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Transliteration of the Cyrillic alphabet follows the Library of Congress system, except in cases when a name has an accepted English spelling (i.e., Koretsky instead of Koretskii, Josef Stalin instead of Iosif Stalin) or when a writer/memoirist/author has adopted an English spelling (i.e., Elena Skrjabina instead of Skriabina). Titles of films, magazines, posters, and so on have been translated into English in order to make the reading accessible to non-Russian speakers. In the scholarly apparatus, titles appear in their transliterated form.
Introduction

I don’t remember how the war began. . . . I remember that all of us little mites, as the adults called us, suddenly started playing at war. . . . We were attacked every day, and we surrendered. We were led around the rooms with our hands up, like enemies, and then, shot one by one, we were made to lie on the floor for a long time. I didn’t like the game very much.

Eduard Kochergin, Christened with Crosses

The Great Patriotic War, the name used to describe the Soviet Union’s struggle against Axis forces from 1941 to 1945 in World War II, was a watershed event for the Soviet Union. Victory after such a desperate struggle affirmed the Soviet system and Josef Stalin’s leadership, established the Soviet Union as one of two global superpowers, and provided a positive collective memory of unity and sacrifice. For all the war’s significance in Soviet history and for all its influence on Stalinist and post-Stalinist state and society, however, it seems somehow disconnected from the history of children and childhood in the Soviet Union. The state’s expectations of children during the war, children’s roles in the war effort, and even children’s daily experiences in wartime remain largely assumed but unproven. Further, the effect of the war on the Soviet state’s vision of childhood and on those who lived it as children has been almost entirely unstudied. This book aims to address this disconnect and write children and childhood into the war’s narrative.

The war dramatically transformed children and childhood in the Soviet Union. Soviet children, on the whole, suffered unparalleled deprivation and violence during the Great Patriotic War. At the same time, they contributed to the war effort in a variety of ways. Many were left to fend for themselves,
as parents and state institutions were absent or negligent. Children were a potent symbol of Nazi brutality and a legitimizer of Soviet vengeance. Some of the most moving postwar cinematic interpretations of the conflict used children as vehicles to explore the meaning of the Great Patriotic War in Soviet society. Yet their part in the war, the story of their childhood, has been largely neglected.

Over the last few decades, historians of the Second World War have begun to “tell the tales of those who have been silent,” to reconstruct a “true military history of the powerless.” They have engaged issues such as gender, civilian life, and class, writing about experiences of women, officers, urban intellectuals, and ordinary soldiers, enriching our understanding of the war and the society who lived it. Olga Kucherenko’s brilliant investigations of Soviet child soldiers, child factory workers, and street children in the Great Patriotic War have set the standard for future research into specific groups within the child population. E. Thomas Ewing and Larry Holmes have described the changes the war brought about in the education system and within selected schools. Other works on broader issues such as evacuation, health, and the home front touch on children’s experiences. Soviet historiography of wartime childhood focused solely on child heroes, and histories of war in the post-Soviet period have been slow to explore questions of children, leading one current Russian scholar to conclude that “the history of childhood in the Great Patriotic War is still not written.” What is missing, however, is context; these studies consider children’s experiences in isolated pieces, without a broad sense of how children fit into the war narrative or how Soviet childhood changed because of it. Children and childhood have not yet been fully written into the history of the war.

On the other hand, neither have the war’s effects on Soviet children and childhood been fully explored. The current chronology of Soviet childhood goes something like this. In the first decades of Soviet power, from 1917 to 1935, the creation of state institutions for shaping the New Soviet Man (Child) provided children a new template for a Soviet childhood of education, enlightenment, and communist morals. Stalinism, from approximately 1935 to 1953, provided children with a “Happy Childhood” in exchange for their adulation of the Great Leader and appreciation of the state’s bounty, granting children a significant role in what Jeffrey Brooks has termed the “economy of the gift.” In the post-Stalin period, from 1953 to 1991, children enjoyed Soviet superpower status, surrounded by war heroes,
star athletes, and cosmonauts. Peace propaganda centered on the image of the child. A gentler Lenin cult arose, and Young Pioneer membership and school attendance became universal. A popular slogan, “Let There Always Be Sunshine,” characterized the post-Stalin version of the Happy Childhood. Throughout the Soviet era, two underlying themes recur. First, children were viewed as special symbols of Soviet achievement. Second, the rhetoric of promised provision for children often fell short of realization. Catriona Kelly’s monumental *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1991* is clearly the standard reference on Soviet childhood. As a study of children’s daily lives and environments, it is an invaluable resource. Kelly says surprisingly little, though, about the war or its effects on the Soviet construction of childhood. Those four years of dramatic change and consequence are simply subsumed in the Happy Childhood paradigm.

The war era stands out as a great rupture in the usual narrative of a progressively sentimentalized Soviet childhood in the Stalinist era. The war shaped children’s lives, affecting everything from diet to leisure to language to the games of a four-year-old boy who did not understand a war had begun. While the state was preoccupied with defense, children contended with altogether adultlike expectations communicated to them via propaganda as well as institutional neglect. The war also altered the state’s definition of childhood. The grateful but relatively passive Happy Childhood myth of the prewar period lost its usefulness once the war began. Its rituals, physical spaces, and language were disrupted or halted altogether. Thus, that prewar construct was supplanted by a paradigm I call the “Sacrificing Childhood.”

This new childhood was an act of state as well as a statement of expectation for children. Victory required the participation of the entire Soviet population—children included—so the state mobilized even its youngest citizens. The “state” was not a monolithic actor but the many individuals and institutions that acted with varying public and private interests, levels of responsiveness, and support for Stalin and for socialism within an apparatus provided by the Communist Party and Soviet governance. In this study, “state” refers more specifically to those in the central Soviet apparatus who wielded policy-making and culture-producing power intended to manage, control, and enlighten children through the construction of a common Soviet childhood. This web of authorities could be institutional (the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment, or Narkompros) or individual
(children’s writer Arkadii Gaidar, for example), part of the administrative structure (such as All-Union Radio, under the Ministry of Post and Telegraph), associated with the party (like the Young Pioneer organization), or creative unions (such as the Writers’ Union). Thus, a variety of opinions existed and sometimes clashed over children’s issues. That said, a remarkably consistent definition of wartime childhood emerged from the writers, artists, pedagogues, and bureaucrats—the adults—who spoke on behalf of the Soviet state and used state-funded channels to disseminate their view. If any group in Soviet society could be acted upon, it was children; however, we will see that children, in return, could cause authorities to act and react, though perhaps not with the same intentionality or awareness of youth or adults. Finally, the use of “state” helps distinguish this as a study of authorities and decision making at the center rather than at the local level. Though local officialedom and individual voices appear frequently, I use them to illustrate responses to federal choices. I suspect that local efforts at defining childhood during the war would differ greatly across the Soviet Union, in terms of who got to participate and to what degree, the amount of resources available, perceived options or limitations, and so on.

With the onset of war, Soviet children were asked to be active participants, donning the mantle of adulthood as best they could. This marks a dramatic departure from prewar rhetoric about Soviet childhood. Children occupied a special place in the Soviet experiment. Collectively, they represented the Soviet leadership’s opportunity to shape minds, worldviews, and loyalties, as well as the measure of its success in doing so. Images of children were used throughout the Soviet era to legitimize socialism and spur adults to greater efforts in building it. As Catriona Kelly puts it, “The Soviet state placed children’s affairs at the heart of its political legitimacy, emphasizing that children were treated with greater care than they were anywhere else in the world. . . . The notion that children owed their perfectly Happy Childhood to the Soviet leadership was to become one of the central tenets of propaganda.”11 Constructing childhood began with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.12 The state took on the responsibility of ensuring a proper upbringing (vospitanie) for its children, deciding that its institutions—nurseries, kindergartens, schools, the Young Pioneers, camps, and so on—could more effectively endow children with collectivist spirit, a correct attitude toward labor, and political education than could their families, local communities, or churches. Right in line with modern
concepts of childhood as a distinct stage in life in need of protection and Marxist notions about the importance of environmental influences, Soviet authorities led an all-out assault on premodern notions of child rearing, stepping in for incompetent, uneducated parents and establishing a remarkably uniform childhood experience across the Soviet Union. The father of the New Soviet Man was the New Soviet Child.

By the mid-1930s, propaganda for and about children presented Josef Stalin as family man, caring father, and paternal protector, signaling a return to education, authorities, and social values more associated with the bourgeois state than the revolutionary. Stalin became a regular sight in children’s mass media; even more frequently, his benevolence was represented by cheerful children gratefully enjoying the benefits of living in the Soviet Union, “the natural quality of Soviet life guaranteed by the big state family and ultimately by Joseph Stalin himself.” Though the nuclear family was invited back into partnership with the state in child rearing by the late 1930s, this did not displace the paternalist state’s position. State policies and priorities molded the Happy Childhood of the prewar era, idealizing obedience, respect for authority, dependency on the state, and love for Stalin. The ideal child was a good student, a good Pioneer, and a good sport. Any youngsters who violated these tenets, such as homeless, neglected, or criminal children, were offensive to the Happy Childhood paradigm and had to be “removed from public view.” The rhetoric touted children as the “quintessential beneficiaries” of the Soviet state, “enjoying its care and attention.” After all, children’s writer Samuil Marshak argued, “today’s children . . . are much happier and have the right and the opportunity to live according to the rightful interests of their age.”

In other words, because of the state’s benevolence, children could be children. The prewar Soviet Union “was a culture where enormous efforts were expended on protecting ‘good’ children from painful experiences. . . . It was not until 14 or 15 . . . when anything approaching an ‘adult’ degree of self-awareness and self-control began to be expected.” The Happy Childhood may not have applied to everyone, but it set a standard expectation about what Soviet childhood should be and an idealized set of childhood experiences and behaviors.

War changed this, in dramatic fashion. The experience of children during the war was largely the result of a state that subordinated the needs of its children—and its prewar definition of childhood—to the goal of winning
the war. This is not to adopt a “nothing but bad” approach to understanding this event but to point out that the crisis brought on by the Axis invasion forced choices onto the Soviet leadership that often deprioritized children and radically changed the paternalist Happy Childhood of the 1930s. To be clear, the Axis powers—and Nazi Germany, in particular—inflicted horror and death on many Soviet children; the war undoubtedly made life miserable for many. But choices made by people and institutions in positions of authority extended hardship to children beyond the reach of the enemy. As Olga Kucherenko rightly points out, children were victims of the “conflict between the state’s ideological and economic priorities. . . . Their well-being was of high importance to the state but not as important as winning the war and preserving social order.” The state, unable or unwilling to protect and provide for its children, expected them to sacrifice everything, including childhood, for victory in the war, and it lauded those who did so. While some Soviet children found a genuine point of convergence with the state’s goal in mobilization—victory—others suffered from the negligence of the state. To more fully appreciate their war experience as well as their collective memory of it, one must understand the state’s shifting definition of childhood during the war.

