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Lisa A. Kirschenbaum

The Meaning of Resilience: Soviet Children in

World War II Does the behavioral category of *resilience* have any explicatory power in the psychology of traumatic experience? How resilient can children be when subjected to the horrors of war? During World War II, the Soviet media used images of threatened, wounded, and murdered children to condemn Nazi brutality and mobilize resistance. In May 1943, Fadeev wrote that when he visited besieged Leningrad in April 1942, as it was emerging from the deadliest months of the blockade, he saw clear evidence of trauma: “The imprint of that terrible winter remained on [children’s] faces and was expressed in their games. Many children played by themselves. Even in collective games, they played silently, with serious faces.” Quoting from reports made by a director of a children’s home for preschoolers in the city, he told heartbreaking stories of damaged children. A child named Lorik, arriving only two days after his mother’s death, anxiously focused on protecting a locket with a photograph of her that he had made from a powder compact. Five-year-old Emma, who had “trouble lacing up her boots,” cried bitterly, but made no attempt to ask for help. The children in the “youngest and middle groups” (probably between three and five years old) “expressed all their requests and demands with tears, whims, and whimpers, as if they’d never known how to talk.” In a city where the bread ration for dependents during the winter had fallen to a low of 125 grams of coarse,

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1 Aleksandr Fadeev, “Deti geroicheskogo goroda: Iz leningradskikh zarisovok,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, May 12, 1943. The first quotation is from *idem* (trans. R. D. Charques), *Leningrad in the Days of the Blockade* (London, 1946), 44, available at <http://bibliotekar.ru/informburo/30.htm> (accessed

adulterated bread, all of the children were obsessed with food. They hid “microscopic” pieces of bread in matchboxes, taking hours to eat it and “treating it as some kind of wonder.”¹

Fadeev left no doubt about the political implications: The enemy would “pay with streams of his own black blood” for the tears of children. Nonetheless, his detailed descriptions of children’s distress ring true. Under less dire circumstances, psychoanalysts Anna Freud and Burlingham reported similar behaviors among children evacuated from London to war nurseries. However, Fadeev’s concluding assertion that “by the time this report fell into my hands, all the children were more or less free from the terrible trauma” seems too optimistic to be believed. In July 1942, he assured his readers, “the majority of children appeared completely normal and healthy.” Skomorovsky and Morris, in an account published two years later in English for Allied consumption (one contemporary reviewer described it as afflicted with a “bad case of officialese”) reached a similar conclusion. On the basis of letters and documents, they surmised that even though parents in Leningrad “worried over the psychological effect of such abnormal times, remembering stories of embittered, gnome-like children and maladjusted, unhealthy adults, the spawn of warfare, . . . most of the children who remained in Leningrad developed a sardonic and simple humor that was indestructible.”²

These stories of resilience and recovery, like the stories of trauma, had clear political uses. They deflected attention from the Soviet state’s failure to evacuate children, downplayed the extent of starvation in Leningrad, and explained children’s ability to withstand trauma as the result of the upbringing provided by the Soviet state. Fadeev praised “Leningraders, and above all the

June 7, 2016). For propaganda, see Julie deGraffenried, *Sacrificing Childhood: Children and the Soviet State in the Great Patriotic War* (Lawrence, 2014), 104–111.

2 Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham, *War and Children* (New York, 1943). Fadeev, “Deti”; *idem*, *Leningrad*, 44 (second quotation); Boris Skomorovsky and E. G. Morris, *The Siege of Leningrad: The Saga of the Greatest Siege of All Time as Told by the Letters, Documents, and Stories of the Brave People Who Withstood It* (New York, 1944), 42; John Chamberlin, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, 3 Feb. 1944. Skomorovsky, a Russian émigré, and Morris contributed to the communist press in the United States. For Skomorovsky, see Al’bert Pavlovich Nenarokov, “Protokoly zagranichnoi delegatsii RSDRP,” *Istoricheskiĭ arkhiv*, III (2007), 101. Morris, “Revolt on Thirty-Fourth Street,” *New Masses* (August 3, 1937), 19–20, available at <https://www.unz.org/Author/MorrisEmanuelGoldsmith> (accessed June 7, 2016).

