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Formation and Development of School Education of the Autonomies of the Middle Volga Region, 1920–1930s

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Abstract: The study is devoted to the analysis of the process of formation of the Soviet system of school education in the 1920–1930s. The policy of the Soviet government in this area and its specific results are also considered. The authors find out that the experiments, carried out in the course of reforming education, were accompanied by both positive and negative paradigms. Of the positive results that were already observed by the end of the 1920s, the quantitative changes, marked by an increase in the number of educational institutions, as well as the number of teachers and students, stand out in particular. Of the positive results that were already observed by the end of the 1920s, there particularly stand out the quantitative changes marked by an increase in the number of educational institutions, as well as the number of teachers and students. Also progressive, although slower, was the strengthening of the material and technical base of schools. Large-scale transformations related to the destruction of the old Russian school and the construction of a new Soviet school took place against the backdrop of important historical events (the Civil War, famine, industrialization and collectivization, etc.), which influenced the course of the modernization processes. Along with objective factors, the development of the educational sphere was also affected by subjective reasons: the dissatisfaction of the population with certain measures in the field of schooling, the conservative views of the peasant population, etc. As a result, in the early 1930s, the course of the Soviet government with regard to the general education school was revised. In order to correct the mistakes made, the Soviet government had to return to the traditional class-and-lesson system. In the 1930s, there increased the budgetary financing of the school education system. The policy pursued allowed the Soviet state to achieve noticeable results in improving literacy of the population, quantitative expansion of primary and secondary education, qualitative improvement of the level of education in general.

Keywords: national school, universal education, Stalinism, Mari ASSR, Mordovian ASSR, Chuvash ASSR

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Становление и развитие школьного образования в автономиях Среднего Поволжья в 1920–1930-е гг.

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Аннотация: Исследование посвящено анализу процесса становления советской системы школьного образования в 1920–1930-е гг. Рассматривая политику советской власти в данной сфере и ее конкретные результаты, следует отметить, что проводимые в ходе реформирования образования эксперименты



сопровождались как положительными, так и отрицательными парадигмами. Из положительных итогов, которые наблюдались уже к концу 1920-х гг., особо выделяются количественные изменения, ознаменовавшиеся ростом числа учебных заведений, а также численности учителей и учащихся. Также поступательно, хотя и медленнее, шло укрепление материально-технической базы школ. Масштабные преобразования, касавшиеся ломки старой российской и строительства новой советской школы, проходили на фоне важных исторических событий (Гражданской войны, голода, индустриализации и коллективизации и т. п.), которые оказывали влияние на ход модернизационных процессов. Наряду с объективными факторами на развитии образовательной сферы сказывались и субъективные причины (недовольство населения отдельными мероприятиями в области школьного дела, консервативные взгляды крестьянского населения и др.). В результате в начале 1930-х гг. курс советского правительства в отношении общеобразовательной школы был пересмотрен. В целях исправления допущенных ошибок советской власти пришлось вернуться к традиционной классно-урочной системе преподавания. На 30-е гг. XX в. приходится увеличение бюджетного финансирования системы школьного образования. Все это в совокупности позволило Советскому государству достичь заметных результатов по повышению уровня грамотности населения, количественному расширению начального и среднего образования, качественному улучшению уровня образования в целом.

Ключевые слова: национальная школа, всеобщее обучение, сталинизм, Марийская АССР, Мордовская АССР, Чувашская АССР

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Introduction

In multinational Russia during the Soviet period, there lived representatives of more than 100 peoples and ethnic groups, which, as the internal and external political situation became more complicated, led to an aggravation of the national issue and relations between the center and multi-ethnic regions. In this regard, it should be emphasized that increase in the popularity and support of the Bolshevik Party during the revolutionary events was not accidental, since it was this party that proposed the principles of equality of peoples and the right of nations to self-determination.

From the first days of its existence, the Soviet state set course for the policy of nation building, for the implementation of which a special department was established – the People's Commissariat for Nationalities (Narkomnats, NKN¹). Among the many issues that were within the competence of the People's Commissariat of Nationalities, of particular importance were those that were related to the sphere of school education. One of the main reasons for the importance of this aspect was the need to bring the Soviet ideology to the numerous peoples and ethnic groups of the country with the help of national languages, culture and schools.

Considering the declared subject, the authors turned to the analysis of the activities of both central and local education authorities. Decisions made in Moscow were implemented locally, in accordance with the economic and socio-cultural factors of individual regions. The specific factual material of the work concerns the Middle Volga region, where a population characterized as multi-ethnic and multi-confessional has always lived. The article deals with the neighboring autonomies of the Mari, Mordovian and Chuvash peoples. At the beginning of the XX century, these were agrarian regions with backward economy, in which the literacy rates of the population were extremely low.

