be more than a game of life.*

Sigmund Freud, 1910

In 1910, the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society met to discuss the problem of suicide among young students, especially those in secondary schools. The session opened with an impassioned statement by an anonymous pedagogue (later identified as David Ernst Oppenheim), who argued that such events unfairly provoke “fierce attacks on the ‘murderous’ school” led by the influential daily press. Oppenheim cited a range of statistical and anecdotal evidence to support his argument that the very category of “school suicide” was invalid; in his view, the key factor was rather age – the turbulent, transitional years of youth. Among the underlying causes, he believed, were modern family life, the use of corporal punishment, the socio-medical problem of hereditary degeneration, and the forces of suggestion (within literature and the press). In a short response framed to open up the discussion, Sigmund Freud agreed that the causes of suicide were complex, requiring sophisticated analysis rather than simplistic vilification, but he also rejected the contention that the school had no part to play. The fact that other young people also killed themselves did not absolve the school, he stressed, for “a secondary school should achieve more than not driving pupils to suicide. It should give them a desire to live and should offer them support and backing at a time of life at which the conditions of their development compel them to relax their ties with their parental home and their family.” The subsequent discussion, which included contributions by Alfred Adler and Wilhelm Stekel, ranged widely, from adolescent sexuality to anxiety neurosis (often caused by the attempt to give up masturbation), but most participants agreed with Freud: the school was failing to guide young people through this difficult period of life¹.

¹ See *Über den Selbstmord insbesondere den Schüler-Selbstmord*, Weisbaden, 1910. I have used the English translation: Paul Friedman, ed., *On Suicide (Discussions of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society – 1910)*, New York, 1957, esp. 33-60, 61.

As the members of the Psychoanalytic Society were well aware, the problem of school suicide was not unique to Vienna but common to many European societies. The best researched case was undoubtedly Prussia, where statistics on youthful suicide began to be compiled as early as the eighteenth century and were extensively published and analyzed by the late nineteenth century². At this time the problem also garnered the attention of French specialists, who likewise compiled statistics and pondered the social, medical, and pedagogical implications³. The very fact of suicide among young people seemed universally shocking, even counter-intuitive, for a bad mark, a failed examination, or an arbitrary teacher rarely seemed – to analysts at least – sufficient reason to kill oneself. According to most statistics of the era, moreover, the suicide rate increased over the lifespan, making suicide proportionally more common in advanced ages. How then could young people – those who had yet to encounter real hardships – depart life with such apparent haste?

These same concerns also garnered extensive public attention in late imperial Russia, where Western specialist literature was avidly discussed and translated, despite its neglect of the Russian case⁴. The parallels were indeed many: the press and many experts (both medical and pedagogical) subjected the secondary school to considerable criticism but likewise acknowledged a range of other factors, including the influence of upbringing and family life, modernist and decadent literature, as well as socio-medical issues. Yet the Russian case was also distinctive. While the phenomenon of school suicide was a pan-European social problem, it acquired very particular and highly politicized meanings in Russia. Indeed, it became emblematic of a more profound social and political crisis. Most fundamentally, the mass movements and social disorder of the Revolution of 1905-07 had constituted an unprecedented challenge to the legitimacy of the Romanov dynasty. Though the revolutionary aspirations of Russian society had been partially suppressed, the principles and practices of autocratic authority continued to be challenged. Within this context, the state-run secondary school became both a symbol of arbitrary power and a forum in which this power could be contested. In dispute was ultimately the paternalist ethos sustaining Russian absolutism – embodied most famously in the myth of the tsar-father but also in the many metaphors of imperial tutelage and guardianship⁵. With parents, doctors, and journalists together claiming to

² See, e.g. Gustav Siegert, *Das Problem der Kinderselbstmorde*, Leipzig, 1893; and Adolf Baer, *Der Selbstmord im kindlichen Lebensalter. Eine sozialhygienische Studie*, Leipzig, 1901. On the history of statistics more generally, including an analysis of the Prussian model and the emergence of suicide statistics, see Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge, 1990.

³ See, e.g., Louis Proal, *L'Éducation et le suicide des enfants*, Paris, 1907.

⁴ See “*Samoubiistva sredi uchashchikhsia*”: *Diskussii Venskogo psikhoanaliticheskogo fereina*, Odessa, 1912; and Lui Proal, *Vospitanie i samoubiistvo detei*, St. Petersburg, 1908. Emile Durkheim’s seminal work, *Le Suicide*, Paris, 1897, was also very influential in Russia and ultimately translated. See E. Diurkgeim, *Samoubiistvo: Sotsiologicheskii etiud*, St. Petersburg, 1912.

⁵ On the representations and ideologies of the monarchy, see Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myths and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, 2 vols., Princeton, 1995, 2000. On suicide

represent the interests of Russian society, symbolized by the well-being of its children, they effectively sought to wrest paternal power from the hands of the state and its social institutions, including the state-run schools. Focusing on several case studies as well as the public debate, this article probes the particular resonance of the school as the site and source of youth suicide in the last decade of tsarism.⁶

A note on methodology: sociologists and psychiatrists continue to debate the causes of suicide, whether as a social phenomenon or as an individual act, but an accepted solution to its enigma has yet to be found. This article does not seek to explain why individual people kill themselves, nor, following Emile Durkheim, to read suicide statistics as a mirror of social processes. Instead, it takes a broadly cultural approach, interpreting suicide as a meaningful act that occurs at the intersection of multiple perspectives: self-fashioning; public discourses and debates; and legal and medical-disciplinary regulation. Though it is discursively framed and often symbolically charged, suicide is not a discourse but a highly disturbing and violent act that can challenge the organization of life. It consequently demands a response, whether informal (among friends and family members), or formal (by legal, medical, and other authorities as well as journalists and writers). Precisely this dialogue within and around the act of suicide makes it a fruitful topic for historical research. This article will thus open with an analysis of a single suicide and move outwards, following the ripples of metaphor and rhetoric, diagnosis and policy.