Leningrad women, who can be proud that in blockade conditions they saved the children who,” for reasons left unspecified, “did not manage to evacuate.” Skomorovsky and Morris traced children’s fearlessness and “complete contempt” for the “invaders” to the fact that “most . . . had received splendid training as members of the Young Pioneers,” the Soviet scouts, and, at a still younger age, as Little Octobrists. They marshalled children’s own words to authenticate these conclusions: A little girl who refused to cry when playing the patient in a game of “stretcher bearer” explained, “I’m one of our wounded, not theirs. . . . Our wounded don’t cry.”³

Collected, mediated, and disseminated by adults, the words of children in wartime narratives can tell us much about the “political instrumentalisation of children.” Seemingly too good to be true, skeptical historians dismiss stories such as Fadeev’s about women’s salutary “love for children” and children’s rapid recovery as mere propaganda. However, work by social scientists investigating more recent conflicts suggests an alternative reading that emphasizes not “trauma” but “resilience.” Studies of children in war zones as diverse as Afghanistan, Palestine, and Uganda document how individuals and communities have effectively managed the stress of war, opening the possibility of understanding children not only as innocent and damaged victims but also as historical actors—even when their exploits appear in accounts shaped by adult intentions and agendas.⁴

From a historian’s perspective, the most illuminating recent studies of war-affected civilian populations highlight the importance of social supports and cultural resources in collective efforts to manage the traumas of war. These works, which we discuss below, maintain that a shared belief in making sacrifices to serve a just and worthwhile purpose, as well as a public encouragement of “cooperative effort and solidarity,” may help those experiencing war to view themselves not as “passive victims” of trauma but as “active citizens.” Although war experiences often produce lasting damage, the central point for humanitarian-aid organizations and for historians is that such “damage” cannot be assessed without taking full account of how children, no less than adults, understand

3 Kirschenbaum, “Innocent Victims and Heroic Defenders: Children and the Siege of Leningrad,” in James Marten (ed.), *Children and War: A Historical Anthology* (New York, 2002), 280–281; Fadeev, “Deti”; Skomorovsky and Morris, *Siege of Leningrad*, 42, 44.

4 Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière, “The Voice of the Innocent: Propaganda and Childhood Testimonies of War,” *History of Education*, XLIII (2014), 107.

the disruptions and sacrifices of war. In the case of Russia's wartime and postwar narratives, two factors that built resilience stand out—children's bond with caretakers and children's sense of actively participating in the war effort.⁵

Emphasizing the cultural and social dimensions of resilience, this research note, like work on more recent conflicts, challenges both the naturalistic assumption that certain events are inherently traumatic and the prevailing Western assumption that all war-affected children are "psychologically 'vulnerable' or damaged." Children clearly suffered profoundly during World War II. This research note explores, if not children's own understandings of their suffering, how children (and the adults that they became) utilized public, official, narratives to make sense of, and recover from, war experiences.⁶

THE CONCEPT OF RESILIENCE The widespread assumption in Western societies that "shattering events" naturally and universally "traumatize" individuals who experience them has fostered a wariness about stories of children's rapid recovery from the "trauma" and "emotional scarring" of war. Merridale, who compiled extensive oral histories from Soviet veterans of World War II and survivors of the purges, explains Soviet (and post-Soviet) indifference to the concept of psychological trauma as the result of a cultural and political preference for stoicism and silence. Societies, she emphasizes, cope with hardship in distinctive ways, and for many people in the Soviet Union, silence (and censorship) seem to have been effective. Merridale noted that most of her interviewees were

5 Derek Summerfield, "The Social Experience of War and Some Issues for the Humanitarian Field," in Patrick J. Bracken and Celia Petty (eds.), *Rethinking the Trauma of War* (London, 1998), 23; Cindy A. Sousa et al., "Individual and Collective Dimensions of Resilience within Political Violence," *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, XIV (2013), 244; Theresa Stichick Betancourt and Kashif Tanveer Khan, "The Mental Health of Children Affected by Armed Conflict: Protective Processes and Pathways to Resilience," *International Review of Psychiatry*, XX (June 2008), 325; Jo Boyden, "Children under Fire: Challenging Assumptions about Children's Resilience," *Children, Youth and Environments*, XIII (2003), 18–21. Studies of more recent wars highlight the importance of "a strong bond between the primary caregiver and the child" and "the assumption of responsibility for the protection and welfare of others" as protective factors. See Emmy E. Werner, "Children and War: Risk, Resilience, and Recovery," *Development and Psychopathology*, XXIV (2012), 555; Sousa et al., "Individual and Collective," 241–250; Betancourt and Khan, "Mental Health," 325.