¹ Ye.K. Mineeva, and A.P. Zykina, “Deyatel'nost' Narkomnatsa RSFSR po sozdaniiu natsional'nykh avtonomii,” *Vestnik Chuvashskogo universiteta*, no. 4 (2021): 92. <https://doi.org/10.47026/1810-1909-2021-4-92-105>

In post-Soviet Russia, the system most frequently reformed is school education. Changes that date back to 1984 continue, with short interruptions, to this day. The long process of transformations was largely due not only to the shortcomings of the Soviet school, but also to the miscalculations made by the reformers in the late 20th – early 21st century. At present, the activities of the Russian school are closely monitored by both the state and society. The main aspects for discussion include the material base of educational institutions, the content and quality of general education, the status of teachers, etc. In this regard, the relevance of studying the historical experience accumulated by the national school at different stages of its development is increasing. An important milestone was the period of formation and strengthening of the Soviet school system in the 1920–1930s. Despite a large number of works devoted to the problem of research, in present-day conditions there are aspects that require further study, especially at the regional level. The purpose of the article is a comparative analysis of the process of formation and development of the new system of school education in the national autonomies of the Middle Volga region in the 1920–1930s.

This issue has repeatedly attracted the attention of researchers. To date, there is certain historiography of the problem, the beginning of which dates back to the 1920s. Among the first studies, one can single out the work of F.T. Timofeev, in which the author discusses the problems and difficulties in the development of the national school.² Further research literature becomes more substantive; it more widely presents the topics of works on the issues of public education: the construction of a comprehensive school³; non-Russian schools of the Volga region and other regions of the country⁴; the formation and development of the system of educational institutions on the territory of Chuvashia,⁵ Mordovia⁶; school within socialist culture⁷ etc. Consequently, the historiography of the Soviet period includes a large number of publications on the topic under study. However, these works are influenced by the official ideology and contain a certain bias. Considerable attention is paid to the role of party organs in the formation of the Soviet school; there is often an absolutization of quantitative characteristics, etc.

In the research literature of the late 20th – early 21st century, the interest of scientists in the initial stages of the history of the Soviet school in the national regions increased. There appeared works dedicated to individual educational institutions.⁸ The problem of

² F.G. Timofeev, *Neskol'ko slov o chuvashskoi shkole* (Cheboksary: Chuvash. otd. State. Publishing House, 1921).

³ A.T. Trofimov, *Narodnoe obrazovanie v Chuvashii za 15 let* (Cheboksary: Chuvash State Publ., 1935).

⁴ A.F. Efirov, *Nerusskie shkoly Povolzh'ya, Priural'ya i Sibiri: istoricheskie ocherki* (Moscow: Uchpedgiz Publ., 1948).

⁵ N.S. Stepanov, *Ocherk istorii chuvashskoi sovetskoi shkoly* (Cheboksary: Chuvash State Publ., 1958).

⁶ A.V. Ososkov, K.A. Kotkov, *Narodnoe obrazovanie v Mordovskoi ASSR* (Saransk: Mordovian State Publishing House Publ., 1946).

⁷ A.L. Kiselev, *Sotsialisticheskaia kul'tura Mordovii* (Saransk: Mordovian Book Publishing House Publ., 1959).

⁸ E.L. Efimov, *Alikovskaia srednyia shkola imeni I.Ya. Yakovleva (1854–2004)* (Cheboksary: Novoe vremya Publ., 2004); T.S. Sergeev, 1) *Shkola poiskov i innovatsii: k 70-letiyu Cheboksarskoi gimnazii*, issue 4 (Cheboksary: Chuvash. state. ped. I.Ya. Yakovlev Univ. Publ., 2006); 2) *Mechta sbylas': (k 100-letiyu Khodarskoi shkoly imeni I.N. Ul'yanova)* (Cheboksary: [S.n.], 1969); M.A. Khuras'kin, *Atnarskaia sredniaia shkola Krasnochetainskogo raiona: 1896–2006* (Cheboksary: Chuvash State. Pedagogical I.Ya. Yakovlev University Publ., 2006) etc.

teacher training became an independent sphere of study.⁹ There also appeared comprehensive works that identify the main trends in the development of education, consider the issues of eliminating illiteracy and introducing universal primary education,¹⁰ of organizing the educational process; there is emphasized the polytechnical nature of the education school¹¹. In this regard, less studied is the process of the formation of the Mari Soviet school. Thus, at present there is a considerable number of works devoted both to individual aspects of the problem and to its comprehensive study, but within the framework of each of the autonomies. This study is based on the comparison of educational policy and its results implemented in the national autonomies of the Middle Volga region. Based on their example, one can clearly demonstrate the pros and cons of the national policy of the Soviet government in the field of education.