1. School Suicide in Orenburg: A Case Study

On October 26, 1908, Vladimir Belavin shot himself shortly before leaving for school. When the police arrived, they found him lifeless on his bed, half-dressed in his school uniform, his hands crossed over his breast. A bullet hole was clearly visible over his heart, and the gun lay next to him. Only fifteen years old, Vladimir Belavin had been a pupil in the sixth grade of the Orenburg Boy's Gymnasium. According to the school doctor, he had been “an extremely impressionable youth, who reacted impulsively to external influences with an insufficiently developed sense of self-possession”⁷. Yet his untimely death would soon provoke controversy not just in Orenburg, a town in the southern Urals, but also in Russia's two capital cities, St. Petersburg and Moscow. Reported by local newspapers and then picked up by the national press,

and paternalism, see Susan Morrissey, *Patriarchy on Trial: Suicide, Discipline, and Governance in Imperial Russia*, “Journal of Modern History” 75:1 (2003).

⁶ For further discussion of suicide in Russia, including youth suicide, see my *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia*, Cambridge, 2006, esp. chs. 7, 9, 11; and Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia*, Ithaca, 1997.

⁷ For the reports of the police and the doctor, see Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (henceforth RGIA), f. 733, op. 199, d. 123, ll. 181, 183-84. Unless otherwise noted, all archival citations in this article refer to this archive, *fond*, and *opis'*.

Belavin's fate resonated in Russia's politicized commercial culture. Not the particularities of his story but its iconic universality caught the public's imagination. Scores of school children were killing themselves each year, and the many images of Russia's youth, freely choosing to die, filled the daily papers, both respectable broadsheets as well as the more sensational boulevard and penny press⁸. Claiming to work in the public interest, journalists rendered school suicide a public act requiring a public response.

Belavin was not the first suicide in Orenburg's gymnasium, nor would he be the last. In April 1907, Grigorii Epaneshnikov had shot himself while in a local restaurant. The school was not to blame, stressed its director in a report to the Ministry of People's Enlightenment, for the boy had long been ill with epilepsy. The following month Aleksandr Ivanov likewise shot himself, and this time the official cause was listed as neurasthenia, the symptoms of which included a lack of willpower, rapid tiredness, and headaches. Belavin's case was the first to catch the media's spotlight, but a series of other cases soon followed, some of which again prompted national attention: the brothers Mikhail and Fedor Zavalishin, Andrei Dibailov, Lazar' Al'shenetskii, Fedor Iakovlev, and Evgenii Teleshev.⁹ The number of suicides was not unusually high in Orenburg, for suicide rates were skyrocketing throughout urban Russia. But the recurring cases and the responses to them illuminate how school suicide provoked competing claims to social, political, and medical authority.

The tactic most often employed by school directors and teachers was to deflect attention from the school by spotlighting the family life and personal qualities of the pupil. On the official form provided by the Ministry of People's Enlightenment for such cases, the director of the Orenburg gymnasium, D. V. Smirnov, thus provided the following explanation for Belavin's death: "The reason for the suicide has not been fully clarified, but it lies – without doubt – in the disorderly life of the deceased, a consequence of unfavourable conditions in his domestic environment"¹⁰. A ten-page letter written two weeks later provided more details. In a clear reaction to the growing public criticism, which I will discuss below, Smirnov outlined several possible explanations for the suicide in an attempt to downplay any responsibility on the part of the school or its teachers. The main tactic was consequently to pillory Belavin's character, which he did in several somewhat contradictory ways. Describing him first as having an "extremely irresponsible attitude" toward his studies, Smirnov noted that his grades and behaviour had deteriorated over the previous year. His "moral-disciplinary infractions" included arriving late to classes, disregarding the

⁸ On newspapers in late imperial Russia, see Louise McReynolds, *The News Under Russia's Old Regime: The Development of a Mass-Circulation Press*, Princeton, 1991; see also Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917*, Princeton, 1985.

⁹ For these cases, see d. 105, ll. 158, 246-56; d. 172, ll. 2, 151; d. 177, ll. 1, 61-63; d. 180, ll. 36-41; d. 213, ll. 16-29; d. 215, ll. 537-546, d. 239, ll. 175-78.

¹⁰ For the official form registering Belavin's suicide, see d. 123, l. 181.

directions of teachers, and reading a Russian book in his German class, for which he had received a failing mark for behaviour. A letter written to a female friend (in which he had expressed regret at her refusal to allow a kiss) provided further evidence of his moral deficiencies and sexual precociousness. The next tactic was to depict Belavin as ill. According to Smirnov, he had recently appeared nervous, spoken rudely, gesticulated wildly, and, in general, displayed a "diseased impressionability" (*bolezennaia vpechatlitel'nost'*). He would come to school with inflamed eyes, a red or sometimes altogether yellow coloring, dirty hands, and a weary look. What united these two scenarios was Belavin's home life and, in particular, the lax supervision of his mother. Because his father had recently received a transfer to another city, she had been raising the children alone during the last year and had not devoted enough attention to them. Instead, she was even working as a schoolteacher. Further evidence of her negligence was that she allowed her son to have friends of both sexes over for parties, where the teenagers also danced. In explaining the suicide with reference to Belavin's immoral and diseased personality, Smirnov thus identified an underlying familial disorder, the absence of the father and the permissiveness of the mother. "Having taken a fancy under these conditions to merry-making and the enticements of an easy, carefree life from an early time," he summarized, "Belavin consequently lost a firm moral ground under his feet; this circumstance, in turn, caused his impressionable nature to lose interest in life itself, and from there it is not far to catastrophe"¹¹.

