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“We Have No Need to Lock Ourselves Away”: Space, Marginality, and the Negotiation of Deaf Identity in Late Soviet Moscow

Claire Shaw

At a meeting of the Moscow branch of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf in 1959, the discussion turned to the local deaf movie night, held every week at the Khronika cinema in the center of the city. A deaf activist, Mokhanov, reported that audience members had been milling in the street outside the cinema, disrupting traffic, and making a nuisance of themselves: “Why are deaf-mutes crowding in the street? For five minutes they run around like mad people. Can that be allowed?”¹ The chairman of the society, Pavel Kirillovich Sutiagin, reassured the meeting that the situation was temporary, as the deaf community in Moscow would soon have their own House of Culture in which they could socialize in a way that would not disturb their hearing neighbors. Yet Sutiagin admitted that deaf people’s visible “otherness” in public, and the growing divide between the deaf and hearing communities, was troubling: “Whose fault is it that we are uncultured, that deaf people don’t understand how to speak in the streets? . . . We have no need to lock ourselves away behind the walls of our House of Culture. The more that deaf people associate with the hearing, the better. But it has turned out the other way around.”²

In the late Soviet period, the deaf began to define themselves more and more through their use of urban space.³ The 1920s and 1930s had seen the development of an active and independent deaf community, defined by the institutional structures of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf (Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh, VOG), but it was in the postwar period that this community became more physically present in the urban cityscape. In the late

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1. Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv goroda Moskvy (TsGA Moskvy, formerly TsAGM), fond (f.) 3010 (Moscow City Directorate of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf), opis’ (op.) 1, delo (d.) 192, list (l.) 14. The Soviet deaf community officially made the transition from using the term *deaf-mute* (*glukhonemoi*) to *deaf* (*glukhoi*) in public discourse in the late 1950s, yet *deaf-mute* was still routinely used by activists; I therefore use *deaf-mute* when translating from the original source material. Although it has become the convention in western scholarship to capitalize the adjective *Deaf* for those who see themselves as belonging to a culturally defined deaf community, this has political connotations specific to the west (and particularly the United States), and as such I do not follow that convention here.

2. *Ibid.*, 1. 22.

3. Following Alexei Yurchak, I define the late Soviet era as the years from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s; the discussion in this article, however, will confine itself approximately to the years 1954–70. Alexei Yurchak, “Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 3 (July 2003): 480.

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1950s, VOG embarked on an ambitious program to build industrial, social, and living spaces for deaf people in Moscow and other cities across the Soviet Union which would be completed and brought into use well into the 1970s. This building program was conceptualized in particularly Soviet terms, as the next step in the coming into being of a cultured and independent new Soviet (deaf) person, liberated from marginalization by the enlightened social policies of the Soviet state and able to participate in the building of communism alongside their hearing comrades. These new buildings were the ultimate expression of deaf agency: funded by profits made through the deaf society's industrial workshops; in many cases, designed by deaf engineers and built by deaf builders; and serving deaf workers, students, and activists across the city. The creation of these specialized buildings was thus seen both to confirm deaf people's place in Soviet society and to facilitate their transformation into "cultured" Soviet citizens.

The creation of purpose-built deaf institutional spaces played a central part in the continuing development of a deaf community identity in the Soviet Union.⁴ As the geographer and deaf studies scholar Mike Gulliver has argued, the existence of "deaf space" has a practical and conceptual impact on the development of a sense of deaf community:

Although deaf people share the same physical *spaces* as the hearing world, . . . they are excluded from many of the interactions that define the *places* of the hearing world. Instead [deaf space] is created by sharing and interaction lived out in the visually interactive world of sign language. . . . The knowledges that produce them (and the knowledges that are produced within them) have developed over time in ways that make them profoundly different in nature and priority from those of hearing people.⁵

Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre and the scholars of the "disability geography" school, Gulliver argues that deaf space is "produced" as a distinct reality, which emerges as deaf people gather together as a community and author their "being in the world" through interactions in natural sign languages.⁶ These deaf spaces might be spontaneously occurring or institutionally framed, set aside from the hearing world or existing within the structures of hearing society. By congregating together to experience the world visually,

4. On the social and cultural history of the deaf community in the late Soviet era, see V. A. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiskogo obshchestva glukhikh*, 3 vols. (Moscow, 2007–11); Susan Burch, "Transcending Revolutions: The Tsars, the Soviets and Deaf Culture," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 393–99; Anastasia Kayiatos, "Sooner Speaking Than Silent, Sooner Silent Than Mute: Soviet Deaf Theatre and Pantomime after Stalin," *Theatre Survey* 51, no. 1 (May 2010): 5–31; and Claire Shaw, "'Speaking in the Language of Art': Soviet Deaf Theatre and the Politics of Identity during Khrushchev's Thaw," *Slavonic and East European Review* 91, no. 4 (October 2013): 759–86.

5. Mike Gulliver, "Places of Silence," in Francis M. Vanclay, Matthew Higgins, and Adam Blackshaw, eds., *Making Sense of Place: Exploring the Concepts and Expressions of Place through Different Senses and Lenses* (Canberra, 2008), 91. Emphasis in the original. See also Michael Stuart Gulliver, "DEAF Space, a History: The Production of DEAF Spaces: Emergent, Autonomous, Located and Disabled in 18th and 19th Century France" (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2009), 30.

6. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991), 195. On the significance of Lefebvre for disability studies, see Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability* (London, 1999), 47–49.

deaf people thus create a space (and an identity) for themselves that is distinct from the orally dominated spaces of mainstream, hearing society.⁷ In Soviet Moscow, the creation of institutional deaf spaces gave concrete form to a community united, not by physical “lack,” but by a set of social, cultural, and linguistic traditions that marked it out as distinct within the broader Soviet collective.

While deaf space can be seen as a means to assert a positive deaf identity, the existence of such distinct community spaces, separated to a greater or lesser extent from hearing space, inevitably had an impact on the way in which this identity was viewed by hearing society.⁸ Gathering deaf people together made them increasingly visible in the eyes of the hearing Soviet population, and the development of deaf areas of the city made their presence within hearing space—and their identity as a community—a source of fascination and, at certain points, concern. Deaf people chatting in the street may not have represented a significant menace to public order, but as a manifestation of visible otherness, it directly challenged the ideals of Soviet homogeneity. This has particular significance in relation to our understanding of the late Soviet era as a time of increased intolerance of marginal groups; recent scholarship has argued that “the post-war body politic was founded on the integration of a select collective to the exclusion of those thought to be less worthy or considered as too ambiguous.”⁹ This exclusion has often been conceptualized in spatial terms in discussions of exile and ghettoization; historians such as Stephen Kotkin, Dan Healey, Monica Rüthers, and Juliane Fürst, in particular, have traced the significance of urban space in the construction of “other” social identities in the USSR.¹⁰ This prevailing view of Soviet social—and spatial—

7. For more on the “oral” nature of early Soviet culture, see Michael S. Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, 2003).

8. I define *identity* as a form of individual or collective self-definition that developed in dialogue with the shifting frameworks of identity promoted by the Soviet state, building on the work of Jochen Hellbeck, who argues that the impact of Soviet revolutionary practice on individuals’ sense of self “was not repressive, but productive.” Jochen Hellbeck, “Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts,” *Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (July 2001): 341. This research also engages with recent scholarship on deaf identity which examines the ways in which deaf communities shape their own individual and collective selfhoods in dialogue with the norms of hearing society. See, for example, Karen Nakamura, *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca, 2006); and Christopher Krentz, *Writing Deafness: The Hearing Line in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill, 2007).

9. Juliane Fürst, Polly Jones, and Susan Morrissey, “The Relaunch of the Soviet Project, 1945–1964: Introduction,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 86, no. 2 (April 2008): 203. For more on exclusionary practices in the late Soviet era, see Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca, 2009); and Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Social Parasites: How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 47, nos. 1–2 (January–June 2006): 377–408. On exclusion during the Stalin era, see Paul Hagenloh, *Stalin’s Police: Public Order and Mass Repression in the USSR, 1926–1941* (Washington, D.C., 2009); and Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin’s Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926–1936* (Ithaca, 2003).

