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Claire Shaw

## TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEARING!\*

### Fighting Deafness in the Stalinist 1930s

If the Bolsheviks were truly a ›millenarian sect‹, as Yuri Slezkine has suggested, then their temple was the factory.<sup>1</sup> In their zeal to create a workers' utopia, they invested the factory with preternatural significance, seeing it as a site of transcendence in which the raw material of ›backward‹, peasant Russia could be remade as a classless, proletarian society.<sup>2</sup> Yet the advent of Stalin's industrial revolution revealed a second, more problematic vision of the factory: as a space of physical peril, where frequent industrial accidents threatened the physical health – and sometimes the lives – of Soviet workers. As Lewis Siegelbaum has shown, poor working conditions in factories, including ›inadequate lighting; excessive temperature, humidity and dust; antiquated equipment; crowding of machinery and workers; insufficient rest periods; and other violations of safety codes and factory rules‹ often led to death and disability.<sup>3</sup> As the first five-year plan (1928–1932) intensified the pace of work and pushed the construction of ›gigantic‹ industrial complexes such as Magnitogorsk, another, more insidious concern was added to this list: the danger of factory noise (*shum*). Unlike industrial

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1 Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government. A Saga of the Russian Revolution*, Princeton 2017, xii.

2 Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilisation*, Berkeley 1995, p. 203.

3 Lewis Siegelbaum, Industrial Accidents and Their Prevention in the Interwar Period, in: William O. McCagg/Lewis Siegelbaum (eds), *The Disabled in the Soviet Union. Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, Pittsburgh 1989, pp. 85-118, here p. 96.



accidents, the danger of noise was cumulative, but no less significant: ›Among workers employed for ten or more years in the flyer-frame division of several large textile mills, 24.8 to 42 percent were found to have had partially or completely damaged cochleae. Studies of railway workers and telephonists revealed that ›reduced hearing ability‹ was widespread.‹<sup>4</sup>

During the first five-year plan, the Soviet state turned to an unusual source to combat this danger: the Soviet deaf community, institutionalised in a deaf-run government organisation, the All-Russian Society of Deaf-Mutes (*Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhonemykh*, or VOG).<sup>5</sup> From 1930 to 1937, VOG organised a yearly, three-day event known as *Beregi slukh!* (*Take Care of Your Hearing!*), the aim of which was ›chiefly, propaganda of the prophylaxis of deaf-muteness in order that society produces, not defective descendants, but completely healthy fighters and builders of communism.‹<sup>6</sup> During each three-day event, VOG members, with the help of the People's Commissariat of Health and other state organs, put up posters, produced brochures and special newspapers, and held lectures and discussions about the prevention of deafness and the protection of hearing, as well as collecting funds for the work of the Society. Over the lifetime of *Beregi slukh!*, more than 46,600 lectures were held in venues across the Soviet Union and 7,900,000 brochures, leaflets and posters printed.<sup>7</sup>

Using a wide selection of these printed materials, as well as archival reports of the events and their results, this article attempts to work through the complex history of *Beregi slukh!* and consider what it can tell us about attitudes to deafness in the Stalin era. At first glance, *Beregi slukh!* appears to be a deeply contradictory event. As the deaf journalist and historian Viktor Palennyi has pointed out, making the prevention of deafness the task of the deaf community points to a considerable ambivalence about the place of deaf people in the early USSR: ›Let the state itself take care of the health of its citizens; oh no, people already deprived of hearing must ›ring the bell‹ in order to

4 Siegelbaum, *Industrial Accidents* (fn 3), p. 100.

5 VOG was founded as the All-Russian Association (*Ob"edinenie*) of Deaf-Mutes in July 1917; following a hiatus in the early 1920s, it was relaunched as the All-Russian Society (*Obshchestvo*) of Deaf-Mutes in 1926. The acronym remained the same. The Russian word *glukhonemoi* (›deaf-mute‹), in adjective and noun form, was common for much of the Soviet period. I use the term ›deaf-mute‹ only when translating from original source material. As Esme Cleall points out in her contribution to this special issue (pp. 380-387), it has become the convention in Deaf Studies ›to use ›deaf‹ with a small ›d‹ as an adjective to discuss an auditory state, whereas to capitalise it as ›Deaf‹ if an identity or affiliation with Deaf politics is mentioned‹ (or ›d/Deaf‹ to indicate both meanings). This division does not map easily onto the Russian or Soviet context, however, so I do not use it here.

6 Sovnarkom RSFSR Polozhenie ›Po dokladu Vserossiiskogo ob"edineniia glukhonemykh o ego deiatel'nosti‹ [Soviet of People's Commissars of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, Position ›On the Report of the All-Russian Association of Deaf-Mutes on its Activities‹], 26 October 1929.

7 V.A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhikh* [*History of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf*] (hereafter *Istoriia*), vol 1, Moscow 2007, pp. 265-266. Here, he is quoting the ENT (ear, nose and throat) doctor Professor S.S. Preobrazhenskii.

»mobilize the people to fight against epidemic illnesses which cause deafness« [...].<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the expectation that deaf people would advocate policies that framed their disability as a remnant of the backward tsarist past, one that would ultimately be overcome through public health interventions, was at best insensitive. It certainly caused a degree of friction between VOG and other state organs, all of which brought their own expectations, jurisdictional tensions and attitudes to the yearly event.

This variety of responses reflects the complex positioning of deafness and other disabilities within the Soviet system. The Soviet state's desire to build socialism envisioned not just industrialisation, but the transformation of the raw human material of the former Russian Empire into »New Soviet People«, rational and collectivist workers who would give their all to building the new utopia.<sup>9</sup> This vision saw human minds and bodies as plastic, able to be transformed and perfected through science and social intervention. Yet at the same time, this vision was complicated by the sheer number of disabled people within society (the legacy of revolution, war and disease), as well as by the narratives of breaking the chains of oppression and marginality that characterised the revolution, which created the need to recognise and create space for disabled people to find their own place in the Soviet body politic. Such complex narratives had underpinned the early decades of Soviet deaf organising, with activists fighting for rights and equalities and advocating for a vision of deafness rooted in culture and the visual, while at the same time making the case that, like ethnic minorities, they might have been »deaf in form« but they were certainly »socialist in content.«<sup>10</sup> Under Stalin, however, the target-setting culture of the five-year plans, and the ubiquitous presence of idealised human bodies in propaganda campaigns such as the Stakhanovite movement, made this claim to sovietness politically more necessary, but more difficult to achieve.

*Beregi slukh!* thus demonstrated contradictory visions of deafness that reveal the wider tensions inherent in the disability politics of the Stalin era. In the crucible of the five-year plan, dreams of »socialist construction« held out the promise of self-transformation and the eradication of human fallibility, dreams that had little place for the permanent imperfection of disability. Yet while the goal to eradicate hearing loss anchored the events of *Beregi slukh!*, many of the deaf activists and workers who ran the event also used it as an opportunity to demonstrate a more diverse and inclusive vision of embodied selfhood, one that, as Lilya Kaganovsky has noted, included and even celebrated disability.<sup>11</sup> By foregrounding their labour capacities, making the case for

8 Ibid., p. 261.

9 On the physical incarnation of the New Soviet Person and its links to the Soviet social experiment, see Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet. Propaganda, Hygiene and the Revolutionary State*, Madison 2008.

10 This echoes the famous slogan related to ethnic minorities in the USSR, which were understood to be »national in form, socialist in content«. See Brigid O'Keeffe, *New Soviet Gypsies. Nationality, Performance and Selfhood in the Early Soviet Union*, Toronto 2013.