These explanations for Belavin's suicide reproduced well-established cultural and scientific patterns. Since the eighteenth century, suicide had been associated with luxury, immorality, and vice, and these associations shaped later statistical and medical studies¹². During the first half of the nineteenth century, when suicide rates appeared to be much lower in Russia than in Western Europe, commentators agreed that the protective embrace of tradition and patriarchy – whether in the family or on the manorial estate – was the single most important factor in Russia's relative immunity to suicide¹³. The Great Reforms of the 1860s – a state-sponsored attempt to modernize Russia's economy, administration, and society – marked an important divide, the rhetorical beginning of a new historical geography. In the subsequent decades,

¹¹ For the director's letter, d. 123, ll. 176-180. This was a typical tactic. For another example of a school attempting to defend itself following a pupil's suicide, see the long, rambling statement that included the following claims: the youth was neurotic and immoral; suicide was crazy in any case; the youth had only been threatened with expulsion but not actually expelled; almost two hours had passed since this threatened expulsion and the actual suicide during which something else might have happened; and the youth may have meant something else with his reference to the teacher as the villain. See d. 141, ll. 28-31.

¹² See Howard I. Kushner, *Suicide, Gender, and the Fear of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Medical and Social Thought*, "Journal of Social History", Spring 1993.

¹³ See, for example, V. Androssov, *Statisticheskaia zapiska o Moskve*, Moscow, 1832, esp. 90; *Statisticheskie svedeniia o Sanktpeterburge*, St. Petersburg, 1836, esp. 196; and Aleksandr Bashutskii, *Panorama Sanktpeterburga*, St. Petersburg, 1834, 92-93.

Russia seemed to develop a wide range of social problems, including urban crime, poverty, vice, and ill-health. Concern about rising levels of suicide in particular first arose in the 1870s and 1880s¹⁴. As a prominent psychiatrist, I. P. Merzheevskii, asserted in 1887, the problem could be traced to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, which had thrust peasants into the modern world without protection or preparation. This had produced stress, anxiety, and pathology, including suicide, drunkenness, and mental illness. Though he linked this process to a social group, his diagnosis was just as much directed at Russia as a whole, still reeling from the dislocations of modernization¹⁵. Other specialists agreed, and they typically localized the problem into the extremities of urban civilization, “with its feverish and at the same time not fully regular and secure labour, with the mass of the working population’s unhealthy life, with the development of individualism, petty, self-loving egoism and vanity”¹⁶. As Russia’s doctors struggled to pinpoint an organic mechanism for this process, several key metaphors provided the essential link between modernity and suicide: nervous illnesses and social diseases grow out of the disorder of modern life, its “extremity,” “feverish” character, “unhealthy” living conditions, and “stifling atmosphere,” all of which caused a “general irritation of the brain” (*obshchee razdrazhenie mozga*)¹⁷. Though established metaphorically, the presumed influence of modernity upon the brain seemed to provide the key to suicide.

Central to this medical model was a notion of social difference. Suicide among the lower classes was linked to poor and unhygienic working and living conditions as well as to the prevalence of drunkenness, which was thought to lead to immorality, the degeneration of will, and thence to suicide. In contrast, the most important factor within educated society was upbringing, and doctors were extremely concerned. Deficiencies at home and in school were weakening the younger generation physically, mentally, and morally. Unable “to struggle with life,” young people were killing themselves due to neuro-physiological impulses caused by such trifling setbacks as poor marks or disappointment in love. Suicides among young people fascinated the medical community, and doctors speculated extensively about the impact of social experience upon the “natural” qualities of children and youth. Impressionability, which was most frequently cited, as in Belavin’s case, was metaphorically linked to still “unformed brains,” and it could easily take a more extreme, pathological form.

¹⁴ For further discussion, see Paperno, *Suicide*, esp. 75-77; and Morrissey, *Suicide*, ch. 7.

¹⁵ See his speech, *Trudy pervogo s’ezda otechestvennykh psikiatrov*, St. Petersburg, 1887, 15-37.

¹⁶ E. N. Tarnovskii, *Statistika samoubiistva*, “Zhurnal ministerstva iustitsii”, no. 1 (1901), 145-46.

¹⁷ N. V. Ponomarev, *Samoubiistvo v zapadnoi Evrope i v Rossii, v sviazi s razvitiem umopomeshatel’stva*, “Sbornik sochinenii po sudebnoi meditsine, sudebnoi psikiatrii, meditsinskoii politsii, obshchestvennoi gigiene, epidemiologii, meditsinskoii geografii i meditsinskoii statistike”, no. 3 (1880), 112-14.

“Diseased pride” (*boleznennoe samoliubie*) developed when an individual had not learned to assess his own strengths and weaknesses objectively and rationally. Healthy individualism could thus degenerate into an unhealthy egoism, and such individuals could not handle even minor setbacks or failures. The period of sexual maturation was particularly hazardous, for “early sexual corruption” (*rannee polovoe razvrashchenie*) – even dances and theatre – introduced children to emotions and sensations which they could not control¹⁸.