6 Summerfield, "Childhood, War, Refugeedom, and 'Trauma': Three Core Questions for Mental Health Professionals," *Transcultural Psychiatry*, XXXVII (2000), 425; Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *idem et al.*, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley, 2004), 8.

“neither incapacitated nor diminished by their choice of lifelong silence” about hardship—whether it be famine, political repression, or war. Yet, she expressed discomfort with the “basically coercive” Stalinist practices and myths that encouraged survivors to suppress their memories in favor of “focussing on work and family,” a strategy that produced “whole lives . . . built around concealment.” Merridale doubts that these strategies were able to produce real recovery, asserting that the “hidden past” retains its full “power to injure.” Describing the Soviet approach to trauma as “crude,” despite its apparent, limited effectiveness, she sympathized with the surprise of Western relief workers in Armenia after the earthquake of 1988, who found that their Soviet counterparts had no understanding of, or interest in, the “psychological consequences of disaster,” much less the need for “western-style counselling.”⁷

Such responses reflect the common (Western) belief that “traumatic events” produce pathologically traumatic memories that require the intervention of a therapist for alleviation. Since 1980, when posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first included in the American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the classification of trauma as an objective psychiatric disorder has shaped medical practice and humanitarian efforts, as well as historical and cultural studies of war and memory. Indeed, as Summerfield asserts, “because medicalized and psychologized thinking are now so embedded in popular constructions . . . accounts that do not use the language of trauma . . . sound as if what children must endure during and after war is being played down.”⁸

7 Alexander, “Toward a Theory,” 2–3; Summerfield, “Childhood,” 422. Catherine Merridale, “The Collective Mind: Trauma and Shell-Shock in Twentieth-Century Russia,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, XXXV (2000), 55, 54, gives the date of the earthquake as 1983.

8 Summerfield, “Childhood,” 428, 422; Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago, 2000), 2–3; Alison Howell, “The Demise of PTSD: From Governing through Trauma to Governing Resilience,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, XXXVII (2012), 215–218; Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, 1997); Selma Leydesdorff et al., “Introduction: Trauma and Life Stories,” in Kim Lacy Rogers, *idem*, and Graham Davis (eds.), *Trauma and Life Stories: International Approaches* (London, 1999), 1–26. The concept of *trauma* has been both influential and controversial in cultural and literary studies of the Holocaust. See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds.), *Testimonies: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, 1992); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, 1995); Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, 1994).

Yet psychologists and psychiatrists have raised “numerous” challenges to the authority of the diagnosis of PTSD and to the “special,” abnormal status of traumatic memory. For historians, critiques that emphasize the social and cultural aspects of trauma are particularly compelling because they approach survivors of war as historically situated participants rather than as exemplars of universal psychological principles. In this vein, psychiatrists involved in treating individuals in non-Western war zones argue that the “discourse on trauma” “has systematically sidelined the social dimensions of suffering; instead it promotes a strongly individualistic focus, presenting trauma as something that happens inside individual minds.” Such an approach ignores the perspective of war-affected populations, who may see their world, not their minds, as damaged. Questioning the universality of PTSD, the emphasis of this work is on the meanings that individuals attach, or come to attach, to their own suffering. Such meaning shapes their perceptions and memories of the war experience.⁹

From this perspective, the pervasive Stalinist narratives of steadfastness and courage (*stoikost' i muzhestvo*) are meaningful not as true representations of the realities of war but as authentic components of survivors’ understandings and memories of war. Indeed, because the tellers of war stories in the Soviet media often experienced the horrors of war themselves, it can be difficult to separate cleanly the “individual” from the “official” discourse: Individual memory informed official narratives, even as official narratives worked to attach particular meanings to individual experiences. “Individuals,” as Summerfield notes, “will largely organize what they feel, say, do, and expect to fit prevailing expectations and categories.” In the Soviet case, what was expected was not “trauma” but “steadfastness” or “resilience.”¹⁰

9 Howell, “Demise of PTSD,” 219–220; Stephan Porter and Angela Birt, “Is Traumatic Memory *Special*? A Comparison of Traumatic Memory Characteristics with Memory of Other Emotional Life Experiences,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, XV (2001), 1101–1117; Patrick J. Bracken, “Hidden Agendas: Deconstructing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,” in Bracken and Petty (eds.), *Rethinking the Trauma of War*, 38.