11 Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade. Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin*, Pittsburgh 2008, pp. 1-3.

increased funding and education, and demonstrating aspects of deaf cultural practices (including sign language) to a hearing audience, *Beregi slukh!* became a powerful means to advocate for the centrality of the deaf community to Soviet visions of self and society. By framing deafness in terms of both its limitations and its opportunities – as both ›hearing loss‹ and ›Deaf Gain‹, to use the Deaf Studies scholars H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray's terminology – the events of *Beregi slukh!* thus provide an important window onto the complex position of deaf people in the first Stalinist decade.<sup>12</sup>

## 1. How to Take Care of Your Hearing: The Factory

The decision to hold the first *Beregi slukh!* was made by the Soviet of People's Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) of the RSFSR on 26 October 1929, just over a year after the start of the first five-year plan. From the outset, it was conceived of as a mass-agitational event that would bring together activists and volunteers from across state organs and the wider population. The *Sovnarkom* decree spelled out the stakes of this decision: ›We have successfully resolved the question of holding a three-day event, »*Beregi slukh!*«, the goal of which is not only the collection of funds, but above all the propaganda of the prophylaxis of deaf-muteness, in order that the society of the future will give us not defective descendants, but fully healthy fighters and builders of socialism.«<sup>13</sup> The first event was held on 16–19 May 1930, before settling into a regular slot in December of each year.

As its name suggests, *Beregi slukh!* had as its central goal to teach Soviet people how to care for and protect their hearing. As such, it formed part of a wider tradition of prophylaxis in the USSR. As Tricia Starks has argued, prophylaxis – or ›staving off illness rather than treating it‹ – had become central to the work of health agencies in the USSR in the aftermath of the Russian revolution, both as a pragmatic response to the lack of qualified doctors and funding for public health, and as a result of wider ideological conceptions of health and disease that underpinned health policy in the first socialist state.<sup>14</sup> At its heart, the Soviet revolutionary project represented an attempt to transform all aspects of everyday life. This project thus envisaged intervention into the most mundane of individual habits and behaviours, and placed responsibility on the individual to maintain the health of society as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Nikolai Semashko, the first People's Commissar of Health and the originator of the Soviet policy of

12 Deaf Gain is a term in Deaf Studies scholarship defined as the ›unique cognitive, creative and cultural gains manifested through deaf ways of being in the world‹: H-Dirksen L. Bauman/Joseph J. Murray (eds), *Deaf Gain. Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, Minneapolis 2014, xv.

13 Quoted in Palennyi, *Istoriia* (fn 7), pp. 260–261.

14 Starks, *The Body Soviet* (fn 9), p. 39.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

prophylaxis, explicitly linked *Beregi slukh!* to this wider revolutionary mission, explaining that the ›most important prophylactic measure against deaf-muteness is the care for the protection of hearing‹.<sup>16</sup>

In order to protect the hearing of the Soviet population, and to mould the habits of its citizens in that direction, participants in *Beregi slukh!* needed to explain the causes of deafness and the measures that could be used to prevent it. For representatives of the central trade union, VTsSPS, the most significant issue – and therefore the central goal of *Beregi slukh!* – was the fight against factory noise: ›the fundamental goal of the three-day event is the carrying out of prophylactic measures and sanitary labour education on the fight against industrial diseases of the organs of hearing and the respiratory tract, especially in such professions as boiler-room worker, riveter, drop forger, or in dusty or chemically dangerous workshops, etc.‹<sup>17</sup> Responding to this challenge, they suggested, would require a combination of measures, including regular inspection of working conditions, regular attendance in the factories by qualified doctors, ›sanitary protection‹ measures, and a wider focus on the construction of modern factories with safety protections in place.<sup>18</sup> A list of practical advice for workers included the following: ›Avoid loud noises, cries and bangs and don't create them yourself. Working in those factories and workshops where there is a lot of noise can also be harmful to the ear (the auditory nerve); for example, in boiler houses or shipbuilding workshops (the hammering of metal sheets); the auditory nerve of soldiers also suffers from artillery shots. In such situations the illness of the auditory nerve as a result of occupation (profession) is called ›professional deafness‹. The main method to prevent this type of deafness is the appropriate safety equipment. Moreover, it is necessary to try to perfect the machines so they function soundlessly, if possible.‹<sup>19</sup>

Another intriguing suggestion, included in a 1933 report on measures to tackle noise-induced hearing damage, envisaged ›the production of systems of rational hearing gymnastics‹, thus tapping into wider practices of calisthenics and physical culture (*fizkul'tura*) as a means to ›temper‹ the body.<sup>20</sup> Alongside concerns about noise and

16 Nikolai Semashko, Protiv epidemii, protiv glukhonemoty [Against Epidemics, Against Deaf-muteness], in: *Beregi slukh! Odnodnevnaia gazeta Vserossiiskogo obshchestvo glukhonemykh pri Nar. Kom. Sots. Obespech. [Take Care of Your Hearing! One-Off Newspaper Edition by the All-Russian Society of Deaf-Mutes under the People's Commissariat of Welfare]*, 16 March 1930, p. 1.

17 A. Abolin, Vsem sovprofam i TsK soiuзов [To all trade union councils and committees], in: Leningradskii nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut po bolezniam ukha, nosa, gorla i rechi [Leningrad Scientific Research Institute for Diseases of the Ear, Nose, Throat and Speech], *Beregi slukh! Na bor'bu s glukhotoi i glukhonemotai: Sbornik [Take Care of Your Hearing! In the Fight against Deafness and Deaf-muteness: A Collection]*, Leningrad 1933, p. 1.

18 Ibid.

19 F. Ronov, Prochti i zapomni! 12 pravil dlia sbrechenie slukha [Read and Remember! 12 Rules to Protect Your Hearing], in: *Beregi slukh! [Take Care of Your Hearing!]*, 16 March 1930, p. 2.

20 V.I. Voiaček, O plane nauchno-issledovatel'skoi raboty na 1934-i god [On the Plan for Scientific Research Work in 1934], in: *Beregi slukh!*, Leningrad 1933, pp. 5-6, here p. 6. It is not clear what ›rational hearing gymnastics‹ would entail. On *fizkul'tura*, see Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society. Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s*, London 2013.

vibration, participants in *Beregi slukh!* also worried about the impact of dusty environments on hearing: as the ›airways are linked to the organs of hearing by means of the Eustachian tubes‹, an industrial environment including significant dust or chemical inhalants ›that are created during the working process and collect in the surrounding air, can have an impact on illnesses of the upper airways and ears‹.<sup>21</sup> Alongside more effective ventilation in the factories, one of the most widely advertised solutions to this problem was the installation of inhaler stations, so that workers could cleanse their airways at the end of the working day ›in the same manner that they cleanse their skin in the shower‹, as well as the widespread exhortation to ›breathe through the nose‹.<sup>22</sup> One of the central tasks of *Beregi slukh!*, therefore, was to push for these innovations and to engage the wider masses of workers to ensure that factory management, and their comrades, complied.<sup>23</sup>

*Beregi slukh!* revealed Soviet discussions of noise-induced hearing damage to be deeply embedded in international debates. Participants in the 1930 event – perhaps to stress the significance of the task they were undertaking – were given information about a US Department of Health study into the effects of noise in urban spaces, a particular concern for the rapidly urbanising Soviet population. The report detailed the impact of noise on the physical and nervous health of individuals: noise was shown to damage hearing, harm work capability, inhibit concentration, irritate the nervous system and cause neurasthenic conditions.<sup>24</sup> Silence represented the only cure, gained either through trips to the countryside, or by taking measures to lessen noise at night. While the focus of the US study was on urbanisation and city noise (thus echoing the significant international concern over the impact of modern cities on health), the significance for Soviet factory workers was clearly spelled out: ›In New York, chauffeurs are being deafened, and it is clear that the same is happening to stokers and other workers standing at their machines and being exposed to the effects of noise.‹<sup>25</sup>

21 G.S. Notkin, *Beregi slukh. Metod razrabotka lektsii ili besedy* [Take Care of Your Hearing. A Guide for Developing Lectures or Talks], Leningrad 1936, pp. 8-9.