This medical-psychiatric portrait of childhood and youth was ambivalent and unstable; natural qualities could easily become diseased, often with tragic results. Family and school played crucial roles – either giving children the strength of body and mind necessary for a life of struggle or, tragically, undermining their health and moral characters. Academic failures, sexual precocity, and ill health could combine to demonstrate the victim’s own lack of biological fitness. As in Smirnov’s report on Belavin, immorality and disease were not antithetical, therefore, but mutually sustaining. Vice had been medicalized into a symptom of degeneration. While this diagnosis could offer a comprehensive explanation for youth suicide, medical specialists were also interested in finding a prophylaxis. Though fearful of the entrenched nature of the “disease,” they also called for concerted efforts to make the next generation physically, mentally, and morally fit. Only a proper upbringing could prevent suicide among school children, they agreed, and it was consequently necessary to reform not just the family and broader social conditions but also the school. As I will discuss further below, the medical model thus contained the potential for a radical critique of the system of education (despite its apparent popularity among school directors).

Although Smirnov had outlined various possible explanations for Belavin’s suicide in his official letter, the story in the press was quite different. Following the lead of local papers, which published daily articles after the suicide, extended pieces began to appear in the national press by early November 1908. In contrast to Smirnov’s official report, which had mentioned a recent incident in a German class but otherwise downplayed the relevance of Belavin’s experiences at school, these articles all linked the suicide to a failing grade, which they blamed on the arbitrariness of a math – not a German – teacher. In this scenario, Vladimir Belavin had been the victim of the “school regime.” According to one account, the teacher had only recorded grades when they were poor; according to an alternative version, the teacher had misplaced his records, asked Belavin to remind him of his grades, and then accused him of

¹⁸ The literature is huge. For examples, see A. N. Ostrogorskii, *Samoubiistva. Povody k nim*, “Pedagogicheskii sbornik”, nos. 7, 8 (1893), esp. no. 7, 14-23 and no. 8, 110-16. See also I.O. Zubov, *Samoubiistvo v Lifliandskoi gubernii (mediko-statisticheskii ocherk)*, “Vestnik obshchestvennoi gigieny, sudebnoi i prakticheskoi meditsiny”, nos. 5, 6 (1902), no. 5, 717-19; I. Lebedev, *O samoubiistve v normal’nom i boleznennom sostoianii*, St. Petersburg, 1888, esp. 9-15, 36-39; and F. K. Terekhovko, *K voprosu o samoubiistve v S.-Peterburge za dvadtsatiletnii period (1881-1900)*, Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Medicine, Gatchina, 1903, 60-72.

lying about them. The end result was the same: a failing grade¹⁹. Accuracy in details was secondary. The main, undisputed point was rather the victimization of a defenceless child by the school. As one Moscow paper stressed, “Newspapers of all orientations, the parents’ committee, and all of society are blaming the administration of the gymnasium for the impossible organization of the school’s regime”²⁰.

In Orenburg, local newspapers became forums of public discussion and leaders of a crusade against the gymnasium. One letter to the editor signed “A Parent” and entitled, “And They are Silent,” provided the slogan. It directly attacked the school’s administration for its long silence, implying that this was a silence of complicity. Not only had the gymnasium refused to recognize the legitimate concern of parents for their children, it was asserted, but calls for openness had been met by a wall of bureaucratic silence²¹. A week later the math teacher, A. Kiselev, broke this silence with a letter to the editor of his own, in which he asserted that Belavin had been sick, and that he, the teacher, had always had the best interests of the child at heart. For its part, the newspaper subverted the author’s message by italicizing self-serving and contradictory passages. It also published an additional commentary entitled, “They Answer,” which spelled out the critique in detail. Dismissing the notion that Belavin may have been ill, it stressed that he was not to blame; instead, the arbitrariness of the teacher had driven him to his death²². By late November, the public outrage had forced the resignation of both Smirnov and Kiselev, which was an unusual result that brought the case back into the national press²³. A St. Petersburg newspaper commented: “But is it possible to consider the question resolved? Do such severe pedagogues really exist only in Orenburg? And does the removal of the director also remove the evil from Russian life in general? Will the suicide of adolescents now stop? Of course not. In order to give youth a taste for life, it is necessary to brighten it with love”²⁴.

The political symbolism of this case was manifold. With parents and newspapers joining forces in a struggle for Russia’s children, battle lines were drawn between the public interest and the state-run school. Not surprisingly, Belavin’s burial became the occasion for some sort of minor demonstration, and officials from the school district were quite concerned about further disorders at

¹⁹ Compare *Samoubiistvo gimnazista*, “Sovremennoe slovo”, Nov. 5, 1908; and *Samoubiistvo gimnazista*, “Slovo”, Nov. 6, 1908. See also the article in “Rech’”, Nov. 5, 1908.

²⁰ “Golos Moskv’y”, Nov. 6, 1908.

²¹ “Orenburgskii krai”, Nov. 11, 1908.

²² “Orenburgskaia gazeta”, Nov. 18, 1908.

²³ The controversy continued into January 1909. A report in the “Orenburgskii kur’er”, largely vindicated the teacher Kiselev, who had apparently tried to protect Belavin, but further vilified the director Smirnov, accusing him of lying and the forgery of school documents. See d. 147, l. 114.

