The role of films and the great directors such as Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Shub in contributing to this constructed narrative especially interesting. Hopefully no one, after reading this, will show Eisenstein’s *October* and its classic scene of the (fake) storming of the Winter Palace without using it not as a representation of reality, but of how Soviet officials reshaped that and replaced it with a myth. There are many more virtues and important issues raised in this fascinating and important book than can be discussed here. It is easily recommended to readers of diverse interests.

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Stalin’s campaign to spread universal primary and secondary education throughout the USSR during the 1930s is often regarded as one of his successful achievements. This book focuses on one key aspect of this process: the changing nature and role of the primary and secondary teaching profession—the single largest profession in a modernizing society.

It was a time of turmoil and hyper-rapid change in education as well as in virtually all other areas of Soviet life. The author cites official statistics that portray an increase in the number of primary-secondary pupils from about 13 million in 1930 to 31 million in 1939, and a growth in the number of teachers from some 350,000 to over a million during the same period.

Aside from this constant drive for expansion, official Soviet pedagogical policy changed sharply during the first half of the ‘30s. Earlier experiments with progressive and pupil-centered education were abandoned, as a series of central decrees from 1931-1934 proclaimed the overriding authority of the teacher and promulgated standardized and traditional curricula. These changes have been well covered by other scholars, and Ewing only briefly summarizes them. His main interest is activities at the local school level, which, he emphasizes, did not necessarily correspond to what the central authorities were calling for. His is a very ambitious approach “from below.” Since there was no effective teachers’ union or other intermediary bodies, he was obliged to scour his sources (state archives, central and local educational publications, the Harvard Emigre Interview Project) for documents, letters, and appeals of individual teachers throughout the USSR in which they recorded their complaints and/or enthusiasms, their working and living conditions, their values, relations with colleagues, and teaching methods. His task was made still more difficult by the admirable decision to focus on rural rather than urban schools. The result is a vast array of fascinating vignettes of individual teachers and their professional lives from the far-flung corners of the Soviet Union, including occasional examples from the union republics. Of course, in view of the fact that he was able, despite extensive research, to consider the views of only a minute percentage of the hundreds of thousands of teachers, his sample, though revealing, inevitably remains haphazard. And, fortunately, he
is not shy about including some diametrically opposed viewpoints of different teachers despite the handicaps this presents to his subsequent efforts to summarize and generalize.

There are a number of interesting insights here. Ewing shows how teachers were both agents and victims of Soviet power. They were expected actively to further the official goals of collectivization, dekulakization, and compulsory school attendance in the village. But they were often checkmated and even attacked by local soviets and party organizations, not to mention the generally hostile peasantry as a whole. Young female teachers were especially vulnerable. Frequently arriving at an unfamiliar village for their first job, these courageous souls often were viewed as threats to the existing patriarchal authority system, seen as easy prey for sexual abuse, and treated with disdain by older, traditional female teachers.

The government tried hard continually to increase the training of teachers to keep pace with the expanding enrollments through the decade, but even credentialed teachers were most often woefully unprepared in terms of both subject matter and teaching methods. A few schools were well-equipped, but the vast majority in the rural areas were lacking in even the basic ingredients of desks, books, and paper. Teachers often taught two shifts with two or more grades in each shift.

The issue of teachers’ social origins received different treatment in different localities. Some teachers deemed to be of undesirable origin were harassed or driven out by local authorities whereas others in a similar position were not. On the other hand, the government regarded all children of teachers as of proletarian origin for the purposes of affirmative action. Curiously, central authorities insisted that children of those kulaks who had survived deportation to distant regions were definitely to be included in the compulsory, universal education. Teachers formed about the same percentage of Communist Party membership as the population as a whole. But it was most often a disadvantage for teachers to be party members because they were then expected to engage in considerable political activism in addition to their exhausting teaching duties, and were even more subject to official criticism and repression than non-party teachers.

Ewing is not entirely convincing, however, in his major interpretive argument. He states that despite all of the hardships and disadvantages teachers faced, they were far from passive and helpless. Indeed, “through their everyday practices, teachers thus contributed as much to the formation of Stalinist education ‘from below’ as did the political leaders who set policies ‘from above’.” (p. 186) He does show that in Stalin’s Russia, as in the tsars’, many locals, including teachers, were ignorant of, misunderstood, or simply ignored the ever-changing barrage of decrees from the center, and continued to act according to their own lights. Some teachers were able to mitigate their inherent vulnerability by devising strategies for dealing with uncooperative parents, or for navigating the treacherous waters of the terror. Most teachers approved of the ultimate central policies stressing teacher authority and the need for discipline, and carried them out in their own way. But from these examples it would seem more likely that the role of teachers lay somewhere in between the two extremes of helpless passivity on one hand and equal importance with the state on the other.