While exploring the declared subject, the authors relied on various types of both published and archival historical sources. There were analyzed the documents of two central and six regional archives of the country: Moscow, Ulyanovsk region, the republics of Mari El, Mordovia, Tatarstan and the Chuvash Republic, which contain reporting documentation, correspondence of regional governments with higher authorities, and other materials.

The source materials used are different in origin, content and degree of reliability. Many documents of the Soviet period are characterized by an ideological and propaganda orientation. In addition, information on a number of issues related to the development of school education is fragmentary.

Regulatory framework and first actions of the Soviet authorities in the field of education in the 1920s

The need to reform the education sector appeared on the agenda of the Soviet government from the first days of its existence. First of all, the management system of educational institutions was reorganized. The People's Commissariat for Education established in connection with this set about creating a new Soviet school. An important direction of its activity was the unification of educational institutions and the centralization of management. To understand the significance of the work of the People's Commissariat for Education, one should recall the complex and extensive system of school education in pre-revolutionary Russia, in which there were various types of schools differing from each other both in the duration of training and in the amount of knowledge gained, in subordination to one or another department and in the amount of funding.¹² The pre-

⁹ M.A. Vorotnikov, *Kuznitsa uchitel'skikh kadrov* (Tsivil'sk: Tsivil'skii izdatel'skii dom Publ., 2001); T.S. Sergeev, *Fakel znani: (k 125-letiyu Poretskoi uchitel'skoi seminarii i 40-letiyu shkoly internata im. I.N. Ul'ianova (1872–1997))* (Yekaterinburg; Cheboksary: Ural Science Publ., 1998).

¹⁰ G.A. Kursheva, *Society, power and education in the conditions of modernization in the USSR: the end of the 1920s – 1930s* (Saransk: Research Institute of Humanities under the Government of the Republic of Mordovia Publ., 2007).

¹¹ L.A. Efimov, “Shkol'noe obrazovanie v Chuvashii v 1920–2000 gg.” abstract of the PhD diss., Saransk, N.P. Ogarev Mordovian State University, 2004; O.V. Ershova, *Shkol'noe obrazovanie v RSFSR v 1917–1941 godakh: istoricheskii opyt i uroki: na materialakh* (Chuvashii: abstract of the PhD diss., I.N. Ulyanov Chuvash State University, 2007).

¹² See: A.P. Zykina, “Nachal'naia i sredniaia shkola Chuvashskogo kraia na rubezhe XIX–XX vekov.” In *Narody Volgo-Ural'ia v istorii i kul'ture Rossii. Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii. Cheboksary, ChGU im. I.N. Ul'ianova, 28–29 sentiabria 2018 g.* (Cheboksary: Sreda Publ., 2018).

Soviet school was characterized by a lack of continuity between its primary and secondary levels. The People's Commissariat for Education was not satisfied with such a situation. Therefore, on February 23, 1918, the decision was made to transfer educational institutions, regardless of their departmental affiliation, under the control of the People's Commissariat for Education.¹³ The measure applied to absolutely all schools from primary to higher education. This meant that educational institutions were now becoming state-owned; there were established centralized management and funding in them. Another important event concerning the activities of schools was the decision of January 20, 1918 on the separation of church and state.¹⁴

All primary and secondary educational institutions were part of the “unified labor school.” The main principles that determined the work of the Soviet school were: continuity, free-of-charge basis, secularism, joint education of boys and girls.¹⁵

Another important direction in the field of school education was the active construction of a national school in Soviet Russia. Among the first laws, a document was adopted that granted the right to all ethnic groups of the RSFSR to teach children in their native language.¹⁶ The archive materials show that for areas with a non-Russian-speaking population, schools were organized which taught students in their native language, but the Russian language was a mandatory subject of study.¹⁷ In such institutions, one more year of study was added. Therefore, in the national regions, there was predominantly a six-year school, which provided elementary literacy and initial public education; it corresponded to a five-year Russian school. As a rule, such a school consisted of two groups or the first and second years of study (or the second and fourth).¹⁸

There were fundamental changes in the content of the educational process as well. First of all, it concerned the forms and methods of work. Teachers received recommendations to work on the basis of the Dalton Plan and the project method, i.e. instead of the traditional class-lesson teaching system, they were supposed to conduct excursions to enterprises and practice laboratory classes. In the new school, instead of dividing into classes, a division into groups was introduced according to the degree of preparedness of students. There were no more homework assignments, the scoring system for assessing the knowledge and behavior of students.¹⁹ All types of punishment of children were abolished. In the absence of exams, the questions of transferring students from class to class and issuing certificates were addressed on the basis of their success and decision of the pedagogical council.²⁰ Most modern researchers have an extremely negative attitude towards such innovations of the Soviet government, pointing out that

¹³ “Postanovlenie Narodnogo komissariata po prosveshcheniyu. O peredache vsekh uchebnykh zavedeniy v vedeniye Narodnogo komissariata po prosveshcheniyu.” In *Sobranie uzakoneni i rasporyazhenii pravitel'stva za 1917–1918 gg.* (Moscow: Upravlenie del Sovnarkoma SSSR), 386.

