

A Farewell to Childhood

GORSHKOV, Boris B. – *Russia's Factory Children: State, Society, and Law, 1800–1917*. Pittsburgh, PA.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. Pp. ix, 216.

FRIERSON, Cathy A., and Semyon S. VILENSKY – *Children of the Gulag*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. Pp. xxviii, 450.

HOFFMAN, Deborah (ed.) – *The Littlest Enemies: Children in the Shadow of the Gulag*. Bloomington, IN.: Slavica Publishers, 2009. Pp. viii, 189.

KUCHERENKO, Olga. – *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945*. Oxford (U.K.): Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xiii, 266.

A widely accepted and common practice in Russia, child labour existed well before modernized factories appeared in that country. Children worked in agriculture, where they performed various types of work according to their ability, gender, and strength, in cottage industries, in manorial and state factories, and in mines. Parents were willing to send their offspring to these various work places, because they saw work as an excellent way of preparing their children for adult life and of contributing to family income.

The middle decades of the nineteenth century witnessed rapid population growth, the emergence of new capitalist forms of production, and the employment of free, no longer bound, labour. Coming to industrial areas with their parents and their relatives or recruited in the countryside by employers, children made up a significant part of this enlarged labour force, particularly in textile production. For many an entrepreneur, child labourers were cheap, better able than adults to learn to work with the new machines, and better fitted physically to perform delicate operations. But low wages were not the only challenge affecting children's employment conditions; long work hours, poor ventilation, cramped spaces, intense heat, dangerous moving belts, high noise levels, shifting parts, dust and the use of hazardous chemicals (in the match-making industry, for example), work-related accidents, sickness, even death attested to an industrial environment that exposed children to more harmful conditions than the ones they were used to in the countryside and that explained, at least according to police reports, the strong desire of many of them to return home.

During the 1870s, public figures, intellectuals, and even state officials who had, like the parents, perceived child labour as a normal practice essential

for the upbringing and education of children, became increasingly concerned about the potential consequences of these health problems for the security and ultimate wellbeing of the tsarist empire. As a result, they appealed for child labour protection laws to replace the timid pre-emancipation legislation of the 1840s that had lacked provisions for implementation or penalty for its violation. Entitled "Public Debates and Legislative Efforts," Gorshkov's third – and most interesting – chapter introduces the voices of those who opposed child industrial labour; indeed, some strongly doubted that the factory was an appropriate place for a child's apprenticeship and work, while others questioned the moral aspects of employing children in industries. Industrialists also participated in these debates. Not too surprisingly, most of them rejected state intervention, arguing that restrictions on the length of the workday for children would reduce the incomes of workers' families, affect the labour of adult workers and, *par ricochet*, the production process, increase the production costs, make their enterprises unprofitable, place Russian industry at a disadvantage to foreign competitors who, to one degree or another, utilized child labour, and finally hamper the industrial development of Russia. These public debates about child labour – a testimony to the emergence and development of a civil society in nineteenth-century Russia – laid the foundations for the 1880s laws concerning children's employment, work, welfare, and education. The result of an interactive process among state officials and society, the 1882 law decisively restricted the industrial employment of children: it banned work for children under the age of twelve, nighttime labour, and work in dangerous industries; it created a corps of factory inspectors responsible for the enforcement of child labour regulations – a task that proved to be somewhat challenging, "because employers often evaded them with the complicity of parents and children themselves (p. 152);" and it required industrial establishments to allow children time for schooling. Labour conditions for children working in industries did improve as a result of this legislation.

A welcome addition to the historiography of child labour, *Russia's Factory Children* relies mainly on periodical publications, memoirs, labour statistics, health records, secondary studies, business reports, laws, reports of factory inspectors, and journalistic accounts. Of course one would like to hear from the children themselves, but most of them left no contemporary records of their experiences, in the end seen through the eyes of adults. The great disappointment of this book, besides its too many repetitions, is the very inadequate treatment, given the temporal parameters announced in the subtitle, of the last decades of the tsarist regime. Russia industrialized at its fastest pace during the years when Witte (1892-1903) and Stolypin (1906-1911) occupied positions of authority in that country. There is very little here on the contributions made by children to this industrialization drive. Furthermore, Gorshkov's contention that his research "suggests a new understanding of late imperial Russian state and society and the relations between them (p. 1)" will not make unanimity among scholars of the Russian past. Much more convincing is the author's assertion that attitudes about child labour evolved during the

course of the nineteenth century from acceptance to condemnation and that Russia's legislation concerning child labour compared favourably to that of other European countries.