10. See Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995), 157–97; Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago, 2001), 29–31; Monica Rüthers, “The Moscow Gorky

practices as exclusionary is especially prevalent in the literature surrounding disability: as Robert Dale has pointed out, the majority of this scholarship has focused on disabled veterans of World War II and traced how disabled individuals were “excluded from work places, pushed aside by welfare bureaucracies, failed by medical institutions, and marginalized by wider society.”¹¹ Such narratives of marginalization also correspond to Cold War frameworks: as European and U.S. disability advocates moved toward discourses of mainstreaming and a rejection of institutionalization in the 1960s, the continued existence of exclusionary practices in the USSR only served to further underline the “inhumane” nature of the Soviet state and society.¹²

Viewing the disabled as passive victims of Soviet exclusionary practices, however, does not allow for the exploration of certain disabled groups’ agency in the construction of their own community identity or indeed in the furtherance of their own position of marginality within wider Soviet society.¹³ In this article, I thus seek to explore the phenomenon of the Soviet deaf community and its presence in urban space in order to pose bigger questions about the nature of Soviet identity and the influence of alternative social groupings in the later Soviet Union. The existence of marginal communities in the Soviet social landscape has often been interpreted as a pointed challenge by alternative groups to Soviet social cohesion or as evidence of the Soviet state’s insistence on excluding those who could not conform to narrow social norms. Yet such interpretations often obscure the complex relationship between empowerment and marginality that existed within Soviet social policy and the everyday experiences of disabled communities. In the case of the deaf, the creation of a separate space and community was not driven by the marginalizing zeal of the Soviet state but rather emerged as an unintended consequence

Street in Late Stalinism: Space, History and Lebenswelten,” in Juliane Fürst, ed., *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention* (London, 2006), 247–68; and Juliane Fürst, *Stalin’s Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford, 2010), 172–73. See also David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford, 2002).

11. Robert Dale, “The Valaam Myth and the Fate of Leningrad’s Disabled Veterans,” *Russian Review* 72, no. 2 (April 2013): 260–84, 261. On exclusion and disability, see Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society* (Oxford, 2008), 81–101; Beate Fieseler, “The Bitter Legacy of the ‘Great Patriotic War’: Red Army Disabled Soldiers under Late Stalinism,” in Juliane Fürst, ed., *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention* (London, 2006), 46–61; and Sarah D. Phillips, “‘There Are No Invalids in the USSR!’: A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2009): n.p.

12. See, for example, Colin Barnes, “A Brief History of Discrimination and Disabled People,” in Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York, 2010), 27–28. A notable example of the negative coverage of Soviet institutions for the disabled was seen in the response to Ruben Gallego’s Booker Prize-winning memoir *White on Black*, described by the *New York Times* as “a groundbreaking exposé of the Soviet Union’s abuse of the handicapped.” Boris Fishman, “A Prize Novel Full of Truths That Stretch Believability,” *New York Times*, September 4, 2004, at www.nytimes.com/2004/09/04/books/04gall.html (last accessed September 15, 2014).

13. Foregrounding disabled groups’ agency also challenges the volumes of disability studies that focus on disabled spaces as “cultural locations of disability in which disabled people find themselves deposited, often against their will.” Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability* (Chicago, 2006), 3. Emphasis in the original.

of attempts to emancipate the deaf from marginality and disenfranchisement. Examining the active participation of VOG activists in the development of the spatial practices discussed here thus reveals a much more complex relationship between inclusion and exclusion, marginality and integration, in the experiences of disabled communities in the late Soviet period.

The Construction of the Late Soviet Deaf Community

In many ways, the late Soviet era can be viewed as the golden age of Soviet deafness.¹⁴ This period saw the deaf community come into its own, facilitated by a fully developed institutional and social framework, which built on revolutionary understandings of deafness to assert a positive community identity. Before the revolution, deaf people had been equated with the insane and kept under legal guardianship, in the belief that their lack of language made them mentally deficient.¹⁵ When the Bolsheviks seized power, their new theories of selfhood and society had provoked a reconceptualization of what it meant to be deaf. The idea of the new Soviet person, an ideal individual who succeeded in overcoming personal and social obstacles to become a rational, politically conscious, and selfless member of society, radically recast the significance of physical “defect.” No longer a tragedy that would blight an individual’s life, disability became another practical obstacle to be tackled on the road to Soviet subjectivity.¹⁶ As Lev Semenovich Vygotskii, the leading Soviet theorist of child development, insisted in 1924, “As a labor apparatus, as a human machine, the body of a deaf-mute barely differs from the body of a normal person and, consequently, a deaf person retains all the fullness of physical possibilities, bodily development, the acquisition of skills, and labor abilities.”¹⁷ By tackling the immediate social consequences of their “defect,” by learning to work and to participate in social life, deaf people would be able to become full-fledged members of Soviet society.

Deaf people viewed their desire to fulfil the “promise of October” and become equal Soviet citizens as the driving force behind the creation of a politically active Soviet deaf community: “If Marxist theory states that ‘the emancipation of the proletariat is the work of the proletariat,’ then we say ‘the renaissance of deaf-mutes and their awakening to conscious, creative life is

14. Paddy Ladd defines the utopian notion of a deaf golden age as characterized by “literacy and pride in all things deaf,” commonly identified as the period of history before sign language was sidelined in favor of oralist education. While the signposts of deaf history are different in the Russian and Soviet contexts, the term remains apposite. Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Clevedon, 2003), 394.

15. See A. K. Gauger, ed., *Zakony grazhdanskie* (Sv. Zak., t. 10, ch. 1, izd. 1914) so vklucheniem pozdneishikh zakoneniĭ rasiasheniĭ po resheniiam Obsh. sobr. i Grazhd. kass. depart. Pravit. senata s 1866 po 1914 g (vkluchitel’no) (Petrograd, 1915), Statute 381, 129.

16. Indeed, as Lilya Kaganovsky has argued, the disabled individual was often cast as a Soviet hero, marked out by his ability to defy his body and prove his rational Soviet “consciousness.” Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh, 2008).

17. L. S. Vygotskii, “K psikhologii i pedagogike detskoi defektivnosti,” in L. S. Vygotskii, ed., *Voprosy vospitaniia slepykh, glukhonemykh i umstvenno-otstalykh detei: Sbornik statei i materialov* (Moscow, 1924), 21.

work for the hands of deaf-mutes themselves.”¹⁸ This Marxist interpretation of individual and collective agency provided the impetus for the creation of deaf grass-roots organizations, which sought to facilitate deaf people’s integration into hearing society through the provision of sign-language interpretation, literacy courses, work placement in state factories, and further education for deaf adults in night schools.¹⁹ These grass-roots organizations were united in 1926 in the All-Russian Society of Deaf-Mutes, a deaf-run national organization under the auspices of the People’s Commissariat of Social Welfare.²⁰ VOG had significant successes in the Stalin era, helping deaf individuals find work in “deaf brigades” in the giant construction projects of Stalin’s first Five-Year Plan, achieve educational qualifications, and gain specialist skills in order to work in industry and aspire to recognition as shock workers and Stakhanovites.²¹

While these activities fostered the symbolic integration of deaf people into the structures of Soviet society, this process of deaf politicization also saw the development of a deaf community identity, defined increasingly in spatial terms. Soviet state organs promoted a policy known as “concentration” (*koncentratsiia*): the gathering of deaf people in groups such as work brigades, study groups, political education “cells,” and social clubs, all functioning in the medium of sign language, in order to facilitate their education and training.²² This policy resulted in transforming a disparate and varied collection of deaf individuals into a community defined by deafness and gathered in particular social spaces. During the 1930s, evenings would find most deaf workers at their local VOG club, at which they could meet, chat, and enjoy some form of educational entertainment. Alongside the social club, another significant place in this developing deaf geography was the Educational-Industrial Workshop (*Uchebno-proizvoditel’noe masterskoe*, UPM), where VOG members could learn labor skills. The UPM represented an economic and social center for deaf people and often became the hub in which the deaf community gathered, establishing other related deaf spaces such as student dormitories, social meeting places, and even deaf shops—a practice so prevalent that the deaf historian E. A. Sil’ianova has referred to these locales as “deaf towns” (*goroda glukhikh*).²³ In Moscow, the largest of these deaf towns could be found in the *Tekstil’shchiki* region, around Moscow UPM No. 1.