¹⁴ *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR. Obshcheobrazovatel'naiia shkola: sb. dokumentov 1917–1973 gg.* (Moscow: Pedagogika Publ., 1974), 12–13.

¹⁵ “Polozheniye o yedinoy trudovoy shkole RSFSR ot 30 sentyabrya 1918 g.” *Narodnoe obrazovanie v SSSR*, 133–137.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁷ Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Rossiyskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. A-296, op. 1, d. 16, l. 86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Respubliki Tatarstan (GA RT), f. P-271, op. 1, d. 192, l. 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, l 10 op.

all this subverted the scientific foundations of public education and negatively affected all aspects of public life.²¹

It is easy to guess that the attitude of most teachers to such radical changes in school education was either reserved or negative. Teachers expressed their dissatisfaction both in letters addressed to higher authorities and during meetings. Therefore, the new school could not immediately start working, given the revolutionary innovations. In the national regions, there were more difficulties due to the new laws that required the introduction of teaching in the native language. The fulfillment of this task depended on the availability of textbooks in national languages, as well as teaching staff that had special training. Whereas by the beginning of the formation of the Soviet school some peoples of the RSFSR had primers, the majority lacked not only educational literature, but also the literary language in general.

As autonomous entities emerged, solving problems related to the formation of the national school was transferred to their competence, but at that time they had different opportunities. For example, in the Mari and Chuvash Autonomous Regions, there was a lack of national personnel and there remained patriarchy. The lack of educational buildings was an acute problem. Traditionally, to solve it, the authorities placed schools in the houses of priests, kulaks, landowners.²² However, these houses were not well adapted for the organization of the educational process.

In 1918, in the country there began activities on the separation of church and state, and anti-religious education was introduced. When implementing this policy, the Soviet government faced teachers' resistance. For example, ignoring the law on the separation of church and state, teachers in the Middle Volga region at first demanded that children attend church before classes.²³ In addition, the archival documents suggest that many parents did not accept new approaches to the organization of schooling and did not let their children go to school.²⁴ Ultimately, the resistance on the part of the population regarding the abolition of lessons on the basics of religion was nevertheless broken, and the policy of separating church and school began to be carried out everywhere.

In 1921, when the famine began, there was a drastic lack of finances. The teachers had to pay great attention not so much to conducting lessons, but to providing material assistance to students, which was aimed at surviving in those difficult life circumstances. The teachers participated in the evacuation of children to more favorable areas of the country in terms of material support (for example, to Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, etc.). In addition, all schools in the region had a shortage of teaching aids and literature, many of them lacked trained staff.²⁵

In 1921, the school education structure in the national regions included a 4-year school of the first stage (it corresponded to a 3-year Russian school, gave elementary li-

²¹ М.Н. Yanborisov, "Sovetskaia obshheobrazovatel'naia shkola v kontse 20-kh – nachale 30-kh godov XX veka: opyt, problemy, uroki (na materialakh respubliky Bashkortostan)," *Vestnik Bashkirskogo universiteta*, no. 1 (2015): 304.

²² Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Respubliki Mariy El (GA RME), f. P-23, op. 1, d. 6, l. 65; Tsentral'nyy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Respubliki Mordoviia (TSGA RM), f. P-40, op. 1, d. 1109, l. 12.

²³ V.A. Ermolov, "Reforma shkol'nogo obrazovaniia v ramkah kul'turnoi politiki sovetskoi vlasti v 20-kh gg. XX veka (Na primere Novgorodskoj gubernii)," *Obshchestvo. Sreda. Razvitiie*, no. 2 (2009): 146.

²⁴ Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Ul'yanovskoi oblasti (GA UO), f. P-190, op. 1, d. 101, l. 55 op.