10 Summerfield, “The Invention of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the Social Usefulness of a Psychiatric Category,” *British Medical Journal*, CCCXXII (January 13, 2001), 96. The blending of public and private memory in “official” narratives of the war separated war memory from the memory of other traumas, notably political terror. For a contrasting view, see Merridale, *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945* (New York, 2006), 373–380; *idem*, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (New York, 2000), 328; Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–70* (New Haven, 2013), 129–211. Merridale emphasizes the repressive, rather than the productive, aspect of “official” war stories

Resilience might be considered the flipside of trauma, highlighting the fact that exposure to trauma does not necessarily result in PTSD. Recent studies suggest that posttraumatic resilience might even be the norm. Resilient individuals “may experience at least some form of transient stress reaction that will be mild to moderate in degree and will not significantly interfere with their ability to continue functioning.” In the field of trauma psychology, the key challenge has been to understand and account for individual variations in “human adaptation to traumatic stress.” The emphasis on individuals’ capacity to adapt in extreme circumstances, like the focus on damage to individual minds, however, runs the risk of sidelining the “social dimensions of suffering.” Much of the psychological research about the role of “meaning making” in successful adaptation to trauma understands both meaning and the process of “making” it in individualistic terms, investigating, for example, how individuals integrate stressful events into their “self-concepts” or “personal biographical narratives.”¹¹

Nonetheless, many of the theoretical approaches to understanding adaptation to trauma point out that factors promoting resilience may operate at both the interpersonal and social levels. For instance, a recent review of the social-science literature about “resilience within political violence” contends that “resilience *must* be understood within a framework that prioritizes the dynamic interaction between individuals and their social and political environments.” Such an approach begins with the recognition—familiar to historians—that war “is a public and collective experience,” and

and argues that the “traumas” of the war and of political repression produced similar state responses. In all cases, survivors were “denied” the “strategy” of “bearing witness.” Jones similarly groups “1937” and “1941” together as Stalinist “traumas,” emphasizing that both could be integrated into “optimistic” Stalinist narratives of progress and heroism.

11 Howell, “Demise of PTSD,” 219; Catherine Panter-Brick et al., “Trauma Memories, Mental Health, and Resilience: A Prospective Study of Afghan Youth,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, LVI (2015), 821; Brian K. Barber, “Annual Research Review: The Experience of Youth with Political Conflict—Challenging Notions of Resilience and Encouraging Research Refinement,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, LIV (2013), 463–464; George A. Bonanno and Anthony D. Mancini, “Beyond Resilience and PTSD: Mapping the Heterogeneity of Responses to Potential Trauma,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, IV (2012), 77, 78; Charles C. Benight, “Understanding Human Adaptation to Traumatic Stress Exposure: Beyond the Medical Model,” *ibid.*, I. Crystal L. Park, “Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events,” *Psychological Bulletin*, CXXXVI (2010), 261. Much of this work deals not with the social trauma of war but with bereavement and cancer.

thus focuses on individual and collective efforts to make suffering bearable and even meaningful.¹²

In these studies, meaning making remains central to the process of coping with trauma, but the emphasis shifts from integrating the traumatic event into personal biographical narrative to making the personal narrative meaningful by integrating individual experience into larger narratives of collective and constructive endeavor. This process is evident in a comparative ethnographic study of Palestinian and Bosnian adolescents' understandings of their respective wars. In interviews, Bosnian teenagers, "not able to make sense" of the violence that engulfed them, represented themselves as powerless and damaged. By contrast, the Palestinian youths, who could draw from widely circulating themes of historic and heroic communal struggle to endow their experiences with significance, described themselves as competent, essential actors in significant events. Barber's contention that the critical variable in Palestine was the availability of "existing explanatory information sourced outside the self" suggests the importance of propaganda as a component of the wartime context. During World War II, the Soviet media provided a constant stream of narratives that represented children as both recipients of excellent care and vital fighters on the home front. For some critics, such stories might indicate a systematic denial of individual trauma and a coercion of silence, but they are also interpretable as contributors to a "meaning system" that promoted resilience.¹³