22 Ibid., p. 9.

23 See G.S. Notkin, Metodicheskaia razrabotka na temu ›Beregi slukh‹ [A Guidance Paper on the Theme ›Take Care of Your Hearings‹, in: Leningradskii nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut po bolezniam ukha, nosa, gorla i rechi, *K trekh dnevniku ›Beregi slukh‹. Na bor'bu s glukhotoi i glukhonemotoi* [Towards the Three-Day Event ›Take Care of Your Hearing‹. In the Fight against Deafness and Deaf-muteness], Leningrad 1931, pp. 5-8, here p. 8.

24 Neurasthenia, or ›nervousness‹, has a unique history in the USSR. Not understood as a bourgeois condition, as it was in the USA and Western Europe, nervousness was seen to particularly afflict the vitality – and virility – of young, working-class, Soviet men, and thus pose a threat to the future of the revolution. See Frances L. Bernstein, Panic, Potency, and the Crisis of Nervousness in the 1920s, in: Christina Kiaer/Eric Naiman (eds), *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia. Taking the Revolution Inside*, Bloomington 2006, pp. 153-182.

25 Anon., Vliianie shum na zdorovie [The Influence of Noise on Health], in: *Beregi slukh!*, 16 March 1930, p. 6.

Yet the focus on similar debates in the USA complicated both individual and collective responses to industrial hearing loss in the USSR. While the science behind these international studies was stressed, hearing damage was also viewed in terms of Marxist understandings of class poverty and alienated labour, which were understood to be the leading cause of illness and disability in capitalist systems. As one article pointed out, ›The causes that lead to deaf-muteness are found not only in our inability to fight nature, but also in that social layer that existed before the revolution with its penury, backwardness and lack of medical help for workers.‹<sup>26</sup> While it was made clear that these social conditions were disappearing with the construction of socialism, the continued existence of industrial deafness raised troubling questions about the success of the Soviet social transformation, questions that were often ducked. Talking points produced for *Beregi slukh!* lecturers were at pains to stress that while industrial deafness was a scourge of the tsarist or capitalist factory, the socialist factory was very different: ›Soviet power has given us every opportunity to lower the number of professional illnesses (labour protection, seven-hour working day, the five-day week, holidays, etc). In 1931, 158 million roubles were spent on labour protection. New factories are being built that meet all the requirements for labour protection (noiseless machines, workshops without dust, automatic telephone stations, inhaler stations, which alongside showers clear the upper respiratory tract of the accumulated mass of dust).‹<sup>27</sup>

To a degree, this was true. The focus on labour hygiene had put noise-induced hearing loss on the agenda in a way that it had not been under tsarism. Data from scientific studies distributed during *Beregi slukh!* stressed the limited nature of industrial hearing loss in comparison to tsarism; whereas in the tsarist factory, a stoker would lose on average 50 percent of his hearing after ten years on the job, in the Soviet factory that number was said to drop to 9.6 percent.<sup>28</sup> Yet the need to celebrate these improvements made the kind of critical activism central to the work of prophylaxis more difficult to achieve. Workers were challenged to hold their individual factories to basic labour standards, and to agitate for ›sanitary minimums‹ in the factory, but they had little power to push for wider reforms and safety measures on a systemic level. Indeed, the pervasive nature of factory noise, and the inevitable persistence of hearing loss in the context of breakneck Soviet industrialisation, made it difficult to envisage the elimination of this problem. Beyond avoiding loud noises, what could the individual worker do? As *Beregi slukh!* developed, therefore, the focus on industrial hearing loss increasingly took a back seat to the discussion of how to prevent other causes of deafness, and especially ›deaf-muteness‹.

26 E. Kovaneva, Pervyi [The First], in: *Beregi slukh!*, 16 March 1930, p. 1.

27 Notkin, *Metodicheskaja razrabotka* (fn 23), pp. 7-8.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 8. As Lewis Siegelbaum acknowledges, statistics related to industrial disability in the USSR are plagued with ›problems of interpretation‹; reporting structures for industrial accidents were complex and shifting, and over time the scientists studying ›labour hygiene‹ found it more politically difficult to conclude that the factory might be a space of danger. See Siegelbaum, *Industrial Accidents* (fn 3), p. 101.



## 2. How to Take Care of Your Hearing: Epidemic Disease

The focus on noise-induced hearing damage, while important to the goals of healthy leisure and the transformation of the USSR, could play only a peripheral role in the wider fight against the kind of deafness that affected VOG members. Industrial hearing loss affected adult workers, who had already mastered oral speech and (to varying degrees) literacy, and therefore could compensate with interventions such as the development of Soviet hearing aids and written communication. Deaf-muteness, on the other hand, was viewed as a distinct developmental disability of the young: ›If in early childhood, when a child has only just begun to learn to speak, he goes deaf, then that child will not be able to learn to converse. He will forget the words he previously knew and become deaf-mute.‹<sup>29</sup> As such, *Beregi slukh!* focused particularly on epidemic diseases that caused deafness in infancy. These included diphtheria, measles, syphilis, scarlet fever, influenza and epidemic meningitis (listed in increasing order of their likelihood to induce deafness, according to a 1931 booklet). While considerable work had been carried out to limit the spread of these diseases in the USSR, they continued to be widespread; in Leningrad alone, there were 16,895 cases of scarlet fever and 4,149 cases of diphtheria in 1930.<sup>30</sup>

The fight against epidemic illness and other causes of ear disease was perhaps a better fit for the prophylactic impulses behind *Beregi slukh!* than the fight against factory noise. As David Hoffmann has shown, Soviet attitudes to epidemic illness were particularly revealing of their ›environmentalist‹ approach, focusing particularly on ›hygiene, nutrition, lifestyle, and other environmental factors‹ in the fight against disease.<sup>31</sup> *Beregi slukh!* conformed to this view. A set of methodological guidelines for lecturers included the following advice: ›The attention of listeners should be attracted to the practical questions of preventing infectious disease: the isolation of sufferers, their hospitalisation, house-to-house smallpox vaccinations, vaccination against diphtheria. It is necessary to draw attention to the significance of preventing infectious disease in children. The lecturer must give particular attention to scarlet fever, as the most severe in terms of complications of the ear, and point out to listeners the importance of early treatment of diseases of the ear, nose and throat.‹<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the fight against epidemic disease focused particularly on a group that was considered ripe for social intervention: the peasantry. Collectivisation, or the violent reorganisation of peasant labour into collective farms, had put the cultural transformation of peasants into enlightened, politically conscious Soviet citizens at the forefront of state policy.<sup>33</sup> The countryside began to be a particular focus of *Beregi slukh!*

29 VOG Karel'skii otdel [Karelia Department of VOG], *Beregi slukh! Na bor'bu s glukhonemotoi* [Take Care of Your Hearing! In the Fight against Deaf-muteness], Petrozavodsk 1932, p. 4.

30 Notkin, Metodicheskaiia razrabotka (fn 23), p. 7.

31 David Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses. Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism*, Ithaca 2011, p. 87.