This book has two primary goals. The first is to illuminate the Soviet child’s experience in the Great Patriotic War. This is not to suggest there is one typical experience or that one typical child represents all Soviet children; a child in occupied Belarus, for example, lived the war quite differently than an evacuated child in Uzbekistan or a child in the Leningrad blockade or a deportee in Siberia. It is still possible, however, to find common threads that wind through the accounts and evidence that differentiate the child’s experience of war from that of adults and create a context against which to compare individual, collective, or subaltern wartime experiences. And the state’s expectations for children in behavior and attitude, as communicated through children’s mass media, children’s literature, and party organizations, were the same for all, regardless of circumstance. The point is to provide a general sense of where children fit into the history of the war. The difficulty in “doing” children’s history lies in locating the voices of children themselves. In an attempt to incorporate the war children into their own history, I have relied heavily on children’s diaries, memoirs and oral histories of those who were children during the war, contemporary war correspondents’ observations of children, children’s letters to magazines,
and archival material such as reports by Young Pioneer leaders, Komsomol (Communist League of Youth) officials, and school administrators sent to the Komsomol concerning children across the nation.

The second goal is to describe the new expectations of Soviet children demanded by the state—to illustrate the Sacrificing Childhood. The acts, the values required of the young, reflected wartime needs of the state. The language of children's institutions changed to fit the environment, as did images of children (for children's consumption) in press, cinema, and propaganda. Whereas in the prewar period, childhood happiness was “a way of assuring adults that whatever else might be unsatisfactory, at least one section of the population was well looked after,” the war turned this on its head: children’s suffering at the hands of the enemy was not only recognized but publicized. The idea of “happiness through self-sacrifice” may have indeed emerged in the late 1930s, but self-sacrifice during the war had nothing to do with personal happiness or security and everything to do with patriotic duty.

The textual and visual messages conveyed via children's magazines, the press, literature, radio programming, and film show how the state conceived of the ideal childhood. Children's magazine publication dropped dramatically during the war, from fifteen titles in the prewar period to only four between 1941 and 1945. Pioneer (Pioner) and Campfire (Kostër) were monthly magazines aimed at older children aged ten to fourteen, United Children (Druzhnye Rebiata) was a monthly magazine for rural Pioneers and schoolchildren, and Murzilka (the name of a yellow, fuzzy creature) was a magazine for younger children. All of these periodicals were associated with the Komsomol and its Children's Publishing House, Detizdat. Contents of each typically included essays on state directives, national Pioneer news, serial stories, poems, science articles, tales from Russian history, biographical pieces on Soviet leaders, and instructional pieces on physical culture, games, and, occasionally, arts and crafts. Contributors to these periodicals included children’s writers Lev Kassil’, Kornei Chukovskii, Samuil Marshak, and Arkadii Gaidar, as well as a host of political personalities, scientists, and military officers. Because of massive paper shortages, the only central newspaper for children during the war was Pioneer Pravda (Pionerskaia Pravda), a four-page paper published approximately weekly. Studying children’s press is essential, because children were confined to it. Children appear infrequently in adult media (even in the youth paper
Komsomol’skaia Pravda), only garnering an article here or there; apparently children were not newsworthy unless they were dead. Children’s literature, also much reduced, demonstrates a shift to wartime priorities in its content and illustrations. A daily, nine-minute “radio-newspaper” (radiogazeta) titled Pioneer Dawn (Pionerskaia Zor’ka) was a morning children’s program of Radio Moscow, the sole domestic and international broadcasting station in the Soviet Union throughout the years of the war, occasionally narrated by the voice of the war himself, Iurii Levitan. Despite the relative scarcity of radio receivers, radio points, and loudspeakers, Richard Stites writes that radio “became a powerful culture medium during the war, . . . served as a lifeline for the troops, the partisans, and civilians under occupation . . . [and] helped reshape national identity by fusing information, culture, and emotionalism into a picture of a just and martyred people beleaguered by the evil force.” Children’s cinema had its own studio, Soiuzdetfil’m, established in 1936, under the artistic direction of Sergei Iutkevich for most of the war. Animated film was the province of Soiuzmul’tfil’m studios, under the artistic direction of Aleksandr Ptushko. Both studios underwent trying evacuations (to Stalinabad and Samarkand, respectively). Working under extremely reduced finances and with a staff diminished by the draft and needs for photojournalism at the front, they managed to put out more than a dozen films each during the war.

Archival materials are important sources in this study, not only for information on state expectations for children’s war work and attitudes but also because of the light they shine on conversations about the management (or lack of management) of children and children’s roles in the war. Because the Little Octobrists, the party organization for children ages six to nine, went inactive during the war, the key children’s institution for understanding state expectations for children is the V. I. Lenin All-Union Young Pioneer organization, the party organization for children ages ten to fourteen. The Young Pioneers, founded in 1924, operated under the direction of its parent organization, the Komsomol, which was to provide Pioneer leaders for links (five to ten children), troops (all links in a grade), and detachments (all troops in a school). Centered in the school by the prewar era, the Young Pioneers offered extracurricular activities and political education to schoolchildren. Aside from the distinctive red scarf, the organization offered children an array of rituals, rhetoric, and spaces: the pledge, the customs and commandments, the lineup, the salute, the motto, the annual
induction, parades, songs, and mass media described above. Official (but unpublished) membership in the Young Pioneers topped 13 million by 1939; about 61 percent of all children ages ten to fourteen were Pioneers on the eve of war.30 In the documents preserved by the Komsomol, we see those responsible for leadership among Soviet children wrestling with the war’s effect on their ability to control and direct them, as well as their efforts to reestablish authority in the latter years of the war.

“Children” will be defined in this study as those through age fourteen, though the study focuses on children capable of receiving and acting upon state messages, approximately ages six to fourteen. Historians of childhood and youth recognize the difficulties inherent in defining “children,” “youth,” and “infants,” as well as delineating between the stages of babyhood, childhood, adolescence, and youth. Some define childhood simply as a biologically bounded stage of life: children encompass those from birth to puberty. Others express it by characteristics: children go to school (not work), experience extensive adult supervision, possess dedicated social spaces, and are protected from war, poverty, and violence.31 The Soviets were an age-conscious society in the modern sense: they issued birth certificates, used age grading, used distinct vocabulary to express stages of development (i.e., mladenchestvo [infancy], detstvo [childhood], otrochestvo [adolescence], iunost’ [youth]), and created institutions based on age. Soviet children entered elementary/primary school around ages seven or eight.32 Any child in school was considered capable of normative socialization, political education, and learning the “rules” of society, but little adultlike restraint or self-regulation was expected of children until about fourteen or fifteen—the age at which secondary education began under the initial Soviet system of schooling. As described above, party organizations for children stopped at age fourteen; during the war, state directives for children repeatedly addressed “Pioneers and schoolchildren” as the intended audience. In economic terms, options for attending trade school or entering the workforce became available at the age of, on average, fourteen.33 Thus, the definition used here takes both age and life stage into account and most closely relates to those whom the Soviets would have considered children.

These children of war were born between 1927 and 1939, though one might extend the lower threshold of the Sacrificing Childhood to include even those who were toddlers and infants during the war, born between 1940 and 1945. Famous among them are cosmonauts Yuri Gagarin and
Valentina Tereshkova, writers Chingiz Aitmatov and Vladimir Voinovich, filmmaker Andrei Tarkovskii, composer Alfred Schnittke, Olympic athletes Ludmila Belousova and Iuri Vlasov, singer Vladimir Vysotsky, poet Bella Akhmadulina, and politicians Boris Yeltsin, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Yuri Luzhkov. These children knew no other leader than Stalin; for some, their childhoods included the famine and the Terror of the 1930s; for all, the war changed them. This “half generation” born just after the wartime generation makes up roughly 10 percent of the population in today’s Russia and the former Soviet republics in Europe, and roughly 4 percent of the population in the former republics of Central Asia.34

The mid-1941 population of the Soviet Union, as estimated by demographers, was 196.7 million. Of those, 34.2 percent, or 67,302,000, were age fourteen or younger.35 Thus, if children’s experiences and roles in the war are dismissed or ignored, we discount more than one-third of the Soviet populace! The two largest population cohorts were 0–4 years and 10–14 years, and the 5–9-year-old cohort was the fourth largest. High prewar infant mortality rates aside,36 the war had a devastating effect on children, particularly on the estimated 16.5 million children born during the war.37 Combined with decreased fertility and increasing child mortality levels, the number of children under five years old by 1946 was half that of 1941.38 Long-term effects are harder to measure, but some evidence suggests wartime deprivation influenced the children of war long after the fighting ended.

Most of the parents of the Great Patriotic War children must have remembered the last time war so dramatically influenced the lives of the young, in the back-to-back Great War (1914–1917) and Civil War (1917–1922). For the second time in three decades, children in the former Russian empire experienced hardship and trauma associated with war. Actions by state, local, and volunteer organizations in aiding children and their families fore-shadowed some of the difficulties the Soviet state would face in the Second World War, though on a greater scale: anxiety about family breakdown, lack of information, questions about juvenile delinquency, and debates about how best to manage children.39 Instead of a monarchy and budding civil society, however, decisions about children of war would be made by a Soviet state that had made public promises to privilege and protect children, by a system that had placed children at the core of its legitimacy.

This positioning of children as crucial indicators of the state’s success put the Soviet Union squarely in line with its international contemporaries.
By the twentieth century, the so-called Century of the Child, the idea that the state was intimately connected to children’s welfare and safekeeping had emerged; therefore, states retaining high levels of child labor, infant mortality, illiteracy, street children, and so on were seen as having failed to preserve the sheltered innocence of childhood. This was the global context of the Soviet constructions of childhood, a project also occurring in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Japan.

A secondary aim of this book is to broadly consider elements of the Sacrificing Childhood in comparison with childhoods and children’s experiences in other combatant nations of World War II that had adopted the Western model of modern childhood. War complicated definitions of childhood and the ability of states to protect children around the world. It tended, as is usual in time of national crisis, to amplify the state’s role in children’s lives. In all five of these countries, the tension between ideology and exigency influenced the expectations placed on children as war participants as well as the national children’s culture to which they were exposed. Expectations and values were conveyed to children through mass media, policies on child welfare, education, and children’s organizations; my study does not take into account individual attempts—by parents, for example—to shield children from the war, which are presumed to have existed everywhere.