From the early Soviet period, therefore, this developing deaf space allowed for the development of a distinct deaf community identity, an experi-

18. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. A-511 (Central Directorate of the All-Russian Society of the Deaf), op. 1, d. 45, 1. 3.

19. For an overview of the development of the Soviet deaf community in the early revolutionary period, see Claire Shaw, “Deaf in the USSR: ‘Defect’ and the New Soviet Person” (PhD diss., University College London, 2011), 75–119.

20. For more on the foundation of VOG, see Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhikh*, vol. 1; and V. G. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh: Istoriia, razvitiie, perspektivy* (Leningrad, 1985).

21. Shaw, “Deaf in the USSR,” 89–92.

22. GARF, f. R-5575, op. 8, d. 2, 1. 116; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 21, 1. 11.

23. E. A. Sil’ianova, “Goroda glukhikh,” in V. A. Palennyi and Ia. B. Pichugin, eds., *Materialy tret’ego Moskovskogo simpoziuma po istorii glukhikh* (Moscow, 2001), 229.

ence of the city that, as Gulliver suggests, was primarily visually mediated and defined by sign language.²⁴ Yet in the early Soviet period this developing spatial and institutional world remained in many ways ad hoc and incomplete, serving only those deaf individuals who sought out its services, and dependent on the goodwill of local soviets to provide deaf clubs and workshops with suitable buildings. After the devastation of WWII, however, VOG, and its Moscow city branch in particular, began work to establish a new, more permanent, and more specialized form of deaf space, including deaf housing.²⁵ This attempt to build deaf space stemmed in part from the mass urban housing program instigated under Nikita Khrushchev that, as Mark Smith has suggested, “transformed the Soviet cityscape . . . [and] helped to modify residents’ ideological consciousness within the new microdistricts.”²⁶ Deaf building projects echoed the concerns of the housing program, in particular the “obsession with square meters” and the need for central planning and targets.²⁷ At the same time, however, the creation of new buildings was driven by changes within the Soviet deaf community. The first of these was the central role played by VOG in deaf people’s lives, particularly in the capital: by 1949, 96 percent of deaf Muscovites were VOG members.²⁸ The second was the institution’s growing financial power: in 1954, after a fundamental reorganization of VOG’s system of deaf workshops, now known as Educational-Industrial Enterprises (Uchebno-proizvoditel’nye predpriiatii, UPP), the society declared that its revenues were sufficient to enable it to function without any further financial support from the state.²⁹

This money, earned by deaf workers and topped up by yearly membership fees, began to be channeled into capital building projects. In November 1958, VOG pledged to spend 1 million rubles on new deaf housing in Moscow’s Cheremushki region.³⁰ In 1960, the society built new premises for Moscow UPP No. 1, as well as a five-story red-brick apartment block to house deaf families, in Moscow’s Tekstil’shchiki region, where, according to the deaf historian Alla Borisovna Slavina, the “spirit of collectivism reigned.”³¹ Between 1959 and 1962, the society built 25,195 square meters of housing for deaf workers in the RSFSR, followed by another 12,000 by 1966. The organization also provided money for the building of a deaf sanatorium outside Moscow, the refurbishment of clubs, red corners, and houses of culture, and provided funds for furnishing and remodeling existing deaf society buildings.³² At the request of

24. Gulliver, “Places of Silence,” 91.

25. See P. Moiseev, “Kapital’noe stroitel’stvo,” *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, 1959, no. 7: 5; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 398, ll. 2–18; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 446, l. 21; and GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 654, ll. 44, 50.

26. Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb, 2010), 101.

27. *Ibid.* All deaf building projects needed to be cleared by Gosplan, which had the effect of delaying construction in many cases. See, for example, GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 469, l. 2.

28. Alla Slavina, “Pripomnim vek minuvshii,” *Russkii invalid*, no. 11 (2012): 7.

29. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiiskogo obshchestva glukhikh*, 1:505.

30. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 469, l. 70.

31. Slavina, “Pripomnim vek minuvshii,” 7.

32. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, 201–4.

the state, VOG also gave significant funds to build and expand deaf boarding schools, despite these schools being outside the society's own purview.³³

This was not simply a matter of providing adequate living and working spaces for deaf people, although that was still a pressing concern following the devastation of the war. These buildings spoke of the deaf community's aspiration to be seen by the hearing as equal Soviet citizens, marked out by their level of education, skills, and culture. This assertion of a distinct social and cultural identity echoes Susan Reid's interpretation of the post-Stalin era as engendering "the articulation of distinct social identities and re-emergence of civil society."³⁴ The most prestigious of the new cultural spaces was the 6,400-square-meter Central (Republican) Palace of Culture on Izmailovskii bul'var, officially opened on Vladimir Lenin's ninety-ninth birthday, in 1969. This bright and modern building housed a fully equipped, 800-seat theater, home to the country's first professional deaf theater company, the Theater of Sign and Gesture (Teatr mimiki i zhesta), which had been officially registered with the state in 1963. Above the theater there was space for a library, six reception halls, offices, a café, and the beginnings of what would become the Museum of the History of VOG.³⁵ The Palace of Culture became the deaf community's cultural hub, the home to a number of cultural clubs and amateur circles, including the Tuning Fork literacy group and the Knowledge society, as well as the editorial offices of the Moscow deaf-society magazine, *World of the Deaf*.³⁶

For deaf members of VOG, the building of such specialized, well-equipped space represented the culmination of their development as Soviet people. By funding their own buildings, they could demonstrate what the society's charter so proudly declared, that thanks to "the development of the organizational independence and political activity of deaf-mutes, our Society has grown into one of the most prominent social organizations, which last year declined state subsidies and lives and works by its own means."³⁷ From 1967, VOG also began to actively participate in the planning and building of this deaf space through its own Specialist Design and Technical Planning Bureau (Spetsial'noe konstruktorskoe proektno-tekhnologicheskoe biuro), which produced plans for industrial and living space for deaf people and was responsible for organizing the production of furniture, equipment, and technical gadgetry to improve the lives of deaf people through the network of UPPs.³⁸ This further cemented the notion of deaf space as an expression of a particularly Soviet form of agency.³⁹

33. Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiskogo obshchestva glukhikh*, 1:553.

34. Susan E. Reid, "The Exhibition Art of Socialist Countries, Moscow 1958–9, and the Contemporary Style of Painting," in Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2000), 101.

35. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 1849, 1. 10.

36. Slavina, "Pripomnim vek minuvshii," 7.

37. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 353, 1. 4.

38. See Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiskogo obshchestva glukhikh*, 1:564.

39. Similar trends can be seen in the blind community at this time. Like VOG, the All-Russian Society of the Blind (Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo slepykh, VOS) began a building campaign in the late 1950s, following state legislation and fundamental restructuring of

For members of VOG, therefore, the construction of their own space was representative of their coming into being as Soviet people and of the establishment of their own place within the Soviet landscape. In turn, this space was viewed as a tool in the further construction of their Soviet selves. As the head of the Moscow branch of VOG pointed out in 1970, "In recent years, hundreds of members of the Society have received new flats. Two excellent houses of culture and a library with 20,000 books are at Muscovites' disposal. The possibilities for VOG members to develop their tastes and talents are wide and limitless."⁴⁰ While the particular "deafness" of the space itself was never in doubt, this cultural difference was seen as a different modality of Sovietness. In fact, a significant aspect of this deaf golden age was the push to encourage hearing people to engage with this deaf space and to bear witness to the Soviet transformation of the deaf community: the Theater of Sign and Gesture, for example, advertised to hearing audiences and dubbed their sign-language performances into spoken Russian to facilitate inclusivity.⁴¹ Yet however much the deaf community stressed their sense of belonging to the Soviet body politic, the existence of this distinct deaf space, and a distinct deaf identity, marked them out as other in the eyes of the hearing and opened them up to new, and sometimes troubling, interpretations.

