UC Santa Barbara
Library Award for Undergraduate Research Winners

Title
The Fate of the Motherland's Children: Youth Action, Trauma, and Experiences within the Russian Revolution (1917-1923)

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/942571pc

Author
Korotchenko, Victoria

Publication Date
2023-04-01

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

LIBRARY AWARD FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH
First Place
Humanities & Fine Arts
UC SANTA BARBARA
Library
www.library.ucsb.edu

The Fate of the Motherland's Children: Youth Action, Trauma, and Experiences within the Russian Revolution (1917-1923)

Victoria Korotchenko

Advisor: Dr. Sara Pankenier Weld

Russian and East European Studies

2023

"It was a lot of fun during the Rivolushun.

And I won't never forget the Russian Rivolushun."

—Anonymous Child[1]

[1] "Revolution for Tiny Tots," *Russian Life and Arzamas Academy*, 10 April 2017. Accessed online: https://russianlife.com/the-russia-file/revolution-for-tiny-tots/.

In the draft of his "Declaration of the Rights of the Child," Russian activist Konstantin Ventcel wrote that one of the most sacred rights of a child is the recognition that "he is not like a parasite, only giving back to society in the future, but that he, in the present, is a participant and builder of social and public life."[2] This youth-elevating declaration was revised and presented at a conference in Moscow in 1918 to Ventcel's fellow Proletkult thinkers, but the piece's ideas about the active child, as well as its utopian vision of a child-dictated education, never promulgated past this meeting and did not directly affect any Russian legislation regarding the role of the child in their society. It would not be until 1959 that the United Nations would produce a similar document, and even then, the U.N.'s own "Declaration of the Rights of the Child" would not directly espouse the child's right to active participation in forming their society, nor did it place the child in such an authoritative role within their own lives.[3]

Initially, Ventcel's concept of a child in charge of their own social participation and education may seem excessive, especially given modern conceptions of the child as innocent and needing guidance. However, Ventcel's ideas already reflected children's role in his contemporaneous world: the chaotic, tumultuous world of the Russian Revolution (1917-1923). Many have discussed children's participation in shaping, and being shaped by, the later Soviet government through avenues like the Komsomol and Pioneer Clubs. But even before Soviet-imposed child participation helped solidify communism's grasp on future generations, Russia's young were already embroiled in the movements of the Russian Revolution itself, exemplifying Ventcel's concept of a participant and founder child.

---

[2] Unless otherwise noted, any translations directly from Russian are my own. Konstantin Ventcel, "Отделение школы от государства и декларация прав ребенка [The Separation of Schools from the Government and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child]," *Yeltsin Presidential Library,* (Moscow: I.N. Kushnerev and Co, 1918), p. 14. Accessed online: https://www.prlib.ru/item/355534.

[3] Manfred Liebel, "The Moscow Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1918): A Contribution from the Hidden History of Children's Rights," *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 24, no. 1, p. 23.

Within the period of tumult and war, children were actively involved on all fronts of the Revolution, serving as its soldiers, its victims, its chroniclers, and its revolutionaries.

The goal of the Russian Revolution was to disrupt and rupture the way that things had always been under Tsarist Russia, and in establishing Bolshevik control and the Soviet Union, the revolutionaries certainly managed to transform Russian society. However, in their tumult of revolution, war, and rebuilding, these revolutionaries and their movement also disrupted the lives of Russia's youth. As we consider this lens of disruption and its effects, we are allowed a new angle on such a well-covered, influential event. By compiling sources written about these children alongside sources written *by* children, we gain a clearer image of daily life during such historical strife—one that is different due to the positionality that age and generation affects—but more importantly, also a clearer characterization of the Russian Revolution as nuanced, traumatic, and certainly not inevitable in its trajectory.

Детский Мир, or a Child's World: Definitions and Context

Immediately, studying childhood and children's experiences prompts its own set of questions and problems, especially since that single word—"childhood"—conjures an incalculable variety of associations (positive and negative) for each individual reader. Different times, places, moments, contexts, and so forth all come to *construct* a childhood, and each one will differ from the next, including throughout history; it is not just an innate, universally understood phenomenon.[4] That is why there are multiple academic fields increasingly springing up to explore this phenomenon, from those focusing on the history of childhood and children's literature to the burgeoning discipline of

[4] Allison James and Alan Prout, preface to *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood,* Second edition (London: Falmer Press, 1997), p. 8.

childhood studies as a whole: there is a lot connotated and worth dissecting under the seemingly simple label of childhood.

Just as this ineffability and diversity is a crucial facet in discussing youth, clarifying the other principles that underlie our present cultural understandings of childhood is an important primary step for tackling childhoods of the past. For example, acknowledging that "it is more correct to talk of 'childhoods' rather than childhood"[5] prompts the caveat that "childhoods" were also obviously incredibly diverse, and thus diversely altered, during the tumult of the Russian Revolution. Change, rather than similarity and continuity, are the hallmarks within studies of children's history.[6] As such, this paper will not even attempt to capture or tackle every possible context but rather present and compare the accounts of several children from different backgrounds and in different roles, all in an effort to provide a distinct perspective on this major historical event, outside of the usual narratives of adult revolutionaries and great military leaders and instead, from the eyes of the children who were also present and involved.

While there are many approaches to the history of childhood (from analyzing the effects of economic or political policies on children's lives to considering children within the family unit), this paper is particularly interested in looking at children as protagonists in their own right, looking to the "emergent paradigm" for constructing and reconstructing childhood, as coined by sociologists Allison James and Alan Prout. This general model features the aforementioned diversity of childhoods while also centering that:

---

[5] James and Prout, preface to *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, p. xi.

[6] Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), p. 1.

1. Childhood is understood as a social construction.... [It] is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.
2. Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity.
3. Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.
4. Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.[7]

Although sociology is undeniably a distinct field from history, interdisciplinary approaches to the study of childhood are unavoidable and even necessary since childhood is "not a terrain on which historians are the only chief guide. Social scientists [including sociologists, psychologists, etc.] can all claim to have distinctive approaches to the study of childhood, which historians ignore at their peril."[8] And to avoid such a perilous journey through the already complicated period of the Russian Revolution, interdisciplinary material, from sociology to literary analysis to art history, will shape this study's trajectory and its analysis regarding the agency of children.

For example, point one defines childhood as a "social construction": this echoes the earlier truth of the diversity of childhoods while also showcasing that childhood is not a universal concept

[7] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood,* p. 8.

[8] Hugh Cunningham, "Histories of Childhood," *American Historical Review* 103, no. 4 (1998), p. 1196. Furthermore, writing as a historian, Cunningham deems that James and Prout's is the "most sophisticated and influential representation" of the "children as agents" approach towards this kind of historiography. James and Prout's succinct paradigm also embodies historiographical precedents, like the ideas first captured in Philippe Ariès's book *Centuries of Childhood* and then elaborated on later as the disciplines studying childhood further developed after the 1960s, including childhood studies and multiple other fields.

across the globe or an innate stage within human development. As a result, different cultures across time and regions had different conceptions of what a childhood looked like, as defined socially rather than individually. What, then, was understood to be a "childhood" during the Russian Revolution? By 1917, social conceptions of childhood had been affected by eighteenth-century Romantic ideals of a child as distinct from an adult and a child as a symbol, by late-nineteenth-century moves to exclude children from industrial labor, and by turn-of-the-century promotions of education and reform. It is difficult to speak in broad terms on this matter, but generally, the period leading up to the Russian Revolution saw a "valorization of children," or a recognition of the child's individuality and importance, rather than solely an eventual economic contributor. This development's implementation varied especially by class, but Russian society (like other Western states) gradually tended toward a trajectory where "children were pushed out of the labor market into schools and became economically 'worthless,' [but] they became emotionally 'priceless' to their family," even in peasant families that put their children to work from pre-teen ages.[9] Undeniably, children like these continued to work alongside their families while other children continued to be abandoned and starve, but as Elizabeth White emphasizes, the *broader* emotional attitudes toward the child shifted toward being more caring and sympathetic. In brief, children were made increasingly important not purely as helping hands within society's labor systems but as conscious individuals who should be nurtured.

As a result, pre-revolutionary reform efforts, such as those in the education realm, increasingly stressed the importance of protecting and developing the child (whether these reforms were successful is a different matter, but the rhetoric was there). These efforts, particularly those during and following the Great Reforms of the 1860s, also marked some of the first fusings of the child with the

---

[9] Elizabeth White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood: From the Late Imperial Period to the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), pp. 3-5.

revolutionary and the radical: while activists advocated for greater protections for Russia's youth, they did so against the backdrop of the country's continuous political, economic, and social issues. For example, fixing systemic labor issues meant addressing children's labor needs or exclusion from it.[10] Improving children's lives thus came to mean improving Russia's issues. Children may have remained physically and politically inferior to their adult counterparts (like they do today), but their lives and their futures were deemed to be worth bettering, even if that meant employing radical means.

