

Charles Beacroft
University of East Anglia

Educating the Uneducable': Deafblind Education in the Soviet Union, 1950 - 1960

This paper will delve into a rarely explored area of Soviet pedagogy, the education of deafblind children. Deafblind education (surdotiflopedagogika) was pioneered by its founder, Ivan Sokolyansky, whom utilised a series of educational techniques, the development of self-care skills and the use of mechanical prosthetics to educate of previously uneducable children. Sokolyansky sought to practically apply Lev Vygotsky's social model of disability, which stipulated that a disabled child can 'overcome' their disability through the training of their existing senses. Such a question is fundamental to our understanding not only of people with disabilities, but how the regime perceived and subsequently interacted with marginalized people whom deviated from the apparent 'norm' in the Soviet Union. It will tap into broader Soviet discourses on the nature of 'disability' and 'ability'. Existing scholarship has already established that disabled individuals sought inclusion in society through their ability to be useful, which in the Soviet Union was through their active, willing participation in labour. However, Sokolyansky emphasized a distinctly Ukrainian disability discourse which sought to favour language acquisition over their ability to work as a means for further integration. Sokolyansky challenged Soviet ideology about how an individual's behaviour and attitudes could be reformed. This will be shown specifically through the education of one of his students, Yulia Vinogradova, during the 1950s.