32 Notkin, *Beregi slukh. Metod razrabotka* (fn 21), p. 6.

33 David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values. The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941*, Ithaca 2003, p. 44.

from 1932, when local committees were formed to go out into the ›backwater districts‹ (*medvezhie ugolki*) and bring hearing prophylaxis to the masses.<sup>34</sup> This was also a matter of practical resource management: in 1931, of the 113,000 people registered as ›deaf-mute‹ in the USSR, 15 percent were in cities and 85 percent in the countryside.<sup>35</sup> To engage those in the countryside, participants in *Beregi slukh!* employed a very different set of practices, sending brigades into the countryside to bring practical help and advice to those in collective farms and small villages.<sup>36</sup> They also exhorted local state organisations to carry out *Beregi slukh!* activities: doctors' surgeries were encouraged to hang wall newspapers, distribute literature and give talks; nurseries and schools were asked to bring in parents for meetings and to hold special classes during which children would be given information about their ears and checked by a doctor; local libraries were encouraged to hold readings of literature about the ears and give slide shows and discussions; and Machine Tractor Stations were asked to hold exhibitions and set up nurseries and support for mothers and children.<sup>37</sup>

A particular focus of these educational activities in the countryside was on the elimination of ›narrow-mindedness and bad habits‹ (a phrase that was used consistently across the *Beregi slukh!* literature).<sup>38</sup> According to a 1935 brochure, ›deep-rooted bad habits and narrow-mindedness are frequently the cause of deafness and deaf-muteness.‹<sup>39</sup> Listeners were exhorted to avoid certain traditional practices of ear care: not to pack the ears with cotton or ›dig about‹ in them with cleaning instruments; not to pour water into the ear or insert onion or garlic to cure earache; not to hit children about the head or box their ears; not to use ear candles; to be careful when swimming to ensure water does not enter the ear; and to avoid alcohol and tobacco use. The literature also explained that kissing someone loudly on the ear could cause the eardrum to rupture, and that religion was particularly harmful, with the christening ceremony (presumably the immersion in holy water) risking diseases of the ear.<sup>40</sup>

Given the focus on the health of young and developing ears, it is perhaps unsurprising that mothers were a particular target of *Beregi slukh!* activities. Advice literature often directly addressed mothers, using the familiar ›you‹ (*ty*) to suggest ease, friendliness and a certain dose of state paternalism. Care for a child's ears, it was pointed out, began even in pregnancy: women were encouraged to avoid negative physical or

34 See A.S. Notkin, Zadachi i metody provedeniia kampanii trekh dnevnika ›Beregi slukh‹ [Tasks and Methods to Carry Out the Three-Day Campaign ›Take Care of Your Hearing‹], in: *K trekh dnevniku ›Beregi slukh‹* (fn 23), pp. 12-18, here pp. 13, 16.

35 A.A. Sakharov, Na bor'bu s glukhonemotoi i glukhotoi [In the Fight against Deaf-muteness and Deafness], in: *K trekh dnevniku ›Beregi slukh‹* (fn 23), pp. 2-5, here p. 2.

36 Notkin, Zadachi i metody (fn 34), p. 18.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

38 See, for example, G.S. Notkin, Bor'ba s glukhotoi i glukhonemotoi v kolkhoze [The Fight against Deafness and Deaf-muteness in the Collective Farm], in: *K trekh dnevniku ›Beregi slukh‹* (fn 23), pp. 20-25, here p. 23.

39 G.S. Notkin, *Beregi slukh. Pamiatka* [Take Care of Your Hearing: An Instruction Manual], Cheboksary 1935, p. 6.

40 *Ibid.*, and Notkin, Metodicheskaia razrabotka (fn 23), p. 7.

psychological experiences that might harm the child, including ›blows or contusions‹ (something of an indictment of marital relations in the countryside).<sup>41</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, given the general wariness towards eugenic theories in the Soviet 1930s, these discussions often tipped over into issues of heredity.<sup>42</sup> Mothers were warned that syphilis or alcoholism in either parent could damage a child's hearing: of every 100 deaf people, it was explained, six had hearing loss caused by syphilis, and it was forbidden for sufferers to marry without the consent of their doctor.<sup>43</sup> Occasionally, the literature pointed out that it was not advisable for deaf people to marry each other, or for relatives to intermarry, although this was never formally prohibited.<sup>44</sup>

Above all, the literature on diseases of the ear stressed the significance of the timely consultation of medical experts. This focus on doctors stood in tension with the lack of medical expertise in the first decades of the Russian revolution, as many doctors left the country or were sidelined by the regime for their political unreliability. By the 1930s, however, the number of Soviet-trained physicians in specialisms such as otolaryngology was beginning to grow. The Leningrad Scientific Research Institute for Diseases of the Ear, Nose, Throat and Speech had been founded in June 1930, a few short weeks after the first *Beregi slukh!*, and began work to develop the network of ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialists in the Soviet Union. As they pointed out, in 1930, in the RSFSR there were 78 ENT clinics with a total of 600 beds, only three children's clinics with a total of 103 beds, and 130 ambulatory clinics serving rural areas. The task facing the Leningrad Institute, therefore, was to expand this network and train sufficient doctors to staff it.<sup>45</sup> From 1931, the Institute began to take a more prominent role in *Beregi slukh!*, particularly in the production of propaganda materials and methodological guidance for activists.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, the advice given in *Beregi slukh!* trod a careful line between the promotion of individual agency in the prevention of diseases of the ear and the importance of timely and appropriate medical advice. The advice given to Soviet citizens, particularly parents, spelled out what to do (and what not to do) in order to protect the ears, but the leaflets distributed made it clear that there were times when self-care was not enough: ›Parents and carers should pay particular attention to the protection of the health of a child's ears and remember that the greatest danger in this regard is posed by infectious

41 Notkin, Bor'ba s glukhotoi i glukhonemotoi v kolkhoze (fn 38), p. 23. For more on this, see Sharon Kowalsky, *Deviant Women. Female Crime and Criminology in Revolutionary Russia, 1880–1930*, De Kalb 2015.

42 Eugenics occupied a contested place in the USSR; while at the time of the Great Breakthrough it had been definitively rejected as a ›fascist‹ science (a move which formed a key part of the Soviet Union's attempt to distinguish its own, ostensibly humane population policies from those of ›fascist‹ Germany), the notion of using genetics to shape and perfect the population persisted. See Nikolai Kremntsov, From ›Beastly Philosophy‹ to Medical Genetics: Eugenics in Russia and the Soviet Union, in: *Annals of Science* 68 (2011), pp. 61–92. See also Mark B. Adams, *The Wellborn Science. Eugenics in Germany, France, Brazil and Russia*, Oxford 1990.

43 Notkin, Bor'ba s glukhotoi i glukhonemotoi v kolkhoze (fn 38), p. 23.

44 See VOG Karel'skii otdel, *Beregi slukh!* (fn 29), p. 5.

45 Sakharov, Na bor'bu s glukhonemotoi i glukhotoi (fn 35), p. 2.

46 On the history of the Leningrad Institute, see <<https://lornii.ru/institute/history>>.

childhood diseases, many of which cause purulent inflammation of the ear. If this inflammation enters the inner ear, total deafness, and its fateful consequences, can result. Such purulent inflammation must be treated by a doctor who specialises in diseases of the ear.<sup>47</sup> Parents were also exhorted to avoid the treatment of local healers or witch doctors (*znakharki*), whose inept treatment was also said to be a leading cause of deafness. The reference to faith healers demonstrated the competing forms of expertise that still persisted in the countryside, but the *Beregi slukh!* activists made it clear that only trained medical advice would suffice: ›The faith healer does not cure, but cripples‹, as a 1931 slogan explained.<sup>48</sup>

The participants and activists of *Beregi slukh!* thus sought to explain the variety of causes of hearing loss and to give the Soviet masses practical advice to help them avoid it. While the concerns surrounding industrial hearing loss represented something of a *cause célèbre* in the context of the breakneck industrialisation of the first five-year plan, other causes of deafness, particularly infectious disease in infancy, also dominated the discussion and drove many of the activities during the three-day event. Strikingly, the new industrial approaches to farming introduced during the collectivisation campaigns had little mention in these works, which reinforced a binary between the ›backward‹ countryside and the ›progressive‹ industrial city. Yet the focus on hearing loss – and the habits and practices that caused cases to persist – raised significant and complex debates about what deafness meant, both practically and ideologically, and provoked certain tensions between participants in *Beregi slukh!* that would prove difficult to resolve.