²⁵ GARF, f. A-296, op. 2, d. 16, l. 80 revers.

teracy and primary public education), a 6-year school of the second stage (it offered students a developing character of education with the acquisition of work skills). But it proposed some adjustments taking into account regional characteristics. For example, if the students of Chuvashia were not prepared for mastering the material of the second stage schools, there was allowed the introduction of the first stage school with a 6-year education.²⁶

Over time, the situation in the country stabilized. A significant role in this was played by the gradual increase in spending on school education. Thus, for example, in the Chuvash ASSR, according to the data for 1927, there were educated 58.2% of school-age children (from 8 to 14 years old). According to this indicator, the region was far ahead of the average indicators for both the RSFSR (46.1%) and the USSR (46.6%).²⁷ A new phenomenon in the education system was the emergence of schools for peasant youth in the country. They were mainly opened as a result of the reorganization of 8-year schools located in rural areas. There were 10 such educational institutions on the territory of Chuvashia. Already in 1927, in the Chuvash ASSR, a decision was made to partially introduce universal compulsory primary education.²⁸ According to E.S. Sergeev, the People's Commissar for Education of the ChASSR, from the autumn of 1930, in the republic there was introduced universal compulsory education, and work was underway to eliminate illiteracy.²⁹ The Mari autonomy also managed to achieve some success in creating the Soviet system of school education during the 1920s. However, taking into account the growth of literacy from 20% in 1920 to 44% in 1930, the illiteracy of the population of the region by the beginning of the 1930s still remained considerable.³⁰ Therefore, the work in this direction continued.

In addition, there constantly arose problems due to the lack of buildings, textbooks and teaching aids. For example, in Chuvashia, as of the beginning of 1927, only half of all schools had their own buildings, the rest were located in peasant houses that did not meet the hygienic requirements for classrooms.³¹ The situation was approximately the same in Tatarstan, where more than a third (34%) of rural schools was located in the premises of former parochial educational institutions built before 1905, and the rest of the buildings were confiscated or rented. Most of them did not meet the minimum sanitary standards adopted by the People's Commissariat for Education of Tatarstan.³²

Throughout the 1920s, there was an acute shortage of teaching staff. Along with this, there were difficulties due to the need to improve their skills. For example, the meeting of educators in 1929 in Cheboksary pointed out the expediency of professional training of teachers. Teachers complained about the lack of continuity between different types of

²⁶ Gosudarstvennyy istoricheskii arkhiv Chuvashskoi Respubliki (GIA CHR), f. P-125, op 1, d. 12, l. 15.

²⁷ A.V. Izorkin, V.N. Klement'yev, G.A. Aleksandrov, *Istoriia Chuvashii noveishego vremeni*. Kn. 1 (Cheboksary: ChGIGN Publ., 2001), 120.

²⁸ GIA ChR, f. P-1752, op. 1, d. 1, l. 324.

²⁹ GARF, f. A-2306, op. 5, d. 124, l. 1.

³⁰ GA RME, f. P-250, op. 1, d. 728, l. 1.

³¹ GIA ChR, f. P-1752, op. 1, d. 1, l. 362.

³² A.R. Akhmetova, "Shkol'noe obrazovanie v Tatarstane v 1920-e gg.: sotsial'no-politicheskii analiz" (PhD thesis, Kazan State University named after V.I. Ulyanov-Lenin, 2006), 21.

schools, the excessive complexity of the curricula of secondary schools; they also noted the importance and need for special agricultural training, the use of narrower specialization.³³

As positive achievements by the end of the 1920s, we should mention a significant increase in the number of schools and students, a noticeable improvement in the material and technical base of educational institutions compared to the pre-revolutionary stage, and the development of a national school. The weak link as a result of the transformation process was the insufficient level of knowledge of graduates, and its main reason was the rejection of the class-lesson teaching system, when the emphasis in the work of the school was on labor education, and labor was recognized as the highest priority subject of study. In practice, the increase in the share of productive labor in the learning process occurred due to a significant reduction or even abolition of teaching the basics of scientific knowledge.

Changes in educational policy in the 1930s and their implementation in the national regions of the country

In the early 1930s quantitative indicators still had priority in the educational policy of the Soviet state. During those years, the country was solving the problem of transition to universal compulsory 7-year education. However, its successful solution required considerable financial resources, which in that period went mainly to accelerated industrialization and collectivization.