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A volume in the series *Annals of Communism* and a fine contribution to the field of emotion in history, *Children of the Gulag* relies on Soviet state and personal archives, memoirs, and oral history interviews, conducted between March 2005 and June 2008, with survivors of Soviet political repression. Most of the documents in this hefty book – and all of them in Hoffman's much smaller *The Littlest Enemies* – were originally published in Russian – *Deti GULAGa, 1918-1956: Dokumenty* (2002) – by Semyon Vilensky, the founder of the Moscow-based *Vozvrashchenie* (Return) Society, an organization of prison camp survivors. In their useful introduction, the authors rightly consider children the most vulnerable members of society and describe them as victims “if they lost their homes, parents, siblings, identities, physical health, or lives (p. 5).” Though innocent, these child victims numbered over 10 million – a staggering figure that belies “the party-state's publicly declared solicitude for children within a welfare state (p. 10).” Indeed, it would be hard to find a better book than this one to debunk the myth of the happy Soviet childhood.

Under the Soviet state, children, more often than not, suffered not so much on account of what they had done as individuals, but because of their parents' ascribed status as “enemies of the Bolshevik regime and the Soviet people.” This violence started at the time of the civil war and the terrible famine that followed in its wake. It continued in the 1920s for children of Socialist Revolutionaries and of priests of the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, and reached its paroxysm in the 1930s as a result of the collectivization of the countryside, a policy that uprooted thousands of children from their familiar surroundings and exiled them, in open barges and locked cattle cars, to unfamiliar and forbidding surroundings (orphanages, labour colonies, the forest or the Gulag itself), and in the purges decreed by Stalin. The Second World War did not provide any significant relief: given the Soviet leaders' conviction that foreign enemy powers along their borders would seek to annihilate their socialist state, they came to believe that anyone living inside the Soviet Union who shared the nationality or ethnicity of those enemies was also an enemy of the people, regardless of age, political or social identity; as a result, hundreds of thousands of Polish, Baltic, Korean, and Rumanian children were deported to the Soviet interior. Finally, the witch hunts and the persecutions of the post-war years saw Stalin perpetuate the atmosphere of foreboding and fear for Soviet citizens and their families, and children, whether those of parents arrested during the Leningrad Affair or of Jews victimized by a resurgence of anti-Semitism, continued to suffer at the hands of cruel authorities. Only the death of Stalin in early March 1953 and Khrushchev's first remedial initiatives led to the rehabilitation, sometimes posthumous, of the victims.

Overcrowding in primitive barracks; insufficient clothing, food, equipment, and personnel; cold, lack of hygiene, exposure, and disease; loss of domestic security associated with displacement, loss of a parent or both parents; narrowing of educational and work opportunities; pilfering of goods and funds allocated for the children; and physical abuse in state institutions – these were the main challenges that children faced on a daily basis. That so many of them survived is an eloquent testimony to their resiliency and to their resourcefulness. Like any victory, though, this one too came at a price – the enduring legacies, both physical and psychological, of these traumatic experiences.

An excellent example of what history from below can reveal, this book is essential reading for students of political repression and Stalinism.

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Little Soldiers is the best, but also the most challenging, of the four books reviewed here. A Research Fellow at St. John's College, Cambridge University, with an expertise in anthropology, psychology, sociology, and history, Kucherenko focuses in this monograph on Soviet children's experiences of World War II.

Part I – “Prologue to the Battle: Exercise in Patriotism” – provides the context for understanding the phenomenon of Soviet children-soldiers, in particular, the ways in which they were mobilized for war. Various agents of socialization, namely the family, youth organizations, the school, mass media, and even celebrities attempted to fashion an identity that would reflect state-defined and state-approved parameters. Relentlessly, Soviet children were taught the values of altruism, cooperation, commitment to duty, patriotism, hard work, and self-sacrifice; they were also instructed to lead their lives as parts of a large collective, not in isolation or in an egoistic quest for personal happiness, and to act in a socially responsible way, both in normal circumstances and in times of crises. “A heroic sacrifice in the name of the collective was not only a desirable but an expected outcome of such socialization (p. 11),” whether the external enemy threatened the achievements of socialist construction or the sanctity of the country's territorial integrity. In such a scenario, death acquired a new meaning: it became a validation of one's life. With the increasing threat of war in the 1930s, youngsters remained key targets of the regime's ideological offensive. Resoluteness and militancy, sense of responsibility, and paramilitary training remained part of the curriculum, since the authorities believed that children (both males and females) would have a role to play in the future conflict. For example, the task of classical literature and history instruction “was to highlight the long-standing martial traditions of the Russian people, exemplify their courage and endurance, and (...) strengthen children's sense of patriotic identity (p. 80).” Such were the main principles of Soviet upbringing; they reveal how cleverly state propaganda linked a child's personal survival to a collective commitment to the mighty and prosperous Soviet Motherland.

