

THE HEROIC SOVIET CHILDHOOD: SOVIET CHILD SOLDIERS AND THEIR LEGACY

Children conceptualize the world differently from adults with fully developed, often essentialized ideas of self and the world around them. This must be considered when studying the perspective of children in history, as children's methods for interpreting, understanding, and coping with the world around them varies from their adult contemporaries. Of critical importance is the question of whether children possess a comparable level of understanding of experienced events to adults facing similar events and phenomena, and the level of agency exercised by children in circumstances such as the theatre of war. Children participating in war is not unique to the modern era, children have participated in conflicts for much of history. The Children's Crusade is one such instance of children fighting in a conflict by their own accord. However, popular understandings of the child are that of an innocent interpreter of the world as opposed to a willing actor.

The proposed paper investigates theoretical approaches to study and understand children's agency in war. This paper seeks to establish an analysis of how Soviet policies shaped the construction of the idea of the "heroic Soviet childhood" through patriotic education, how this construction played into the greater Soviet narrative of the German-Soviet War (1941–1945) as the Great Patriotic War, and how the construction of the "heroic Soviet childhood" as a component of this narrative was actualized during the war. Further, this paper seeks to explore the cultural impact it has left in the post-war Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. Considerations for the diverse ethnic make-up of the Soviet Union and the origin of records on the matter are provided, though this was not a primary research focus of this study.

Moreover, this paper is going to trace attention to the post-war legacies of the “children of war”, their traumatic experiences and the memory politics towards them in post-Soviet republics with a focus on the Russian case. The legal realities of veterans of World War II will also be investigated to observe how post-Soviet republics have dealt with issues of support for veterans and “children of war”.

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on understandings of the definitions of child soldiers, their agency exercised during times of war, and methods for coping with traumatic and military experiences. The general interpretation of a child soldier is broad, with the United Nations defining a child soldier as any individual under eighteen years of age¹. This broad definition, including children as young as toddlers to those reaching adulthood, obscures the popular image of the child soldier as a helpless young individual, dragged into an armed conflict devoid of their own agency. Many records detailing the lives of child soldiers do not go into enough depth about the cultural phenomenon of child soldiers within Soviet society. Thus, an understanding of patriotic education employed by Soviet officials is necessary to explain the participation and enthusiasm of children for the war effort. Articles pertaining to child soldier theory from primarily African scholars such as Alcinda Honwana² and Opiyo Oloya³ are consulted to establish a basis by which child soldiers and their experiences can be viewed through a theoretical lens. The experiences of child soldiers in the African context can then be compared to the experiences in the Soviet context to construct parallels. Additionally, history of memory studies, as well as trauma studies are useful in constructing a thorough theoretical

¹ Child Recruitment and Use – United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict | To Promote and Protect the Rights of All Children Affected by Armed Conflict. United Nations. 2020. May. 12. URL: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/child-soldiers/>.

² Honwana A. *Child Soldiers in Africa* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

³ Oloya O. *Child to Soldier: Stories from Joseph Kony's Lords Resistance Army*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016.

framework. Particularly, the theoretical concepts of resilience⁴ as contrasted with the concept of trauma, paired with an understanding of children's agency⁵ is important for understanding the mental and emotional states of children soldiers in World War II and afterwards. Further considerations for the difficulties associated with the memory of wartime, and the acknowledged aid that counselling provides in processing memories of war and violence⁶ are given.

Primary sources consulted for this project consisted of works from authors such as Lisa Kirschenbaum⁷ and Olga Kucherenko,⁸ featuring translated interviews and testimonies from former child soldiers or wartime survivors. Sources of popular culture examined for this paper were films as artworks addressed for constructing the popular narrative about child soldiers in post-Soviet children's literature.⁹ The film *The Fortress* (2015)¹⁰ was especially useful for observing the post-Soviet media perspective of this cultural phenomenon.

This study found that in response to increasing threats of invasion, Soviet authorities since the post-revolution era possessed a vested interest in ensuring that their nation would be completely prepared to defend the revolution from outside threats. This desire for wartime preparedness culminated in patriotic education programs that sought to prepare the Soviet Union's young population to fight in the perceived conflicts of the future. Actions such as education in military terminology, and the introduction of the military training course in

⁴ Kirschenbaum L. The Meaning of Resilience: Soviet Children in World War II. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. 2017. Spring. 47. no. 4. P. 523.

⁵ Akello G., Annemiek R., Ria R. Reintegration of former child soldiers in northern Uganda: Coming to terms with children's agency and accountability. *Intervention*. 2006. November. 4. no. 3. P. 229–243.

⁶ Ibid. P. 232.

⁷ Kirschenbaum L. The Meaning of Resilience: Soviet Children in World War II. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. 2017. Spring. 47. no. 4. P. 521–535.