However, as point two of the paradigm reiterates, the images of *individual* childhoods, as well as the images of what they should be reformed into, drastically depended on variables like class, gender, and ethnicity. This principle is certainly clear within the Russian Revolution context, even when just looking at another traditional-yet-complicated marker of childhood: age. Age as defining the boundaries of childhood has never remained constant, nor was it typically consistent across all social groups, particularly in terms of class. For example, many see the school-leaving age as a key boundary separating the child and the adult, at least legally if not also culturally. However, education was inconsistent in the decades before, after, and certainly during the frequent instability of the Revolution. Elite and gentry children more often experienced formal education, whether that be through tutors, devoted "pedagogical mothers… who took a serious and sustained interest in the raising of their children," or formal schools. Through the changes and reforms of the preceding nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the "school-leaving age [was] raised from twelve to fourteen and then to sixteen."[11] Peasant children, on the other hand, started working alongside their families in the field or the trade from the age of five or six, with the adult seeing this "as education and apprenticeship, rather than labour, as children were learning their future roles and responsibilities

[10] White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood*, p. 5.
[11] White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood*, p. 6.

through practice." By eighteen, they would be legally considered full workers, although they had been farming, tending to animals, and working with machinery since ages as young as eight.[12] Although reform efforts throughout the late 1800s increasingly attempted to spread education to these children, the disparities between children's experiences across classes remained in the years leading up to the revolution. And as age is concerned, no singular age range encompassed childhood, and therefore this paper will include accounts from a variety of ages. While this might hinder some direct comparisons, the rewarding trade-off is a larger, more detailed trove of perspective and revealing experiences: a microcosm of the revolutionary period. We could attempt to define childhood based on our modern markers of education, laws, or marriage[13], but as the experiences across class demonstrate, the reality was a very varied world of childhood in revolutionary Russia.

Framing the analysis of revolutionary Russia through James and Prout's paradigm has thus set up a contextual look at Russia and its childhoods leading up to the Russian Revolution: powerful adults, from politicians to radicals, were concerned about children's overall place and purpose within society, with many using children as a symbolic figure when propagating their goals of reform. Meanwhile, children were experiencing a vast array of ordeals, from learning how to tend the fields or how to run an estate; their life trajectories heavily dependent on which type of family they were born into. As historian of Russian childhood Catriona Kelly writes, "Above all, it depended upon the place of a child's parents in the social hierarchy."[14]

---

[12] White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood*, p. 27.

[13] Marriage, as expected, similarly varied across class and gender. Throughout the nineteenth century, the average age at which a young man or woman gradually increased, but peasant and rural youth tended to get married at younger ages, and girls were generally married at younger ages than boys. White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood*, p. 19.

[14] Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia 1890-1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 6.

However, as points three and four emphasize, children experience a variety of tribulations during their childhood, but they are not passive subjects within this segment of their lives. There have been numerous approaches applied to study children during the time of the Russian Revolution, but by incorporating this paradigm as a guiding structure, the perspective of the child can truly shine through. Much of the existing literature on children during the Russian Revolution discusses children from the lens of education reforms, forced participation in communist clubs, and the breakup of families due to war and violence—in short, descriptions of what was done *to* children rather than what children themselves *did,* while others still erroneously position children as less human and thus less valuable in studying the past. But if we keep in mind that, then and now, children's "social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right" and that children "are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives...and of the societies in which they live,"[15] then we become considerably more alert to moments within the historical record where children do stand apart from the masses, where they enact their agency, and how the contexts of their childhoods affected their choices. After all, some might deny the significance of their perspective, but youth were present in every historical moment and were thus also its witnesses and participants. This may be a simple concept, but truly, moments of children's agency and action must be acknowledged first in order to become visible.

Not only does this kind of study of childhood reveal children's agency and mentalities, but most importantly for a historian, children's experiences also echo the features and thoughts of the broader society in flux. As historian James Schultz argued, there is a "'historicity of childhood': the lives that children lead reflect not simply their human biology but also the cultural assumptions of the

[15] James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, p. 4.

time and place in which they live."[16] After all, children stand at the intersection of many societal facets: they are a chief concern of the public government but occupy the individual, private domain; they are being educated about the world, but they simultaneously and frequently push its boundaries and question its rules. Childhood "is the true 'missing link': connecting the personal and the public, and the psychological and the sociological, the domestic and the state," and can reveal just as much about social and historical attitudes as it can about youths themselves.[17] In the case of the Russian Revolution, the following accounts will demonstrate not only the experiences, the traumas, and the musings of the children themselves but broader themes regarding this historical disruption: it was chaotic, controversial, and touched all parts of Russian society, including its youngest members.

"Something tragic and final had befallen the Russian Empire and all of us."[18]: Elite Children

It might be odd to begin the discussion of revolutionary children with the undeniably privileged Tsarevich Alexei, but any Revolution is multifaceted, and the Russian Revolution shattered the young lives of all classes, including those within the nobility that the Revolution was targeting. After all, the elite and their youth were emblematic of imperial Russia's transgressions, and as the Revolution dawned and the stakes became higher, these children became literal physical targets that need to be addressed. Although Nicholas II's family provides five possible entry points into this perspective, Tsarevich Alexei Romanov was the youngest of the royal children and the closest in age to the majority of the other children discussed hereon, being only fourteen when he was assassinated in Yekaterinburg alongside the rest of his family and remaining faithful servants. Within his short life,

[16] James A. Schultz qtd. in Cunningham, *Histories of Childhood*, p. 1198.
[17] Stephen Mintz qtd. in White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood*, p. 2.
[18] Zinaida Schakovskoy, "The February Revolution as Seen by a Child," *The Russian Review* 26, no. 1 (1967): p. 70.

however, he was disabled by hemophilia, coddled by his worried mother, and unknowingly grew up within the last decade of Romanov rule.

The young Romanov also occupied a unique spot as compared to his older, more discussed sisters: as World War I and then the Revolution unfolded, Alexei was being raised up to take over the country as its future tsar. Of course, that destiny was never fulfilled—his position as heir also made him one of the greatest dangers to the Revolution—but his writings reflect the resulting mentality of superiority and concern regarding the state of the country and its politics, even at his young age. Uniquely empowered, he was actively engaged with the events unfolding during the war period, although his writings unsurprisingly emulate his position as future heir and guardian of the Russian *narod*. As such, this child's perspective, as well as the perspective of those around him, demonstrates an opposing mentality regarding the Revolution and tumult: it was a temporary squabble to be put down, yet, simultaneously, something whose gravitas these elites did not quite understand.

Although Alexei only started writing in a diary in 1916, and unfortunately, his 1917 diary is owned privately and cannot be studied here,[19] his available letters and other diaries demonstrate the daily life of a tsarevich, as well as his understanding of the political events unfolding around him. For example, as Russia was engaged in World War I, ten-year-old Alexei visited wounded soldiers[20] and at twelve, Alexei describes joining his father's conversation with allies like Prince Kan'in Kotohito of Japan and the Japanese ambassador.[21] And during the Revolution itself, Alexei would describe the constant watch that his family was under in Tobolsk:

---

[19] Introduction to *Alexei, Russia's Last Tsesarevich- Letters, diaries, and writings*, translated by George Hawkins, (Printed by the translator, 2022), p. 12.

[20] "Alexei to Nicholas II, 19 November 1914" in *Alexei, Russia's Last Tsesarevich- Letters, diaries, and writings*, p. 158.

[21] "Alexei to Alexandra Feodorovna, 12 September 1916" in *Alexei, Russia's Last Tsesarevich- Letters, diaries, and writings*, p. 482.

> During our morning walk, extraordinary commissioner Demyanov came to take a look at our garden and yard, he is also the head of the Omsk detachment of the Red Guard. With him, there was the commander and the committee of our detachment. The Red Guards have been here for a week already.[22]

All of these fragments demonstrate a child active within his world and aware of its affairs: much of this involvement may be due to forced duty and responsibility, but nonetheless, Alexei was not a child shielded from the political upheaval wrought by World War I and the following Russian Revolution. Rather, he was a participant in broader historical events and was even engaged enough to recount and muse upon these moments in his writing.

However, his writing exudes a much different tone than the revolutionary children that will serve as his foils: Alexei's accounts of daily life and historical moments are interspersed with lightheartedness characteristic of not only a child but also someone distant from the actual troubles plaguing regular Russians. For example, in a jovial letter to his mother, Alexei complains about his deserved salary and his hunger, writing, "My salary! I beg you!!!!!!/There is nothing to eeeeaaaaaat!!!/.../Soon I sell dresses, books and finally, starve to death" alongside a doodle of a coffin (Figure 1).[23] This is a joke between a mother and son but, nonetheless, stands out given the broader context of Russia in the months leading up to the revolution. The class disparities were vast, peasants struggled because of the ongoing world war, and the accusations lobbied towards this dynasty specifically concerned food shortages "in a country glutted with food."[24] Noble children like the

---

[22] "Alexei's Diary, Thursday 29 March/12 April" in *Alexei, Russia's Last Tsesarevich- Letters, diaries, and writings*, p. 618.
[23] "Alexei to Alexandra Feodorovna, 8 November 1916" in *Alexei, Russia's Last Tsesarevich- Letters, diaries, and writings*, pp. 527-528.
[24] S.A. Smith, *The Russian Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 5-8, 12-14.

tsarevich were plunged into political dealings and world events, but simultaneously, they remained distant from the closer-to-home issues plaguing other children their age in the lower classes.