MOTHERS AND "SUBSTITUTE MOTHERS" AS SAVIORS No one knows how many children died in the siege of Leningrad during World War II. When the blockade enclosed the city in the fall of 1941, only a small fraction of the city's 400,000 children had been evacuated. Few of those left behind managed to escape during the first months of the blockade, when the daily ration for dependents fell to starvation levels. Official figures provide only an approximation of the number of deaths during the blockade and no information

12 Sousa et al., "Individual and Collective," 236 (emphasis added); Summerfield, "Social Experience," 22.

13 Brian K. Barber, "Making Sense and No Sense of War: Issues of Identity and Meaning in Adolescents' Experience with Political Conflict," in *idem* (ed.), *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence* (New York, 2009), 290, 291.

about the number of children who died. The winter of 1941/2 saw thousands of Leningraders die of starvation every day; the city lacked the capacity to bury, let alone identify, all of them.¹⁴

As noted earlier, the Soviet state had a political interest in making sure that information about the extent of starvation did not reach wartime accounts of the blockade. It had to straddle a fine line between publicizing Nazi atrocities and suggesting that the Soviet state had failed to protect children from the ravages of war. Thus, alongside powerful representations of innocent victims, the wartime Soviet media ran sentimental accounts of the extraordinary acts, often performed by mothers, to rescue their children. Fadeev used the report from the children's home to illustrate the "holy work of Leningrad women," who possessed deep "knowledge of the child's psyche" and "voluntarily devoted their strength to saving and raising the children."¹⁵

Properly analyzed, such stories of mothers as saviors reveal—albeit in a distinctively sentimental and nostalgic key—how the presence or perception of "supportive, loving adults" and children's "ability to emotionally attach to supportive caregivers" can facilitate resilience and recovery from trauma. The assumption that war traumatizes children allows us to take the stories of Soviet children's suffering seriously, despite their political purposes. Moreover, recent research about resilience can lead us to accept the optimistic stories of Soviet women's selfless parenting as the truth, even if not the whole truth, regardless of their political purposes. The numerous child survivors who attributed their survival to loving caregivers offer support for such an approach. A collection of poems published in 1999 by the organization Young Participants in the Defense of Leningrad included a chapter devoted to celebrating "our mothers—holy blockade women." A poem by Molchanov in that volume begins with the well-known aphorism, "Everyone who survived the blockade / Had a kind guardian angel," and concludes with the sentiment, "But most frequently the angel was

14 Dmitri Pavlov (trans. John Clinton Adams), *Leningrad 1941: The Blockade* (Chicago, 1965), 48, does not specify the age range included in the category "children." According to conservative postwar estimates, the dead numbered about 670,000. More recently, historians have suggested that a death count of 1 million due to starvation is a reasonable approximation. See A. R. Dzeniskevich, *Leningrad v osade: Sbornik dokumentov o geroicheskoi oborone Leningrada v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny, 1941–1944* (St. Petersburg, 1995), 279–280, 313–343.

15 Fadeev, "Deti."

mama— / Holy Leningrad *mama* / Giving her bread up *mama*, / Immortal blockade *mama*.” The collection’s depiction of selfless maternal care as the norm in blockaded Leningrad underscored the importance of both received and perceived social support as protective factors.¹⁶

In other post-Soviet reminiscences, teachers became surrogate mothers, nursing orphans back to physical and psychological health. In 2014, Aleshin wrote that at age thirteen, after his mother died of starvation and his father died at the front, he “became a ward of the state.” Decades later, he recalled Children’s Home No. 17 “with gratitude,” remembering that the children “lovingly” called its director “mamasha.” The insistence among Soviet survivors that children in such care “do not remember the horrors of war” so much as “the love with which the adults related to us” confirms Fadeev’s happy conclusion. They are also in line with the wartime observations of Freud and Burlingham, who saw “no signs of traumatic shock” in children who had survived the air raids: “If these bombing incidents occur when small children are in the care of either their own mothers or a familiar mother substitute, they do not seem to be particularly affected by them.”¹⁷