Children were used as symbols of a particular future, one that nations fought to preserve. In the two fascist states, national destiny and racial superiority shaped wartime childhoods. For Germany, “the pure-bred, well-educated and upright German child [was considered] the racial future of the nation.” Thus, protection meant both the elimination of deviant children and the strict regulation of “Aryan” children. The Nazi state tried to shield its children from the effects of war as long as possible, encouraging disdain for the inferior and adulation for Adolf Hitler, all the while fostering a kind of dog-eat-dog ethos of violence, exclusivity, and sadism in its children’s organizations. The Japanese state concluded that “national salvation depended on the socialization of ordinary Japanese children . . . to a new national consciousness.” Through the state-controlled school system and propaganda, children were daily reminded that their ultimate service to Japan and to the emperor was death. In Great Britain the Victorian childhood of the early twentieth century, with its emphasis on primacy of family and strict roles and values for children was being replaced by a childhood
in which the state assumed shared responsibility for children's welfare. British children associated World War II with evacuation, an attempt by the state to preserve the innocence of children by sending them to families (not institutions) in the countryside (not cities). Although not entirely successful, it signaled the more prominent role the British government would play in children's lives in the postwar period. And for the United States, the war spawned urbanization and anxiety over the first (and only) twentieth-century war to take large numbers of fathers away from their children. Family and professionals retained critical voices in discussions about child rearing, but the war itself set the stage for the “protective nurturing” of the postwar Dr. Spock era. The physical distance from the war and images of war mediated its urgency for most American children. Most importantly, the war “politicized the lives of the young; it altered the rhymes they repeated, the cartoons and movies they watched, and the songs they heard, and instilled an intense nationalism that persisted into the postwar years.” Childhood is certainly a “product of particular social and cultural circumstances.” Yet these nations experienced a war that committed unprecedented violence toward children and, in turn, inspired unprecedented protections for children's rights. Indeed, World War II was a transformative moment for all children.

Thus, the consequences of the Sacrificing Childhood in the Soviet Union persisted long after the war ended in 1945. Even before war's end, the state began to reemphasize prewar, “traditional” children's roles and activities. Too much self-sufficiency could have dangerous implications for state and society. The Sacrificing Childhood, however, did not disappear as the war drew to a close. Despite attempts to equate victory with prewar normalcy, the postwar period was anything but normal for children. Life remained difficult during reconstruction and state control over children challenging to effectively reassert. An understanding of the war's effect on children and childhood elucidates its enduring influence.

Graeme Gill calls the victory in the Great Patriotic War one of the six foundational myths of the Soviet state—not in the sense that the victory was somehow false or fictional, but in the sense that the Soviet triumph helped define Soviet society’s “perception of its identity, rationale, and purpose.” Amir Weiner goes further, identifying the war as the critical element in understanding Soviet history and the war myth as the “yardstick by which identity, meritocracy, and status were measured” in the postwar
The war myth both legitimized the Soviet system (symbolized in the immediate aftermath by Stalin) and, later, celebrated the victory as a national achievement of the Soviet people. The power of the metanarrative—confirmed by the fact that it outlived the Soviet Union that created it—derived from intense state propaganda and memory management as well as the significance the war played in people’s lives. Public and private identities converged.

Many Soviet children believed their wartime sacrifices granted them a share in the triumph over the Axis powers. By the summer of 1945, they were veterans of a kind: maybe they had contributed to the war effort or maybe they had simply managed to survive. Either way, they belonged to “the generation of victors” because “the war to a remarkable degree washed away the boundaries between age-groups.” But as the war myth unfolded, a handful of manageable child martyrs were used to exclude discussion of the traumatic, varied experiences and contributions of Soviet children. The dominant narrative proclaimed that all surviving children were protected, not neglected, by the Soviet state during the war, in effect denying that the Sacrificing Childhood ever existed. Apparently their childhood was the price of victory.
1 The Children’s War

Death was everywhere. . . . It must be coming back for me.

_Elena Fedorovna Kozhina, Through the Burning Steppe, quoting herself at age ten_

During the liberation of Ukraine in the late summer offensive of 1943, war correspondent Vasilii Grossman attached himself to the Seventy-Fifth Guards Rifle Division, keeping notes of his observations. He wrote:

On a windy and overcast morning, we met a boy on the edge of the village of Tarasevichi, by the Dnepr. He looked about thirteen to fourteen years old. The boy was extremely thin, his sallow skin was tight on his cheekbones, large bumps protruded on his skull. His lips were dirty, pale, like a dead man’s who had fallen face flat on the ground. His eyes were looking in a tired way, there was neither joy nor sadness in them. They are so frightening, these old, tired, lifeless eyes of children.

“Where is your father?”
“Killed,” he answered.
“And mother?”
“She died.”
“Have you got brothers or sisters?”
“A sister. They took her to Germany.”
“Have you got any relatives?”
“No, they were all burned in a partisan village.”
And he walked into a potato field, his feet bare and black from the mud, straightening the rags of his torn shirt.

Like fresh army recruits for whom combat is essentially unlike training and drill, the Axis onslaught was fundamentally dissimilar from anything
for which Soviet children had been prepared in the prewar period. No slogan, no song, no film, no book could adequately express how life in the Soviet Union was going to change after June 1941.

What was the Great Patriotic War like for the children who lived it? Clearly, no one description can capture the variety of children’s experiences dictated by geography, social position or connections, and sheer luck. Regardless of the war’s immediacy, however, no Soviet child lived a life untouched by it. What was unique about the way children experienced this war? Fear, anxiety, deprivation, death, loss—these events and emotions were shared by children, youth, and adults alike. Yet Grossman’s perceptive description of a lone child in Ukraine suggests that children lived these trials differently than other segments of the Soviet population because of their age and position in society. Undoubtedly, the enemy inflicted unspeakable horrors on some Soviet children. But the state, when faced with the crisis that began on June 22, 1941, made choices that extended suffering to children far beyond the territory occupied by the Axis.

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The Physical Effects of War on Children

Children suffered atrocities, injury, and abuse at the hands of their enemies. Aside from isolated cases, age does not appear to have been a factor in sparing them from ill treatment or death. The denial of sufficient food by the Germans in occupied territory and the inability of the Soviet state to provide an adequate food supply—particularly in urban areas in the rear—meant that hunger was a common characteristic of life among children across the Soviet Union. Youth, adults, and the elderly lacked sufficient sustenance, too, but they had more opportunities to supplement their diet than children had. In addition, a starvation diet and poor nutrition in the developmental stages of life had long-lasting consequences for children of war.

For the first two to three years of the war, the Germans occupied approximately 900,000 square miles (1,440,000 sq. km) of heavily populated portions of the Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Belarus, eastern Poland, the Baltics, and western Russia, from south of Stavropol in the Caucasus to Leningrad in the north. Only about one-fifth of the civilian population was evacuated before the Germans arrived, leaving about 85 million people under the brutal policies of the Nazis. Soviets living in occupied territory
faced what one British observer described as “a deliberate policy of extermination . . . devoid of the slightest trace of human feeling.” Eschewing positive engagement of the population in favor of terror and exploitation, the Nazis burned hundreds of villages, executed suspected Jews and communists, and showed little regard for those who remained alive, all in an attempt to intimidate and pacify. Children living under the Nazis witnessed and endured atrocities as the “inferior races” in occupied territories were tortured, beaten, shot, hung, buried alive, drowned, and burned.

Children were certainly not spared as mobile killing units, the Einsatzgruppen, pursued and brutally decimated Jewish communities in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. By the autumn of 1941 the mobile killing squads who had previously targeted male Jews of draft age for execution turned to the annihilation of Jewish women, children, and the elderly on the orders of Heinrich Himmler. Whereas Jewish communities in western and central Europe were rounded up and transported to concentration (or extermination) camps, large-scale public shootings were far more typical on the Eastern Front. Children were among the more than 30,000 victims massacred at Babi Yar outside Kiev on September 29–30, 1941, and at subsequent mass killings at Rovno, Krivoi Rog, and Dnepropetrovsk. Thirteen-year-old Jacob Lipszyc witnessed the slaughter of thousands of Jews in Mir (Belarus), including that of his mother, brother, and sister, as commandos positioned at each corner of a town square opened fire on a crowd of people rounded up for just such a purpose. Witnesses of the Jewish massacre at Klintsy testified that an SS special unit buried children alive in a pit while also “hurling babies up over the trench and shooting them in the air.”

Near the end of 1941, remaining Jews—a large proportion of which were women and children—were rounded up and placed in ghettos, particularly in areas under German civil administration in western Ukraine and western Belarus. A majority of these people were killed during the “Second Wave” actions of 1942 and 1943, when the ghettos were liquidated. Though implemented by the Nazis, these later actions were by and large carried out by local police units, many of whom volunteered to ferret out and turn in Jews in hiding. In Radomyshl adult Jews were shot to death by SS Einsatzgruppen, but Ukrainian police stepped in to shoot their children. The rest of that community, fearing German reprisal or inspired by anti-Semitic feeling, ostracized the few remaining Jews, despite witnessing the beatings, starvation, and death of former neighbors. In at least four Ukrainian towns,
Jewish children living in children’s homes were handed over to the Nazis by their adult caretakers or children’s homes directors. Imagine the feelings of confusion and betrayal that children must have felt, driven to torture and death by adults whom they had known all their lives.

By late 1942, when partisan activity began to disrupt German military operations, children could be targeted for abuse or death for alleged (or real) aid to the elusive resistance. Children escaping Jewish ghettos or mass killings in Belarus or Poland often ran into the surrounding forests, meeting up with partisan groups who might (or might not) accept them. Hoping to gain food and community, some children joined or aided partisan bands, serving as couriers, stealing weapons, or damaging Nazi supplies. As German antipartisan campaigns escalated, children could be executed, tortured, or punished for aiding partisan actions or for refusing to give information. Even ignorance could not save some from death. Elena Kozhina remembers a young boy:

He had been buried without a coffin, but the loose earth had been brushed off his face . . . [which was] totally calm as if he were merely sleeping, sleeping like a child. All the more horrible was this child’s sleep when Mama saw his mutilated hands: his fingernails had been torn off. The locals told Mama that the Germans tortured him before they shot him—he was suspected of helping some underground guerrillas. Was he helping? Everybody shrugged their shoulders. He didn’t say anything under torture (maybe because he had nothing to say), so the Germans grew angry, and shot him.