Figure 1: Doodle of a coffin from Prince Alexei's letter to Alexandra Fedorovna, 8 November 1916. *Alexei, Russia's Last Tsesarevich- Letters, diaries, and writings*, p. 528.

Besides the tsarevich case study, this attitude toward the revolutionary events is seen in the accounts and recollections of other elite children, such as Zinaida Schakhovskoy. She was born into a noble family—her mother was a minor princess—and was a ten-year-old student in Petrograd when the 1917 February Revolution broke out.[25] Although her accounts of the February and October Revolutions were not written when she was a child, her autobiographical papers provide first-hand details about the events while further exemplifying the attitudes and actions of elite children regarding the revolutionary moments. For example, Schakhovskoy embodies the same elite disconnect towards the Revolution as Alexei did, even more directly so:

> The unfamiliar word entered my vocabulary: the Revolt, not yet "Revolution." Of course, the event was beyond our comprehension. The world which I had entered without enthusiasm some months ago, was, in spite of its excellent education program, remote from reality and nearer the eighteenth century than the twentieth. Over our tight corsets we wore long dress... which would have suited the court ladies of Catherine the Great.... It was a dress which hardly conveyed the idea of the struggle for life.[26]

[25] Schakovskoy, "The February Revolution as Seen by a Child," p. 63.
[26] Schakovskoy, "The February Revolution as Seen by a Child," p. 68.

While some of her peers were out on the streets protesting and fighting, Schakovskoy admits that she and her classmates saw "this first day of the February Revolution…[as] just an exceptionally exciting day which liberated us from the tedious obligation."[27] Because of the disconnect between classes, the children of the gentry tended to perceive this event as a distant, fleeting moment: there was an awareness that something big was happening, but as is evident in Zinaidia's excited tone, few could understand the sheer impact that this "revolt" (later, revolution) would have and thus acted accordingly.

However, just as class shaped how children described and acted within the revolution, this distinction also greatly influenced how the Revolution impacted the children. Most Russians came to see incredible violence and trauma in this period, but elite children encountered the Revolution's impacts through forced displacements, threats, and constant exodus as Bolshevik sympathizers tried to arrest the bourgeoisie parents and acquire their lands. While Zinaida's tone is ambivalently curious in her account of the February Revolution, her account of the October Revolution chronicles her family's migrations across southwestern Russia as they went from estate to estate, searching for some peace but always encountering trouble from countryside revolutionaries. For a period, the family stayed at a Tula-province estate once owned by her godfather, who had been killed there "by revolutionary terrorists," until most of the family, including her mother, were arrested by Red Army soldiers, and Zinaida was held hostage.[28] While Zinaida lived through these events and eventually emigrated to France like many other children, the tsarevich and other gentry children suffered worse fates as they were killed to break with the past and to preserve the Revolution's momentum. Briefly put, all of these accounts exemplify a key trait of children's experiences within the Revolution seen in

[27] Schakovskoy, "The February Revolution as Seen by a Child," p. 68.
[28] Zinaida Schakovskoy, "The October Revolution as Seen by a Child," *The Russian Review* 26, no. 4 (1967): p. 377, p. 390.

every section hereafter: the exposure to traumatic disruptions and violence amidst the sociopolitical upheavals. However, while children of other classes also saw threats, forced displacement, famine, and death, the violence experienced by elite children was specifically *directed* at them, rather than being largely incidental, because of the class of these children and their families.

The accounts, experiences, and attitudes of the elite children unsurprisingly differ from those of the proletariat and peasant children. They were its targets, after all. But within these records is presented another commonality that will echo throughout the lives of most revolutionary children: no matter the tumult and chaos, life must continue. As Zinaida recalls, "violence and friendliness were interlaced and very confusing for a child's mind."[29] While she was cooped up in the estate and her family was facing the threats of arrest, Zinaida also notes moments that contrasted yet coexisted with the chaos. She writes about her mother hoarding food because of an impending famine yet immediately switches to talking about their seamstress falling in love with one of their other servants in the next line; she had to help guard the woods but made play out of it with her brother, proudly naming her little revolver "Bulldog"; she follows up her descriptions of how revolutionary *razboyniki* dug up and mutilated the corpses of her godfather and grandmother with how the town "had not changed a bit and for a while we could forget about the revolution. Everyone was at his usual post."[30] Similarly, Alexei had moments of jovial play and mundane daily life even when he was in captivity: he managed to make friends with the fifteen-year-old kitchen boy, Leonid Sednev, and was recorded playing toy soldiers with the one available playmate.[31] These were childhoods, nonetheless, albeit shaped by the Revolution.

---

[29] Schakovskoy, "The October Revolution as Seen by a Child," p. 378.
[30] Schakovskoy, "The October Revolution as Seen by a Child," pp. 380-384.
[31] Helen Rappaport, *The Last Days of the Romanovs*: *Tragedy at Ekaterinburg*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), p. 88.

These moments are when the utility of studying children's history and children's experiences really stands out: while many accounts chronicle the Russian Revolution through its big moments and its great men, making it seem quick, active, and profound, the experiences of life *within* the Revolution varied dramatically, even for those it was specifically targeting. The Revolution undeniably touched these children—in one of the cases discussed here, it even caused his demise—but these children's chronicles and actions provide a different characterization of the Revolution: it was violent, traumatic, and far-reaching in its effects, but there was still the presence of common fun and the fulfillment of everyday tasks, despite the ongoing political turmoil spurred by the big-name revolutionaries in Moscow and Petrograd. After all, the Revolution did not upend the country in one day, and people continued living and trying to survive within the revolutionary scope.

"The street raises proletarian children."[32]: Youth Activists and Child Soldiers

While gentry children, like Princess Zinaida Schakovskoy and Tsarevich Alexei and his sisters, were being imprisoned, forced to flee, or killed because of their status, other children their age in Moscow, Petrograd, and elsewhere were out on the streets actively participating in the Revolution and were caught up in its fervor (Figure 2).

[32] "Воспитываетъ пролетарскихъ дѢтей улица." Alexandra Kollontai, "Семья и Коммунистическое Государство [Family and the Communist Government]," (Moscow: Kinogazetelctvo "Kommunist," 1918), p. 16. Accessed online: https://www.calameo.com/read/005365657bf7db7d9520f

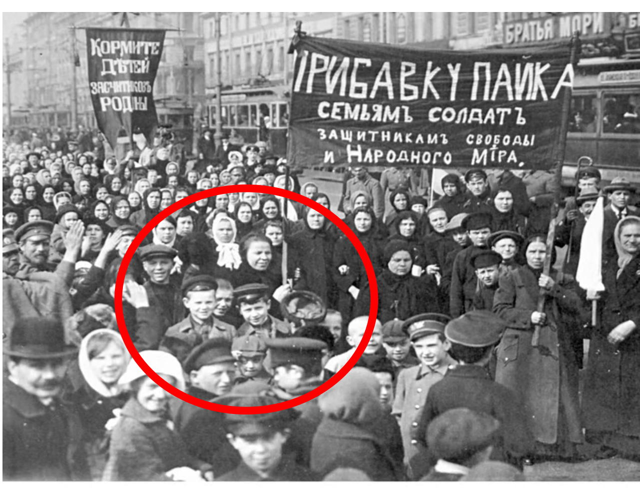

Figure 2: Workers, including children (circled), marching in Petrograd.
Photograph from *The Independent,* 08 March 2017. Accessed 30 March 2023,
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/international-womens-day-2017-how-it-started-ussia-revolution-100-years-anniversary-a7618876.html.

Although they were on the opposite side of the cause, they shared certain commonalities with the aforementioned children of the opposition: children on the revolutionary front also encountered socio-political upheaval—with some of them getting caught right in the center of it—as well as the pride, complicated pacificity, trauma, disillusionment, and other associated emotions that came with such violent, impactful moments of change. In terms of their place in the revolutionary hierarchy, they made up the masses, but these youth also, from the very beginning, were positioned (and positioned themselves) as an unparalleled generation that would embody the new Russia in the making. However, their actions were not truly unprecedented, and despite the increased importance placed on youth in revolutionary rhetoric, these children and young people could not always escape the darker consequences of the Revolution.