Reading Deaf Community Identity

Deafness is sometimes referred to as an "invisible" disability. Being deaf is not seen on the body, and without other markers of difference, such as hearing aids or cochlear implants, it is impossible for a bystander to recognize an individual as deaf. This liminality represented a powerful tool in the fight for deaf equality. As Vygotskii had affirmed in 1924, deafness did not prevent an individual from wielding a hammer or working a metal lathe, and this physical prowess was used to great effect by deaf people in the early revolutionary years to "blend in" to the Soviet body politic. The emergence of institutionalized deaf space in the 1960s, however, with its attendant emphasis on sign-language culture, had the result of embodying deafness and making it visible. Within Moscow, certain areas of the city became known for their association with the deaf community, such as the headquarters of VOG's Moscow branch on Sretenskii Tupik, the deaf housing blocks in Cheremushki, the Palace of Culture on Izmailovskii bul'var, and the deaf dormitories near UPP No. 1 in Tekstil'shchiki.⁴² In these locales, when deaf people came together and began

the organization. It is clear that "blind space" was not conceptualized in the same way as deaf space, however; the particular needs of the blind community meant that blind spaces were inward facing and supportive rather than seeking to advertise blindness to the sighted world, and no evidence has yet been found of social concerns over the behavior of the blind in this period. See F. I. Shoev, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo slepykh i ego deiatel'nost'* (Moscow, 1965), 88–90.

40. I. I. Snetkov, "Schastlivye sudby," *V edinom stroiu*, 1970, no. 4: 8.

41. See Shaw, "Speaking in the Language of Art," 784.

42. For a visual representation of this developing deaf space, see the interactive heat map created by Seth Bernstein for his blog, *Abstractualized*, at staticsites.abstractualized.com/VogHeatMap.html (last accessed October 27, 2014). This map is based on VOG data

to socialize in sign language, their physical difference became more evident to those around them.⁴³ As such, deaf people's identity—and their integration into the Soviet collective—became the object of varied, and often ambiguous, hearing readings.

On a state level, hearing attitudes to deafness in the late Soviet period reflected the growing awareness of, and care for, the disabled in the context of a renewed interest in the legacy of WWII. Mark Edele has traced the developing framework of pensions and benefits for disabled ex-servicemen that developed over the 1960s.⁴⁴ Similar frameworks were established for the deaf: the pension reform of 1956 saw group 3 invalids (the administrative category into which the majority of deaf people fell) granted pensions of up to 40 rubles per month, regardless of their individual earnings.⁴⁵ On August 25, 1962, the Ministry of Social Welfare, in collaboration with the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (*Vsesoiuznyi tsentral'nyi sovet professional'nykh soiuzov*, VTsSPS) produced a new decree setting out state support for deaf individuals, "On the Improvement of General and Professional Education, Work Placement, and Services for Deaf Citizens in the USSR." Among the measures it put forward were the confirmation of VOG's capital building program, a proposal to improve education for deaf children and adults, and a plan to help more deaf people to find work in state industry, as well as a series of measures to improve cultural provisions, including the subtitling of feature films.⁴⁶

The 1962 decree put forward a vision of deaf people as equal and capable Soviet citizens. The provisions made in the decree confirmed deaf people's agency and potential in labor, education, culture, and everyday life and outlined society's power to unlock that potential through a series of practical measures. This vision was reflected in central hearing publications, such as an *Izvestiia* article from 1957, which stated that "there are over one hundred thousand deaf and deaf-mutes in the RSFSR. In our country they do not consider themselves wretched [*obezdolennye*]. Like all Soviet citizens, they lead full-blooded lives."⁴⁷ Yet even this positive party line on deafness belied the ambiguity and complexity of hearing attitudes to the deaf. The *Izvestiia* article betrayed a tension between the positive portrayal of deaf people as active and

on Moscow social clubs and their members in 1963, located in TsGA Moskvyy, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 266. I am extremely grateful to Seth for his work to give visual form to the notion of deaf space in Moscow.

43. On the visibility of signing deaf groups in the metro, see TsGA Moskvyy, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 171, ll. 3–4.

44. Edele, *Soviet Veterans*, 86.

45. *Zakon o gosudarstvennykh pensiiakh* (Moscow, 1956), 13. For a discussion of the categorization of disabled individuals and their levels of pension rights, see Bernice Madison, "Programs for the Disabled in the USSR," in William O. McCagg and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, eds., *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice* (Pittsburgh, 1989), 176–80.

46. GARF, f. R-5446, op. 96, d. 252, ll. 45–46. This decree spawned a series of further decrees by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health, and the Secretariat of the VTsSPS as well as local state bodies. GARF, f. A-259 (Soviet of Ministers of the RSFSR), op. 1, d. 1639, ll. 14–24; GARF, f. R-5446, op. 96, d. 252, ll. 2–34.

47. "Zhizn' glukhikh," *Izvestiia*, June 15, 1957, 4.

equal citizens and a more passive portrayal of the deaf as grateful recipients of state care: “The deaf and deaf-mutes are surrounded by considerable care. The state gives substantial material support to the society of deaf-mutes, cares about the improvement of [their] cultural and everyday services, about raising [their] ideological, general educational, and political level.”⁴⁸

This sense of the deaf as “victims” of their disability in need of social support drew on broader social trends that began in the postwar era. Building on the work of Elena Zubkova, Edele suggests that war veterans, including the disabled, framed themselves as an “entitlement community” that sought care from the state in recognition of their suffering in the war.⁴⁹ This rhetoric of care for the deaf community clearly fits into this framework of suffering, victimhood, and reward. However, the construction of the deaf as a form of entitlement community by public and state rhetoric was problematic, as it went against the deaf community’s own self-identification as an active and independent Soviet collective who “live and work by [their] own means.”⁵⁰ Far from being supportive and integrating, this rhetoric of pity and care served as a distancing phenomenon, making assimilation into the Soviet collective more difficult.

The ambiguity of state attitudes to deafness was also reflected in popular culture. The 1960s saw the issue of deafness and deaf culture come to the foreground, as the Theater of Sign and Gesture became more prominent in Moscow cultural life and deaf characters began to appear in mainstream feature films. As in state legislation, these cultural representations of deafness revealed a problematic tension between the recognition of deaf citizens’ capabilities and their portrayal as objects of pity and concern.⁵¹ In 1965, for example, the young director Mikhail Bogin premiered his short feature film *Dvoe* (The Two), cowritten by Bogin and Iurii Chuliukin, at the Moscow International Film Festival. The film tells the story of a budding relationship between a hearing music student, Serezha (Valentin Smirnitskii), and a deaf acrobat, Natasha (played by the hearing actress Viktoria Fedorova), who lost her hearing in the bombs of WWII. The film plays out on the streets of a Soviet city and creates much of its dramatic tension through the interplay between deaf and hearing communities in urban space.⁵²

Through their screenplay, Bogin and Chuliukin highlight the ability of space both to hide deafness and to make it visible. This can be seen in the extended opening scene, in which Serezha bumps into Natasha outside her

48. *Ibid.*, 4. This reference to “material support” was in fact untrue: VOG was entirely self-sufficient from 1954 and at certain points gave money to the state to fund activities involving the deaf community. See GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 580, 1. 35.

49. Edele, *Soviet Veterans*, 185–214; Elena Iu. Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945–1957*, trans. and ed. Hugh Ragsdale (Armonk, 1998), 31–39.

50. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 353, 1. 4.

51. On the disabled as objects of pity in popular culture, see Vera S. Dunham, “Images of the Disabled, Especially the War Wounded, in Soviet Literature,” in McCagg and Siegelbaum, eds., *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, 151–64.