Life in occupied territory had to be carefully negotiated by children. Curfews were strictly enforced by occupation troops. Communication with other villages or regions was almost nonexistent. Young people had to act warily around the occupation troops. Arbitrarily, Axis troops might shoot or beat children, force them to run errands, demand sexual favors, or give out bags of candy. Girls in occupied villages attempted to avoid notice by wearing shapeless rags and smearing ash on their faces.

Older children could be sent to Germany as workers, as fourteen-year-old Olga Selezniova was. In a May 1942 letter she wrote, “It would be better to die than to be here . . . We were sold . . . as if we were slaves.” To prepare “a new generation of obedient and docile slave labor,” tens of thousands of children were sent to labor camps, the majority ending up at
Lódź-Konstynów, making straw shoes, repairing uniforms, and working in the kitchen. At least 5,000 children, primarily from Belarus, lived at Majdanek, working and giving blood, while others handled corpses or housekeeping tasks at Auschwitz and Dachau. As late as 1944, some 50,000 children ages ten to fourteen were seized and taken to Germany as *ostarbeiter*. Vasilii Grossman witnessed thousands of these deported Soviet children walking home as the German Reich crumbled, recounting, “We saw eight hundred Soviet children walking eastwards on the road, the column stretching for many kilometers. Some soldiers and officers were standing by the road, peering into their faces intently and silently. They were fathers looking for their children.” Tragically, liberation did not necessarily end their suffering, and not all soldiers behaved paternally. Grossman noted regretfully that Soviet girls returning home were molested and raped by Red Army men, one girl weeping to him, “He was an old man, older than my father.”

Those who remained lived in conditions not much better than those taken to Germany. Many found themselves homeless, living in makeshift lean-tos or in underground holes. Kozzina lived with her mother and another family in the ruins of a dilapidated barn for two years on the Kuban steppe. Many children lived in attics, gardens, abandoned buildings, or forests. People improvised clothing and foot coverings, scrounging from the deceased or nearby birch trees. Despite the rich agricultural land in occupied territory, many Soviets endured constant hunger because the Nazis commandeered food supplies to feed their own troops and animals. The price of food skyrocketed: in occupied Kharkov, for example, a cabbage cost 60–80 rubles, ten potatoes cost 70–80 rubles, a kilogram of butter cost 1,200 rubles, and a pud of grain cost more than 2,000 rubles.

Shifting front lines compounded the hardships for those in the western Soviet Union. Children were seized to serve as human shields for Germans. Nikolai Mahutov recalls that at the age of six, he and hundreds of other children were “forced to drag logs with long ropes along roads ahead of the Germans, in order to detonate any mines.” Even “friendly fire” could cost children their lives, as enemy positions were shelled by the Soviets. Caught between Hitler’s advance and the Soviets’ scorched-earth policy for the first few years, then the Germans’ destructive retreat and the Red Army’s pursuit in the final years of war, civilians could be swept up in the noise, confusion, and devastation of artillery attacks, air raids, tank battles, and infantry shoot-outs.
There was perhaps no single city in the Soviet Union as uniquely desperate and long-suffering as Leningrad. Besieged, in limbo between the German occupation and Soviet defense, the surrounded city endured a blockade from August 30, 1941, to January 27, 1944. Leningrad’s population was decimated by starvation, disease, cold, and near-constant air attacks by the Nazis, with perhaps as many as 800,000 dying in the first, horrific winter of 1941–42. Though as many as 216,000 children had been evacuated from Leningrad in the months before encirclement, hundreds of thousands of others remained. As German bombs and inept state planning combined to create conditions of incredible scarcity, the lives of children changed immeasurably.

Those children who survived Leningrad were remarkable. Dependents’ rations—for young people up to age fourteen—were half those of workers. As of October 1, 1941, this meant a ration of 200 grams of bread daily; between November and December, bread rations were 125 grams a day. Svetlana Magayeva, ten at the time of the siege, remembers children with huge heads, swollen stomachs, and matchstick arms and legs. Starvation exacerbated the effects of disease and unsanitary conditions. Fatality
rates for all diseases rose drastically during the siege: from 4 percent to 60 percent for typhus and from 10 percent to 50 percent for dysentery.\textsuperscript{32} Death might have been a blessing for some; many children experienced the pain of outliving their own families. Vsevolod Vishnevskii, among others, recalls seeing children hauling the bodies of their dead parents on sleds through the streets of Leningrad.\textsuperscript{33} Human predators of children were not unknown. Though it was a crime, adults sometimes stole the ration cards of children, purporting to be their “guardians.”\textsuperscript{34} In extreme cases, some children were killed for their ration cards, despite the low category into which they fell. By November 1941 mothers kept children inside because of reports of kidnapping and cannibalism. Boys and girls were prime targets because of their vulnerability and because their “flesh was tender.”\textsuperscript{35} Not all children had relatives to protect them. In order to survive, some children took to the streets, resorting to theft and risking the punishments and beatings it would entail.\textsuperscript{36}

Even those children who were evacuated from areas considered dangerous were subject to arduous physical conditions. The trip, in particular, was often a grueling trek for which children (and their guardians) were ill prepared. Because of the need to prioritize military and industrial transport, the wagons of evacuees could be shunted and delayed repeatedly. On at least one leg of her journey, Skrjabina’s family—and those traveling with her in a boxcar—was simply shunted onto a siding and forgotten.\textsuperscript{37} Kozhina, a Leningrad evacuee, remembers that on her lice-infested, disease-ridden trip, “We had lain together like sardines on wooden bunks and straw, falling asleep with the living and waking up with the dead.”\textsuperscript{38} A train carrying 2,700 children from Leningrad to Omsk oblast in August 1941 took more than six weeks to arrive at its destination—what, under normal conditions, would have been a three-day trip. The physician accompanying them noted there was “constant sickness,” hepatitis, jaundice, lice infestation, measles, and severe weight loss. The food sent with children by their parents was gone or spoiled after a few days and evacuation stations could not adequately feed them.\textsuperscript{39}

Lack of adequate sustenance was common to children across the Soviet Union. Whereas those in Leningrad or Nazi-occupied territory starved due to enemy administrative policies or outright cruelty, children on the home front lacked adequate food due to Soviet state decisions. Wartime rations could not sustain life, so supplementing one’s rations was a necessity.\textsuperscript{40}
Without the networks, incomes, or connections of adults, however, children—especially those who lost contact with their parents—found additional food difficult to come by.

Shortages were nothing new to the Soviet people. Rationing had been used in various locales during the 1930s, housing had been in short supply since the revolution, and consumer goods were scarce before the war began. The war exacerbated these conditions, particularly in the first few years. The bread ration in Lenger-Ugol, Kazakhstan, in the fall of 1941 was 400 grams a day, if one could get it before the state stores ran out—a daily occurrence, according to one young witness. In Gorkii, promised rations were rarely provided. On the black market, people traded whatever they had—clothes, furniture, kitchen goods, their bodies—for food from peasants or kolkhoz (collective farm) workers. Children were rarely in possession of anything worth trading, so even this option was closed to them. Skrjabina, a 1942 evacuee from Leningrad, witnessed shortages from northern Russia to the Urals region to central Russia to the Caucasus—in
Cherepovets, Vologda, Perm,’ Gorkii, Liske, Piatigorsk—as illicit market prices shot up and state rations remained wholly insufficient or simply nonexistent. The state had closed all local markets and forbidden the sale of local foodstuffs, to direct the bulk of produce to the front, and this remained the rule until the summer of 1942. After that, food was either in short supply or too expensive for most to afford. In Moscow bread could be had, “but very little else” and “fuel . . . [was] very short.” The scarcity of fuel was felt by all but the most privileged. Children and adults snuck pieces of fence, wood from lumberyards, or coal dropped near railroad tracks or factory grounds to warm themselves.

Scarcity—especially hunger—could drive children to extreme actions. In the Donbass, Grossman saw one enterprising twelve-year-old boy attempt to trade bogus intelligence information on the Germans to a Soviet regimental commander in exchange for some chicken and vodka. In Stalingrad starving children agreed to fill water bottles in the Volga River for the Germans in exchange for food, knowing that Soviet snipers had orders to shoot them for collaboration if they did so. There were certainly benefits for collaborators, however short-lived: the Stakhanova children, for example, “looked healthy and tanned and had rosy cheeks. [They] played all day long . . . [and] ate the plentiful variety of fruits” available in southern Ukraine, while their father served the Germans there. Vera Stakhanova remembers, “Sometimes we would even forget that there was a war out there.”

Few children were so lucky. A recollection shared by all memoirists is an acute awareness of a lack of food for the duration of the war. After all his experiences in occupied Ukraine, N. K. Dovbenko reflects that “what has stuck most strongly in my mind for all my life is that I was perishing with hunger.” Yuri Kirshin agrees: “During the entire period of occupation, I cannot remember a single day that I did not feel hunger.” Victor, a Muscovite child, “remember[s] being hungry very often.” In Siberia, Esther Hautzig recalls being “perpetually hungry.” Eduard Kochergin, in a children’s home run by the NKVD (Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del, or People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs), relates that “recollections of food from the times of freedom were popular—who ate what before the state house.” To satisfy their “dreams” and stomachs, the boys resorted to eating weeds. Incarcerated in a Finnish concentration camp, eleven-year-old Zinaida Petrova was driven by hunger to what she recognized as insane recklessness: she appealed to a guard for something to eat. Urban children
felt the effects of hunger most acutely, though even a rural setting could not guarantee enough food. Scarcity caused many to dream of food, to obsess over tiny amounts of wasted bread or grains of sugar. The preoccupation with food even filtered into children’s innocent questions. In 1943 writer Vera Inber recorded some overheard conversations. “Boy: Mother, what is ham? Mother tells him. Boy: And who has tried it?” And, “Girl: Mother, what does a giant weigh? And what rations is he getting?”

This privation was particularly severe for those children in Leningrad. The number of stillbirths and premature births skyrocketed. More than one in five babies born in 1942 did not survive the year, while one in every three born that year did not survive the war. According to Kozlov and Samsonova, the “age most vulnerable to adverse conditions” appears to be three to four. Though all children who lived through siege conditions experienced physical difficulties and developmental retardation, the greatest effects were felt by children who were under the age of eight by war’s end (born 1938–1945). Greater developmental difficulties generally relate to a weakened immune system and greater negative response to stress factors. It follows, then, that children under eight would have a higher mortality rate than children over eight.