### 3. Visions of Hearing Loss

From the outset, *Beregi slukh!* was conceived of as a Stalinist event, one that tapped into the goals and rhetoric of ›socialist construction‹ and the first five-year plan. Alongside the wider economic and technological goals of the Stalin revolution, a second set of equally important goals envisaged the transformation of the raw, peasant material of tsarist Russia into a population of modern, healthy people ready to build and inhabit the communist utopia of tomorrow.<sup>49</sup> Building on the Marxist notion of the individual as shaped by his or her context, Soviet theorists envisaged the human of the future as unbound by exploitation and oppression, and able to develop his or her capacities to the utmost (as Trotsky put it, to become ›a higher social biologic type, or if you please, a superman‹).<sup>50</sup> Yet until the ultimate endpoint of communism was reached, such a human would need to be ›constructed‹ through state intervention and individual effort.

47 VOG Karel'skii otdel, *Beregi slukh!* (fn 29), p. 6.

48 Notkin, *Metodicheskaia razrabotka* (fn 23), p. 7.

49 See, for example, Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values* (fn 33), pp. 45–46.

50 Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strutsky, Chicago 2005, p. 21.

This focus on shaping the New Soviet Person was both mental and physical; communist attitudes and ethics sat alongside visions of the ›machine man‹, and parades of athletes on Red Square during the May Day parades advertised a vision of the Soviet Union as a uniquely healthy and strong body politic.<sup>51</sup>

Within this wider vision, the notion of physical ›defect‹ (as developmental disabilities such as deafness and blindness were categorised) was understood as a symptom of the past, one that would ultimately be overcome as the Soviet Union moved towards the communist future. *Beregi slukh!* materials made this connection to the past clear: ›The pre-revolutionary era was an era of darkness, ignorance and the difficult conditions of labour and everyday life of workers and peasants. Tsarist Russia has left us an inheritance of tens of thousands of deaf-mutes and deafened people.‹<sup>52</sup> As such, the transformations undergone by the Soviet Union in the early 1930s were expected to lead to the elimination of deafness altogether.<sup>53</sup> As the organiser of the first *Beregi slukh!* pointed out, ›only now, with the final demolition of old social relations, after several years of creative, constructive work, have we begun to know a society in which there will be no deaf-muteness, or if it does exist, it will be the rarest occurrence, and only in such situations in which science is helpless in the face of nature.‹<sup>54</sup>

The utopian notion of a ›great breakthrough‹ to a future with no disabilities thus stood at the heart of *Beregi slukh!*. The three-day event was referred to by its organisers as a ›shock‹ (*udarnyi*) event, aligning it with developing traditions of ›shock work‹ and the breaking of records in Soviet industrial production.<sup>55</sup> The event organising committees, which were established on a Union, republican, regional, city and factory or collective farm level, conformed to a rigid hierarchy and involved systematic planning and reporting of targets and achievements in a manner reminiscent of Soviet economic management.<sup>56</sup> In order to encourage participants to hit their targets, practices of ›socialist competition‹ were employed, with regions, cities or even schools competing with each other to attract the most participants or give the most advice. For example, a 1935 circular to teachers in the Kalinin district announced a ›competition for the best organisation of treatment and prophylactic help for the population regarding diseases of the ear, nose and throat and the best carrying out of the 6th *Beregi slukh!*.‹<sup>57</sup> Schools

51 See Toby Clark, The ›New Man's‹ Body: A Motif in Early Soviet Culture, in: Matthew Cullerne Bown/Brandon Taylor (eds), *Art of the Soviets. Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917–1992*, Manchester 1993, pp. 33–50.

52 P. Savel'ev, K spetsialistam po bolezniam ukha, nosa, gorla i rechi ot Vserossiiskogo ob"edineniia glukhonemykh [To Specialists in Diseases of the Ear, Nose, Throat and Speech from the All-Russian Association of Deaf-Mutes], in: *K trekh dnevniku ›Beregi slukh!‹* (fn 23), p. 1.

53 The promise to ›overcome‹ or eliminate disability was made in various socialist states; see Kateřina Kolářová/Martina Winkler (eds), *Re/imaginings of Disability in State Socialism. Visions, Promises, Frustrations*, Frankfurt a.M. 2021.

54 Kovaneva, Pervyi (fn 26), p. 1.

55 *Instruktsiia i plan provedeniia 3-dnevnika ›Beregi slukh!‹ v 1932* [Instructions and Plan to Carry Out the 3-day Event ›Take Care of Your Hearing‹ in 1932], Moscow 1932, p. 6.

56 On target setting, see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain* (fn 2), pp. 41–42.

57 *Pedagogu o trekh dnevnike ›Beregi slukh!‹* [To Educators on the Three-Day Event ›Take Care of Your Hearing‹], Kalinin 1935, p. 5.

were encouraged to ensure that certain targets – such as regular inspection of pupils by an ENT doctor, the creation of separate classes for those with hearing loss, or discussions with parents on the subject of healthy hearing and speech – were met in order that the region might triumph.<sup>58</sup>

Within these ›shock‹ tactics of organisation, the notion that deafness should (and could) ultimately be eliminated was taken as a given. This view was even shared by some deaf activists, including VOG chairman Pavel Savel'ev, who had argued as early as 1925 that ›it is time to think about us, to give us the chance to hear. To make it so that deaf-muteness is no more, and to take all the best measures in order to prevent the growth of diseases as a result of which a person is deprived of hearing and speech.‹<sup>59</sup> Yet in order to frame the elimination of deafness as an unalloyed good, the rhetoric surrounding *Beregi slukh!* presented deafness as an individual tragedy resulting from ›backward‹ habits and poor social inheritance. This vision of deafness was on clear display in the poem ›Take Care of Your Hearing!‹, ostensibly written by a deaf person, that was published in a 1932 brochure. The poem contains many of these negative tropes of deafness, and is worth quoting in full:

It is hard beyond measure for he who is deaf,  
 On his shoulders, the weight of silence eternal...  
 Mother, protect your child's fragile hearing  
 And with it the gift of speech inestimable!  
 How many delights, so bright and joyful,  
 Will become for eternity inaccessible...  
 Mother, protect your child's fragile laugh  
 To be careless is dangerous and criminal.  
 Easier beyond measure to protect your baby  
 Than it is a deafened child to raise.  
 Mother, do not look at our life jestingly,  
 Protect your child from a tender age!  
 But if it is too late, and he's already deaf  
 Then put a book quickly into the child's hands  
 It replaces the hearing of which we're bereft,  
 Helped by labour and science's illumination.  
 Not all understand the pain of the mute,  
 How bitter a world without language; how narrow.  
 For of bright dreams, our life is only a fragment  
 And of your loud songs, only an echo...<sup>60</sup>

58 Ibid., pp. 4-8.

59 Savel'ev (writing as Volgin), cited in Palennyi, *Istoriia* (fn 7), p. 261.

60 VOG Karel'skii otdel, *Beregi slukh!* (fn 29), p. 3 (my translation).

In order to encourage the reader to take the danger of deafness seriously, the poem describes the existence of deaf people as a mere shadow of the joyous life that Soviet people were expected to experience.<sup>61</sup> This sentiment echoed the Commissar of Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii's 1929 speech to the VOG Congress, in which he argued that, as a result of their hearing loss, and by extension their lack of speech, deaf people ›fall from the living cloth of society‹.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, by addressing the poem to a ›careless‹ mother and suggesting that a ›jesting‹ attitude to life stood at the root of deafness, the poem tied deafness to wider discourses of culturedness (*kul'turnost'*), or the promotion of positive habits of everyday life. Indeed, as deafness due to epidemic illness was understood as a particular problem of the countryside, the poem implicitly linked deafness to the ›backwardness‹ of both peasants and women, something that the cultural revolution of early Stalinism sought definitively to overcome.