In such a situation local executive authorities had a hard time. The archival data show that the executive committees were forced to turn to public organizations and civilian population. The most common example of community support was the help of ordinary people in the preparation of firewood for schools and the repair of classrooms, sometimes in the construction of school buildings. Since it cost a lot of money, this assistance was extremely important. Thus, for example, with the help of the population, in 1931–34 the Chuvash autonomy managed to build 152 schools.³⁴ With the direct support of the rural population in Mordovia, in 1928–1933 there were built 27 schools.³⁵ In 1933, the population of the Chuvash ASSR donated 75 thousand rubles for textbooks, 23 thousand rubles for hot breakfasts, 98 thousand 600 rubles for the overhaul and current repairs of school buildings.³⁶ In the same year, the schools in the Mordovian autonomy received 1,486.2 thousand rubles from trade union, cooperative and public organizations; the donations from the students' parents amounted to 204.9 thousand rubles.³⁷

One of the serious problems in the activities of the Soviet school was the high dropout rate of students. As a rule, it was children from low-income families that left studies before completing the full course of training. In order to solve this problem, officials of local administrations took specific measures. For example, in 1930, 60,000 rubles were allocated from the budget of the Mordovian region to assist such students who studied at the school of the first stage. Warm clothes were also given to them (30 coats,

³³ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sovremennoi istorii Chuvashskoi Respubliki (henceforth – GASI ChR), f. 2851/753, op. 2, d. 2, l. 232, 232 ob.

³⁴ Yubileynye torzhestva v Chuvashii (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe gos. izdatelstvo, 1935), 36.

³⁵ Tsentr dokumentatsii noveishei istorii Respubliki Mordoviia (henceforth – TSDNI RM), f. 269, op. 1, d. 980, l. 26, 27, 28.

³⁶ GIA ChR, f. P-221, op. 1, d. 967, l. 9.

³⁷ TsGA RM, f. P-464, op. 1, d. 5, l. 128–142.

400 pairs of felt boots, 300 scarves, 200 pairs of stockings), and hot breakfasts were given in 118 schools.³⁸

In terms of the modernization pace of the school education sphere in the 1930, Chuvashia again stood out among many national regions of the Middle Volga region. From the early 1930s, there was a process of strengthening 7-year schools. In the 1932/33 academic year, 86.6% of those who got primary education at a 7-year school continued their education, that is, 25.2 thousand people. In the 1934/35 academic year, these figures amounted to 98.1% – 43.8 thousand people respectively.³⁹ On the territory of Mordovia, in 1934 71% of the graduates of primary education continued their education at a 7-year school. However, the authorities of the autonomy were able to report on the implementation of the universal 7-year education only by 1939.⁴⁰ The main reason for the backlog was still the lack of finance and teaching staff.

Already from the end of 1932, the process of transforming elementary schools into secondary educational institutions was underway. Table 1 shows the changes in the number of secondary schools in the Chuvash ASSR and the number of students in them.

Table 1

**Dynamics of growth of secondary schools,
the number of students Chuvash ASSR from 1932–1933 to 1940–1941 academic years**

Types of schools, number of students	Academic year				
	1932/1933	1934/1935	1937/1938	1938/1939	1939/1940
Secondary schools	4	41	73	104	107
Students	108	–	7132	10 110	12 960

The table is compiled according to: *20 years of CHASSR*. Cheboksary: Chuvashknigoizdat Publ., 1940), 121; *Chuvashia for 50 years of Soviet power (in numbers): stat. Sb.* (Cheboksary: Chuvashknigoizdat Publ., 1967), 85; *Chuvash ASSR 60 years* (Cheboksary: Chuvash. kn. izd-vo Publ., 1980), 213.

In the 1940/41 academic year, in Chuvashia there were 556 primary, 353 incomplete secondary and 126 secondary schools. It should be emphasized that most of them were located in rural areas – 991 schools (95.7%); 44 educational institutions (4.3%) were located in towns. By 1940, there were 2.4 times more students in grades 5–7 than in 1933, and 17 times more than in 1913.⁴¹

Throughout 1929–34, the number of schools opened in Mordovia increased manifold: secondary and 7-year schools – more than 5.3 times, the number of students in grades 5–10 – 24.4 times.⁴² The way the numerical indicators for incomplete secondary schools in the Mordovian ASSR changed from 1931 to 1934 can be seen from the data in Table 2. In 1940, on the territory of Mordovia there were 297 7-year and 120 secondary schools. In the 1940–1941 academic year, the number of students in grades 5–7

³⁸ TSDNI RM, f. 269, op. 1, d. 259, l. 43, 53.

³⁹ A.T. Trofimov, *Narodnoe obrazovanie v Chuvashii za 15 let* (Cheboksary: Chuvash State Publ., 1935), 16.

⁴⁰ G.A. Kursheva, *Obshchestvo, vlast' i obrazovanie v usloviyakh modernizatsii v SSSR: konets 1920-kh – 1930-ye gg.* (Saransk: Nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut gumanitarnykh nauk pri Pravitel'stve Respubliki Mordoviia Publ., 2007), 162.

⁴¹ P.M. Mikhailov, *Kul'turnaia revoliutsiia v Chuvashii* (Cheboksary: Chuvashgosizdat Publ., 1957), 12.