Children over eight might have been more likely to survive, but they were not unscathed. Skrjabina watched as her son and his friends promptly fell ill and despondent from lack of food, appearing to regress in development. Kozhina stopped growing during her years as a Leningrader and evacuee, though she was only ten years old, and teenager Shavrova’s weight fell from 92.4 pounds to 68.2 pounds by 1942. Long-term studies suggest that siege survivors lost approximately two years of life expectancy and were more likely to be susceptible to a variety of diseases, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, and pneumonia.

Hunger and poor diet were common to the entire population beyond Leningrad. Low rations and scarcity created conditions conducive to malnutrition and starvation. Children experienced this hardship differently than youth and adults because of age. They were particularly susceptible to developmental problems due to the lack of vitamins at crucial periods. Modern analyses of malnutrition relate it to chronic enteric disease, depressed immune system function, impaired cognitive development, mental illness, wasting, and stunted growth. Lack of food and near-starvation aggravated psychological problems among children; one child psychiatrist noted that...
it was rare to encounter a child with “acute psychogenic reactions” that had not also experienced physical trauma such as poor nutrition. Many teenage factory workers, receiving the lowest rations but working countless hours, were anemic and sickly, their heights and weights underdeveloped. Indeed, decades of studies of war children demonstrated that the harsh conditions were “reflected in a reduction in general (overall) body size and weight, in chest measurements and in retarded sexual development.” At least one scholar has suggested that the increase in infant mortality that occurred in the 1970s might be partially attributed to their mothers having been born during the war and nutritionally deprived in their formative years. One demographer points to the “after-shocks” of war-related privation to help explain Russia’s current “mortality explosion.”

**The Psychological Effects of War on Children**

As war raged, child psychiatrists in the Soviet Union begged the state to “pay closer attention to the increase of reactive states among children, and to organize proper prophylactic and therapeutic institutions.” G. E. Sukhareva, the director of the children’s clinic at the Central Institute of Psychiatry, published a study based on 858 case histories of children ages eight to sixteen in 1943 from one of the largest psychiatric hospitals in the Soviet Union, including observations from colleagues who met to discuss this issue in 1944. A comparison of adult and child patients led these physicians to conclude that “children are less stable under war conditions . . . and more susceptible to infections and toxic reactions.” Overall, the number of “reactive states”—psychological problems brought on by external conditions—had doubled from 1940 to 1943. The most severe reactive states appeared in children who had lived for “prolonged periods” in occupied territory. These children exhibited intense fear and anxiety that manifested itself in crying spells, depression, insomnia, vomiting, involuntary eye movement, enuresis, and speech disturbances, among other symptoms. Less acute trauma (presumably children who had not lived in occupied territory) caused obsessive-compulsive behaviors, phobias, inability to focus, dejection, apathy, an inability to sleep, and trouble in school. Children who had lived in occupied territory longest exhibited distinct personality change and “primitive behavior . . . intensified by marked antisocial tendencies.” They related prolonged psychic trauma to serious complications of usually routine physical ailments, such as upper respiratory infections
or bacterial infections, resulting in psychoses. Though Sukhareva suggested that almost all of these children successfully recovered once they received treatment, she warned that the possibility for “escalation” of these problems remained, “especially . . . in children whose personality is still developing and character formation is liable to changes.” Treatment usually consisted of rest and vitamin supplements, the same treatment given to frontline soldiers suffering from shock or mental breakdown. What was most needed—“absence of any emotionally negative, harm-inducing experiences”—could not possibly be provided. A 1953 manual on trauma management affirms the existence of lingering psychological problems in those negatively affected during the war. Drug therapy and hypnosis were recommended for persistent nervous tics, nighttime anxiety, and enuresis, while patients presenting with hysteria had to be handled on a case-by-case basis; no single treatment was deemed appropriate. Medical professionals recommended that psychotherapists be placed in schools to deal with the aftereffects of the wartime childhood.

Not all children were fortunate enough to receive professional care from child psychiatrists; in fact, it is safe to assume that under the circumstances of war most did not. For some, the burdens of loss, deprivation, sorrow, and survival were too much to bear; hence the “old, tired, lifeless eyes” in the boy Grossman encountered. An aid worker in Stalingrad described children “swollen with hunger [who] cringed in corners, afraid to speak, to even look people in the face.” Observers of children remarked on their propensity toward nightmares as well as their noticeable reactions to loud noises. Lydia Chukovskaia, interviewing children in Tashkent for a collection of stories, noted that they were obviously “deeply shaken by what they have endured.” Repressed memories of traumatic experiences manifested themselves in violent or abusive play, physical illness, or personality disturbances. No wonder, considering the fearfulness and uncertainty that marked the children’s war. Held in a poultry farm turned prison for families of suspected communists, Yuri Kirshin, ten years old in 1942, recalls, “Everyone—mothers and children—expected to be shot.”

Children themselves recognized that war and encounters with death had changed them. Elena Kozhina fell into a deep depression, brought on by “an awareness of the horror of all that happened to us.” Fourteen-year-old Yitskhok Rudashevski recorded in his diary, “I feel we are like sheep. We are being slaughtered in the thousands and we are helpless. The enemy is
strong, crafty, he is exterminating us according to a plan and we are discouraged.” Diarist Macha Rolnikas wrote of the terror of occupation and death, “One feels like crying, screaming, biting, shouting,” while Kochergin remembers feeling numb upon seeing his first death close up: “Perhaps after two and a half months in the blockade, I had already got used to the concept of death. But for some reason I wasn’t afraid for myself, or for others. I accepted the soldier’s death as a fact. . . . After the strafing of the bus, and the sight of that blood, something broke off in me—I was stupefied.”

**“Liberation”**

With fathers at the front and mothers gone to work to take their places, many children experienced a conspicuous increase in unsupervised free time. Though schools and activities sponsored by organizations such as the Young Pioneers might have filled the vacuum, this was not to be the case. Schools were immediately affected by the war, as prewar standards of education were seemingly, as one Komsomol report suggested, “out of the question.” Though schooling was not completely absent, it was certainly dramatically disrupted and affected by the war. According to a 1943 report
from Gosplan, the Soviet State Planning Commission, the student population declined precipitously with the onset of war. In 1942 only 14,015,000 children attended any kind of school—only 47.6 percent of the total number of students in 1937 (the beginning of the Five-Year Plan) and only 40 percent of the total students in 1940. After the onset of war, attendance in rural schools declined by approximately 58.4 percent; urban schools suffered a decline of approximately 62.4 percent. Though the percentage of children attending school increased in the latter years of war, concerns about delinquency lasted well beyond the war’s end. In Leningrad the majority of schools were closed for, at least, the 1941–1942 school year. Even Moscow closed all of its primary schools during the first year of the war, though some secondary schools reportedly remained open. By 1942 school seems to have resumed in most unoccupied parts of the Soviet Union, though attendance was certainly hampered.

Without even considering the difficulties of getting children to focus on studies during an occupation, practical obstacles prevented most schools from functioning. School buildings went up in flames in occupied villages; in others, schools were often commandeered as headquarters for troops, both German and Soviet. A 1943 state decree ended the requisitioning of school grounds by Soviet forces, but the law went largely ignored until the war ceased. In Leningrad the Germans destroyed schools and the Pioneer Palace with artillery. Kozhina recalls that by the fall of 1941 “there was not a single school left near us. Some were bombed, others converted into hospitals.” Victor, living in his grandmother’s village 150 kilometers northwest of Moscow, lost an entire year as children “were left completely to our own devices: there were not even any private lessons.” Schools in the rear were often utilized by local government or party officials as recruitment centers, dormitories, or military hospitals, at least in part because education buildings were designed to be converted for such purposes. This led to all sorts of complications, including overcrowding, the spread of disease, poor instruction, and an utter inability to offer any extracurricular activities to children.

Lack of teachers and resources also hindered attempts at education. Teachers were not necessarily exempt from the draft, nor were they immune to the patriotism that inspired them to volunteer for war work. A contemporary Western estimate quoted a 40 percent decrease in the number of teachers between 1941 and 1943. A 1943 letter from a Pioneer troop
in Leningradskaya oblast explained that partisans had formed a school of sorts for them, but they had no books, no paper, no pencils, or any other school supplies. Even after liberation, this remained a problem. Kozhina returned to school in 1944 after the Kuban steppe was retaken by the Soviets; the fifteen students in her one-room school had no supplies, and Kozhina notes that attempts to teach quickly degenerated into horseplay. By age ten she still had not learned to write.

In the rear, fuel, staff, and school supplies always seemed to be lacking, except in a few select schools. Esther Hautzig recalls all grades meeting in one room, sharing old textbooks, and writing on old newspaper due to shortages of resources. For 5 rubles a month, she received lunch at school: a slice of bread with an occasional piece of cheese. In Kazakhstan Polish deportee Janina Goldberger attended a “modern” school for three years during the war. She, too, remembers making exercise books out of newspaper, but she adds that only children with enough money for shoes and books could attend. Interestingly, no Kazakhs attended her school, though a wide variety of ethnic groups—mostly evacuees and deportees, it seems—were represented. Mordvins, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, and Chechens (after 1942) shared classes, and Goldberger reports that “every ethnic group thoroughly disliked all others.” Hautzig, on the other hand, describes the Siberians in her school as very warm and welcoming; unlike Goldberger, she experienced no anti-Semitic or nationalist-inspired taunting. In all cases, these practical challenges led to the practice of schooling in shifts. In Kirov schools operated in three to four shifts, with the final group of students finishing classes at midnight. When some schools reopened in Leningrad in 1942, schooling remained sporadic. Evgeniia Vadimovna Shavrova recalls attending school every other day and having only three classes per day.

In occupied territory, school closure was a deliberate choice. The German administration in Slavic territories deemed the natives unworthy of the reestablishment of even rudimentary education. Kirshin, a native of Unecha, Ukraine, recalls that schools were closed and other activities restricted because of the occupation. A 1943 report on occupied Ukraine commented on the dearth of operational schools: in Kharkov, for example, only 13 of 138 schools were open. These, the report continues, were populated only by children of office workers, police, starostas (local elders), and “other fascist lackeys.” In a few atypical cases, local efforts by Germans
provided education to the conquered. School continued, for example, in Elista, though German officials replaced any books that discussed Soviet politics or history with magazines such as “Hitler the Liberator”; created story problems in math using downed Soviet aircraft; and added German to the curriculum. Schoolchildren could expect their bags to be searched on a regular basis and were chastised if anything smacked of Leninism. Vera and Natasha Stakhanova’s father, a Russian who collaborated with the Germans, was assigned the task of organizing a children’s home outside Melitopol. The Stakhanovas recount that the orphans had “clean dormitories, food, clothes and teachers” and a mass christening sponsored by the German administration; this relatively comfortable tableau, however, lasted only about a month, as shifting front lines forced the family’s flight to the west and the abandonment of the orphanage. Even the few children who managed to attend some sort of “regular” school, however, faced constant interference. While in his native village of Golubichi, Ukraine, N. P. Dovbenko recalls that because schooling was so often disrupted, students were kept in the same grades for two consecutive years.