From the very beginning of the Russian Revolution, children were positioned as the future of the Bolshevik cause, and they would remain central to communist iconography and ideology. This narrative came to promote and motivate youth's participation in the revolution, consciously and

unconsciously, and would shape the figurative "model revolutionary child." For example, leader Vladimir Lenin spoke on the importance of youth to the cause back before Bolshevik control was an assured thing; quoting Engels, he said in 1906:

> Is it not natural that youth should predominate in our Party, the revolutionary party? We are the party of the future, and the future belongs to the youth. We are a party of innovators, and it is always the youth that most eagerly follows the innovators. We are a party that is waging a self-sacrificing struggle against the old rottenness, and youth is always the first to undertake a self-sacrificing struggle.[33]

The youth, according to this rhetoric, were expected to helm the construction of the communist utopia, for those of a capitalist generation can only "at best, destroy the old social order and build the foundation which only the generation working under new conditions, without exploitative relations between people, can build upon."[34] While some might see it as propagandizing even before the true propaganda state was established, many co-opted this narrative quite enthusiastically and earnestly. One individual was quoted as saying, "'Our generation has October as its birthday. It is the first

---

[33] "...Энгельс писал: разве не естественно, что у нас, партии революции, преобладает молодежь? Мы партия будущего, а будущее принадлежит молодежи. Мы партия новаторов, а за новаторами всегда охотнее идет молодежь. Мы партия самоотверженной борьбы с старым гнильем, а на самоотверженную борьбу всегда первою пойдет молодежь." Vladimir Lenin, "Кризис Меньшевизма [The Crisis of Menshevism]" in *Ленин В.И.: Полное собрание сочинений* [*Lenin V.I.: Complete Collection of Essays*], vol. 14, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 163. Accessed online: https://leninism.su/works/52-tom-14/2893-krizis-menshevizma.html.

[34] "Ибо ясно, что поколение работников, воспитанное в капиталистическом обществе, в лучшем случае сможет решить задачу уничтожения основ старого капиталистического быта, построенного на эксплуатации. Оно в лучшем случае сумеет решить задачи создания такого общественного устройства, которое помогло бы пролетариату и трудовым классам удержать власть в своих руках и создать прочный фундамент, на котором может строить только поколение, вступающее в работу уже при новых условиях, при такой обстановке, когда нет эксплуататорского отношения между людьми." Vladimir Lenin, "Tasks of Youth Unions (Speech at the Third All-Russian Congress of the Russian Communist Union of Youth on October 2, 1920)," in *Ленин В.И.: Полное собрание сочинений* [*Lenin V.I.: Complete Collection of Essays*], vol. 41, (Moscow: Political Literature Committee, 1981), p. 298. Accessed online: http://www.uaio.ru/vil/41.htm#s298.

generation in Russian history not to have ancestors. We are children without fathers.'"[35] Young people were to be the chief creators of the new Russia—they were the only ones capable of truly fulfilling the vision—and were specifically encouraged to take an active role by the Revolution's top figures. In this way, the Revolution reassured the youth's right to exert their agency. However, their action was notably nothing new—from as early as the 19th century, children walked out onto the streets in protest. Children's strikes were recorded in 1878 and in 1903, at St. Petersburg's Novaya Cotton-Spinning Mill and the Kening Textile Mill, respectively,[36] but the concept of a child's right to be socially and politically involved had seldom been acknowledged before the 1910s and 1920s. In the decades leading up to the Revolution, children were increasingly seen as independent, cognizant individuals, but still individuals that needed to be protected and guided; this revolutionary rhetoric, however, signaled a changing positionality for children within society and politics. They were, and even had to be, independently in charge of their own lives and their own world.

Many Russian children and youth answered this call from the very early days of the Revolution, exerting their agency and promulgating their vision of a better future. As one child excitedly wrote, "As soon as the Revolution began, I could not stay home. And I was drawn to the streets. All the folks were going to Red Square, where students were making speeches down by the duma. Everybody was in a joyfull [sic] mood."[37] One example can be seen in the youth worker organization Labor and Light (*Труд и свет*) which managed to mobilize 100,000 workers aged thirteen to twenty for an independent May Day protest; at its peak, this organization had a membership of

[35] L. Balabanov, "Затерянная ценность'" in *Каким должен быть коммунист* (Moscow-Leningrad: Molodaia gvardiia, 1925), p. 115, quoted in Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 49.
[36] White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood*, p. 46.
[37] "Revolution for Tiny Tots."

50,000.[38] Although the organization eventually lost its prominence to a more radical and more Bolshevik-aligned youth coalition, its actions demonstrated young people's willingness to get involved in revolutionary change-making, and the documents left behind by the organization can serve as an insight into the young revolutionary mentality. In an explanation of their goals, the organization includes "1. To become to the proletarian youth—an enlightened citizen and a conscious champion of their rights," and "4. To develop in him a sense of dignity and class consciousness as part of the power of the working class."[39] These youth were concerned about worker rights and other immediate causes, but they simultaneously looked more broadly toward the future and toward society. Just as in the case of Lenin's speeches, certain goals were being set for the ideal revolutionary child and for the future member of society that they would become; however, revolutionary bigwigs were not the only ones crafting the narrative. Many children—Labor and Light was only one youth group of many coalitions—took the narrative into their hands, all while being active within the fray, progressing the Revolution while hoping to shape society to be as they wanted it.

While youth organized themselves into notable political bodies, participation in the Revolution also existed outside these amalgamations. Other children were incorporated into the striking mass purely because their parents were majorly involved in underground political activity. For example, there is a famous photograph of Lenin leading a group of Bolsheviks in 1917, and in the background, one can see revolutionary Grigory Zinoviev holding the hand of his young son Stefan

---

[38] Isabel A. Tirado, "The Socialist Youth Movement in Revolutionary Petrograd," *The Russian Review* 46, no. 2 (1987): p. 141-142.

[39] "Поголовное объединение… Для самой широкой самодеятельности. Из программы организации 'Труд и свет,' 1917 г. ["General meeting… for the widest possible activity. From the program of the organization 'Labor and Light,'" *Russian Historical Archives: Electronic Library of Historical Documents*, (Petrograd: Petrograd Proletarian Youth Organization "Labor and Light," 1917), p. 29-30. Accessed online: http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/118459-pogolovnoe-obedinenie-dlya-samoy-shirokoy-samodeyatelnosti-iz-programmy-organizatsii-locale-nil-trud-i-svet-locale-nil-1917-g#mode/inspect/page/1/zoom/4.

(Figure 3); later on, both would come to be arrested and executed by Soviet authorities within one year of each other.[40]

Figure 3: Bolsheviks walking with V.I. Lenin through Stockholm, with G. Zinoviev and his son (circled) in the background. Turton, "Children of the Revolution," p. 53.

While they were sometimes burdensome to their parents (particularly to any active mothers who were seen as responsible for child-rearing), these children often proved to be useful to the causes of their parents. Some smuggled weapons underneath their small winter coats, while others thwarted police searches and hid incriminating documents within their toys and dollhouses, all to aid their parents.[41] Some were unsurprisingly pressured by their parents to keep quiet about their dealings, but some children vocally championed the cause themselves, with one woman later writing how proud she was as a child to be able to smuggle secret correspondence to her mother while the latter was in prison.[42] Another admitted that she "could rarely follow the gist of the speeches, but [she] felt [her]self part of

[40] Grigory Zinoviev would be executed in 1936, while the now-adult Stefan was shot in 1937. Katy Turton, "Children of the Revolution: Parents, Children, and the Revolutionary Struggle in Late Imperial Russia," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5, no. 1 (2012), p. 53.

[41] Lydia Petrusova, *Дети русской эмиграции: Книга, которую мечтали и не смогли издать изгнанники* [*Children of the Russian Emmigration: A book which the exiles dreamt of and could not publish*], (Moscow: Terra, 1997), p. 37.

[42] Turton, "Children of the Revolution," p. 72.

the crowd, sharing that special warmth" when amidst a worker's strike.[43] Of course, it is difficult to judge the earnestness of these children's feelings, since they were partially shaped by the opinions and motivations of the adults around them, but it is also undeniable that these children participated within this faction of the Revolution and, more importantly, *felt* that they were making a difference through their dangerous activities.

Some children protested, striked, and picketed. Some smuggled weapons, passed along secret messages, and hid illegal correspondence. All the while, others took up weapons and fought to preserve the Revolution from its battlefields. The Revolution was preceded by and partially coincided with World War I, and the political subversion of the monarchy sparked a Civil War within the already war-torn nation; child soldiers, just like child activists, were not unprecedented in these conflicts. During World War I, young boys were commonplace on the Front; there were some regulations in place, but their laxity did not stop twelve and thirteen-year-old boys from fighting with the rest of the Russian Army, with a variety of underlying motivations such as better opportunities and greater independence.[44] This is paralleled within the fighting of the Revolution and of the following Civil War: "Children fought on both sides where they, like their counterparts in wars before and since, often proved ruthless, unpredictable, and trigger happy."[45] Furthermore, the newly formed Red Guard militia consisted of many minors. In Moscow and Leningrad, "over 40 percent of [the] Red Guards… were under the age of 25," with many of these individuals being teenagers.[46] While some youth earnestly believed in the cause, others sought to take advantage of the possibility of a better life in the army. Their commanders became their "surrogate fathers," since many of these young boys had lost

---

[43] Vera Broido, *Daughter of Revolution*, (London: Constable and Co., 1998), p. 42.
[44] Kelly, "Children's World," p. 11.
[45] Kelly, "Children's World," p. 11
[46] Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia,* pp. 49-50.

their parents or had been abandoned by them, and the boys sought to make them proud: "These little soldiers were noted for their readiness to do as they were told... as well as for their ruthless ability to kill the enemy."[47] In return, they were provided with shelter, food, clothing, education, and community, none of which were guaranteed out on the streets. Here, even more so than on the street, can we see children's independence: while they were still under the command of adult lieutenants, these child soldiers largely joined of their own volition (and against the traditional draft rules of the army) and fought, even died, for the Soviet cause, later becoming lionized in Soviet iconography for this sacrifice.