⁸ Kucherenko O. *Little Soldiers: how Soviet children went to war, 1941–1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁹ Pecherskaya A. *Children – the heroes of the Great Patriotic War [Дети – герои Великой Отечественной войны]*. Moscow: Drofa Plyus, 2011.

¹⁰ Dmitriev F. *Крепость: щитом и мечом*. Russia: Melnitsa Animation Studio, CTB Film Company, 2015. Film.

higher grades and replacing physical education classes in primary schools are some examples of this push for military preparation.¹¹ The militaristic tone of the Soviet Union's patriotic education would reach its zenith under the Stalin regime, with organization such as the Pioneers providing children with skills and knowledge that would benefit them should an armed conflict arise. From the Soviet Union's use of patriotic education, the historical construction of the "heroic childhood" is useful in characterizing the elements of education, ideological indoctrination, and patriotic pride employed by Soviet officials before, during, and after World War II. This idea is supported by works such as Vitaly Bezrogov's *If the War Comes Tomorrow*, which outlines how the various youth organizations and facets of children's education in the Soviet Union were interested in preparing the nation's youth for the potential of invasion.¹²

Actualization of Soviet efforts to energize their youth population towards defending their homeland came into effect as the German invasion of the Soviet Union began. The war was labelled the Great Patriotic War by Soviet authorities, and a call was made for all to assist in the war effort. This call to action was answered by adults and children alike, who often expressed positive sentiments towards fighting off the invaders.¹³ Children served in various roles within the official Soviet military and paramilitary Partisan units throughout the war with varying degrees of consent from military officials. Soviet children of varying ages would participate in wartime activities ranging from frontline fighters to supply-carrying support personnel, with 10–16% of members of the resistance movement being school aged.¹⁴ The common occurrence of the phenomenon of "a son of the regiment" (*сын полка*) in Soviet regiments as support personnel is of

¹¹ Kucherenko O. *Little Soldiers: how Soviet children went to war, 1941–1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. P. 125–126.

¹² Bassin M., Kelly C. *Soviet and post-Soviet identities*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. P. 113–168.

¹³ Kirschenbaum L. The Meaning of Resilience: Soviet Children in World War II. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. 2017. Spring. 47. no. 4. P. 532.

¹⁴ Kucherenko O. *Little Soldiers, how Soviet children went to war, 1941–1945*. P. 193–228.

interest. A movie was produced in 1946 of the same name, indicating that in the context of the Cold War and potential invasion from Western powers, a militaristic approach to children did not conclude with the end of the war in 1945. The result of the construction and perpetuation of the “heroic childhood” is a cultural phenomenon in Soviet society during the 1940-1980s that glorifies the image of child soldiers. The film *Come and See* (*Иди и смотри*) (1985)¹⁵ is one such instance that follows the life and actions of a teenage partisan who fights against the Nazi occupation of Belarus.

This culminated in a culture of praise for the idea of the brave child soldier that continues to be cultivated in Russia today. The children's movie *The Fortress: By Shield and Sword* (*Крепость: щитом и мечом*) (2015) is one such example, in which two children take actions to combat the advance of Polish-Lithuanian forces on the fortress of Smolensk during the Time of Troubles. However, despite a culture of praise for the heroic actions of child soldiers during World War II, actions taken by governments following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 vary with regards to the level of care and support given to veterans of the conflict. The question remains with regards to the memory politics of World War II within the Russian Federation as to whether the courage and bravery of child soldiers should take the place of pride or quiet acknowledgement or a traumatic experience within the popular memory attached to the war. Works such as *The Fortress* and other postwar films serve to glorify the idea of the child soldier. Additionally, the book *Children – the heroes of the Great Patriotic War*, targeted at a child audience, constructs a likewise exalting ethos around child fighters of the period in language that appeals to and is easily understood by children today. It would be interesting to further explore the cultural impact the concept of the “heroic childhood” has left on post-Soviet society within Russia and other post-Soviet nations.

The demand for wartime preparedness from all Soviet society produced a culture of militarizing youths that would lead to the

¹⁵ Klimov E. *Come and See* [*Иди и смотри*]. Minsk: Belarusfilm, 1985. Film.

historical construction of the “heroic childhood”. Through policies such as patriotic education, Soviet children were willing and able to participate in the armed conflict of World War II. Children served as active combat troops and support personnel through their own agency and resilience. The recognition of children’s contribution to resistance efforts produced a culture of praise for child soldiers prevalent in Soviet and Russian popular culture during and after the war. The memory politics associated with child soldiers during the war and the cultural impact it has left on post-Soviet nations offers potential grounds for fruitful study as the memory of the war and its ramifications remain relevant to this day.

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