²⁴ “Gazeta kopeika”, Nov. 19, 1908.

the gymnasium²⁵. In an interesting twist, the political subtext also informed one last scenario about the causes of the suicide. In his letter to the editor, the “parent” had been especially indignant about attempts to smear Belavin with insinuations of his involvement in a political conspiracy²⁶. Director Smirnov had indeed mentioned this possibility in his extended report to the education ministry. According to unspecified rumours, Belavin had really been a member of a secret terrorist circle involved in the murder of a local prison official which had taken place two days *after* the suicide. Chosen by his comrades to carry out the assassination, but either unwilling or afraid to do it, Belavin had killed himself instead²⁷. Though clearly lacking any credibility, this rumour nonetheless illuminates the politicization of suicide, in this instance tying it to the disturbing reality of revolutionary terrorism²⁸.

In many respects, suicide never has a satisfactory explanation. Why did Vladimir Belavin shoot himself? Was it because of mental or physical illness? A “cheerless attitude” toward life? Familial disorder? Early sexual development? A bad grade and the school regime more broadly? A political conspiracy? These explanations, which were all advanced by contemporaries, embodied quite divergent understandings of suicide – the medical, the moral, the familial, the political. Yet the message communicated by newspapers was remarkably uniform: the inhumane structure of the school as exemplified by the arbitrariness of the teacher had so affected the youth that he was driven to suicide. The main point is that the story headlined by local and national newspapers was deliberately chosen. It was not the only way to tell the story of Vladimir Belavin’s tragic end.

Neither the public criticism of the secondary school nor the suicide of school children constituted a new issue in 1908. Ever since the 1860^s, when the radical publicist Dmitrii Pisarev had castigated the deadly grasp of the classical gymnasium, progressives had routinely attacked the dry formalism and harsh discipline of the secondary school²⁹. Both the system of examination and the close supervision of student behaviour (in and out of school) provoked resentment among teenagers and their parents alike. By the 1870s, journalists were routinely investigating the circumstances of youth suicides and often blaming the negative and stifling influence of the gymnasium, symbolized by

²⁵ Unfortunately, details on the funeral are sketchy. See d. 123, l. 192. On traditions of political funerals, see Susan Morrissey, *Heralds of Revolution: Russian Students and the Mythologies of Radicalism*, New York, 1998, ch. 7 and *passim*.

²⁶ “Orenburgskii krai”, Nov. 11, 1908.

²⁷ In response to these rumours, Smirnov stressed, the police had already opened an investigation. For his letter, d. 123, ll. 176-180.

²⁸ On terrorism in these years, see Anna Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894-1917*, Princeton, 1993; and O. V. Budnitskii, *Terrorizm v Rossiiskom osvoboditel’noi dvizhenii*, Moscow, 2000.

²⁹ D. I. Pisarev, *Nasha universitetskaia nauka*, in his *Izbrannye pedagogicheskie sochineniia*, Moscow, 1951.

the emphasis on classical (“dead”) languages and the arbitrary power of teachers and school directors. Already at this time, the linkage between the authoritarian “school regime” (*shkol’nyi rezhim*) and the autocratic political regime was intimated, if not explicitly stated given the exigencies of censorship. In at least two cases, the Ministry of People’s Enlightenment had ordered the publication of internal documents, apparently to disarm public criticism, though with little effect³⁰. In a rather different attempt to counter this trend, the reactionary publicist Prince Meshcherskii provided an alternative literary model – a confession narrated by an adolescent who has attempted suicide only to be saved in body and soul by a stern but warm-hearted school director³¹. Not a slackening of traditional paternal authority, it was implied, but rather its reinforcement would provide the best prophylaxis for youth suicide. The negative stereotype persisted, however, and Anton Chekhov would immortalize it in his 1898 short story, “The Man in a Case,” which told the tragicomic tale of a rigid, close-minded, and sanctimonious teacher of Greek. Chekhov’s metaphor – the man wrapped up in a case, isolated from external impressions – became an oft-cited phrase in newspaper reports on the suicide of school children and even appeared in pupils’ suicide notes³². The resonance of Belavin’s story depended not on its novelty, therefore, but on its recognition value. The reader knew what had happened before perusing the story; only the details varied – whether a German or a math teacher was to be blamed this time. Indeed, countless such cases clamoured for attention on the pages of the daily newspaper during the early twentieth century.

Commentary was the business of newspapers, of course, and the school regime proved to be a flexible metaphor, capable of many gradations of meanings. Most prominently, it functioned as an open political metaphor referring to the heavy hand of the state in the maintenance of order. Following the disorder of the revolutionary years, when schoolchildren – emulating their elder siblings and parents – had attempted to overthrow the old regime in the school, the years of reaction had witnessed the re-imposition of strict rules, supervision, and discipline³³. The persistence of the school regime could thus

³⁰ The individual articles are too numerous to be listed here. See especially Nedelia, no. 33, 34, 37, 39 (1870); no. 5 (1871); no. 14 (1877); O. Miller, *Samoubiistvo ot ekzamena*, “Zaria”, no. 6 (1870); V. Nesterov, *Sovremennaia shkola i zdorov’e*, “Trudy vtorogo s’ezda russkikh vrachei v Moskve” vol. 1, Moscow, 1887; N. Nikoladze, *Po povodu odnoi smerti*, “Ustoi”, no. 7 (1882); and K. G. Lavrichenko, *Roditeliam i uchiteliam: Voprosy vospitaniia*, St. Petersburg, 1894. For brief newspaper reports, see *Kto vinovat?*, “Peterburgskii listok”, Jan. 27, 1876; and a case in Vologda, “Peterburgskii listok”, Feb. 10, 1876, which was also investigated by the Third Section; see GARF, f. 109, op. 3, d. 3131. For further discussion and citations, see Paperno, *Suicide*, 90-94; and Morrissey, *Suicide*, ch. 9.