Just as there were revolutionary children, there were also *counter*revolutionary children. Some aligned with the monarchical cause, like Zinadia and her family above, while others just did not support the Bolshevik aspect of the Revolution. Perhaps counterrevolutionary is, therefore, the wrong term since these children were still revolutionaries but did not fall into line with the typical narrative of the Revolution as Bolshevik or as even communist in trajectory. For example, Vera Broido was the daughter of Jewish Menshevik Eva Broido, and as a young child, she aided her mother in concealing her mother's hiding spots and any overheard secrets.[48] While they ran in the same underground circles as Bolshevik sympathizers, the Broidos and their faction championed other leaders and the Menshevik vision of progress. Similarly, Socialist and anti-Bolshevik Pitrim Sorokin wrote of sympathetic cadets in Petrograd military schools who, years into the Revolution, "fought like lions and died like true patriots" fighting off the Bolsheviks.[49] Although history did not fall in their favor, these instances highlight the diversity of causes and mentalities championed, consciously or unconsciously, by these youth. In this regard, the Revolution and children's participation within it was multifaceted.

---

[47] Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), p. 782.
[48] Turton, "Children of the Revolution," p. 61. See also Broido, *Daughter of Revolution*, p. 101.
[49] Pitrim Sorokin, *Leaves from a Russian Diary—and Thirty Years After,* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), p. 104.

Child activists and soldiers are some of the most visible examples of youth involvement in the Revolution, but the upheaval touched every child in a variety of contexts, even in the most individual and personal aspects. Schoolchildren, for instance, also interacted with the cause, participating in their schools' sociopolitical debates and conversations. *Pravda* reported a debate on Soviet marriage law in which the debaters were just nine years old.[50] Even more personal was the Revolution's impact on one of the chief pieces of a child's identity: their names. In the early days of the Revolution and the USSR, you could meet a child named Marx, Engelina, Pravda, Barrikada, Oktiabrina, or amalgamations of revolutionary epithets like Vladlen, Marlen, or Melor.[51] From the day they were born and as they progressed through schools, these children were touched, shaped, and even burdened by the Revolution's influence on their identities, before they were truly cognizant of what truth, revolution, or socialism even meant. These practices imbued these children (and, more importantly, their futures) with revolutionary-focused mentalities.

While some children were proudly involved in the events of 1917-1918, others were less enthused, sometimes vocally presenting their frustrations with the country's developments. Admittedly, it is difficult to truly judge the authenticity of children's pride and valor in the Revolution's protests and battles because of numerous uncontrollable factors like adult influences and child naïvieté, and it is similarly difficult to judge the earnestness of children's emotions of disillusionment, sadness, and anger towards the Revolution.[52] However, this acknowledgment does not cancel out the fact that children did report these emotions in their writings and recollections of the Revolution. For example, while the aforementioned revolutionary's child did admit to being proud of

---

[50] Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, p. 59.

[51] For Vladimir Lenin; for Marx and Lenin; and for Marx, Engels, Lenin, and the October Revolution; respectively. Figes, *A People's Tragedy,* p. 747.

[52] This also is true when judging the authenticity of adults' emotions in such matters. Many external factors shape what emotions are recorded and how they are recorded, but the focus here is the presence of this range of reaction.

helping her mother in prison, others wrote more negatively about what their parents put them through. Vera Broido wrote of her complicated relationship with her mother and with the Revolution: in the few instances where she reconnected with her mother-in-hiding, she always cried at the sight even "though I don't think that I cried or missed her very much in between. Each time she seemed a stranger..."[53] Another described how he "had no sympathy" with the aims of his revolutionary mother despite reuniting after a decade-long exile.[54] These children came to reckon with absentee, imprisoned, even dead parents as well as turbulent daily lives, and this instability certainly aroused strong, significant emotions of sadness, anger, and disillusionment with the cause—even if they might not have fully understood the cause itself.

In his recollections of the 1917 Revolutions, Pitrim Sorokin wrote that "the Russian Revolution was begun by hungry women and children demanding bread and herrings."[55] While the causes of the Russian Revolution are certainly more complicated than that judgment, his statement accentuates the presence of children within the revolutionary masses begging for change. And in the word "demanding," the quote also demonstrates youth's agency, noteworthy and memorable in the decades after 1917, during which Sorokin was compiling his memoir. While this is just one statement regarding the Revolution, it captures truths backed by the historical record: children were touched by and involved in the Revolution, whether their cause was found on the streets, alongside their parents, in schools, or on the battlefield. Although there are certain inevitable caveats about this discussion, such as the difficulty of gauging earnestness and the existence of ulterior motives, children undeniably felt deeply about this chaotic moment in history, expressing pride, frustration, anger, and excitement towards the changing and unprecedented new condition of Russia.

---

[53] Broido, *Daughter of Revolution*, p. 42.
[54] Turton, "Children of the Revolution," p. 61.
[55] Sorokin, *Leaves from a Russian Diary,* p. 3.

“Comrades in misery and poverty”[56]: The Revolution’s Child Casualties and *беспризорники*

Following 1917 and following the establishment of the USSR, Soviet childhoods were depicted in juxtaposition with pre-Soviet childhoods. The former were “happy, unclouded, and protected,”[57] while the latter were uncontrollable, lonesome, and unpredictable amidst a deluge of conflicts like war, revolt, and famine. Although the reality of often-propagandized Soviet childhood was obviously more complicated, there was some credence to this contrast. The Russian Revolution undeniably subverted the state of Russia and its political system, but the years-long event also irrevocably wrecked many lives of the nation’s children. While, for some, the Revolution meant better lives through military opportunities and chances to vocalize their opinions about society and politics, for others, the Revolution meant turmoil and trauma. Arguably, *this* was the unifying experience across class, age, and gender: the Revolution destabilized young lives, and most children’s accounts repeatedly feature sadness, melancholy, and anger when describing or recalling this historical event as they witnessed cruelty, experienced threats and violence, and confronted death all around them.

Childhoods during the duration of the Revolution were shaped by the consecutive blows of World War I, the Revolution, and the Civil War. Furthermore, individuals were also dealt the cards of scarlet fever, typhus, and cholera, as well as famines, all in the immediate post-revolutionary years.[58] While day-to-day life had no choice but to move forward, living in the wake of revolutionary conflict and instability was not easy, especially for young children who relied on adults to raise and protect them. However, many children went without these guardians because they died or were killed,

[56] Thomas P. Whitney, afterword to Vyacheslav Shishkov, *Children of the Street,* trans. Thomas P. Whitney, (Royal Oak, MI: Strathcona Publishing Co., 1979), p. 146.
[57] Alla Salnikova, “Great Transformation: The World of Russian Children before and after the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution.” *Neue Räume, neue Zeiten* 4 (2013): p. 37.
[58] Peter N. Stearns, *Childhood in World History,* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 107.

abandoned their children, or fled the country without them. Those who retained their family units still encountered problems such as food shortages, starvation, and violence. To summarize the key issues plaguing children in the wake of this bombardment:

> Millions [of children] died prematurely, became orphaned or separated from their families, missed out on education, suffered from illness and poor health, bore the emotional and financial burden of supporting families in the absence of adults.... Around half a million children had been placed in various children's institutions by 1921, while millions more were home or left outside family groups.[59]

And even as the Bolsheviks gained control of the government and attempted to establish stability, these kinds of issues lingered: "the combined traumas of revolution, war, and famine devastated millions of families and overwhelmed the new state's ability to implement the kinds of revolutionary programs Bolshevik visionaries had dreamt of."[60] While the new communists in charge immediately set to building their utopia of the future, they simultaneously had to reckon with the present issues plaguing the nation, including its abandoned, orphaned, and struggling children.

Particularly emblematic of this type of childhood are the *беспризорники* (besprizorniki; literally, "without supervision"). While the Bolsheviks concentrated on their vision for society, these young children and adolescents were organizing a society of their own. Against the backdrop of the Revolution, these groups of abandoned, runaway, and orphaned children came together in communes in an effort to survive, mimicking adult life while also rebelling against it. For example, they had their own street jargon, ethics, and hierarchy, usually with older boys at the top.[61] Arms covered in tattoos

---

[59] White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood,* p. 52.
[60] Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia*, p. 28.
[61] Alan Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 37-38, 41.

and thin frames dressed in rags, these young individuals found shelter wherever they could, even if that meant sleeping in bins under the covers of trash can lids (Figure 4).[62] These communes also incorporated both sexes, although young boys tended to make up the majority.