Since Young Pioneer links, troops, and detachments had been intentionally located in and within the schools in the 1930s, disruption of education meant disruption of children’s formal political education, too. The sites most associated with Pioneers’ activities, schools, parks, and camps were in disarray because of the war. Of more serious concern was the massive shortage of Pioneer leaders and a high turnover rate among local Pioneer leadership. A June 1942 report from Bashkiria related that the entire Bashkir republic was assigned 525 Pioneer leaders for 243,000 Pioneers—one Pioneer leader for every 445.7 Pioneer children! Even if all 525 leaders existed—which is unlikely—this is far from the ideal ratio of one Pioneer leader for each detachment, much less a leader for each troop or link. The issue raised in Bashkiria was illustrative of a national, institutional predicament. The Komsomol considered proper and competent leadership crucial to the success of the Pioneer organization, and here they were faced with serious shortcomings. Pressure to “genuinely” contribute to the war through military service or physical labor meant that Komsomoltsy were quite unlikely to remain dedicated to work with children. Thus, children lost one more layer of supervision and organized activity.

Without school or party institutions to engage them and their parents often preoccupied or absent, some children chose to fill their time with
war work. Approximately 60,000 children—the majority of them under fifteen—voluntarily served with various armed services or partisan troops during the war, undergoing the same battle stresses as the adults around them. In frontline combat, children often served as scouts or informants, helping locate enemy headquarters. Other children worked on their own initiative. One fourteen-year-old in Tul’skaia oblast recounted that he spent his time cutting German communication cables, “[bringing] revenge as much as I could.” Others treated, fed, or housed wounded Soviet soldiers. For some children, the opportunity to contribute to the war effort through labor superseded the desire to attend school. Many rural children worked year-round on labor-poor collective farms, while some children obtained jobs in industry. Ten-year-old Oleg, for example, joined his father as a worker at a defense factory in Tashkent.

Not all children devoted themselves to betterment of society. The homelessness and lack of supervision that inspired some to patriotic duty created conditions conducive to juvenile delinquency for others. In a September 1942 report, Komsomol chief Nikolai Mikhailov enumerated a variety of troubling trends around the Soviet Union. Teenage thugs roamed the streets in Chkalov, armed gangs of children in Prokopievsk (Novosibirskaya oblast). In Moscow authorities had to “constantly catch children running away from schools.” In Cheliabinsk young workers committed 42 percent of work discipline violations. Mikhailov complained, “We are talking about fourteen- to fifteen-year olds many of whom . . . do not do any work. Why? . . . The saw is too dull, then he is two hours late for lunch and that undermines his health, so he really cannot perform.” His dismissive attitude suggests a man out of touch with children’s reality and needs.

Children learned “to steal, to cheat, to lie, in order first to survive.” A rise in theft and begging was noted in occupied Ukraine. Foraging for food was a major passtime for Soviet children; sometimes this hunting and gathering crossed the line into pilfering. Goldberger remembers from her years in Kazakhstan that theft was simply a means to an end: survival. From marketplace thieves with razors strapped to their palms to workplace thieves furtively slipping an extra can of milk in their coats, she recounts, “Everybody who had the opportunity stole. A good job was the one which offered most opportunity to do so. It was the only way to survive. . . . It was perfectly respectable. . . . After all, the government owned everything on our behalf.” She admits, however, “It was a terrible thing to get caught.”
A more innocent way to pass the time was to play. Children’s play was dramatically influenced by the war. Vania Titov, five years old when the war began, vividly recalls playing war during the war:

When we were tired of “Whites and Reds,” [or] “Chapaev,” then we played “Russians and Germans.” We fought. We took prisoners. We shot them. We wore on our heads soldiers’ helmets, ours and the Germans, because those helmets were strewn everywhere—in the forests, in the fields. No one wanted to be the Germans, we would even fight over it. We played in the dug-outs [blinduzhok] and in trenches. We fought with sticks, threw ourselves into battle. And the mothers shook their heads, they did not like it. They cried.116

Similarly, Kirshin remembers that “every day we played war, and passionately argued who would play the part of the Soviet troops, and who—the Germans.” He also recounts that boys were blown up while playing with discarded grenades, cartridges, and shells lying in the streets of his village. In the summer of 1941 Leningrader Kochina observed that “spymania, like an infectious disease,” swept through the ranks of her friends. Others made games of collecting shrapnel, making up rules to protect one another from burning fingers on red-hot metal; ran pretend air raids on Berlin; and played military hospital. Maya Ganina’s characters, young boys in wartime Moscow, fantasize about killing Germans. Mishka makes a stiletto and uses an anatomy book to figure out where to stab a German should he encounter one. He claims he will scalp them in order to keep count of how many he’s killed. Kesha, his friend, agrees that “it would be sheer delight to watch them dying in horrible convulsions.”

Even during the war, Soviet propaganda prided itself on “regarding children’s leisure with great seriousness.” But for most of the war, there was little formal children’s entertainment. The Committee for the Arts of the USSR did not order the reopening of children’s theaters and the showing of plays for children until May 1944. When children’s theaters, circuses, and cinemas were reopened, authorities restricted them to daytime performances. Upon first glance, this seems designed to protect and honor children, but successive documents make clear that the state was combating juvenile ticket-scalping. The sale of evening tickets to children under sixteen was prohibited, and performances for children had to occur in the daytime, due to the “recent rise in instances
of theatre tickets being resold by schoolchildren,” presumably on the black market.123

What is most striking is the normalization of war and war-related activities in the lives of children. A Soviet War News article quotes a child from an evacuee camp in 1942: “We practice grenade throwing and play with our pets.”124 A letter from an evacuated daughter read, “I am mastering the rifle and reading Gogol’s Dead Souls.”125 The equation of weapons training with typical hobbies in each quote is quite telling: playing war had become standard, as had mortality. Even professionals noted this tendency; child psychiatrist Sukhareva observed that among her young patients, “adaptation occurs more often than sensitization.”126 The elastic ability of children to adjust and acclimatize allowed for the extraordinary to share space with the ordinary. “Death has become routine, a part of everyday life,” wrote one deportee.127

**Grown Up, but Not Grown Up Enough**

The war orphan—probably the most popular image of the child in the press for adults—symbolized powerlessness. Certainly, the state portrayed children as vulnerable and helpless, as a perusal of wartime propaganda posters demonstrates.128 Occupation, siege, frontline fighting, evacuation, the children’s home, displacement—all could contribute to feelings of helplessness. Most children could not fight in the war, could not choose whether or not to be evacuated, could not avenge the loss of home or family. This lack of agency could be debilitating. The physical and emotional trauma connected with an inability to choose—to choose to participate in war, to choose to dissociate oneself from war, to choose to live a life free of conflict—is well documented among children of war.129 Children simply did not have the dynamic options they believed to be available to all youth and adults to express their outrage or confusion or patriotism in tangible acts of violence against the enemy.

Many children expressed an awareness of this inability to act. Twelve-year-old Tolya Zakharov wrote, “I am sorry about one thing only. The Nazis will be beaten before I get a chance to grow up. I’ll have no chance at all to put my hands on them. I did put out some incendiary bombs but that doesn’t count. I didn’t have a chance to hit them and probably never will. I won’t be grown up enough.”130 Twelve-year-old Liubov’ Borisovna Beregovaia mused, “I often thought about what I would do to Hitler if he had been
caught. Gouge out his eyes, like they do to bandits and cyclopses in fairy tales? Brand him with the Fascist sign, like the Germans did to our Soviet partisans?” When the prompt “What I would do if I had an invisible cap” was given to a class of sixth graders, thirty “almost identical answers” returned in essay form: reconnaissance in the German rear, sabotaging of German weapons, and fighting in the Red Army. For some, “grown up” could not come fast enough.

And yet, the war—its conditions as well as the expectations of the state because of it—did pressure children to grow up quickly. There was adult work to be done, adult responsibilities to be shouldered, younger siblings to be kept alive. Vera Inber gave a speech in Moscow about the inhabitants of Leningrad; in it, she described a little boy “who wept as he put out an incendiary bomb with sand. He was afraid of it, he was only nine years old; nevertheless, as he wept, he was extinguishing it.” With many mothers and fathers absent, responsibility to care for younger siblings or grandparents often fell upon older children. Children helped bury their family members whose bodies were sometimes mutilated and hideously disfigured by injury or disease.

The boundaries between childhood and adulthood were blurred by extraordinary circumstances, as is often the case in war. Social upheaval affected family roles, definitions, and values. Few families had the luxury of preserving “normal” childhood; the war simply did not allow it. Attempts to treat children as children led to contradictions in daily life. Yuri Kirshin witnessed the deaths of family and neighbors at the hands of the Germans, yet, because of his age, he was kept from attending funerals. By 1943 children were being sent to Pioneer camp in Leningrad—a city still under siege. While camp was supposed to be a time for play, rest, and relaxation, the children met all visitors with the same questions: Was there any shelling? in which districts? What was the forecast for future attacks? Some children could not bear to be away at camp, feeling a responsibility to check on relatives back in the city. Twelve-year-old Volodia Barsuk, along with his family, joined partisans in Belarus. He learned to shoot a rifle and survive in the forest, but his mother chewed him out when she caught him smoking for the first time.

The state required adultlike behaviors and attitudes of its children, but these demands created tension in the latter years of the war as the state sought to restore order and “normalcy” among children. In many respects
the state’s expectations provided an outlet for children’s feeling of powerlessness. Perhaps as Fadeev noted, “These were neither children nor were they grown-ups—they were simply new people”—new people with one foot planted firmly in the familiar world of childhood and another thrust into the unpredictable, hazardous world of adulthood. Inna Bityugova, a ninth grader in Leningrad, submitted an essay to a writing contest in 1943. She wrote about her work on a collective farm: “I know now what hard work means, and I feel responsible for the work I do. I feel I’m not a child schoolgirl any more, but a schoolgirl warrior. I have worked for the city and for the Front.” On the cover of her essay, the warrior drew smiling beets, dancing radishes, and happy turnips.