⁴² G.A. Kursheva, *Obshchestvo, vlast' i obrazovanie*, 116.

was 61,135 thousand people, and in grades 8–10 17,993 thousand people.⁴³ It turns out that in 1929, only 50% of school-age children were enrolled in primary schools, and by 1934 it was possible to enroll 100%.⁴⁴

Table 2

**Dynamics of growth of incomplete secondary schools,
the number of students The Mordovian ASSR from 1931 to 1934**

Year	Total schools	Of them are Mordovian	Number of students, people	Of these, representatives of the Mordvins
1931	70	25 (35, 7%)	12 000	2600
1934	198	79 (39, 9%)	24 270	7490

The table is compiled according to: Kursheva, G.A. *Society, power and education*, 120.

The process of establishing a national school in Mordovia was much more difficult than in the neighboring regions. The problems in the organization of educational work there were due to the later formation of autonomy (the Mordovian Autonomous Oblast was established only in 1930) and the dispersed settlement of the Mordovians. There was another reason that also interfered with the organization of primary education. It was the reluctance of the parents of students to teach them in their native language, which is confirmed, for example, by the reporting documents for the Ulyanovsk province of 1925 which state:

Among the Chuvash and Tatars, there are no obstacles to the teaching in their native languages on the part of the population. In some places Mordovians object to it: “We want to learn in Russian, and we ask you not to revive the Mordovian language.”⁴⁵

In 1940, out of 556 primary schools in the Chuvash ASSR, 439 (78.4%) were Chuvash schools. There were only 97 educational institutions in which teaching was conducted in Russian (17.4 %). There were also 9 Tatar and 5 Mordovian schools in the republic. Among the secondary educational institutions, the Chuvash ones prevailed – 83 (65.9%), there were 29 Russian schools (23%), 3 Tatar schools and 1 Mordovian school.⁴⁶

Thus, by 1940 the national school in the republics of the Middle Volga region had achieved serious success. It was said above that one of the first and important decisions of the Soviet government was to grant the right to the peoples of the RSFSR to educate children in their native language⁴⁷. Despite the fact that the law allowed people to choose the Russian or native language for education, in the national regions the Russian language was one of the compulsory subjects.⁴⁸ Such attention to the Russian language had objective reasons, namely, ensuring continuity in education between all links and levels of the Soviet educational system; first of all, this measure was meant to provide access to

⁴³ G.A. Kursheva, *Obshchestvo, vlast' i obrazovanie*, 121.

⁴⁴ TsGA RM, f. P-40, op. 1, d. 71, l. 22.

⁴⁵ See: A.V. Lomshin, “Razvitie shkol'nogo obrazovaniia, likvidaciia negramotnosti i osushhestvlenie vseobshhego nachal'nogo obucheniia v Mordovii v 1920-e gg.” *Integratsiia obrazovaniia*, no. 3 (2012): 103.

⁴⁶ GIA Ch R, f. 1041, op. 1, d. 371, l. 37–38.

⁴⁷ GARF, F. P-130, op. 2, d. 1, l. 38–40, August 10, 2022, <https://projects.rusarchives.ru/statehood/08-41-dekret-bezgramotnost-1918.shtml>

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, f. A-296, op. 1, d. 16, l. 86.

secondary specialized or higher education to graduates of national schools. Therefore, in the Chuvash, Mari and Mordovian schools, the teaching of the Russian language began already in the 1920s. In this regard, immediately after the adoption of the Law “On compulsory study of the Russian language in schools of the national republics and regions” on March 13, 1938,⁴⁹ there were no major changes in the work of schools in the Middle Volga region. A significant change in the status of the Russian language (transition from the subject of study to the subject of teaching) would occur much later.

A serious achievement in schooling was the increase in state spending on the development of the education system in terms of per capita: in 1940 it amounted to 61 rubles 90 kopecks. In order to show the scale of the changes, we should consider the data of a one-day census of elementary schools in the Russian Empire in 1911, when this figure was 58.4 kopecks.⁵⁰

It was not enough to improve the country's school education system only by increasing quantitative indicators. It is no coincidence that in the 1930s the Soviet authorities recognized the need to restore lessons as the main form of conducting classes. The beginning of the reform was laid by the resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks of August 25, 1931 “On Primary and Secondary Schools,” which recorded the successes and achievements of the education system, as well as identified problematic issues. In particular, it was the weak general educational preparation of students that was named as the main drawback of the work of educational institutions. Therefore, it was proposed to adopt stable curricula, to clearly identify the amount of systematized knowledge that graduates were supposed to have.⁵¹

In accordance with the above-mentioned resolution, in 1934 a new law was adopted – “On the Structure of Primary and Secondary Schools in the USSR,” which provided for serious changes in the structure of school education. Whereas by the end of the 1920s on the territory of the Middle Volga region, as well as throughout the country, there were different types of comprehensive schools, then, in accordance with the new document, they were all unified. As a result, there emerged an elementary school (grades 1–4), an incomplete secondary school (grades 1–7) and a secondary school (grades 1–10),⁵² which testified to the creation of a single type of comprehensive institutions in the country.