³¹ K., *Rasskaz zastrelivshegosia gimnazista*, “Grazhdanin”, nos. 38-40 (1873).

³² Anton Chekhov, *Chelovek v futliare*, in *Povesti i rasskazy v trekh tomakh*, vol. 3, Moscow, 1959.

³³ Laura Engelstein has discussed the metaphor of the school regime in both a political and a sexual-disciplinary context. See her *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle Russia*, Ithaca, 1992, 232-36, 240-48.

implicate the failure of the 1905 revolution to enact significant political change. In this sense, the struggle of parents and newspapers (representing “society”) against the state-run schools in the name of children (the future) represented an ongoing power struggle with clear implications: not the government but society was best able to guide and form its children. Indeed, the “regime” seemed a pathogenic force, promoting not health and vitality but disease and infirmity.

Not surprisingly, these tensions exploded once more into public view in Orenburg following two suicides in early 1910. The local press again led the campaign. One journalist thus attacked the official judgment in the first case. To ascribe the boy’s act to his “psychological abnormality,” he indignantly emphasized, is to forget that “the school routine caused this abnormality.”³⁴ The second case, which occurred two months later in March, prompted the headline, “Another Victim of the School Regime.” Yet these suicides also mobilized the various interest groups within Orenburg’s educated society, polarizing them along predictable political lines. Fearing some kind of political demonstration, the new director of the gymnasium forbade pupils to make any kind of commemorative speeches at the funeral of the second victim, declaring that such ceremony was unnecessary and potentially harmful. It could, he feared, drive more neurotic classmates over the edge. Still, a group of thirty pupils did protest, supposedly under the influence of an older agitator (which was a stereotypical image propagated in the rightwing press), who made a brief speech linking the suicide and the suppression of free speech at the funeral to the conditions of political reaction. The conflict then spilled over into an emergency session of the school council and parents’ committee, which the director had called in order to address what he considered the slanderous rumours circulating through the city³⁵. While the intention had been to draw up measures to combat the spate of suicides, this meeting provided a brief forum for open political debate and an exemplar of its suppression. Tapping into a common rhetorical trope of the era, a local merchant opened the discussion by asserting that the government’s frequent recourse to the death penalty had “devalued human life,” which immediately prompted the indignant intervention of the director. The “solid” members of the committee then took the floor, blaming the political excesses of 1905 for leading youth into moral debauchery as well as the harmful influence of contemporary theatre and literature. Ultimately, a working group (stacked with politically reliable members) developed six measures to combat the epidemic, including religious education and choral singing, physical activities, lectures on morality and hygiene, as well as wholesome literary-musical evenings³⁶. In reporting this meeting, including the speeches of the

³⁴ A. Kh-v, *Samoubiistvo gimnazista, 13 let*, “Novaia Rus’”, Jan. 24, 1910.

³⁵ Parents’ committees had been legalized during the revolutionary upheavals, partially as a means to encourage parental support for the school, but they possessed little power and were increasingly dominated by “trustworthy” parents. On schools in this period, see Patrick Alston, *Education and the State in Tsarist Russia*, Stanford, 1969, ch. 6.

³⁶ See d. 177, ll. 61-63 (on the suicide and pupils’ protest); d. 178, ll. 15 (the newspaper report on the emergency session from the liberal “Novaia Rus’”, Mar. 29, 1910); d. 180, ll. 36-38

“reactionary” and “progressive” factions, a liberal newspaper in St. Petersburg published the entire program of measures as an ironic commentary on the bankruptcy of state policy. The many individual cases of youth suicide that were constantly reported in the press thus came to symbolize the pathogenic incompetence of the old regime.

2. The Epidemic

In fact, however, the government was not passive in the face of the rising tide of youth suicide. By 1905, specialists working in the Medical-Statistical Division of the Ministry of People’s Enlightenment had become concerned about the large number of suicides among school children. In several circulars sent out to educational districts that year, school authorities were reminded of the problem. Not only were they to extend religious and moral instruction beyond the classroom, especially following any incidents; they were also ordered to fill out new standardized forms for each case of suicide, attempted suicide, and accidental death³⁷. Over the following years, the drive to compile information produced tens of thousands of documents, including police, medical, and school reports, suicide notes, and newspaper clippings. This archival collection, which forms the primary material basis for this article, serves as an eloquent, if disquieting memorial to both the tremendous dimensions of the problem and the seriousness with which the government perceived it³⁸.

The Medical-Statistical Division used these materials to compile statistical reports, which were published annually beginning in 1906³⁹. The systematic collection and analysis of data with regards to a social problem marked an important innovation for the tsarist government. Despite the longstanding calls of statisticians and doctors to improve official statistics, the Russian state had lagged behind its Western counterparts in the employment of population technology. Especially striking, therefore, was the government’s willingness to publish these statistics. In the aftermath of 1905, however, this very approach

(the report of the district curator on the same session); d. 213, ll. 16-29. Unfortunately, however, the problem of youth suicide continued to plague Orenburg over the next years. See the reports on two cases from 1911 in d. 215, ll. 537-46.

³⁷ See d. 33, ll. 8, 10-12, 43-44.

³⁸ Seventy-three files each generally containing several hundred folios have survived in the archive and form the basis of this article. See RGIA, f. 733, op. 199. Some of the newspaper articles from 1908, 1909, and 1910 cited here were preserved in the archive. For the convenience of readers, I have provided the newspaper rather than the full archival citation.