This framing of deafness as ›backward‹ was widespread in the publications produced by ENT doctors. G.S. Notkin, who produced several of the most widely circulated brochures for the event, quoted Lenin: ›We are achieving all that needs to be achieved, overcoming all of the impediments that were left to us from the old order and that we cannot immediately overturn; we need to re-educate the masses and this can only be done through agitation and propaganda.‹<sup>63</sup> Yet this insistence on viewing deafness as a persistent relic of the old order led to a certain amount of tension between doctors and VOG activists, who were tasked with the organisation of *Beregi slukh!*. Notkin pointed out that in 1932, problems were caused by the failure of deaf activists to organise events and to participate in them in sufficient numbers: ›VOG departments, having oversight and control of the preparation for the running of the three-day *Beregi slukh!* event, barely participated in the mobilisation of wider society and were not in a position to organise the deaf activists to genuinely participate in the event [...]. As a result, almost all the work for the preparation and running of the three-day *Beregi slukh!* event was carried out by Departments of Health Protection or ENT doctors, who were obliged not only to carry out prophylaxis and treatment work, but also organisation and financing.‹<sup>64</sup>

While many of these tensions can be attributed to the usual organisational stresses of running a multi-agency, nationwide event, many of the ways in which *Beregi slukh!* sought to use deaf people to advertise the necessity of preventing deafness – to ›ring the bell!‹ for good ear hygiene, as Palennyi puts it – were evidently uncomfortable for many deaf people.<sup>65</sup> For example, some of the methodological materials for the 1931

61 On celebration and joy, see Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades! Celebrations in the Time of Stalin*, Bloomington 2000.

62 Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF, State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 41.

63 Notkin, *Zadachi i metody* (fn 34), p. 12.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

65 Palennyi, *Istoriia* (fn 7), p. 261.

event suggested that speakers should draw attention to those deaf or hard-of-hearing people in the audience and exhort them to take care of their own ears (which were still susceptible to disease, despite their deafness), to avoid marrying other deaf people and thus passing on their deafness, and to join a deaf organisation, because only VOG will give deaf-mutes back their full social value.<sup>66</sup> The awkwardness of such encounters does not appear to have occurred, however, to those doctors organising and engaging in the event. Instead, they attributed the failure of deaf people to fulfil their duty to a lack of discipline among individual VOG members, and a lack of familiarity on their part with the tasks of the three-day event.<sup>67</sup> As such, they suggested, deaf people merely required further education and training, in order that they could become an unwavering group of activists (*aktiv*) in future events (thus inadvertently reinforcing the framing of deaf people as backward and requiring of transformation).

However, hearing protection was not the only task of *Beregi slukh!*. From its inception, the event had had another goal: to attract the attention of society to the work of the association of deaf-mutes and the procurement of necessary funds to strengthen the activities of VOG.<sup>68</sup> In carrying out this task – secondary in the eyes of doctors and the state, but primary for the deaf community – the deaf activists participating in *Beregi slukh!* were able to put forward a very different understanding of deafness; one that engaged in important ways with Soviet ideology, and which made a powerful case for the place of deaf people, their language and their culture, at the heart of the Stalinist revolution.

#### 4. Visions of Deaf Gain

While ostensibly working towards the same goal – the elimination of deafness as a kind of disability – the documents produced by deaf activists for *Beregi slukh!* are characterised by a strikingly different tone, and put forward a different set of measures to achieve this outcome. A collection of methodological materials put together in 1931, for example, opened with a message to ENT specialists from the chairman of VOG, Savel'ev, who used the opportunity to set out the transformation in the position of deaf people since the revolution: 'From the first days of the October revolution, the worker-peasant government has given deaf-mute workers all rights of citizenship; deaf-mutes have joined the soviets of worker-peasant and Red Army deputies.'<sup>69</sup> Savel'ev spelled out the significance of VOG, founded in 1926 to unite all deaf people and help them to

66 Notkin, *Metodicheskaja razrabotka* (fn 23), p. 8.

67 Notkin, *Zadachi i metody* (fn 34), p. 16.

68 *Postanovlenie Soveta Narodnykh Komissarov RSFSR ot 22/X 1929* [Position of the Soviet of People's Commissars of the RSFSR of 22 October 1929], in: Notkin, *Beregi slukh. Metod razrabotka* (fn 21), p. 13.

69 Savel'ev, *K spetsialistam* (fn 52), p. 1.



find their place in Soviet life. He dwelled on the 2,600 deaf people studying in specially equipped Educational-Industrial Workshops, the 800 deaf people studying in worker night schools (*rabfaki*), the growing network of state-run deaf schools, and the significant number of deaf people working alongside the hearing. For Savel'ev, the task of prophylaxis came as something of an afterthought: ›The introduction of these prophylactic measures can be achieved only by specialists working in the field of diseases of the ear, nose and throat.‹ VOG would offer ›active participation and friendly support‹, but it was implicit in this document that their efforts were needed elsewhere.<sup>70</sup>

These efforts were to be directed primarily towards strengthening the unification of deaf people in VOG and lobbying state organisations to increase support for deaf people. A circular produced by VOG in advance of the 1932 event put forward a set of eight goals for participants, only one of which referred to prophylaxis; the other seven called on state organisations to make education accessible to the deaf, to better serve deaf people in the countryside, to encourage deaf people to enter the factories alongside hearing workers, to open new local VOG cells and to fundraise for VOG activities.<sup>71</sup> The latter was, indeed, a central preoccupation of organisers, who used a variety of means to gather money. For example, the VOG organisation in the Ural region made 60,000 roubles in 1931 by releasing special bonds, which were sold in the railway station alongside train tickets.<sup>72</sup> Local VOG organisations were encouraged to raise money through entertainment, including special theatrical performances, film screenings or sports matches, to be held during the three-day event (instructions to activists made it clear that such events would be freed from state taxes, as per the *Sovnarkom* decree). The suggestion was made that a special markup on alcoholic drinks sold during the three-day festival could also be used to raise funds, although it is not clear if this was ever implemented.<sup>73</sup> While these practices appear strikingly similar to the fundraising activities of Western disability organisations, or to the charitable practices pioneered by the tsarina Mariia Fedorovna in the early 19th century, VOG made it clear that this ›mobilisation of funds‹ did not represent charity, which was understood to deny disabled people's agency, but a means to facilitate the sovietisation of deaf people and their participation in society.<sup>74</sup>

Deaf activists also used *Beregi slukh!* to attract attention to failures of the state to make good on their promises to the deaf community. For example, a 1932 brochure produced by the Karelia branch of VOG devoted particular attention to the ›cavalier attitude‹ displayed by state organisations and industrial enterprises towards deaf

70 Savel'ev, *K spetsialistam* (fn 52), p. 1.

71 *Instruktsiia i plan provedeniia 3-dnevnika ›Beregi slukh‹ v 1932* (fn 55), p. 1.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.* On the rejection of charity by Soviet deaf activists, both before and after the revolution, see Claire Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR. Marginality, Community, and Soviet Identity, 1917–1991*, Ithaca 2017, pp. 26–27, 46.

people. This included the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*), which had not yet managed to include all deaf people in the region in universal education: ›For three years *Narkompros* has given objective reasons; they say they have no premises, teachers, etc, but these reasons are not founded on anything.‹<sup>75</sup> Of the 210 deaf people in the region, only 20 were learning to read and write, and the only premises made available to them was the bedroom of a deaf workers' boarding house. The local VOG workshop had a similar problem with space; a larger shed was needed in order to house the 40 deaf people receiving training in carpentry, but jurisdictional tussles with the local city soviet meant that no new premises were forthcoming.<sup>76</sup> For activists struggling throughout the year to achieve their goals for the deaf community, *Beregi slukh!* offered a real opportunity to draw the attention of wider society to these goals, and to pressure the state to fulfil its responsibilities.