**Fatherlessness**

Death visited many Soviet children in an intimate way. The name for the Great Patriotic War—*Velikaia Otechestvennaia voyna*—can alternatively be translated as the Great Fatherland War. It is ironic, then, that this Fatherland War produced an epidemic of fatherlessness in the Soviet Union. More than 76 percent of human losses were men, more than half of them between the ages of fifteen and forty-four. Hautzig, in Siberia, recollects, “Almost without exception, the children of [my] village had lost either a father, an uncle, a brother, a cousin; sometimes, there were none left, no male relatives at all.” In Maria Smirnova’s small village of seventeen households, twenty men went to the front; only five returned. Another informant from Karelia described how children would dream about their fathers’ return, about who would be first to run up and hug their papa. She concludes, though, by saying, “But it was only a dream because very few from our village were fortunate to ever embrace their fathers again!”

Mothers, too, became casualties of war, separated from children by evacuation, living at work, preoccupied by survival, or murdered by the enemy. An American psychiatrist visiting the Soviet Union in the 1970s noted that the effects of dislocation and disruption of families were felt even three decades after the war. She observed that “particularly difficult situations arose when . . . children were adopted and subsequently reunited with natural parents who had been missing or were believed dead.” Even children who remained with their families sometimes “lost” them to the war. A diarist in Vilna chided her mother for her lack of resolve in front of younger siblings, writing that she begged her to stop crying, but her mother simply could not.
Lida wrote to her brother, Vanya, “Father’s hair turned grey from worrying; and mother has changed, too. She looks as if she were seventy years old.”

Desperate conditions led to unfathomable family dynamics. Imagine the horror of a granddaughter whose grandmother prepared to eat her!

A three-year-old girl at her mother’s corpse, March 1944. Photo by Ye. Podshivalov. Reprophoto ITAR-TASS.

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On the other hand, when reading diaries or memoirs of children during the war, one is often struck by the enormous level of sacrifice caregivers, especially mothers, made to help their sons and daughters survive, finding creative ways to keep their children fed, or doing without food themselves in order to give what little they had to their children. Smirnova remembers that when there was terrible hunger in occupied Karelia, parents gave the best of whatever they had to their children.147 Another child of war describes how her parents would do anything—lying, name-dropping, or collaborating with the enemy—to keep her and her sister safe.148 Orphanage staff in occupied territory sometimes changed the names of Jewish children on their records in order to keep them from being seized by the Germans.149 Magayeva’s family and neighbors, living in a building with no bomb shelter, stayed in an apartment playing games during air raids. No matter how bad the bombing got, the adults encouraged play to continue “in order to protect [her] and other children from fear.”150 It is difficult to overstate the advantage that a kind or loving adult could make in a child’s survival.

Some children tried to replace their lost families with new ones. Children sought adoption by various soldiers, units, or partisans, many accompanying them into battle or acquiring military duties along the way.151 While this filled a need, both for a parentless child and for childless parents, this was a precarious situation that could be no more permanent or dependable than the next encounter with the enemy or internal dispute. Still, some surviving “sons” testify to warm paternal relations between combatants and children. Even authority figures, though, could disappoint in wartime. As the Germans approached in July 1941, Al’dona Volynskaia and her fellow residents at a children’s home were sent to Pioneer camp in Ukraine, while the teachers and staff deserted, taking the children’s meager belongings with them.152 Yuri Kirshin and his family were turned in to the Nazis as Communist Party members—by Yuri’s Young Pioneer leader!153

This sort of betrayal strikes one as particularly vile. For much of the prewar period, children had been encouraged to rely more on the paternal state than on their families and personal relationships. The icon of the 1930s for children was Pavlik Morozov, a boy whose actions—at least, as mythologized by the state—demonstrated that the Soviet state was more worthy of trust and loyalty than biological parents. Propaganda of the prewar period promoted Stalin as the great father of children across the Soviet Union, crediting him with the happy and joyful childhood they enjoyed.
Unfortunately, the Soviet state as surrogate parent failed children during the war as well. Examples of policy decisions provide evidence that the state, despite its prewar and postwar propaganda, did not make provision for its children a priority in wartime. Rationing policies, discussed above, make clear that feeding children adequately was not in the state’s plan. It should also be added that no attempt to ameliorate children’s rations or prenatal care—no research into vitamin supplements or food technology or efforts at nutrition education, for example—was conducted, though such experimentation was taking place in other nations.\textsuperscript{154} Civilian evacuation and children’s homes offer additional examples.

Though the evacuation of industries and essential workers has long been hailed as a major achievement of the Soviet government and a key reason for the eventual Soviet victory, evacuation of civilians to various interior regions was far from laudatory. While it is untrue that no evacuation plans were made prior to the war,\textsuperscript{155} the plans that were made did not prioritize children. Prewar evacuation discussions, proven necessary by the new technology of aerial bombardment, included children; when it came time for a national decree on evacuation in 1941, however, children were excluded from the list of priorities.\textsuperscript{156} Flawed evacuation procedures, directed from the center, caused the deaths of more children. For example, evacuation of children from Leningrad “on the English model” removed children from alleged target zones in the city, not to the interior but to the surrounding countryside, where they would be caught between German troops and the Soviet defense. An August 1941 evacuation of 2,700 Leningrad children to Omsk—normally a three-day trip—resulted in a seven-week odyssey of hunger, lice infestation, jaundice, hepatitis, and death. An accompanying doctor, forced to leave some in hospitals along the way, confessed, “I didn’t even know where the place was where I left those children.”\textsuperscript{157} Leningrad’s summer evacuations were so chaotic that parents were unwilling to send their children on subsequent evacuations, dooming them to entrapment and the deadly winter of 1941–1942.

Allocation and organization of transport wagons were similarly incompetent. Records for July 1941 indicate that 44 percent of the nation’s wagons were serving Moscow—a city not under threat until October—while only 39 percent and 17 percent were being used for evacuees from frontline regions and Leningrad, respectively.\textsuperscript{158} Because military and economic priorities trumped civilian evacuation, trips could be interminable. What should
have been a relatively brief twelve-hour train trip from Moscow to Kirov in July 1941 lasted five days; by October the same trip took twelve days. In many places—Klintsy, Smolensk, Taganrog, Stalingrad, among others—the utter lack of information about developments at the front combined with an unwillingness to initiate evacuation orders without a directive from Moscow led to innumerable and repeated evacuation orders that were too late to do any good. Only about one-fifth of the civilian population was evacuated from what became occupied territory.

Prewar discussions about evacuation did not consider that splitting up families was an important consideration, an idea consistent with the paternal state-child relationship, but the grueling conditions of the trek to the interior must have been even more harrowing for children traveling without parents. Based on figures from Leningrad in 1941, in that peak year for evacuations, most children traveled as groups rather than as families. For example, of the 79,826 children who passed through Iaroslavskaya oblast in 1941, 85 percent evacuated with organizations—schools, orphanages, parents’ workplace affiliations, and so on—rather
than with mothers, grandparents, or siblings. Unconfirmed memoirs relate that thousands of schoolchildren were evacuated, on foot and without food or water, in order to escape the German invasion of Kiev. The children were not allowed to tell their families good-bye, nor were they able to take anything with them. Many of them died of exhaustion along the road, while hundreds of others were driven across a minefield in Pechersk district “in order not to hand them over to the enemy” “when it became clear that it was impossible to lead them through the [German] encirclement.” Entire children’s homes were ordered to evacuate by foot, sometimes walking hundreds of kilometers to the rear. In Tashkent, well over half of the approximately 6 million registered child evacuees arrived without parents.

Children arriving at evacuation stations received mixed reactions. Despite the assertion that people “vied with one another in efforts to assist the young evacuees,” it is apparent that advanced notice and preparation for the overwhelming number of refugees were decidedly lacking. In Altai region, while some children were greeted by locals, others were simply ignored. One group of children, abandoned at the railway station in Biysk, lived there for a month before attracting the attention of local officials. Nine thousand Polish children were put in children’s homes outside Kuibyshev, but provided with no bedding, furniture, kitchen utensils, disinfectants, or other supplies. Local children in Tashkent were aided most by the services of the Commission to Aid Evacuated Children—in “formal terms . . . a government body run by republican officials,” but in reality, a group of volunteers who received little to no financial assistance from the state.

Of the 227,235 children evacuated from Leningrad by December 1941, more than a quarter of them simply could not be accounted for; as far as record keeping goes, those children had simply vanished.

Small wonder: the monumental task of organizing proper records for hundreds of thousands of children—many of whom were probably in shock, ill, and disturbed by wartime experiences—would be daunting, even today. The Central Information Bureau itself had been evacuated to Buguruslan and was swamped with thousands of daily requests for information about evacuees. From 1941 to 1945 the bureau was able to locate only 3,069,358 of the 17,072,868 people (about 18 percent) about whom it received inquiries. Of the 994 children who lived through the Battle of Stalingrad, only nine could be reunited with their parents.
Most evacuation centers were ill prepared to receive vast numbers of refugees, and local populations were loath to share any of their own meager provisions. For those who survived the journey, separation from family members and neighbors, loss of possessions—often traded for food or other essentials—and horrendous housing awaited. The state’s policy of allowing “free resettlement” usually meant that refugees had to find their own housing, often in areas of low population. Any home with an extra interior wall could be rented; often three, four, or five families lived in one- or two-room houses. In some places, anyone twelve years or older was expected to report to work, despite labor laws on underage employment, either on state farms, in mines, or in factories; by 1942 “even the ten-year-olds were forced to work, weeding millet fields, poisoning gophers, and gathering manure.” In Tashkent any evacuees fifteen and older arriving without families were enrolled in trade schools or given work in local industries or agriculture. Any children fourteen and younger were sent to children’s homes.

The children’s home (detdom) could be a blessing or a curse. Despite the propaganda that children of the Red Army officers and men were being provided “more education, more dining-rooms, better sanatoria and rest-homes, the maximum amount of clothing and the love of the whole nation to compensate for their father’s absence,” the resources were simply not provided to make this so. The prewar practice of assigning “patron enterprises” to children’s homes in order to inspect, but more importantly to supply them, must have ended with the economy’s full-scale transition to defense. While examples of excellent children’s homes existed, the majority were fettered with unhealthy children and lack of supplies and staff. In “good” children’s homes, residents could expect a highly regimented schedule, consistent schooling, triweekly war briefings, defense training, volunteer agricultural work, and Pioneer activities. One suspects there were few children’s homes functioning this effectively, as they were “notorious for their substandard conditions.” In a good many children’s homes, the children simply ran the home as a sort of cooperative. The children chopped their own firewood, cleaned, did laundry, prepared meals, and mended clothes and linens as needed. The same report that recognized these self-serve orphanages, however, also noted that many children’s homes had curtailed extracurricular activities and physical training “primarily due to lack of lighting and absence of kerosene lamps.”
In addition to a lack of heating, beds, bedding, clothing, and books, most children’s homes faced food shortages, forcing children to fend for themselves, planting gardens, stealing, or foraging for sufficient nourishment. The residents of one children’s home simply “ate the park” nearby, leaving trees stripped of bark and buds. The state’s 1943 decree that mandated better medical surveillance of children’s homes was “widely ignored,” so tuberculosis, scabies, pneumonia, and influenza plagued these institutions throughout the war. No psychological care was provided for orphans, and the homes often suffered from inadequate staffing. After an inspection tour of children’s homes, one Komsomol Central Committee member, writer Kornei Chukovskii, reported, “At each detdom there are always three or four ‘atamans’ who give orders to the rest of the children and make them steal and sell things. Mass raping of girls is a norm in those places.” He went on to describe the gang rape of an eleven-year-old girl at a children’s home in Uzbekistan.