52. The majority of the action was shot on the streets of Riga, but the institutions featured in the film, alongside the scenes shot in the Theater of Sign and Gesture, situate the action firmly in Moscow.

building and then follows her through the streets of the city, trying—with increasing frustration—to make her speak to him. Her smiles and lack of response are misunderstood by Serezha as a form of enigmatic charm (he jokes, “You aren’t very talkative, are you?”), and he waits for her outside the circus school where she studies, stealing a photograph of her to show to a friend. Her deafness remains hidden until she reaches the steps of the Theater of Sign and Gesture and stops to speak to a friend in sign language. Accompanied by a dramatic freeze-frame and the sound of a car braking, Serezha realizes that Natasha is deaf.

This “making visible” of Natasha’s deafness is initially troubling for Serezha, but he becomes fascinated by her and her deaf world as the two strike up a friendship. Bogin and Chuliukin’s screenplay echoes this fascination, with extended scenes filmed among the deaf crowds at the Theater of Sign and Gesture and long, lingering close-ups of the signing hands of real-life deaf actors Marta Grakhova and Valerii Liubimov. Serezha attempts to understand Natasha’s silent and visual experience of the world, walking down the street with his hands over his ears or attempting to read a friend’s lips as the film’s soundtrack falls silent. Yet however much Bogin’s film might highlight the exoticism of deafness, his screenplay also strongly emphasizes the Sovietness of his central characters. His work depicts members of the deaf community as cultured, intelligent, and lively, equally comfortable reading *Izvestiia* as acting out scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*. Natasha is shown striving to “overcome” her hearing loss, working late into the night to pick up complex acrobatic routines to music, sensing the rhythm by resting her hands on the lid of her accompanist’s piano.

According to an interview in the VOG magazine *Zhizn' glukhikh*, Bogin’s intention in making the film was explicitly to showcase Soviet deaf people’s abilities. He explained that he had become interested in the deaf after a chance meeting with a deaf actress named Svetlana: “We understood that here was an opportunity to show our audience something new. It is true that foreign directors have made several films about the deaf. . . . But in these films, people deprived of hearing are shown as poor, rejected by society, and humbled. No, we had a very different goal in mind. . . . We wanted to tell of the spiritual community of Soviet people, of genuine human worth.”⁵³ For Bogin, therefore, deaf people were hidden in plain sight and should be made visible in order to marvel at their capabilities and resilience in the face of their perceived defect. Space and community marked the deaf out as different, but they remained Soviet in their strength of character and striving to better themselves.

Again, however, the attitudes to deafness revealed in *Dvoe* are much more ambiguous than Bogin’s positive statements suggest. The fascination with deafness and the positive view of deaf characters in the film are tempered by occasional moments of anti-deaf bigotry, such as when the pianist accompanying Natasha’s acrobatic training abruptly stops playing, muttering that “it’s a useless task, nothing will come of it.” In another scene, some young men try to get the attention of two of Natasha’s female friends (using the same pick-up lines Serezha had used on Natasha), but, on realizing that the pair are deaf,

53. V. Baulin and I. Razdorskii, “Dvoe,” *Zhizn' glukhikh*, 1965, no. 7: 13.

they turn away in disgust. While the film makes clear that these reactions are unacceptable and should be challenged, the presence of such reactions of disgust does complicate Bogin's positive message of inclusion.

The relationship between the two main characters reveals similar complexities. The obvious attraction between Natasha and Serezha is undermined by the division between the deaf and hearing worlds, heightened by Bogin's direction. When she is in hearing space, Natasha is silent and reserved, unable to express herself to Serezha or his friends. The camera frequently replicates her gaze as she attempts to read lips or sense music, and the soundtrack is replaced by dissonant noise or silence. Natasha's muteness is indeed rather surprising; despite the social emphasis placed on sign language, spoken language was at the heart of Soviet deaf education, and it seems unlikely that someone like Natasha would have no ability to speak.⁵⁴ Yet such silence, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued, is characteristic of the marginal or subaltern subject—and particularly the female subject—and as such, serves to underline Natasha's innate otherness in the context of the film.⁵⁵ Serezha, on the other hand, is depicted as talkative but still unable to penetrate the walls of deaf space: in one telling scene, he goes to visit Natasha at her home but cannot bring himself to knock on the door, which is marked as "deaf" by a sticker bearing the logo of the VOG magazine *Zhizn' glukhikh*. The film's final scenes show both characters smiling and walking separately through the park; whether they are moving toward or away from each other is left unclear.

Dvoe is an important piece of evidence of the complex and multilayered nature of Soviet popular notions of deafness in the 1960s. The film speaks to the growing recognition of the deaf as a unique and valuable community: deaf reviews of the film lauded the presence of a deaf character in a mainstream film and underlined the real-world inspiration for the movie, interpreting it as evidence of the growing social power of the deaf.⁵⁶ Hearing responses to the film were also uniformly positive and suggest it had a significant cultural impact: *Dvoe* won the FIPRESCI (Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique) Prize at the 1965 Moscow International Film Festival and was discussed widely in print.⁵⁷ Natasha, in particular, became representative of a particular kind of Soviet deaf heroine—disabled by war but beautiful, soulful, and full of potential. Similar portrayals of deaf women can be seen in Vasili Shukshin's film *Vash syn i brat*, also from 1965, which featured the deaf actress

54. See A. I. D'iachkov, *Sistemy obucheniia glukhikh detei* (Moscow, 1961).

55. As Spivak argues, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), 287. The issue of muteness in relation to the Soviet deaf community is discussed at length in Kayiatos, "Sooner Speaking than Silent," 5–8.

56. The subtitle of the article in *Zhizn' glukhikh* about the film sets out the significant points for the deaf community: "The Heroine of the Film is a Deaf Girl. There Are Young Actors in the Main Roles. The Plot Is Taken from Real Life." Baulin and Razdorskii, "Dvoe," 13.

57. See, for example, "Novye: Mikhail Bogin," *Iskusstvo kino*, 1965, no. 6: 29.

Marta Grakhova in the role of the hero's mute sister Verka; likewise, numerous reviews of productions by the Theater of Sign and Gesture focused on the life story of a real Natasha, the actress Ol'ga Garfel'd, who was also deafened in the war and overcame her "defect" to become a theatrical star.⁵⁸

Yet, again, the popularity of these deaf heroines with the hearing did not entirely dispel the ambiguity of hearing attitudes to deafness; their muteness and seeming inability to fully connect with the hearing world complicated the portrayal of the deaf as socially integrated Soviet citizens. Although this could be read as the persistence of popular prejudices in the face of enlightened Soviet state policy, the ambiguity hints at a more fundamental uncertainty about the nature of deaf people and their place within the Soviet body politic. This uncertainty was highlighted in February 1960, when *Izvestiia* published a lengthy article by E. Garina under the title "Pygmalion."⁵⁹ It focused on a deaf woman, Mariia Ivanovna Ivanova, who was far from being a heroine: a nineteen-year-old deaf orphan from Khar'kov, she had been arrested in Moscow and accused of "being vagrant, begging, living without a permit, and not leaving the city where she, as a homeless person, was not permitted by the militia to live." Mariia was deafened at an early age by the bombs of WWII and had, in the chaos, lost all contact with her relatives. She had been found by soldiers and taken to a children's home in Kursk, where she completed only four years of education before running away to Stalino, where she worked as a seamstress. Fired from her job due to staff reductions, she returned to Khar'kov but was unable to find work and ended up living at the railway station with other homeless people. After being arrested and jailed for vagrancy, she travelled to Moscow, where she again lived in railway stations, begging and stealing to survive. The article sought to expose the reasons for Mariia's deviancy and directed its criticisms at those in authority who had failed in their duty to recognize Mariia's potential and help her find work and a stable home.

While Garina's article demonstrated pity and sympathy toward Mariia (who is referred to throughout as *devchonka*), it also betrayed deeper fears within Soviet society about deaf people's place and identity. Mariia's chief crime, the article implied, was to be deaf out of place: instead of assimilating into deaf space and taking the opportunity to learn labor skills and become Soviet alongside her deaf peers, Mariia persisted in hanging around Moscow's railway stations with other perceived deviants, including "one guy [*paren'*], also from a children's home, also a vagrant—she even knows that he was a

58. For examples of Ol'ga Garfel'd's life story, see Dmitrii Brudnyi, "Mimika i zhest," *Teatr*, 1971, no. 11: 39; and Ilya Gitlits, *Leading a Full Life Regardless*, trans. Lyudmila Tet-skaya (Moscow, 1984), 32–35.