Figure 4: A Group Huddled For Warmth in a Garbage Bin.
Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930,* p. 34 (image 12).

While sticking together in groups allowed for greater chances of survival, especially amidst bleak winters, scarce food, and raging conflict, these communes were not total beacons of hope and organization. Children not only came into these communes traumatized after experiencing loss and forced independence, but *беспризорник* living itself was also not easy. These children, some as young as seven or eight, wore rags, were barefoot, and were diseased with lice, gangrene, and syphilis. Many were addicted to heroin, alcohol, and methamphetamine from a young age, and according to a 1920 representative survey, around 88% of boys and girls reported having to resort to prostitution to earn even some meager money. As a result, girls as young as twelve became infected with sexually transmitted diseases and grew pregnant, having numerous children out on the streets.[63] Others resorted to petty crimes, thievery, or even flagellating themselves to attract attention and thus hopefully some

[62] Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened,* p. 29.
[63] Shishkov, *Children of the Street*, p. 4.

pity change; others still found reprieve in murder and violent crime, with revolutionary Maxim Gorky describing witnessing "twelve-year-old children who already ha[d] three murders to their name."[64] Regardless of the degradation and ethical implications of these actions, even the child murderer usually acted in self-preservation, attempting to kill or steal only to ensure the next meal. Briefly put, while *беспризорники* adopted adult-like roles and responsibilities, they only did so based on pure survival instincts.

Unsurprisingly, these tactics and lifestyles caused these abandoned children to become a great nuisance to the government and other residents of their cities. Attempts to confront the problem were largely unsuccessful. While the local and national governments sent these children to labor camps, the army, sweatshops, and relief organizations, there were not nearly enough places for every child to get accommodated.[65] As a result, these *беспризорники* became commonplace in Russian cities, their existence a consequence of the Revolution and its violence. Although the Bolshevik Revolution promised better living conditions and a more hopeful future, five years after its start in 1922, about seven million children were "living rough in stations, derelict houses, building sites, rubbish dumps, cellars, sewers, and other squalid holes," abandoned and with no reprieve in sight.[66]

Although *беспризорники* are often cited as the chief image of the Revolution's dramatic consequences on children, every child experienced some form of trauma and damage—physical, mental, or otherwise. As described by a contemporary, every day and night, people and children would "hear the rattle of trucks bearing new victims. Every night [they would] hear the rifle fire of execution" and the groaning of the almost-dead in the mass-grave ditches.[67] Children's drawings, specifically after

[64] Figes, *A People's Tragedy,* p. 781.
[65] According to Figes, there were only about half a million spots in these various programs combined for seven million abandoned children. Figes, *A People's Tragedy,* p. 779.
[66] Figes, *A People's Tragedy,* p. 780.
[67] Sorokin, *Leaves from a Russian Diary*, p. 233.

October 1917, frequently featured the motif of death, violence, and mass graves (Figure 5). Unfortunately, unavoidable, death was a force to be confronted by most, if not every, child.

Figure 5: "By an Open Communal Grave (November 1917)."
Artist unknown, *State Historical Museum of Russia*. Accessed 29 March 2023.
https://russianlife.com/the-russia-file/revolution-for-tiny-tots/

Physically, children were affected by their mothers' starvation and malnutrition. The birth rate significantly decreased following 1917, with the contemporary Sorokin writing that "all the children are dead or dying. New ones are not being born."[68] Those that were brought into the world were "markedly smaller than older cohorts, and five percent of all newborns had syphilis."[69] Some of these children became *дезпризорники*, others became emigres, while others still ended up in prison at their young ages, further stunting their growth and development: "a government inspection of Moscow jails in March 1920 found that children under the age of seventeen comprised five percent of the prison population."[70] These are all direct consequences of the Revolution on the lives of children—the same

[68] Sorokin, *Leaves from a Russian Diary*, p. 287.
[69] Figes, *A People's Tragedy,* p. 783.
[70] Figes, *A People's Tragedy,* p. 642.

youth who were meant to build the bright communist future promulgated by Lenin in his writings and speeches.

Psychologically, practically every primary source consulted for this essay mentioned revolutionary violence touching and impacting the mental life of the child. Regarding the children in prison, for example, Sorokin described their anguish as he sat alongside them: "the bitter weeping of little children is heard now in our prison. I wonder how long they can live in this hell."[71] Although it is impossible and unethical to make diagnoses for these individuals, it is undeniable that the Revolution was traumatic. It forced children to make adult decisions at tender ages and aroused fear that stayed with them as they grew up and even after they left Russia. One example is a young girl named Natasha Topchi, who experienced her home being raided by Bolsheviks while her father was gone. At nine years old, she was held at gunpoint and questioned under the threat of death about where her father was. She was allowed to live only because of one sympathetic Bolshevik soldier in the pack. She also described hiding under the bed while the Bolsheviks stormed their home, and how one other night, bombs thrown into their house ripped the doors off their hinges and broke eleven windows. During one of these raids, she wrote how the Bolsheviks "frightened her and caused terror within her" that only dissipated when she emigrated far away to Constantinople.[72] Another child, M. Dlysskaya, wrote that she was not able to close her eyes to sleep because of clatter and booms caused by bombs and shots fired just outside of their doors; at this point, she was younger than seven.

Dlysskaya also graphically described another common image of the Revolution: hunger and the resulting death and cannibalism, all witnessed by children. She recalls that with the arrival of the Bolsheviks:

---

[71] Sorokin, *Leaves from A Russian Diary,* p. 199.
[72] "Тончий Наташа, *Воспоминания 1917 года* [Tochin Natasha, Remembrances of 1917]" in Petrusova, *Дети русской эмиграции*, p. 34.

> Everything suddenly increased in cost and prices started to rise not by the day, but by the hour. Money was scarce, but everything was expensive, and as a result, there was a horrible hunger. People lay strewn out on the street and there they died of hunger and ate cats, dogs, horses, rats, and in our city there were two occasions of cannibalism. Mothers, losing their minds, killed their children and ate them. One person… killed his neighbor for half a bag of flour. Everyone who was hungry was ready to do anything, to rob, to kill, and so forth. I will never forget this most horrible time of my life.[73]

Natasha, Dlysskaya, and the *беспризоники* are emblematic of many children's experiences during the Revolution. We have discussed children who acted of their own volition to forward the Revolution, serving as its activists, soldiers, and so forth, but many youth actions during the Revolution were comprised of things done out of pure necessity. Living through violence and dealing with traumatic events is also one significant way in which children participated in and interacted with the ongoing Russian Revolution. After all, the reality of the Revolution was not one socialist front against the monarchy, but rather, it was a tangled web of multiple factions and armies and ideologies, with numerous victims caught in the crossfire, like these children who constructed their own societies and confronted revolutionary violence—all in an effort to make it past childhood.

"What are you doing? ...I am drawing the Revolution!"[74]: Child Chroniclers

The Revolution's historiographical foundations traditionally lie in the political writings of its leaders and its largest factions, like Lenin, his comrades, and the Bolsheviks, as this is to be expected given their prominence within each development of the Revolution. However, another, more obscured history is found in the writings, drawings, and recollections of children from this period. In

[73] "Длусская М., *Мои воспоминания* [Dlysskaya M., My remembrances]" in Petrusova, *Дети русской эмиграции*, p. 29.
[74] "The Revolution for Tiny Tots," *Russian Life and Arzamas Academy.*

this regard, not only were youth actors in the Revolution, but they also served as its chroniclers and historians. Within their narratives of the Revolution, a more personal and diverse account of the events is found, but more importantly, we glean a more complicated, tangled picture of the Revolution as a whole: it was mysterious yet exciting, life-altering yet distant-seeming, fast-moving yet slow. But above all, it was unpredictable in its trajectory and nuanced in how it affected the daily life of each child.

None of these child writers and artists expected their accounts to be read or studied—in fact, many of the chroniclers' names have been lost to time—yet they are impactful perspectives on the Revolution, told from the viewpoint of ordinary young individuals. For instance, there is a collection of drawings done by Moscow children, and not only are they graphic, detailed visualizations of the Revolution in Moscow, but they are also demonstrative of its shifting tides and churning emotions. The drawings done following the February 1917 Revolution predominately spotlight marches and protests and give prominence to Bolshevik adults and dialogues (Figure 6).

Figure 6: "Demonstration —'Long Live a Free Russia!' (February 1917)."
Yatskevich, *State Historical Museum of Russia*. Accessed 29 March 2023.
https://russianlife.com/the-russia-file/revolution-for-tiny-tots/

These illustrations capture the bustle of revolutionary ideas being promulgated on the streets as well as the electric words spoken by communist promoters, such as "Long Live a Free Russia" and "War until Victory! Hurrah!" being incorporated within the art.[75] However, these Moscow drawings also demonstrate a significant shift in tone and attitude toward the Revolution following October 1917. The art from the later months are solemn, less colorful, and oriented around death and violence wrought by the conflict between the Bolshevik and White armies. No longer featuring "Demonstration," "Rally," and "Free Speech!," the titles instead have key words of "Siege," "Shelling," and "Funeral/Burial" alongside images of gunfire, rubble, and corpses (Figure 7 and 8).