Most children’s homes were neither the picture of perfection nor dens of iniquity but a bit of both. Svetlana Magayeva paints a complex, detailed portrait of life in a children’s home, based on her experiences in 1941–1942. She was fed—generally bread, three times a day, gruel twice a day, and tea twice a day. In the same home where troublemakers fought, teased, stole, and humiliated other children, a teenage resident, ill from dystrophy, “nursed” his toddler-aged brother to sleep each night because it was the only means of pacifying him. In the same home where a child was murdered because he witnessed theft from the pantry, a ten-year-old took on the role of nurse/monitor to dozens of sick children, trying to help them recover enough to be evacuated.

The state did launch a campaign to aid war orphans; however, its overall effect was fairly limited. A sympathetic picture of children who had lost their families to war emerged in the early years of the war. The state promoted adoption of war orphans, but prospective adoptive families “did not appear readily.” Authorities did not allow children registered in children’s homes as orphans to return to the cities of Moscow and Leningrad, so children that had families there could not be reunited with them. The 1943 establishment of Suvorov military academies was widely advertised in the press (even in the children’s press), and admission policies favored orphans and children of the military. But even the establishment of more trade schools and children’s homes for orphans was merely a drop in the bucket. Sixteen
thousand more cots in orphanages could not begin to address a problem as overwhelming as homeless and neglected children.

The number of street children (both bezprizorniki and beznadzornye, children made homeless by abandonment or neglect) skyrocketed during the war in quantities not seen since the 1920s, living bleak lives with neither family (and parental networks) nor the minimums provided by the state. Petty crime increased as well, and many of the perpetrators were street children. Komsomol and Narkompros officials seemed completely unable to cope with the issue, as they were already shorthanded and underfunded. The state addressed the problems of child neglect, hooliganism, and crime in a predictable, if unimaginative, way: apprehension and arrest. At fourteen a child could be tried as an adult for any offense, including political crimes; a twelve- to fourteen-year-old could be tried as an adult for theft, murder, sabotage, and violent acts. In June 1943 Stalin authorized the NKVD to set up additional labor education colonies for an estimated 50,000 eleven- to sixteen-year-olds who fell into one of three categories: neglected (or homeless) children and youth, those arrested for hooliganism and petty crime but not convicted, and children at state orphanages who misbehaved. A subsequent directive, in July 1944, ordered the NKVD to increase the number of children in labor colonies by ten thousand. Lavrentii Beria’s instructions, issued six days after Stalin’s initial order, make it clear that, in most respects, children’s labor colonies differed little from “regular” NKVD camps. He authorized “all measures” to prevent children escaping from the camps or transport to the camps and required that processing procedures not exceed two weeks. “Work ethics” and “curriculum” were to be conducted “in accordance with the norms of the NKVD’s work colonies.”

Conditions in children’s camps were grim. Tasks performed in labor colonies included ammunition production, agricultural work, and military clothing production. “Exceptional” workers were to be identified and placed in special camps where skills such as metalwork, woodwork, and wool production were taught; these special colony sites ranged from central Russia (Moskovskaia oblast and Iaroslavskaja oblast) to the Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan) to south-central Russia (Bashkir ASSR) to Central Asia (Uzbekistan), though children’s labor colonies were located throughout the Soviet Union. In an August 1944 report, the NKVD reported that children’s labor colonies had produced 52 million rubles’ worth of goods in the first half of 1944 while simultaneously being directed to “reduce assignations
from the government to support their needs,” a euphemism that resulted in depriving the young workers of adequate food and shelter. Conditions of release depended on the nature of the colony placement. Children without a criminal conviction in labor education colonies, for example, could not be released before age fourteen without a parental request.

The problem with street children and juvenile delinquents far outstripped camp capacities. In 1942 the NKVD reported arresting and sentencing 351,473 minors in the second, third, and fourth quarters of 1941 and the first quarter of 1942. In 1942 they detained 286,467 street children. In fact, so many children were being arrested that the Pioneer leadership filed a formal complaint with the Komsomol, the procurator general, the NKVD, Narkomzdrav (People’s Commissariat of Public Health), and Sovnarkom (Council of People’s Commissars). In it, Comrades Voronkov and Koniaeva complained that police were being overzealous in their pursuit of children, arresting some on dubious charges. A 1946 Internal Affairs report to the Young Pioneer department of the Komsomol claimed that police had taken 638,208 juvenile offenders and 185,543 street children “off the streets” and out of public spaces in 1945. The largest number of child criminals had been arrested in Ukraine (90,067), while Moscow and Leningrad had ranked second and third, respectively (71,583; 67,722); arrests had clearly increased in the final year of the war, everywhere from the republic of Georgia to the cities of Rostov and Gorkii. The secret police thanked the Komsomol for its support, pointing out that organizational cooperation had resulted in over 50,000 more apprehensions in 1945 than had occurred in 1944 and urging its continued cooperation as “in most areas there [was] still not enough assistance... or initiative in this important work.”

**The War against Children**

Tara Zahra begins her book on the post–World War II effort to reconstruct the family by noting that “contemporaries of the era often described the Second World War as a ‘war against children.’” Indeed, this war brought unprecedented levels of violence and deprivation to children, particularly across Eurasia. More children were killed or orphaned than at any other point in history. The numbers of suffering children are overwhelming: 13 million children in Europe lost one or both parents; 8 million homeless children in Germany; 6.5 million homeless children in the Soviet Union; more than 13 million Germans displaced at war’s end; 7.3 million displaced
Soviets; 5 million Japanese relocated back to Japan; 100 percent of children in occupied countries malnourished.201

To situate the Soviet children's war in the global context we need not pursue a point-by-point comparison of wartime experiences with those of children in other countries. All nations rationed food and other supplies during the war; the scale of the war ensured that children from every state experienced fatherlessness and a degree of independence from supervision; most children in Eurasia lacked adequate food or water; psychological effects of war were observed in children around the world. Most of these states excluded and mistreated certain groups of children in their visions of childhood, based on ideology or national interests. The experiences themselves are far more similar than dissimilar; it is the degree to which children suffered them that differs.

The crucial factor in defining national children's experiences in World War II was proximity to sustained combat or occupation. Because of the decision by combatant nations to wage total war, using new technology that endangered civilian populations, children were placed in the line of fire—intentionally and unintentionally—as part of a conflict created by their elders. Doctrines of racial superiority (and genocide) in fascist nations, translated into actions on the ground, reinforced this attack on children, leading to the deaths of more than a million children at the hands of Nazism and perhaps more at the hands of the Japanese in East Asia. Thus, the closer a nation was to combat or Axis occupation, the more difficult—collectively—the experiences for that nation's children. The United States recognized this implicitly: they knew their children did not face the same challenges as children in Europe.202 The United States faced neither large-scale invasion nor air attack; the British and Japanese avoided invasion but suffered serious damage from tactical and strategic bombings. Germany and the Soviet Union experienced both bombing and invasion. On top of that, the Soviet Union suffered three years of occupation by an enemy bent on decimating the civilian population. In comparison to other combatants, the Soviet Union experienced unparalleled devastation and a consistent defensive mentality that required total mobilization and social control to combat enemy action.

The point is not to talk about which wartime childhood was “easiest” or “worst”; rather, the question should be to what extent the war—and the state managing it—infuences children's lives and constructions of childhood. For each state, the kind of war lived and fought influenced the messages
relayed to its children, as we will see in succeeding chapters. The wartime experiences of children in the Second World War affected the degree to which children could contextualize and personalize these expectations and values. Success or failure in the war effort meant the success or failure of particular models of childhood and the degree to which the war remained an important part of national consciousness as the children of war grew up.

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In a 1944 booklet published by London’s Russia Today Society, Georgii Miterev, People’s Commissar for Health, claimed, “Despite all our war-time difficulties, the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet Government have not for a moment forgotten the children.”203 The state had not forgotten the children; however, state policies toward children were not particularly protective or paternal, either. Rationing policies did not suggest that children were an essential part of the population. Neglect and appropriation of schools suggested to students that their education was not important to the state. Evacuation policies did not privilege children but defense. Children’s homes were established for orphans, but the homes were not provided with adequate resources, and directors of children’s homes were granted enormous latitude in seizing, disposing of, and making revenue from children’s personal possessions.204 The state may have removed the stigma of adoption, but it did little to facilitate the procedure and few children benefited.205 Fourteen-year-old boys could enroll in trade schools for mining, construction, engineering, or transportation, which offered the benefit of deferred draft, yet trade school students were among those who received the lowest of rations—so low that Leningraders remember the starving boys, as a group, as the most desperate and most likely to steal one’s rations.206 The “orphaning” of Soviet children, literally and figuratively, was a unique part of their wartime experience.

To be sure, the war brought with it an enemy bent on destroying the Soviet population, children not excepted. Soviet authorities in Moscow cannot and should not be held responsible for Axis atrocities. We may be tempted, however, to rationalize Soviet policy making aimed at securing a successful defense. After all, we assume that a victory for Hitler would have had dire consequences for children, enslavement and oppression among them. The Soviet victory, however, does not justify all of the choices made by Soviet authorities regarding children. And defeating the Axis powers
did not mean that the state lived up to the postwar claim of privileged care and concern for children during the war. Repeatedly, the state chose to place the welfare of its children below dozens of other wartime priorities. The boy Vasilii Grossman encountered in Ukraine demonstrates the effects of the Great Patriotic War on children: emaciated from hunger, attacked, orphaned, reeling from witnessed trauma, abandoned by the state, tagged by the enemy as a partisan collaborator, childhood innocence lost. He was utterly alone, without anyone to care for him. He had no family left, and the state failed him. For many Soviet children, these qualities were far too common.