The next achievement of the Soviet school by the end of the 1930s was success in the development and publication of educational literature in national languages. However, the results of the work of the autonomies in this direction were different. Of the considered regions of the Middle Volga, the Chuvash ASSR stood out noticeably. By the 1932/33 academic year, national schools there were almost completely provided with textbooks in the Chuvash language.⁵³ In Mordovia, this process was more compli-

⁴⁹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoy istorii (hancefoth – RGASPI), f. 17, op. 3, d. 997, l. 103–107, August 10, 2022, <http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/123876-postanovlenie-tsk-vkp-b-i-snk-sssr-ob-obyzatelnom-izuchenii-russkogo-yazyka-v-shkolah-natsionalnyh-respublik-i-oblastey-13-marta-1938-g#mode/inspect/page/4/zoom/4>.

⁵⁰ Odnodnevaia perepis' nachal'nykh shkol Rossiiskoi imperii, proizvedennaia 18 ianvaria 1911 g. Issue XVI (Petrograd: Ekonomiiia Press, 1916), 41–48.

⁵¹ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 844, l. 22–29.

⁵² “Postanovlenie SNK SSSR i TSK VKP(b) “O strukture nachal'noi i srednei shkoly v SSSR,” in *Sobranie zakonov i rasporiazhenii raboche-krest'ianskogo pravitel'stva SSSR za 1934 g.* (Moscow: Yuridicheskaiia literatura, 1948), 367–368.

⁵³ GARF, f. A-296, op. 1, d. 543, l. 55.

cated; only with the formation of the Mordovian Autonomous Oblast in 1930 did the activity of publishing school textbooks in native languages considerably intensify. During 1933–37, in the region there were published 276 textbooks for primary and secondary schools in the languages of Mordovian people.⁵⁴

Conclusions

Thus, during the 1920–30s, in the development of the school education system in the autonomies of the Middle Volga region, there was a positive trend. There was an increase in the number of educational institutions and students; the material and technical base was strengthened. All this became possible against the backdrop of a gradual increase in investment in education. Educational institutions received the bulk of the money from the state. At the same time, schools also had other sources to improve their material and technical base (help from parents, collective farms, and enterprises). By the end of the 1930s, a significant result of the modernization of the general education system was the functioning of the national school in the country. An important part of this area of work was to provide schools with educational literature in native languages; particular attention was paid to their development and publication. It was Chuvashia that achieved the greatest success in this matter.

In the first years of the establishment of the Soviet school, serious mistakes were made, for example, in such an important area of the education system as upbringing – the emphasis was laid on labor education to the detriment of the mental development of students. The negative consequences of this approach forced the organizers of education to decide on the next changes in the early 1930s, although there was no complete rejection of the task of labor education. It should also be noted that, in general, the ideologization of the educational process assumed the status of special importance in the practical work of the Soviet school from the first days of its functioning, since the Bolsheviks were aware of the role of the spiritual and moral values in the process of educating the “new person.”

With all the positive changes at the stage of the Soviet school formation, there were a large number of difficulties and problems. First of all, among them there should be mentioned the insufficient number of teachers. On the one hand, the lack of teaching staff is explained by the fact that in the Soviet state there was still no well-established system for training teachers. On the other hand, in the first years, teachers did not always agree to cooperate with the new regime because of not only the rejection of the Bolsheviks' ideological guidelines, but also disagreement with the means and methods that the new government introduced into the school education system. It should be noted that at the initial stage of school modernization a serious mistake was the rejection of the experience and achievements of the pre-revolutionary Russian education. While the organizers of the new school succeeded in breaking the class-lesson teaching system, they failed to create an effective alternative system.

At the same time, one should recognize the introduction of universal primary and 7-year education (and, as a result, a sharp increase in the level of literacy of the population), as well as the creation of national schools as a serious achievement of the USSR in the early Soviet period. By 1939, literacy in the national autonomies of the Middle Volga

⁵⁴ G.A. Kursheva, *Obshchestvo, vlast' i obrazovanie*, 127.

region reached high level: in the Mordovian ASSR – 80%, the Mari ASSR – 87.5%, the Chuvash ASSR – 91% (for comparison: in the USSR – 89.1%). However, the further progressive development of the Soviet school was disrupted by the Great Patriotic War.

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