59. E. Garina, "Pygmalion," *Izvestiia*, February 10, 1960, 3. While the archival files detailing the editorial discussion of this article are not available, the circumstances of its publication are intriguing: the article appeared shortly into the editorship of Aleksei Adzhubei, who is notorious in the deaf community for having prevented the deaf from using a holiday home (*dom otdykha*) next door to the *Izvestiia* holiday home outside Moscow because "he didn't like having 'deaf-mute' neighbors." Palennyi, *Istoriia Vserossiskogo obshchestva glukhikh*, 1:543.

thief [on voroval].”⁶⁰ Mariia was expected to work to overcome her defect in the Soviet model, and her rejection of this model of selfhood was clearly a matter of concern; when, after all her trials, Mariia was given the opportunity to become a member of VOG and to work and live in one of the UPPs alongside her “comrades in misfortune” (*tovarishchi po neschastii*), she fought with her roommates, stole, and soon ran away and returned to her old life. “Where is that deaf-mute girl wandering now and what does she expect from her life?” the article asked in conclusion.

“Pygmalion” demonstrated an uneasy mix of attitudes toward deafness. To a certain degree, Garina’s analysis supported the attitude that, given the correct set of circumstances, deaf individuals were capable of overcoming their defect and becoming ideal Soviet citizens. Her article also affirmed that it was the deaf community itself, with help from the state, that would provide the necessary basis for deaf individuals to transform themselves into ideal Soviet citizens. Garina used the Pygmalion myth as a referential metaphor for this work of transformation: just as the sculptor Pygmalion recognized the beauty of his sculpture and brought it to life through his passion and inspiration, Soviet society showed that the “spiritual strength of one person can awake the best feelings in another.” However, the article also showed this process to be extremely fragile: “What would happen if some stupid person [*kto-nibud’ bezdarnyi*] stole into the sculptor’s workshop and smashed his creation?” By refusing the opportunity to assimilate into the deaf community, whether by necessity or choice, Mariia disrupted this process of transformation and thus was no longer able to become an ideal Soviet individual: her innate otherness won out.

In many ways, Garina’s tale was not about deafness at all: rather, the criticism of Mariia’s deviance reflected broader social concerns in the Khrushchev era over individuals who refused to take part in productive work or be tied down to a particular place of residence.⁶¹ However, the article’s overt and public linkage of deafness and deviance revealed fundamental worries about the ability of deaf people to truly become Soviet citizens which had their roots in the early Soviet period. While in the 1930s, deaf people’s physical wholeness and ability to work (*trudosposobnost’*) was seen as evidence of their potential to become well-rounded Soviet citizens, their perceived difficulty in acquiring spoken language was often cited as a possible stumbling block on the road to Soviet consciousness. As such, the issue of muteness had fundamental ideological implications in the Soviet context. Karl Marx’s theories stress the importance of communication in the creation of ideal, socially minded individuals. If deaf people were cut off from that spoken communication, then their ability to transform was potentially compromised.⁶² During the early Soviet period, the practical difficulties faced by many deaf people in learning spoken

60. Garina, “Pygmalion,” 3.

61. See, for example, Fitzpatrick, “Social Parasites.”

62. A key example of Marxist thought as applied to deaf child development in the Soviet Union can be found in L. S. Vygotsky, “The Collective as a Factor in the Development of the Abnormal Child,” in *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky*, vol. 2, *The Fundamentals of Defectology (Abnormal Psychology and Learning Disabilities)*, ed. Robert W. Rieber and Aaron S. Carton, trans. Jane E. Knox and Carol B. Stevens (New York, 1993), 199.

language and literacy and assimilating into society had led those in authority to limit their utopian ambitions for the deaf community. Even the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii, a staunch advocate of deaf education and a supporter of Vygotskii, suggested in a speech to the All-Russian Congress of the Deaf in 1929 that it would take considerable education and speech therapy for deaf people even to become “like living people [*kak zhivye liudi*],” although they might still be “fellow travelers” on the march toward communism.⁶³ Indeed, during the purges, deaf people’s perceived otherness led to numerous arrests, including one notable case in Leningrad in which fifty-five deaf people were arrested for espionage.⁶⁴

This concern about deaf people’s fundamental otherness had been strengthened in July 1950 by Iosif Stalin himself in an exchange of letters in *Pravda* following its publication of his work *Marxism and Questions of Linguistics* (*Marksizm i voprosy iazykoznanii*). In response to a question posed by D. Belkin and S. Furer, Stalin suggested that “deaf-mutes, having no language [*glukhonemykh, ne imeiushchikh iazyka*]”—as he understood the signing deaf community—were best described as “abnormal people” (*anomal’nye liudi*).⁶⁵ In the absence of spoken language, education, and Soviet socialization, he implied, deaf people were physically and mentally incapable of overcoming their defect and integrating into society. While deaf individuals’ successes in industry and the arts during the thaw went some way to undermine Stalin’s thesis, articles such as Garina’s could not help but tap into this legacy of fear and misunderstanding.

The creation of established deaf spaces within postwar Moscow and the discussion of deaf behavior in the public arena therefore engaged with particular and longstanding worries about deaf people’s potential for anti-Soviet deviance. One could argue, indeed, that the publicity surrounding the deaf community and the growth of hearing people’s familiarity with deaf institutional spaces served to reinforce the perceived marginality of the deaf community. As Kate Brown has pointed out, the spatial organization of deported ethnic communities in the Soviet Union of the 1930s strengthened their identity as other: “In Karaganda . . . residents were sorted by class, ethnicity and race, . . . which strengthened ethnic ties and minority allegiances, ironically, the very traits for which these people were deported.”⁶⁶ Similarly, for the deaf in late Soviet Moscow, their existence as a spatially defined community both highlighted their deafness and configured it as a potential challenge to norms

63. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 13, l. 41. Emphasis added. The term *living person* (*zhivoi chelovek*) appears to have originated in the literary debates of the 1920s, used to refer to characters who possessed well-rounded, complex personalities and appeared to live beyond the page (as opposed to the *paper person*, who did not). See, for example, Sergei Tret’iakov, “Zhivoe i bumazhnoe,” in N. F. Chudak, ed., *Literatura fakta: Pervyi sbornik materialov rabotnikov LEFa* (Moscow, 2000), 149.

64. For details of the “deaf-mute affair,” see D. L. Ginzburgskii, “Pomniu tragicheskii 1937-i,” and A. Ia. Razumov and Iu. P. Gruzdev, “Delo leningradskogo obshchestva glukhonemykh,” in D. I. Bogomolov and A. Ia. Razumov, eds., *Leningradskii martirolog 1937–1938*, vol. 4 (St. Petersburg, 1999).

65. I. V. Stalin, “Tovarishcham D. Belkinu i S. Fureru,” *Pravda*, August 2, 1950, 2.

66. Kate Brown, “Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana Are Nearly the Same Place,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 1 (February 2001): 45.

of behavior in hearing space. Certainly, the deaf were never singled out by the state or the public as a community of particular concern in the way that gulag returnees, “parasites,” or *stiliagi* were targeted in the late 1950s.⁶⁷ Yet within the deaf community itself, these ambiguous interpretations of deafness, and the increased focus on deaf behavior in hearing space, had a significant impact on their self-representation as Soviet people.

The Hearing Gaze and the Management of Deaf Behavior

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the political *aktiv* within VOG began to show increasing concern about how the hearing community viewed and interpreted deaf behavior within urban space. While hearing interest in the deaf community was overwhelmingly viewed as a positive, the highlighting of deviant behavior among the deaf, or indeed the recognition of their visible difference in urban space, was deeply unsettling to those activists who sought to frame the deaf community as inherently Soviet and equal. The “Pygmalion” article, in particular, provoked furious discussions at VOG’s highest levels about the need to police deviant members of the deaf community. As one deaf activist remarked, “They published ‘Pygmalion’ and it was as if a bomb had gone off.”⁶⁸ Through these discussions, another vision of deaf space emerged, not as a positive reflection of deaf community identity, but as a disciplined space, controlled from above by deaf activists themselves, in order to present a well-ordered image of deafness to the hearing.