During *Beregi slukh!* deaf activists also made a case for new ways of looking at deafness and the deaf. This pointed to the transformation in attitudes to deafness – and in the lives of deaf people – that was taking place during the Stalin revolution. As I have argued elsewhere, the five-year plans offered an opportunity for deaf people to demonstrate a new kind of capacity – labour capacity (*trudosposobnost'*) – by entering the factories and working alongside the hearing, and by taking advantage of the transformational potential of the factory to ›forge‹ new kinds of Soviet identity.<sup>77</sup> From the beginning of the five-year plan, deaf people were placed in concentrated groups in the factory, served by a sign-language interpreter who facilitated their training, political education and communication with factory management. Deaf people found placements in the most celebrated factories of the industrial revolution and celebrated their ability to ›storm the fortress of industry.‹<sup>78</sup> This narrative was clearly put forward during *Beregi slukh!*: ›Whereas before the organisation of VOG, deaf people were working in industry singly, as untrained labourers, cleaners, etc, or occasionally as draughtsmen [*chertezhniki*] or copyists, in 1932, 19,000 people are employed in enterprises in the socialist sector. [...] There is no area of industry where the labour of deaf people is not employed.‹<sup>79</sup> This employment was seen to directly refute the ›fairy tale‹ that deaf people were not capable of engaging in complex work, or ›that a deaf-mute is not a normal person: this [narrative] has also been smashed to smithereens.‹<sup>80</sup>

In these discussions, the idea of eliminating deafness meant something rather different: not removing the medical fact of hearing loss, but creating the conditions in which deafness would no longer be a ›tragedy,‹ thanks to the development of deaf people's capacities and the elimination of barriers to their success. Many of the *Beregi slukh!* brochures were explicit in their promotion of deaf people's usefulness to the

75 VOG Karel'skii otdel, *Beregi slukh!* (fn 29), p. 8.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

77 Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR* (fn 74).

78 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

79 VOG Karel'skii otdel, *Beregi slukh!* (fn 29), p. 7.

80 *Ibid.*

state through their labour: ›At the present time the fundamental mass of deaf-mutes works in enterprises in the socialist sector: they participate in socialist competition and shock work, they do not fall behind the hearing in the productivity of their work and in the quality of the goods they produce. They earn no less for their work, and sometimes even more than the hearing.‹<sup>81</sup> Indeed, the ability of deaf people to advance further in the workplace and to become Stakhanovites (hero workers who exceeded the norms of production and were rewarded accordingly) was central to this narrative.<sup>82</sup> This shift to what we might now recognise as the ›social model‹ of disability – the theory, pioneered in Britain in the 1970s, that social barriers, rather than individual physical impairment, were the cause of disability – was very different to the medical narrative of *Beregi slukh!*, but in fact stemmed from the same Marxist theories that underpinned notions of prophylaxis: the social context, rather than the individual body, was seen as central to comprehending and tackling the obstacles that impeded individual and collective progress.<sup>83</sup>

*Beregi slukh!* was thus transformed by the deaf community from a self-abnegating warning of the dangers of deafness into an opportunity to propagandise their transformation to hearing workers and to show the leap they had taken from ›backwardness‹ to the ›first ranks‹ of the Soviet industrial proletariat. Yet the discussion of deaf people in industry went beyond questions of equality to become a wider conversation about the particular capacities and culture of deaf people. For example, one of the key platforms of *Beregi slukh!* was the promotion of deaf labour in the noisiest parts of the factory, such as boiler rooms. In these contexts, the visual capacities of deaf people, their ability to communicate in sign language over the noise of the machines, and to be less distracted by the noisy environment than their hearing peers, were particular assets that became sought after in the Soviet industrial environment. Not only that, but the celebration of visuality was also viewed as a tool in the wider prophylactic goals of *Beregi slukh!*: by employing deaf people in the noisiest sectors of industry, the hearing would in turn be protected, able to work in quieter parts of the factory and avoid exposure to noise that would threaten their ears: ›But as such measures [to eliminate factory noise] are insufficient, and it is sometimes impossible to find out whether work involving noise and banging is dangerous for every worker, it would be sensible to employ for this work those who are deaf or hard of hearing from birth or from other causes. Deaf and deaf-mute people cope very well with this type of work.‹<sup>84</sup>

81 Savel'ev, *K spetsialistam* (fn 52), p. 1.

82 See Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR* (fn 74), pp. 65–66.

83 On the Marxist underpinnings of the social model, see Colin Barnes, *A Brief History of Discrimination and Disabled People*, in: Lennard J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd ed. New York 2010, pp. 20–32, here pp. 27–28. For a critical reading of the social model, see Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*, Abingdon 2006.

84 Ronov, *Prochti i zapomni!* (fn 19).

In the context of the factory, therefore, one type of deafness could function as a solution to another: through their labour, deaf people could take on tasks that would be dangerous to the hearing, and thus prove their worth in the Soviet industrial landscape. At the same time, deaf people's ability to communicate above the din of the factory floor hints at a very different sensory experience of the factory, one marked by the visual and the tactile, which coexisted with the perilous soundscape of Soviet industrialisation that marked the narratives of *Beregi slukh!*. This shift, from the fear of ›hearing loss‹ to the celebration of ›Deaf Gain‹, has been noted in other individual contexts, such as the routine hiring of deaf workers at the Goodyear tyre factory in Akron, Ohio.<sup>85</sup> Its implementation on a national level by the Soviet government spoke not only to the Soviet state's commitment to a ›rational‹ approach to the hiring of its workforce (i.e. seeking to employ those best suited to the auditory environment), but also to the belief in the transformative power of labour, which would enable deaf people to become ›conscious and active builders of a classless socialist society‹.<sup>86</sup> Yet it also resulted in the institutionalisation of deaf cultural practices at the heart of the Soviet factory, and the celebration of the visual within the bounds of *Beregi slukh!*.

While Soviet deaf culture is by its nature ephemeral, it too can be traced in *Beregi slukh!* newspapers and publications. In a description of the Moscow Deaf Club published in the first *Beregi slukh!* newspaper in 1930, the hearing journalist Tatiana Tess found workers animatedly discussing the five-year plan in sign language, ›someone's hand waving in the air and making a few jerky movements to attract attention, clicking and flicking to ask their questions‹.<sup>87</sup> In another room, a meeting of the ›Military Circle‹ prompts her to consider why someone ›who cannot hear the sound of a shot or the thunder of battle‹ should not be permitted to fight in the military.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, many events during the three days of *Beregi slukh!* appear designed to facilitate such encounters between the hearing and the deaf, and to familiarise hearing people with aspects of deaf culture, including sign language: fundraising postcards were printed with the finger alphabet, and excursions were organised for workers and schoolchildren to visit schools for the deaf and deaf clubs to view the work being done there.<sup>89</sup>

Alongside the methodological and informational texts produced for *Beregi slukh!*, the event also saw the wide distribution of *Exploded Silence* (*Vzorvannaia tishina*), Mikhail Shorin's memoir of the first generation of deaf *rabfak* (worker night school) students.<sup>90</sup> The memoir makes a strong case for the inclusion of deaf people in all

85 Kati Morton, *Gainful Employment: Historical Examples from Akron, Ohio*, in: Bauman/Murray, *Deaf Gain* (fn 12), pp. 306-320, here p. 318.