The Soviet focus on mothers’ extraordinary devotion to their children owed much to the Stalinist “resurrection of the family.” The legislation of the mid-1930s that recriminalized abortion and made divorce more difficult and expensive to obtain coincided with a new sentimentality toward mothers and children, by no means eradicating Stalinist constructions of motherhood and childhood. Revolutionary conceptions of emancipated women and

16 Werner, “Children and War,” 555; Sousa et al., “Individual and Collective,” 242; Benight, “Understanding,” 5. Iunye uchastniki oborony Leningrada, *Blokadnoi pamiati strannitsy: Poeticheskii sbornik* (St. Petersburg, 1999), 59, 60 (emphasis in original). See also Viktor Petrovich Ivanov, “Ia vyzhil blagodaria materi!” in *Blokada Leningrada: Narodnaia kniga pamiati* (Moscow, 2014), 292–293; Marina Gulina, “‘The Child’s Past in the Adult’s Present’: The Trauma of the Siege of Leningrad (1941–1944),” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, XCVI (2015), 1315.

17 Elena Shul’gina, “Na risunkakh doshkoliat nashi vseгда bili nemtsev,” *Smena*, 19 April 1995. Evgenii Vasil’evich Aleshin, “My voevali samootverzhenno!” in *Blokada Leningrada*, 24; Elena Shul’gina, “V dvadtsat’ let oni posedeli,” *Smena*, May 7, 1995. See also Galina Nikandrovna Baburkina (Baikova), “Vse detdoma byli ochen’ khoroshie!” in *Blokada Leningrada*, 91. Freud and Burlingham, *War and Children*, 21. More recent studies support their findings. See Ann S. Masten and Angela J. Narayan, “Child Development in the Context of Disaster, War, and Terrorism: Pathways of Risk and Resilience,” *Annual Review of Psychology*, LXIII (2012), 243–244.

activist children quickly regained their prominence during the war. Unlike Freud and Burlingham, who emphasized the “primitive animal tie between mother and baby, which in some respects, still makes one being out of the two,” Soviet writers in wartime tended to highlight children’s conscious recognition of their mothers’ suffering and self-sacrifice. Such recognition allowed children (whether at the time or in retrospect) to see themselves less as dependents than as junior members of a collective for which they, too, might be called to fight and sacrifice.¹⁸

“WE FOUGHT SELFLESSLY” The question of children’s agency is particularly salient for the Soviet Union during World War II. Unlike in the West, Soviet children at the time were not generally viewed as “overwhelmingly vulnerable and dependent.” Even as Fadeev praised women’s work on children’s behalf, he also praised children for assuming adult responsibilities in “defending and saving the city.” In Leningrad, boys and girls “extinguished tens of thousands of the incendiary bombs dropped from airplanes, put out fires in the city, stood watch on rooftops on freezing nights, carried water from ice holes in the Neva, stood in line for bread, and caught spies and saboteurs.” Soviet propaganda told children that they were “heroic defenders” of the motherland. Despite the terrible dangers that these children faced, recent studies of resilience suggest that their activities may have provided them a means of coping with, and making sense of, the traumas of war.¹⁹

The young defenders that Fadeev described in his wartime reporting appear frequently in the stories that survivors later told. In a contribution to the collection *Deti goroda-geroia* (Children of the Hero City) published in 1974 and directed at children born after the war, one such survivor, named Krestinskii, acknowledged the romantic cliché of the hero child. Although he affirmed that

18 Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (New York, 1993), 296–336; Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1991* (New Haven, 2007), argues that in the 1930s, “attitudes to children became much more consistent” and “all commitment to children’s autonomy was abandoned” (93), though she also says that “initiative was still expected from [children] in some ways” (108). DeGraffenried, *Sacrificing Childhood*, takes Kelly’s emphasis on “consistent” attitudes as a point of departure, arguing that the war constituted a “great rupture” in Soviet understandings of childhood (4). The contrast has clear heuristic value but may overstate the consistency and uniformity of Stalinist norms. See Freud and Burlingham, *War and Children*, 32.