Part II – “Greatcoat, Weapons and War: Soldiers in the Making” – considers the ways Soviet children were drawn into the war. With the invasion of the

Soviet Union in June 1941, Soviet children, though not mobilized for military service – an interesting contrast with the situation in Germany and in Japan – were encouraged to support the war effort; this they did in many different ways. Children worked in the fields, hospitals, and workshops; collected scrap metal; donated their pocket money and wages to building airplanes, tanks, and submarines; and gathered medical plants. In areas close to the front, children sheltered wounded Red Army soldiers, provided paramilitary and regular units with intelligence information, collected bottles for petrol bombs and weapons, carried out acts of sabotage, and apprehended enemy agents. Children were repeatedly reminded that this was no conventional war of conquest, but a methodical extermination of the Soviet people, which had to be repelled at any cost; furthermore, they were told that by getting rid of the Germans they were serving not only their nation, but also the whole world. The media, in particular, created well-honed stereotypes of the enemy in order to instil the children with confidence in their own abilities and with a positive attitude towards fighting.

Soviet ideology, values, and propaganda efforts clearly influenced the actions of individual children, but, important as these motivating factors were, they do not explain the whole story. Curiosity and a spirit of adventure, patriotic convictions, hunger and displacement, the weakening of social support networks, the destruction of families and feelings of revenge, the exhilaration of danger and the impulse of adolescence, the closure of schools, and the desire to belong to a community pushed thousands of unsupervised children and youths towards the front line, where armed forces picked them up and, given the haemorrhage of manpower, used them in support tasks and, later, in combat positions, especially when units were under the threat of encirclement. Once at the front, children performed a variety of duties, which allowed the freeing up of adults for combat. While they helped keep up morale, children shared similar hardships with the rest of the troops: they lived in damp dugouts, suffered through sleet and frost, ate mouldy food, wore the same dirty and lice-infested clothes for months on end, and endured long marches and shelling. Many children put up with such difficult experiences, because of the many rewards these very challenges engendered; indeed, in such a volatile environment, uniform and weapons increased their self-esteem, provided them with a sense of security, and singled them out as members of a heroic cast.

Kucherenko's sixth chapter – "Imps and eaglets: Children in the forest" – tells the story of their important contribution to the resistance movement in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. In contrast with the lukewarm treatment of child-volunteers at the front, Soviet children behind enemy lines were strongly encouraged by the authorities to take part in the hostilities. Given the ruthlessness of the enemy and the difficult conditions of their daily existence (many children were under the constant threat of abuse, disease, starvation, humiliation, and summary execution), it did not take long to persuade many of them to get involved in the fight against the Germans. Children provided both direct and indirect support in communications, reconnaissance, makeshift weapons production, partisan agitation campaigns, animal husbandry, and food procurement.

They also staged diversions by blowing up ammunition depots and stole weapons at night. Finally, once they had undergone rigorous physical and professional training in naval schools, enthusiastic children made a substantial contribution to the war effort on shipboard: they saw action on destroyers, cruisers, minesweepers, and patrol boats, in both European and Far Eastern waters.

A highly researched and detailed monograph that started its life as a Ph.D. thesis at Cambridge University, *Little Soldiers* adds another dimension - the nature and impact of propaganda directed at children - to our understanding of the Great Patriotic War.

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Pioneered by the late and controversial French mediaevalist Philippe Ariès, childhood studies, in particular the study of children as a distinct social group, are thriving, as these four books on children in Russia and the former Soviet Union attest to quite convincingly. True, children did not change the course of either the industrial revolution or the Second World War; nevertheless, by highlighting the many roles they played, whether as young factory workers or as little soldiers on the eastern front, these authors remind the reader of the importance of their contributions. The sad thing, at least for this reviewer, is that all these children were, in various ways, hapless victims of decisions made by adults. Childhood is a very precious time in the life of any human being and it needs to be enjoyed as much as possible, since a premature final good-bye to childhood is often a recipe for disaster in adulthood.

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