86 Palennyi, *Istoriia* (fn 7), p. 350.

87 Tatiana Tess, *Do-zvi-danna*, in: *Beregi slukh!*, 16 March 1930, p. 1.

88 *Ibid.*

89 See, for example, *Pedagogu o trekh dnevnike ›Beregi slukh‹* (fn 57), p. 8.

90 Mikhail Shorin, *Vzorvannaia tishina* [Silence Exploded], in: V.A. Palennyi/Ia.B. Pichugin (eds), *Vspolokhi tishiny* [Flashes of Silence], Moscow 2012, pp. 121-186.

aspects of education and labour, and discusses the many obstacles facing these pioneering students in their attempt to pursue an education. Yet it is also replete with descriptions of deaf cultural practices and experiences. Shorin discusses standing in the entrance of the *rabfak*, in the midst of crowds of hearing students, signing animatedly with his friends, each of whom had been christened (or ›Octobered‹, in Soviet parlance), with sign names like *Scar*, *Little Hedgehog* or *Professor*. Shorin explains: ›If [deaf people] want to say that someone is red-haired, they must first touch their index finger to their bottom lip, and then run their palm along their hair, which indicates red hair.‹<sup>91</sup> Such glimpses offer rare evidence of the ephemeral visual and sensory experiences of the deaf factory brigade, which represented the most common form of employment for deaf people in this period.

Within the bounds of *Beregi slukh!*, therefore, the deaf community found ways to celebrate and promote their own collective cultural identity, something that was not only facilitated but actively fostered by the Stalin revolution. As such, the growing cultural confidence of the deaf community enabled them to push back at some of the more damaging narratives fostered by *Beregi slukh!*, summed up by Shorin as the attitudes of those who ›do not consider deaf people to be human beings at all!‹.<sup>92</sup> For example, he devotes space to the debate over deaf intermarriage, making clear his view that it is not necessarily the best thing for children, who will either be born deaf or grow up to be culturally estranged from their parents, while also giving voice to those who see this as a question not of health, but of culture: ›A successful marriage between a deaf-mute and a normal hearing girl is a rarity in our time [...] Husband and wife in that case would have different interests from the start of their marriage and soon divorce.‹<sup>93</sup>

While deaf participation in *Beregi slukh!* pushed these alternative narratives, it would be a mistake to define this activism as outright resistance to Soviet models of identity and notions of belonging. Even Shorin's spirited defence of the capacities of deaf people and their own cultural traditions was shaped by dominant narrative tropes that would later become codified as Socialist Realism. The deaf students in his memoir undergo transformative struggles to emerge as conscious, ideal members of the Soviet proletariat, willing to give their all to the construction of communism. As Shorin concludes, the significance of his memoir, and his *rabfak* experience, is that ›a person who has lost one of the most important sensory organs will not become socially obsolete: deaf people can be Soviet too.‹<sup>94</sup> Yet the promotion of the capacities and the culture of deaf people challenged the dominant narratives of prophylaxis during *Beregi slukh!*, and raised questions about how deafness might be overcome, and even whether it should. At the same time, it had the effect of creating a deaf community apart, secure in its usefulness to the state, but existing at arm's length from the hearing.

91 Shorin, *Vzrovannaia tishina* (fn 90), p. 135.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

## 5. Conclusion

The narratives of *Beregi slukh!* thus return us to the tension at the heart of the Stalin revolution with which this article opened: the five-year plans envisaged the physical and industrial transformation of the Soviet body politic, yet did so in ways that often imperilled the bodies of Soviet individuals. In the 1930s, the risk of noise-induced hearing damage put the problem of deafness on the state's agenda and raised important questions of prophylaxis and health protection, questions that this three-day event sought ultimately to solve. These concerns swiftly moved beyond the factory to encompass other causes of deafness, from epidemic disease to genetics, as Soviet theorists made it clear that the future of socialism would be free of almost all disabilities.<sup>95</sup> The activities promoted by VOG and other state organs, particularly the Leningrad ENT Institute, thus framed deafness as a relic of the backward past, one that would inevitably be overcome when communism was finally reached.

Alongside these negative visions of the elimination of hearing loss, *Beregi slukh!* put forward alternative narratives of deafness that emphasised Deaf Gain and the particular culture and capacities of deaf people. This vision drew on Soviet ideology that viewed industrial labour as a site of transcendence, making the case for deaf people's sovietness through their ability to work, study and participate in social life. Yet at the same time, deaf people's successes were an opportunity to advertise a different way to look at deafness: as a culture, a language, and a way of life that were eminently compatible with socialism. Indeed, in promoting deaf people in the ›noisy shop‹, VOG activists posited deafness not as a problem, but as a solution, and reframed the problematic soundscape of the Soviet factory as a visual space in which sign language could foster the types of collectivity that were simply inaccessible to hearing workers, who were alienated from their work and from each other by intense noise. While this narrative had its practical imperatives, particularly the gathering of funds and the lobbying of state industry on behalf of VOG, it also stood as a powerful argument for the place of deaf culture at the heart of the Soviet experiment.

It is not clear why *Beregi slukh!* ended after 1937. Perhaps it was a victim of circumstance: many prominent members of VOG, particularly in Leningrad, were inadvertently caught up in the Purges, and it is possible that the growing threat of war simply turned the state's attention to other, more pressing matters.<sup>96</sup> Yet it is also plausible that the tensions between these two visions of deafness – and between VOG and the specialists who promoted them – simply made the continuation of the three-day event untenable. *Beregi slukh!* put forward two conflicting dreams of the Soviet future: a future of no deafness, or a future in which deaf people took their place alongside the hearing in the ›first ranks‹ of the industrial proletariat and celebrated their own particular

95 Kovaneva, Pervyi (fn 26), p. 1.

96 See Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR* (fn 74), pp. 74-75.

culture and experiences. In its combination of approaches, constituencies and attitudes, the three-day event attempted to promote both of these dreams: as such, one might argue that it failed to effectively promote either.

This tension – and the resulting activism of the deaf community on behalf of their own culture and place as Soviet people – remained central to the Soviet experience of deafness. Deafness was not eliminated over time: while the prophylactic policies promoted by *Beregi Slukh!* did lessen its incidence, babies continued to be born deaf, and cataclysmic events such as the Second World War, epidemics of disease, and the use of new, deafness-causing drugs such as Streptomycin from the 1940s created new waves of deaf people to replenish the ranks of VOG. In the context of wider, post-war policy shifts, the discourses around disability also changed, moving away from notions of individual ›overcoming‹, to foreground welfare and the reception of benefits from a benevolent state as central to Soviet identity.<sup>97</sup> Even among the deaf activists within VOG, the idea of deafness as a ›tragedy of fate‹ remained prevalent.<sup>98</sup> Yet faith in socialism as a means to negate the impact of disability, and the fostering of a distinctly Soviet deaf community that combined a unique visual culture with a political commitment to the ideals and practices of the revolution, continued to endure. While the utopian vision of a world without deafness faded, the alternative utopia of the Soviet deaf community put forward during *Beregi Slukh!* would persist until the last days of the Soviet experiment.

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97 Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR* (fn 74), p. 101.

98 *Ibid.*, p. 6.