This vision of deaf space can be clearly seen in reports of a meeting of the Central Directorate of VOG, held a mere two days after the publication of “Pygmalion.” After admitting that “the facts laid out in the given article have, in the main, been confirmed,” VOG chairman Sutiagin laid the blame firmly at the door of the local VOG organizations, which had failed to “surround Ivanova with genuine care and attention” and, more importantly, to “control her behavior and . . . create the necessary conditions for her rehabilitation [*perevospitanie*].”⁶⁹ In response, Sutiagin recommended a series of urgent measures, including discussions of the article at emergency meetings of local VOG activists and state representatives and the urgent work placement (*trudovoe ustroistvo*) of “those deaf-mutes who are not engaged in socially useful labor.” Beyond this, he strongly urged local VOG organizations to establish “brigades of VOG members, with the assistance of the organs of the militia, to accustom to useful labor all deaf-mutes who shun work placement.”⁷⁰ A copy of these conclusions was sent to the editorial board of *Izvestiia*, and plans were made to revisit the question at a later date.

It becomes clear from reading Sutiagin’s conclusions, and from the lively debate held a week later at the Moscow city branch of VOG, that the case of Mariia Ivanovna Ivanova was seen as symptomatic of a wider and more seri-

67. See Fitzpatrick, “Social Parasites,” 389–94; and Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, 156–85.

68. TsGA Moskv, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 212, 1. 61; GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 887, 1. 4.

69. GARF, f. A-511, op. 1, d. 670, 1. 49.

70. *Ibid.*, 1. 50.

ous problem of crime and misbehavior within the deaf community. As deaf factory worker Komalov put it, “We are discussing the article about Comrade Ivanova, but in fact we are not just talking about Ivanova alone.”⁷¹ Discussion focused in particular on how VOG should deal with “those elements who have for many years strayed from the right path.”⁷² In his opening remarks, Sutiagin commented sadly, “It concerns us that in Moscow, the capital of our Motherland, there is a certain small group of the deaf and deaf-mutes who do not wish to engage in socially useful work. It is particularly unpleasant that deaf-mutes, former convicts who do not wish to work, are living in many of the railway stations of our capital.”⁷³ Activists told tale after tale of deaf individuals, often registered members of the Moscow VOG, who refused to work in deaf enterprises, drank, begged, stole, displayed “wanton behavior” or engaged in petty speculation, and often sold postcards bearing examples of the sign-language alphabet on the electric-train system.⁷⁴ The most urgent question facing VOG and its members, it became clear, was how to “return these individuals who have ended up on the path of crime to the ranks of the honest workers of our Society.”⁷⁵

This evident concern over crime and public misbehavior was hardly unique to the deaf. As recent scholarship has shown, the image of the new Soviet person in the Khrushchev era was linked to increased regulation of individual and collective behaviors.⁷⁶ Public debates about “hooliganism” framed deviant behavior as a challenge to the cohesion of the Soviet body politic and encouraged citizens to involve themselves in “societal self-management” as a step toward building the communist utopia.⁷⁷ The issue of deviant behavior was particularly urgent for the deaf community, however, in light of their history as a disenfranchised community in the prerevolutionary period. The cultural memory of this disenfranchisement was particularly strong in the 1960s, as VOG began to narrate its own history; according to a volume of popular historical essays published in 1957, the majority of deaf people before the revolution “led a dog’s life [*vlachilo zhalkoe sushchestvovanie*] and were doomed to unemployment and destitution.”⁷⁸

71. TsGA Moskvy, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 212, l. 52.

72. *Ibid.*, l. 10.

73. *Ibid.*, l. 4.

74. Postcard selling was a perennial concern for VOG. A popular way to earn money in the prerevolutionary deaf community, in the Soviet era it was seen as evidence of the persistence of old habits in the face of the enlightening power of Soviet re-education. See G. Sakharov, “Khuliganstvu—boi!” *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, 1966, no. 10: 1.

75. TsGA Moskvy, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 212, ll. 25–26.

76. See, for example, Gleb Tsipursky, “Citizenship, Deviance, and Identity: Soviet Youth Newspapers as Agents of Social Control in the Thaw-Era Leisure Campaign,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 49, no. 4 (October–December 2008): 629–49; and Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, 139.

77. Tsipursky, “Citizenship, Deviance, and Identity,” 632.

78. P. Savelev, “Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhonemykh za 30 let,” in P. Sutiagin, ed., *30 let VOG: Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1957), 3–24. The compiling of deaf history developed over the late Soviet period; alongside the Museum of the History of VOG, housed inside the Republican Palace of Culture and formally opened in 1976, the organization produced several commemorative volumes, including A. S. Korotkov, *50 let Vserossiiskomu*

This narrative had a significant impact on the Soviet deaf community's engagement with debates on public behavior. The phenomenon of deaf hooliganism was clearly unsettling to VOG activists, as it appeared to contradict their self-representation as cultured Soviet people. The Soviet identity framework, with its emphasis on labor capacity and the overcoming of physical disability through individual willpower, had been incredibly powerful for the deaf community, allowing them to prove their capabilities and gain independence and agency within society. If being visibly "different" in public space disrupted this narrative of Soviet transformation, the deaf risked losing this social power and returning to their prerevolutionary position of marginality. Even if this difference only applied to a small minority of deaf individuals, it called into question the Sovietness of the deaf as a group; as Sutiagin warned, these individuals "bring shame to the members of our Society with their amoral behavior and beggarly way of life and give the wrong impression about the deaf and deaf-mute people of our country."⁷⁹

As such, the increased visibility of the deaf community to the hearing affected the way in which the former conceptualized and regulated its members' behavior. This internalization of the *hearing gaze*, to borrow Michel Foucault's term, had a significant impact on deaf activists in the 1960s: examples of deviant—or, indeed, simply different—behaviors were seen to reflect badly on the deaf community as a whole, and deaf activists began to devote considerable attention to monitoring and policing deaf behavior, particularly in those situations in which deaf groups came into contact with the hearing.⁸⁰ While the "Pygmalion" furor represented an extreme example of this impulse, the need to control deaf misbehavior appears as a constant theme in VOG documents from this period. This was not limited to outright criminality: the debate over deaf people's disruptive presence on the streets, with which I opened this article, did not cite any concrete challenges to public order but instead reflected a general despair over deaf people's failure to respond to the city and behave in the same way as the hearing. Their inability to hear cars on the street and their insistence on standing outside the cinema to socialize in sign before the film and during the breaks broadcast their difference clearly to the world. While this lack of responsiveness and visible difference was not the fault of the deaf themselves, it was clearly regarded as their responsibility to learn to deal with the situation in a more appropriate way. As deaf activists lamented, "There are cars and everything, but what is

obshchestvu glukhikh (Leningrad, 1976); Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*; and V. Krainin and Z. Krainina, *Chelovek ne slyshit* (Moscow, 1984).