Figure 7: "Civil War in Moscow (October-November 1917)." Author unknown, *State Historical Museum of Russia*. Accessed 20 January 2023. https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/pictures/2017/04/27/revolutionary-moscow-drawn-by-child-witnesses_751488.

[75] "The Revolution for Tiny Tots," *Russian Life and Arzamas Academy.*

Figure 8: "Funeral of Students and Cadets (November 1917)."
A. Malyshkov, *State Historical Museum of Russia*. Accessed 20 January 2023.
https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/pictures/2017/04/27/revolutionary
-moscow-drawn-by-child-witnesses_751488

This shift mirrors a broader change in mentality experienced by many Russian residents who witnessed the year's developments: "the first revolution was perceived as liberation from the monarchy, while the Bolsheviks' armed coup in October was horrifying."[76] Although this idea can be seen in many other sources, considering the shift as told through children's drawings highlights the true wide scope of the Revolution. It afflicted not only the adults but also the children who absorbed every slogan and every image thrown at them throughout the tumult, and whose doodles captured the excitement and curiosity followed by fear and uncertainty felt by many.

Children's writings are similarly evocative of broader emotions and opinions toward the Revolution. In his diary, sixteen-year-old Yuriy Ivanovich Bukin (Figure 9) describes observing a May Day manifestation with curiosity: "Workers, students, teachers..., walked down the streets with

[76] Oleg Krasnov, "Revolutionary Moscow drawn by child witnesses." *Russia Beyond,* 27 April 2017. Accessed online: https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/pictures/2017/04/27/revolutionary-moscow-drawn-by-child-witnesses_751488.

banners. Before the march, speeches were given from the balcony of the national building....I filmed the whole thing."[77]

Figure 9: Photograph of Yuriy Ivanovich Bukin (1901-1957).
Прожито. Accessed January 21, 2023. https://prozhito.org/person/1635.

However, within the following year or so, this interest dissipated into hostility toward the Bolsheviks as they sought to take over his town of Melekess (now Dimitrovgrad). In early February 1918, he wrote, "Thursday. What am I worrying about in the present? The Bolsheviks in Melekess have taken hold of all power....For example, the day before yesterday, there was a battle between soldiers and the Bolshevik workers. In the evening, one could not go out onto the street.... Today in our class there was a special kind of hostility towards the Bolsheviks..."[78] Yuriy's diary further exemplifies the nature of the Revolution—and more importantly, attitudes towards it—as mutable and variable.

[77] "Была устроена манифестация. Несколько организаций как, например: рабочая, ученическая, учительская…, со знаменами, в рядах ходили по улицам. До шествия с балкона народного дома было сказано несколько речей….. Я снимал все это шествие." Yuriy Ivanovich Bukin, *Diary 1917-1918*, 1 May/18 April 1917, *Прожито*, https://prozhito.org/person/1635.

[78] "Четверг. Что я в настоящее время переживаю? Большевики в Мелекессе захватили всю власть…. Так, например, позавчера здесь был бой солдат с рабочими большевиками. На улицу вечером нельзя было выйти, слышалось трещание пулемета и выстрелы из винтовок. Сегодня у нас в классе было особенно враждебные настроения против большевиков…" Bukin, 21/8 February 1918.

Every child knew about the Revolution, whether that was because they saw it happening in front of their eyes or because they came to recognize it through the unavoidable effects it had on their young lives over time. Eleven-year-old Kira Alexandrovna Allendorf (Figure 10) frequently wrote about the Revolution, particularly how everything became expensive as a result, writing cost lists at the end of each of her entries.[79]

Figure 10: Photograph of Kira Alexandrovna Allendorf (1905-?).
Прожито. Accessed January 21, 2023. https://prozhito.org/person/371.

Interestingly, however, riots in Moscow and famine in the country, while acknowledged, were often streamlined in favor of longer, more detailed descriptions of her every day, such as in her March 14, 1917 entry. She writes, "Basically, there are riots everywhere. Well, I will finish describing my name days. At 4 o'clock Grandma Masha came and gave me two apples...," and she goes on in meticulous detail about her day.[80] This intermingling of daily life and politics is ever-present in other diary entries. Some, like Valeria Martynova Vekilova, never speak directly of the Revolution; instead, she puts down her musings on Shelley, Tolstoy, and God alongside frustrations with her love life in the years between

[79] Kira Alexandrovna Allendorf, *Diary 1915-1922,* 30/17 April 1921, *Прожито*, https://prozhito.org/person/371.
[80] "Вообще, повсюду беспорядки. Ну, окончу описывать мои именины. В 4 часа пришла бабушка Маша и подарила мне два яблока…" Allendorf, 14/1 March 1917.

1917 and 1923.[81] In Yuriy's diary, there are about three entries that acknowledge the Revolution, while the rest describe his school life, his first taste of alcohol, and his failures with the beauty Vera Vypretskaya, his fellow classmate.[82] More often than not, firsthand chronicles like these diaries are interspersed with the political and the personal, with the latter taking precedence.

While the Revolution undeniably disrupted their lives, these chronicles exemplify a key feature of living through any great historical event already emphasized previously: life continues to move forward. The Revolution was a significant point on the historical timeline, but simultaneously, this timeline also encompasses the day-to-day lives of individuals like these schoolchildren, including their growth, their romances, their losses, and their fun. Other writings by children also exemplify this phenomenon. Russian emigré children in Turkey were given the specific, limited task of describing the Revolution through their recollections and experiences. While they managed to describe political developments and specific notable events, their essays always swerved toward their own family, their own interests (not unlike a historian writing through the lens of what interests them), and their own hopes. Ten-year-old Ekaterina Kobilinskaya described how her father was murdered on the Civil War front and her harrowing escape from Russia, but concludes her account with, "I am doing very well in school and I can't wait to finish so that I can become a teacher."[83] Even though her life was admittedly traumatic and unstable as a result of the Bolsheviks, she still managed to balance her memories of the Revolution with her own personal interests in the present and her hopes for the future.

The Revolution as a whole was destabilizing for the country in a comparatively short period of time, and children expressed concern and uncertainty about what was to come, but as Ekaterina's impatience with her school and Yuriy's jumbled fear-of-Bolsheviks and daily failed crushes

---

[81] Valeria Martynova Vekilova, *Diary 1914-1970*, 2 July 1919, *Прожито,* https://prozhito.org/person/4311.
[82] Bukin, 24/11 Feb 1918.
[83] Petrusova*, Дети русской эмиграции*, p. 25.

demonstrate, time also moved slowly, day-to-day. Oftentimes, days ended without any notable political developments to be remarked on in future textbooks, but there were constant noteworthy occasions in the life of each child: revolutionary history told from the lens of a child unassailably features both and thus paints a more nuanced composition of these momentous years. This presentation of the dual nature of the Revolution as both fascinating and traumatic, and as both progress and struggle, is probably best succinctly summarized in the wit of little Kira: "Everyone says, 'hunger, hunger,' but people still get food from somewhere."[84] In Kira's world, these opposing statements both simultaneously describe living amidst a chaotic, multifaceted revolution.

Conclusion

If you were a child in 1917, your life could take one of many paths. If you were luckily born into nobility, your life of privilege would become *un*luckily targeted by revolutionaries. Likely, you would be forced to hide your possessions and lie to save your skin. Eventually, you would likely have to flee abroad to escape the wrath of those who saw your wealth and status as undeserved and unnecessary in the new society that they craved. However, you might be like the Romanovs—arrested and killed by the Bolsheviks to preserve their path to power.

If you were born into a lower-class family outside of the gentry, you might also flee to avoid the impending violence, or you might have been part of the revolutionary masses out on the streets of Moscow, Petrograd-turned-Leningrad, or other cities. If you were like many other children, you would have already started working, likely in factories, but in the wake of revolutionary mobilization, you are holding picket signs demanding fairer wages and better working conditions with many others. Your voice would join the louder cries of the mass to become one. Or you might be standing with others on

[84] Allendorf, August 18/2 1918.

the battlefields of the Civil War, enthusiastically fighting and killing others for the Red or White cause, even though you might not have even hit puberty yet. If your parents were also involved in the Revolution, you could also be involved right alongside them, even if they were in prison or hiding underground—you are their little spy or smuggler or even fellow prisoner.

Or you might be alone. You become part of a different metaphorical mass, one in which everyone has also lost their family due to war, famine, or simple abandonment. You might join a gang of fellow *беспризорники* in their commune, learning their lingo and following their example to steal even just a morsel. Your group would be one of many in tumultuous Russia, banded together in an effort to survive on merciless streets. You might stay alone, thriving on independence or succumbing to the struggle, joining the other corpses on the street and the Revolution's increasing death toll.