19 De La Ferrière, “Voice of the Innocent,” 119; Fadeev, “Deti.”

children did, in fact, disarm bombs and catch spies, he did not claim to do so himself. His primary intent was to show “today’s kids how we really were: ragged, hungry, bereft of loved ones, and at the same time not depressed, resourceful, desperate boys of the besieged city.” His was a story of hardship but also resilience, told in the high diction of a heroic struggle that “tested our character and will, our honor and friendship, our human virtue.”²⁰

Forty years later, in 2014, the aforementioned Aleshin wrote that in 1941, when he was ten years old, “very quickly we boys and girls became accustomed to [the explosions], and stood watch without fear on streets and rooftops. In attics we extinguished incendiary bombs dumped from airplanes not individually, but in batches.” He downplayed the danger, noting that the “bombs were small and light and even a child could grab them with special tongs and discard them in a safe spot or throw sand on them.” Looking back on his childhood, he understood that the blockade “had a powerful effect on people’s psyches and that the echoes of these disorders still remain.” At the same time, he emphasized, “We fought! We fought selflessly, especially as some of us at that time had not yet come of age.”²¹

What should we make of such stories of resourceful, determined, resilient children? Hearing similar tales from adult veterans in the 1990s, Merridale concluded, “Kitsch war poetry and film created a consensual world, a fantasy of survival and endurance. It was a collective escape, a voluntary anesthetic, and the people who remember it believe that it worked.” Alternatively, such stories can be read as evidence of survivors’ strategies for coping with unimaginable experiences. The stories that survivors told long after the war, even after the end of the Soviet Union, echoed “kitsch war poetry and film” because the affirmation, “We fought selflessly!” made their suffering meaningful, and because believing that their suffering had a larger purpose helped—and continued to help—them to survive.²²

Adults’ recollections reflected Soviet ideas that granted children individual agency and a significant role in the larger collective

20 Gulina, “‘Child’s Past,’” 1323; A. Krestinskii, “Gorod nevdaleke,” in *Deti goroda-geroia* (Leningrad, 1974), 246. For the “high diction” of honor and sacrifice that ended with World War I, see Paul Fussell *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975), 21–23.

21 Aleshin, “My voevali,” 19, 22.

22 Merridale, *Night of Stone*, 251.

struggle. Thus, for example, Bliumina, another contributor to the 2014 collection, who was eleven years old in 1941, recalled the organization of “children’s brigades to help adults extinguish incendiaries.” Wearing canvas gloves and helmets, children aged ten and older grabbed the bombs, “spinning like tops, throwing off a sea of sparks,” and tossed them out of the attic windows to the paved courtyard, where they burned out. Ivanov—only four years old when the blockade began—remembered joining the adults who were hauling sand onto a roof to extinguish incendiaries “with [his] own child’s bucket.” Although he had only enough strength to make one trip to the attic, he confessed himself to be “immensely proud of having added my grain to the cause of the city’s defense.” Goncharenko recounted that when her father, who had volunteered for the home guard (*opolchenie*) returned to his family on leave, he told her that the situation in the city was worse than it was on the front: “[In the city] . . . we didn’t know when a bombardment would begin” because the sirens howled continuously. In memory, Leningrad remained the “city-front” that it had been in the wartime press, and children appeared, much as they had in the wartime press, as active and vital contributors to the war effort.²³ Even if this shared narrative was a “fantasy,” it was also a real resource that could help individuals to alleviate trauma.

Many of the survivors who drew strength from the process of writing themselves into the shared narrative of heroism also hinted that they knew and felt the limits of the heroic story. Concluding his account of the wartime fates of his neighborhood friends, Goppe, for one, remembered, “At the beginning of the war we said: ‘We are almost a platoon.’ Now I must sorrowfully say: This platoon, like any real shock troops, came out of the battle with enormous losses.” His representation of the boys as “shock troops,” not passive victims, offered a way to find some significance in the death of his neighbors, not so much anesthetizing pain as allowing survivors to make narrative sense of persistent sorrow.²⁴

23 Galina Evgen’evna Bliumina, “My pomogali vzroslym gasit zazhigalki,” in *Blokada Leningrada*, 62; Iurii Il’ich Ivanov, “Ja vnes svoiu krupinku v delo osvobodzheniia goroda,” in *ibid.*, 283; Larisa Ivanovna Goncharenko, “Otets, skazal, chto u nas strashnee, chem na fronte,” in *ibid.*, 148; DeGraffenried, *Sacrificing Childhood*, 64–118.