79. TsGA Moskvyy, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 212, 1. 4.

80. This notion of the hearing gaze draws on Foucault's description of power relations in medical and penal institutions, in which the gaze of outside observers leads to a change in individual behavior: "An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorization to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself." Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power," in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York, 1980), 155. For an example of the application of Foucault's theory to the Soviet Union, see Stephen Kotkin, "Living Space and the Stranger's Gaze," in *Magnetic Mountain*, 157–97.

so special about that? They have tickets and seats, so why are they crowding in the streets?”⁸¹

Deaf activists were particularly heated in their condemnation of those deaf individuals who refused to conform to certain (hearing) codes of conduct. For those debating the *Khronika* cinema affair, just as for those debating the “Pygmalion” article a year later, deaf antisocial behavior revealed, not individual criminality, but failures within the institutional and social structures surrounding the deaf community to control and educate: “The aktiv needs to explain how to behave in public places. You have to behave yourselves better everywhere. The organizers of the House of Culture must organize the queues in the breaks and before the start of the film.”⁸² The VOG activist Mokhanov was starker in his recommendation: “They have no conscience. I say, fine them.”⁸³ Over the course of the 1960s, VOG began to put more pressure on its local social and cultural organizations to propagandize correct behavior within and outside deaf space. Articles in *Zhizn' glukhikh* set out local organizations’ responsibilities in policing deaf behavior, such as the establishment of deaf auxiliary police brigades (*druzhiny*) and people’s courts (*narodnye sudy*), and made it clear that tough measures would be taken against those who engaged in antisocial activities.⁸⁴

These debates and articles reveal not only the development of structures of deaf self-policing but also the extent to which the deaf community was beginning to understand Sovietness in an increasingly pragmatic sense: as a cultural value to be acquired and a narrow set of behavioral guidelines to which they should conform. For Sutiagin in particular, Sovietness and public behavior were closely intertwined. In his speech to the Moscow branch of VOG, he commented that the Soviet deaf community had come a long way, as evidenced by the change in the society’s name in 1959 from the All-Russian Society of Deaf-Mutes to the All Russian Society of the Deaf: “This obliges us to raise our level of culture. This name speaks of the fact that deaf people are more cultured, more literate. If deaf-mutes prevent the hearing from walking in the streets, the fault is ours.”⁸⁵ This rhetorical distinction between uncultured deaf-mutes and the cultured deaf thus reflects the concern within the deaf community over their own identity and place in Soviet society.⁸⁶

For members of VOG, therefore, a growing tension was beginning to emerge between inclusion and marginality. While deaf magazine articles assured them that being good, “cultured” Soviet citizens meant “the ability to

81. TsGA Moskvyy, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 192, 1. 14.

82. *Ibid.*, 1. 22.

83. *Ibid.*, 1. 14.

84. See, for example, “Sornuiu travu—s polia von!,” *Zhizn' glukhikh* 11, no. 7 (1958): 18; and V. Shuvalov, “Sovet kluba na strazhe poriadka: Khuligany poluchaiut odpor,” *Zhizn' glukhikh* 11, no. 9 (1958): 13. There is evidence that a deaf *druzhina* operated within the Moscow Palace of Culture well into the 1970s. See TsGA Moskvyy, f. 3089 (House of Culture of the Moscow Directorate of VOG), op. 1, d. 38.

85. TsGA Moskvyy, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 192, 1. 23.

86. Indeed, the “Pygmalion” debates referred consistently to deaf criminals and hooligans as “deaf-mutes” rather than as “deaf.” See TsGA Moskvyy, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 212, 1. 46.

live ‘in people, among people, for people,’ their forays into hearing space frequently saw them configured by their own community leaders as deviants or hooligans and encouraged to retreat into deaf community spaces where they would be better understood or indeed where their latent criminal tendencies could be more successfully tackled.⁸⁷ Similarly, the deaf community’s perceived need for special adaptations and technologies made hearing spaces increasingly reluctant to cater to the deaf.⁸⁸ As such, over time, the deaf community began to retreat further and further into its own institutionalized deaf spaces. Capital building continued apace: during the tenth Five-Year Plan (1976–81), VOG built eight new industrial buildings, twelve houses of culture and clubs, a deaf Pioneer camp, and twenty-two blocks of flats housing up to three thousand deaf families.⁸⁹ Over five hundred translators served in VOG’s regional offices, thus excusing its members from much everyday interaction with the hearing.⁹⁰ Although the VOG leadership continued to insist that these new buildings showcased the Sovietness of its members, the separateness of deaf space continued to represent a significant, practical divide between deaf people and the rest of the Soviet, hearing population.

The development of deaf spaces in the late Soviet period embodied the deaf community and opened it up to myriad readings by both the deaf and the hearing. For the deaf, the creation of modern and specialized buildings, defined by their technological adaptations and ideally suited to their visually mediated engagement with the world, represented the epitome of their Soviet identity and marked them out as self-sufficient, capable, and creative. For those hearing people who came into contact with deaf space, however, its visible difference provoked debates over deaf people’s place in Soviet society. Were they exotic and fascinating, marked out by their enigmatic silence and unique communication skills but still capable of overcoming their defect and becoming equal Soviet citizens? Or were they ultimately deviant, constantly on the brink of anti-Soviet behavior? While VOG and state organizations continued to insist that the deaf belonged within Soviet society, this concern over their visible difference began to push deaf people to the margins.

The phenomenon of deaf space thus reveals a central paradox in our understanding of identity in the late Soviet Union. In many ways, this period saw the practical realization of the “promise of October” for deaf people: the creation of a highly educated, independent, and self-sufficient deaf community that had emancipated itself with its own hands. Yet these achievements saw the deaf choosing to distance themselves even further from the rest of the Soviet body politic. The perceived pluralism of the Soviet emancipatory dream had convinced the deaf that they could become ideal citizens, but the creation of special conditions and unique places for them to achieve this transforma-

87. L. Kabo, “Chto takoe ‘Kul’turnyi chelovek’?,” *Zhizn’ glukhikh*, 1966, no. 4: 18. On the use of deaf space to rehabilitate deaf criminal elements, see TsGA Moskv, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 212, ll. 52–53.

88. TsGA Moskv, f. 3010, op. 1, d. 192, l. 13.

89. Ushakov, *Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo glukhikh*, 204, 206.

90. Korotkov, *50 let Vserossiiskomu obshchestvu glukhikh*, 43.

tion had the result of creating individuals who, while politically wedded to the Soviet idea, belonged to a community that existed in parallel to, but in many senses outside, the hearing Soviet community. Driven by concern over their own potential for deviance, the deaf community in the 1960s ultimately chose to “lock themselves away,” to further retreat from contact with hearing society and strengthen their internal ties as a community. As a result, they only compounded their own marginality within Soviet space.

Deaf people’s experience thus demonstrates how the Soviet project to transform individuals and society resulted in the creation of multiple and intersecting identities, which emerged from the ideology of the Soviet state but often resulted in a feeling of *not* belonging to the broader Soviet collective. Yet while the marginalization of deaf people, both spatially and socially, was often driven by the internal politics of the deaf community, its development in the Brezhnev era also provoked a significant backlash. By the beginning of the 1980s, deaf people were openly questioning the isolation in which they were being held, both by their own organization and by the growing prejudices of the hearing community who had so little experience in dealing with the deaf. Publications before and during glasnost revealed deaf people’s resistance to being marginalized by their disability. One 1984 publication revealed that doctors routinely used the formula “GN–UO,” meaning “Deaf-Mute–Mentally Retarded” (*Glukho-Nemoi–Umstvenno-Otstalyi*), on medical notes: a shocking throwback to the prerevolutionary marginalization of the deaf. “A deaf person must step beyond the bounds of his own circle [*svoego kruga*] into the hearing world,” the authors concluded.⁹¹

The creation of alternative spaces and communities in the late Soviet city both reinforced and undermined the concept of a cohesive and uniform Soviet selfhood. The utopian nature of Soviet attitudes toward the deaf (and indeed those with other disabilities) belied the complex and sometimes troubling reality of living in a society predicated on the eradication of problematic behaviors and other outward markers of difference. Yet this was not a straightforward tale of the marginalization of a problematic social group. Deaf people in the USSR had developed what Karen Nakamura has described, in the Japanese context, as a “hybrid and intersectional identity”: an identity formed in dialogue with dominant social concerns about self and society.⁹² This hybrid deaf-Soviet identity shaped deaf people’s responses to state policies and framed their understanding of their own place in Soviet society. Deaf people sought to understand themselves in Soviet terms, to remake themselves as ideal Soviet people, which had the paradoxical result of exacerbating the divide between their deaf and Soviet identities. As the urgency of the utopian project began to fade, the role of deaf people as “builders of communism” on an equal footing with the hearing thus gave way to a more complex identity: as problematic outsiders in an increasingly standardized social world.

91. V. Krainin and Z. Krainina, “Vy dali vsem nam schast’e,” in Krainin and Krainina, eds., *Chelovek ne slyshit*, 137, 138.

92. Nakamura, *Deaf in Japan*, 11.