³⁹ For the first article that was textually driven, see G. V. Khlopin, *Samoubiistva, pokusheniia na samoubiistva i neschastnye sluchai sredi uchashchikhsia russkikh uchebnykh zavedenii (Sanitarno-statisticheskoe issledovanie)*, “Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniia” no. 3 (1906). Subsequent editions appeared as books. See G. V. Khlopin, ed., *Samoubiistva, pokusheniia na samoubiistva i neschastnye sluchai sredi uchashchikhsia uchebnykh zavedenii Ministerstva Narodnogo Prosveshcheniia*, Series, St. Petersburg, 1907-1916. Later editors were N. G. Ushinskii, and E. A. Neznamov.

would become symptomatic of a broader political failure: the human tragedy of youth suicide, it was often claimed, had prompted only a formalistic, bureaucratic response. Although the first published report, which had presented data dating back to the 1880s, had included an extended (and generally balanced) analysis of the major causes of youth suicide (especially social-familial, medical, and school-related factors), subsequent volumes presented ever more numbers with ever less analysis. Commercial newspapers and specialized journals then cited this preference for numbers as evidence of the government's failure to understand the human dimensions of the problem or to enforce proper prophylactic measures. Furthermore, the government's call to combat youth suicide through religious and moral admonition formed a clear contrast to the modernizing impulse of social-statistical analysis. By rendering suicide a social fact, statistics created a causal framework around the social, hygienic, and pedagogical environment, and they consequently contained an implicit imperative to institute specific reforms. In contrast, the official emphasis on the moral state of the individual pupil reproduced traditional forms of paternal authority in a period when large segments of Russian society were explicitly rejecting such expressions of autocratic tutelage.

Parallel to and highly critical of this governmental project was the work of several independent physicians, including Grigorii Gordon and Dmitrii Zhbakov. Dismissing bureaucratic sources as incomplete, they collected newspaper accounts and compared them to the official numbers. Newspapers not only shaped the stories of suicides, therefore, but also provided the primary source for independent statistics. This process had distinct stages: an adolescent commits suicide; the newspaper writes a story; the independent statistician collects these stories and calculates from them both the suicide rate and the general causes of suicide, which are then reported – a confirmation of the generic story⁴⁰. What were the results? Between 1905 and 1909, the Medical-Statistical Division reported 289 cases of suicide and attempted suicide among secondary-school students; for the same period, Dr. Gordon listed 573 cases⁴¹. The implication was clear: not only was the government failing to make meaningful reforms, but it was also under-estimating the real extent of the problem. For his part, Zhbakov collected newspaper accounts of 16,989 suicides from the period between July 1905 and 1911, and he used them as

⁴⁰ Newspapers, in turn, avidly followed these specialized debates and reported the facts and figures of modern suicide. See, for example, "Birzhevye vedomosti", Apr. 21, 1909; Apr. 24, 1909; "Novaia Rus' ", Aug. 20, 1909; "Peterburgskii listok", Apr. 23, 1908; Apr. 15, 1909; May 21, 1909; and Aug. 19, 1909; "Rech' ", Feb. 2, 1910; "S.-Peterburgskie vedomosti", Jan. 6, 1910; "Sovremennoe slovo", May 19, 1909 and Aug. 22, 1909.

⁴¹ I have located eighteen articles by Gordon, seven of which appeared in "Rech' " or "Sovremennoe slovo". For an overview of his most important findings, see *Samoubiistva v srednei shkole*, "Obrazovanie", nos. 3, 4a (1909); *Sovremennye samoubiistva*, "Russkaia mysl' ", no. 5 (1912); and *Otchego nasha molodezh' konchaet tak chasto samoubiistvom*, "Svobodnoe vospitanie", no. 1 (1912-13).

evidence in a minimally veiled indictment of the political regime. According to him, 9.9 percent of suicides occurred among students of all ages. Citing Gordon's statistics, he noted that the leading single cause for secondary school pupils was the school regime. Additional evidence came directly from the newspaper, as he concluded: "The reinstatement of examinations and the ever increasing severity at school likely bodes an intensification of [suicide] attempts; thus, for the end of April and beginning of May [1912], [the liberal newspaper] *Rech'* calculated twenty-four suicides among students of various educational institutions"⁴². This circularity propelled the conviction that suicide was epidemic among school children and sustained the epidemic's governing metaphor – the "school regime". In the years immediately following 1905, the epidemiology of youth suicide presumed a political-environmental causality. The social and moral world of the school was the site on which suicide festered and spread.

Not just Gordon and Zhabankov but countless other specialists – doctors, psychiatrists, and pedagogues – wrote on the phenomenon of school suicide and lambasted the failure of the government to take the necessary measures of reform. While the system of examination was the factor most often singled out, the "school regime" as a whole came under concerted attack. The general atmosphere of arbitrary rule and harsh discipline, it was repeatedly asserted, undermined the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of young people. In this sense, the school was the underlying cause of most youth suicide, even those cases where no specific incident had occurred. Most independent specialists openly aligned themselves with Russian society in opposition to the government and its bureaucratic methods. By joining the struggle of parents' committees and journalists against the school regime, they too sought to constitute a new civic sphere. The political significance of the epidemic was quite clear, as Dr. Gordon intimated in the conclusion to one of his many articles on suicide:

"In a free country," someone once said, "the school must be free and independent." Beautiful words about which our "free" country can still only dream... dream about those happy times when the powerful sun of freedom rises over us and melts the age-old ice of bureaucratic routine binding our school and destroying everything living, sympathetic, [and] humane in it"⁴³.