Regardless, if you managed to stay alive, the days would continue progressing, and you would do your best to continue forward, despite the fact that you are growing up in a socially and politically unstable Russia, where Bolsheviks are painting all of the towns red in communist symbols and in blood. Eventually, you might make it through the Revolution, especially if you were lucky enough to still have living parents or if you emigrated out of the country, or you might *not* make it, but in the present moment, you will continue to act within and despite the ongoing revolutionary tumult.

In spite of their age and their minority status in society and law, children participated in the Russian Revolution, making their thoughts, opinions, and presence known through their actions then and their writings left behind for us now. Although they were a fraction of the population, examining young lives, rather than relying solely on the words and acts of adults with more recognizable names, unravels a more complicated portrait of the Revolution. We accept that class, gender, and race undeniably affected how people experienced and lived through the past, and these facets therefore

allow for new entryways into retelling historical events: generation can be just as revealing. Each generation experiences things differently depending on their age at the time of the event, and thus each has a unique perspective to share or new aspects to uncover. Children during the Russian Revolution experienced it differently than their parents and their elders and, therefore, reveal different corners of it that otherwise were obscured in shadow. For example, the Russian Revolution meant to acknowledge and reverse the struggles felt by the ordinary peoples of Russia; however, Russia's youth reveal their struggles through poverty, hunger, famine, and general uncertainty and instability in those post-1917 years. In line with Lenin's vision for the communist future, children went out onto the streets to protest and picket alongside their adult counterparts; however, we find that not all those involved in the fray were necessarily enthusiastic participants despite propaganda later exalting the image of the revolutionary child. There is a clear, understandable chronological progression of the Russian Revolution as studied from above; however, looking at the experiences of children from below reveals a period of hard times and strife entangled with typical life events experienced by children before and after the ones growing up between 1917 and 1922.

The puzzle of the past is already missing quite a few pieces, but including children's memories, experiences, and action supplements what we have, thus bulking up our stash of workable historical material and that is only a good thing for those interested in the narratives of the past. In crafting our narratives of history, acknowledging and presenting children as its protagonists is no less important than the other players involved—they were always there too.

And these traits are not unique to these revolutionary children—as noted, many of their actions mirrored those of history's preceding children; their responses and actions were not unique to the early twentieth century nor to only Russia. Following the 2022 actions against Ukraine by the

Russian Federation, journalists descended upon war-torn cities to chronicle the ongoing damage. Many stories and images eventually made their way into the broader consciousness, but the biggest ripples included photographs of young children displaced by the war, with their lives disrupted by bombs destroying their homes and their education fractured because of unrelenting military action.[85] These images of children—kids having to do homework in bunkers, bomb shelters, and refugee schools, and youth activists protesting Russian actions all across the Slavic diaspora—speak to jolted audiences about the wide-reaching effects of such conflicts, but also to the long legacy of youth's involvement in life-changing historical events. Not only have children been unwittingly brought into wars and conflicts, but they have also decided to be active participants in these moments, even at their young ages. Just as their descendants continue to do in the twenty-first century, children and youth notably participated in earlier events in the same region, including within the Russian Revolution and Civil War of 1917-1922, serving as its targets, its activists, its soldiers, its victims, and its historians.

[85] Megan Specia and Nataliia Novosolova, "Pencil Cases and Air-Raid Sirens: School at War with Ukraine's Children," *New York Times*, 14 April 2022. Accessed online: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/13/world/europe/ukraine-schools-war.html

Bibliography

Allendorf, Kira Alexandrovna. *Diary 1915-1922. Прожито*, https://prozhito.org/person/371.

Alexei, Russia's Last Tsesarevich- Letters, diaries, and writings. Translated by George Hawkins. Printed by the translator, 2022.

Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962.

Ball, Alan. *And Now My Soul is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Broido, Vera. *Daughter of Revolution*. London: Constable and Co., 1998.

Bukin, Yuriy Ivanovich. *Diary 1917-1918. Прожито*, https://prozhito.org/person/1635.

Cunningham, Hugh. "Histories of Childhood." *American Historical Review* 103, no. 4 (1998): pp. 1195-1208.

Figes, Orlando. *A People's Tragedy.* London: Jonathan Cape, 1996.

Gorsuch, Anne. *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents.* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.

James, Allison and Alan Prout. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood,* Second edition. London: Falmer Press, 1997.

Kollontai, Alexandra. "Семья и Коммунистическое Государство [Family and the Communist Government]." Moscow: Kinogazetelctvo "Kommunist," 1918.

Kelly, Catriona. *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia 1890-1991.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Krasnov, Oleg. "Revolutionary Moscow drawn by child witnesses." *Russia Beyond,* 27 April 2017. Accessed 20 January 2023, https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/pictures/2017/04/27/revolutionary-moscow-drawn-by-child-witnesses_751488.

Lenin, Vladimir. "Кризис Меньшевизма [The Crisis of Menshevism]" in *Ленин В.И.: Полное собрание сочинений* [*Lenin V.I.: Complete Collection of Essays*], vol. 14, pp. 149-172. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965. Accessed online: https://leninism.su/works/52-tom-14/2893-krizis-menshevizma.html.

Lenin, Vladimir. "Tasks of Youth Unions (Speech at the Third All-Russian Congress of the Russian Communist Union of Youth on October 2, 1920)" in *Ленин В.И.: Полное собрание сочинений* [*Lenin V.I.: Complete Collection of Essays*], vol. 41, pp. 298-301. Moscow: Political Literature Committee, 1981. Accessed online: http://www.uaio.ru/vil/41.htm#s298.

Liebel, Manfred. "The Moscow Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1918): A Contribution from the Hidden History of Children's Rights." *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 24, no. 1 (2016): 3-28. doi: 10.1163/15718182-02401003.

Petrusova, Lydia. *Дети русской эмиграции: Книга, которую мечтали и не смогли издать изгнанники* [*Children of the Russian Emmigration: A book which the exiles dreamt of and could not publish*]. Moscow: Terra, 1997.

"Поголовное объединение… Для самой широкой самодеятельности. Из программы организации 'Труд и свет,' 1917 г. ["General meeting… for the widest possible activity. From

the program of the organization ‘Labor and Light.” *Russian Historical Archives: Electronic Library of Historical Documents*. Petrograd: Petrograd Proletarian Youth Organization “Labor and Light,” 1917. p. 29-32. Accessed online: http://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/118459-pogolovnoe-obedinenie-dlya-samoy-shirokoy-samodeyatelnosti-iz-programmy-organizatsii-locale-nil-trud-i-svet-locale-nil-1917-g#mode/inspect/page/1/zoom/4.

“Revolution for Tiny Tots.” *Russian Life and Arzamas Academy.* 10 April 2017. https://russianlife.com/the-russia-file/revolution-for-tiny-tots/

Rappaport, Helen, *The Last Days of the Romanovs: Tragedy at Ekaterinburg*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008.

Salnikova, Alla. “Great Transformation: The World of Russian Children before and after the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution.” *Neue Räume, neue Zeiten* 4 (2013): 33-43. https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/10.1007/978-3-531-18948-2_3.

Specia, Megan and Nataliia Novosolova. “Pencil Cases and Air-Raid Sirens: School at War with Ukraine’s Children.” *New York Times* (New York, NY), 14 April 2022.

Schakovskoy, Zinaida. “The February Revolution as Seen by a Child.” *The Russian Review* 26, no. 1 (1967): 68–73. https://doi.org/10.2307/126865.

Schakovskoy, Zinaida. “The October Revolution as Seen by a Child.” *The Russian Review* 26, no. 4 (1967): 376–90. https://doi.org/10.2307/126896.

Smith, S.A. *The Russian Revolution: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Shishkov, Vyacheslav. *Children of the Street.* Translated by Thomas P. Whitney. Royal Oak, MI: Strathcona Publishing Co., 1979.

Sorokin, Pitirim A. *Leaves from a Russian Diary– and Thirty Years After.* Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950.

Stearns, Peter N. *Childhood in World History.* New York: Routledge, 2017.

Tirado, Isabel A. “The Socialist Youth Movement in Revolutionary Petrograd.” *The Russian Review* 46, no. 2 (1987): 135-155. https://doi.org/10.2307/130623.

Turton, Katy. “Children of the Revolution: Parents, Children, and the Revolutionary Struggle in Late Imperial Russia.” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5, no. 1 (2012): 52-86. doi: 10.1353/hcy.2012.0001.

White, Elizabeth. *A Modern History of Russian Childhood: From the Late Imperial Period to the Collapse of the Soviet Union.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Vekilova, Valeria Martynova. *Diary 1914-1970. Прожито,* https://prozhito.org/person/4311.

Ventcel, Konstantin. “Отделение школы от государства и декларация прав ребенка [The Separation of Schools from the Government and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child].” *Yeltsin Presidential Library.* Moscow: I.N. Kushnerev and Co, 1918. Accessed online: https://www.prlib.ru/item/355534.