24 G. Goppe, “Marshruty odnogo puteshestviia,” in *Deti goroda-geroia*, 88.

In recent work on children and political violence, psychologists, psychiatrists, and anthropologists have moved away from “deficit and trauma frameworks,” invoking resilience instead. Similarly, a number of historians have questioned whether children should “be considered as passive victims” of war, without explicitly referring to the parallel social-science literature. Other historians, however, continue to use the language of trauma, even as they note the complex ways in which children adapt to, and cope with, conflict. Moreover, historians particularly sensitive to the mediated nature of sources about children tend to interpret stories of children’s resilience and political activism as serving adult political purposes, thereby dismissing any diminution of trauma as propaganda, if not dangerous self-deception.²⁵

The concept of resilience offers an alternative approach: Adult wartime memories about childhood clothed in Soviet clichés are not necessarily suspect in every respect. Taken seriously, these stories of maternal sacrifice and children’s “steadfastness and courage” are significant components of child survivors’ understandings and memories of the war, even if they are not fully accurate accounts of wartime experiences. Historians, in turn, can advance understandings of resilience by calling attention to its political, social, and cultural dimensions, placing individual stories in their proper context and highlighting the centrality of shared narratives in the process of endowing the traumas of war with meaning.²⁶

Finally, a focus on resilience need not entail a neglect of suffering and trauma so much as an appreciation of the complexities of children’s functioning in wartime. Certainly World War II often brought an abrupt, premature, and painful end to childhood—“happy” as it always was in the Stalinist lexicon. More than seventy years after the war began, Grigor’eva recalled the war as the moment when she and her peers stopped playing with toys: “Childhood ended, we started to grow up fast and before long came a difficult,

25 Célia Keren, “Spanish Refugee Children in France, 1939: An Insight into Their Experiences, Opinions and Culture,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, LXXXIX (2012), 281; Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945* (New York, 2011), 7–8, 247–248, 250; de La Ferrière, “Voice of the Innocent,” 118; Gelinada Grinchenko, “‘And Now Imagine Her or Him as a Slave, a Pitiful Slave with No Rights’: Child Forced Labourers in the Culture of Remembrance of the USSR and Post-Soviet Ukraine,” *European Review of History*, II (2015), 389–396.

26 Barber, “Annual Research Review,” 461. Gulina, “‘Child’s Past,’” 1312, calls attention to the importance of “faith in victory” but designates it an “inner,” not an external cultural resource.

orphaned young adulthood (*iunost'*).” During the famine winter, her neighbor “sometimes joked that I looked like a wizened little old lady.” In retrospect, however, Grigor’eva emphasized not only her losses but also her heavy responsibilities. As her mother weakened, twelve-year-old Zinaida took over the physically demanding task of queuing for the family’s bread ration: “I had to hold on in order to calm mama and sustain my brother Gena, who had turned six.”²⁷

War exposed Soviet children to unimaginable physical and psychological risks. Fadeev’s catalog of orphaned, isolated preschoolers who had seemingly lost the ability to speak stands as moving testimony to children’s need for protection from the ravages of war. Often unwilling to make children’s safety a priority, the Soviet state encouraged children to participate in such “adult” duties as extinguishing incendiary bombs or waiting in bread lines. Such activities no doubt added to the dangers, but they might also have been adaptive. The state provided a framework for understanding children as essential to a great cause, allowing some children (and the adults that they became) to conceive of themselves not as passive victims but as active citizens defending the motherland and helping their loved ones. Such stories did not necessarily anesthetize pain. As one survivor, who at the age of eight had watched her mother die and who had acquired the responsibility of procuring bread for her family, asserted, “Not one of us, even today, after sixty years, can speak calmly about the blockade; we all cry.” Documenting both “courage and suffering” (*muzhestvo i stradaniia*), child survivors’ reminiscences underscore children’s potential strength and competence, as well as war’s enormous destructive force.²⁸

27 Zinaida Fedorovna Grigor’eva, “Krys my boialis’ bol’she, chem trupov!” in *Blokada Leningrada*, 161, 163.

28 Valentina Vasil’evna Griaznova, “Tol’ko trupy i my s mamoi!” in *ibid.*, 171; Leonid Ignat’evich Vdovichenko, “My uvideli troikh nastoiashchikh nemtsev v voennoi forme,” in *ibid.*, 132.