Envisioning a new kind of modern and rational paternal authority – a loving and humane one, Gordon rejected the bureaucratic model of the school regime in favour of an affective one, in which pupils would be treated with sympathy, respect, and consideration. His diagnostics and therapeutics built upon a series of politicized oppositions: official versus independent, bureaucratic versus civic, arbitrary versus humane, dead versus living.

⁴² D. Zhabankov, *K statistike samoubiistv v 1905-11 godakh*, "Prakticheskii vrach", nos. 34-38 (1912), 520, 535. See also his *O samoubiistvakh v poslednee vremia*, "Prakticheskii vrach", nos. 26-29 (1906); and *Sovremennye samoubiistva*, "Sovremennyi mir", no. 3 (1910).

⁴³ Gordon, *Samoubiistva v srednei shkole*, 24.

As the shock waves of the 1905 Revolution faded, however, it became more difficult to explain suicide and other social problems solely with reference to Russia's political situation. With the epidemic showing no sign of lessening, it also implicated Russian society, especially its market economy and mass media. Increasing numbers of journalists and doctors thus began to fear that the very publicity upon which independent experts depended might also be a source of contagion. Did newspapers encourage suicide by glorifying the victims as heroes in the battle against the school regime? Was it a coincidence that the funerals of youthful suicides were routinely sites of minor protest, a chance to praise the deceased as a hero? Furthermore, the medical paradigm of degeneration, which had already been well established by the turn of the twentieth century, increasingly shaped an alternative epidemiology. How had the psyche of the child so weakened that a bad grade could provoke a suicide? In addition to the environmental role of the school regime, were not other factors also complicit, whether family life, moral education, or heredity? Indeed, explanations tended to lose the polarity characteristic of Belavin's case. No longer were individual (moral and medical) causes necessarily antithetical to social and environmental ones.

Even Dr. Gordon, the most vocal critic of the school regime, came to fear that youth suicide was not caused solely by the pathogenic influence of autocracy within the school. In an article from 1912, he thus diagnosed an acute stage of degeneration in Russia, which he linked to poverty, alcoholism, and syphilis. Easily thirty to forty percent of school pupils, he estimated, suffered from nervous illness or other symptoms of hereditary instability⁴⁴. Such a disquieting picture suggested, of course, that Russian society was not simply a victim of a pathogenic government. Instead, it was fully complicit in its own ill health, both literal and figurative. Would not a healthy and vibrant society be able to affect its own political liberation? Could not the suicide of school children evidence an entrenched degenerative disease? As Gordon's language of medical diagnostics further intimates, not the government but rather doctors and other specialists were best qualified to affect a therapy and ultimate cure. While this aspiration remained largely unfulfilled in this period, the new Bolshevik state would not just welcome such impulses but actively promote the systematic application of specialist knowledge⁴⁵.

3. Conclusion

Russia was not alone in experiencing a perceived upswing in suicide rates during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and concern about

⁴⁴ G. I. Gordon, *Samoubiistva molodezhi i ee nervno-psikhicheskaia neustoichivost'*, "Novyi zhurnal dlia vsekh" no. 9 (1912), 105-10.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent*, Chicago, 2001; David Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, London, 2000.

youth suicide in particular was a pan-European phenomenon. Fears were widespread that the family and the school were failing to raise healthy children fit for survival in the treacherous world of market capitalism. Furthermore, medical notions of national decline shaped public and political discourse not just in Russia, but also in Germany, France, Italy, and other countries⁴⁶. Indeed, Russian doctors were very well read in the French and German scholarly literature, and bureaucrats in Russia's education ministry even modelled their information-gathering on a Prussian model⁴⁷. Despite such parallels and similarities, the meanings of suicide depended upon their specific cultural context. In Russia, the public outcry about the epidemic among school children built upon longstanding associations between the "school regime" and the autocratic political regime more generally. Furthermore, the Revolution of 1905-07 was a critical reference point, used by liberals and radicals as evidence of the pathogenic qualities of autocracy. In this framework, the government was accused of suppressing the healthy, civic aspirations of a Russian society that had now grown to political maturity. Conversely, conservatives could assert that the crisis was caused by the disorder of revolution, its destabilization of social institutions, including the patriarchal family and traditional school. Yet the political symbolism of epidemic suicide was hardly clear cut for it also drew on the ambiguous imagery of urban modernity. Optimistic narratives of political and social progress thus competed with pessimistic assessments of disintegration, fragmentation, and decline. Though claiming the right to govern itself, Russia's educated society also feared its own moral and physical corruption. School suicide consequently symbolized both the pathogenic affects of autocracy and the diseased weakness of society. The school was not a game of life, as Freud had advocated, but a site on which life seemed to be formed – and deformed. Such anxieties did not disappear after 1917. Instead, the tentacles of the past still seemed to cling to the new society, hindering the Bolsheviks' attempts to reshape man and society and encouraging ever more radical measures of social purification.

⁴⁶ See Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline*, Princeton, 1984; Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-c. 1918*, Cambridge, 1989; and David G. Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity*, Princeton, 1994. For the Russian case, see Daniel Beer, *Renovating Russia: The Human Sciences and the Fate of Liberal Modernity in Russia, 1880-1930* (forthcoming); and Engelstein, *Keys to Happiness*, 128-52.

⁴⁷ See d. 33, l. 207.