



Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945*

Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945 by Olga Kucherenko

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Europe and, if they could afford to do so, to the United States. And while Zionism as a movement had yet to be fully formed, there is little doubt that this widespread resentment would eventually contribute to the growing demands for a permanent homeland in Palestine.

In addition to maps, the author and editors furnish twenty images and a valuable appendix citing the various measures taken by the Russian state with regard to its Jewish population. Although this is obviously the author's last word on the subject of ethnic violence, he has left a solid and erudite foundation for other scholars to build on.

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Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945. By *Olga Kucherenko*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv+266. \$99.00.

Olga Kucherenko begins her book with an account of the most internationally known “little soldier” of the Great Patriotic War. This was Ivan Bondarev, a twelve-year old character from Vladimir Bogomolov’s fiction made famous by Andrei Tarkovskii’s luminous film *Ivan’s Childhood*. Ivan was a hardened and experienced boy whose days were spent convincing Soviet officers that he should be allowed to stay on the front lines to perform reconnaissance missions and whose nights were filled with dreams of a simpler, bucolic past and the more recent memories of the murder of his family by the Germans. It was a film of a stolen youth, of personal revenge, and of the soul-destroying wastage of war.

Kucherenko claims that Ivan was “the personification of many children who participated in combat on the Eastern Front” (2), but Ivan does not reappear in this book until a brief mention in the conclusion. This is so not only because Kucherenko reasonably wants to focus on nonfictional child soldiers but also because Tarkovskii’s vision of child soldiering is actually much different from the vision that she presents to us in this book.

The argument in *Little Soldiers* is that the Soviet leadership’s explicit pedagogical project in the 1930s to mentally and physically prepare children for war worked. The barrage of propaganda in the form of military stories and other forms of heroic literature, in the form of inculcating notions of communist superiority and xenophobia and in the form of a “conflation of Russian historical traditions with Soviet Patriotism” (54), had a large effect on Soviet children. Furthermore, the expansion of paramilitary organizations dedicated to bringing young citizens into the military fold also transformed children in the 1930s. Drawing on ideas regarding motivation and identity formation ranging from early works of Erik Erikson to more recent studies in social psychology, Kucherenko argues that children are unusually susceptible to these influences and that as a result the younger generation became both more militant and more Soviet in many important ways. Soviet children, in her view, believed propaganda and generally accepted the official view of the world at face value.

Thus, the fictional character who more accurately reflected the Soviet child soldier was Arkadii Gaidar’s Timur, who had “become the nation’s heart-throb and a role model for thousands of children on their path to conversion into virtuous collectivists” (75). Already by July 19, 1941, Gaidar was using Timur to motivate children to join warlike pursuits in *Timur’s Oath*, a serial in *Pionerskaia pravda*. This they did en masse, joining “Timur’s teams” to help local economies and then often joining the military or the partisans. Kucherenko admits that, as the war dragged on, “feelings of insecurity and revenge” (152) began to play a part in addition to patriotism, but the success of Soviet indoctrination remains Kucherenko’s major theme.

It is only after the book is more than half finished that we see the extended treatment of the experiences of child soldiers in the war, which was too little and too late in my view. The chapters on culture and propaganda are serviceable, but they offer little new to specialists on the era. In contrast, Kucherenko is able to present a good deal of new material when she gets to the war period, thanks not only to her work in archives but also to a set of interviews she conducted with former child combatants. In three separate chapters on children in the army, the partisans, and the navy, she paints a picture of the experiences of these young combatants. Her descriptions of children on the move as refugees, partisans, and hangers-on during the war are well sourced and her inclusion of female child soldiers adds further interest to her account. On the basis of less evidence, she deals perfunctorily with questions of the abuse (particularly sexual abuse) of the children in these units, arguing unconvincingly that the stigma against pedophilia meant that “children did not experience any abuse, even girls” and that the propaganda link between fascism and sodomy meant that “it is unlikely boys were subjected to such exploitation” (178). Descriptions of the crises of conscience and of the mental illness brought on by the violence of the war are better substantiated and extremely poignant.

It bears noting that Kucherenko focuses almost exclusively on the Stalinist Soviet Union in her analysis. Earlier moves toward patriotic indoctrination and child militarization, not only in prerevolutionary Russia but also during the Soviet 1920s, are ignored. The experiences of child soldiers elsewhere are also basically unaddressed. The Nazis used child soldiers, especially near the end of the war, but the parallel is not drawn here. The topic also has enormous contemporary resonance, but Kucherenko dodges the issue by saying that “despite certain common features, the Soviet case is in many ways dissimilar to modern-day conflicts and thus should be understood in its own historical and historical context,” a context that was “unique” (254). Perhaps this is true, but without an explicit comparison we really can’t know.

Who, then, represents the Soviet child soldier best, Ivan or Timur? Kucherenko convinces me that there were many Timurs and that some of these survived to respond to the request of a historian to tell their story for posterity. Propaganda and early childhood socialization clearly made many of them eager to go to war and passionate when they fought, spied, or dug trenches. But weren’t there many Ivans too, swallowed up with barely a trace into the great meatgrinder of the Eastern Front or so traumatized by their experiences that they never spoke honestly about them again? They left few sources, so it is hard to blame Kucherenko for directing her attention elsewhere, but nevertheless, if you assign Kucherenko to a class, make sure that *Ivan’s Childhood* is the companion DVD.

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Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War. By *Kristin Roth-Ey*.

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. Pp. xii+315. \$39.95.

This delightful and deeply serious book explores the paradox offered in the title: the Soviet Union aimed to win the Cold War through soft power, by demonstrating the superiority of its sovereign high culture and exporting that culture to the world. In harnessing this cultural sense of mission to new media technologies, argues Kristin Roth-Ey, the