

Chaotic Childhoods: the experiences of children and adolescents during the Russian Revolution and the turbulent first decade of Soviet rule, 1917-1927

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Introduction

Children and adolescents played an important role in Soviet politics and ideology. They were seen as the embodiment of the 'New Soviet person': the future citizen who would build socialist society and realize all communist ideals in the process. Thus, the state tried to influence child rearing in many ways. Official guidelines and propaganda emphasized education, cleanliness, hygiene, social conformity, secularization, physical and mental discipline, hard work, and preparation for life as part of the collective. Political intervention in the upbringing of children also occurred through various state institutions such as schools, children's homes, and communist youth leagues.¹ The goal was to do away with the traditional, 'bourgeois' family and let the state and society as a whole take 'the social education of the rising generation' upon itself. As prominent revolutionary, diplomat and People's Commissar for Welfare (1917-1918) Aleksandra Kollontai (1872-1952) explained at the First All-Russian Congress of Working and Peasant Women in November 1918:

[T]he workers' state will come to replace the family; society will gradually take upon itself all the tasks that before the revolution fell to the individual parents. (...) The playgrounds, gardens, homes, and other amenities where the child will spend the greater part of the day under the supervision of qualified educators will (...) offer an environment in which the child can grow up a conscious communist

¹ C. Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven, CT 2007) 1, 3, 10, 61-62, 70, 371-373, 376, 378, 386; C. Kelly, 'Shaping the 'Future Race': Regulating the Daily Life of Children in Early Soviet Russia' in: C. Kiaer and E. Naiman ed., *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Bloomington, IN 2006) 256-281: 256-258.

who recognizes the need for solidarity, comradeship, mutual help, and loyalty to the collective.²

Unfortunately, such rhetoric ignored the historical realities shaped by the Russian Revolution (1917-1923), the Civil War (1917-1922), and the general atmosphere of politicization, militarization, hunger, death, and violence permeating the first decade of Soviet rule. Millions of lives were impacted by these circumstances, including those of many young people. This article will explore the ways in which children and adolescents experienced the Russian Revolution and the turbulent first decade of Soviet rule (1917-1927).³ It will consider general experiences of youngsters living through these chaotic times, and specific experiences of children of revolutionaries and those choosing the political path themselves by fighting at the frontlines and joining the Komsomol; the 'All-Union Leninist Young Communist League' – a large-scale youth organization with strong ties to the Communist Party. The period of 1917-1927 has been chosen because it includes the beginning of the Revolution and several important turning points in Soviet society. By the end of the 1920s, Vladimir Lenin's (1870-1924) market-oriented, partial return to capitalism via the New Economic Policy (NEP; 1921-1928) was abandoned, Joseph Stalin's (1878-1953) collectivization and industrialization were creeping in, laws and policies pertaining to children shifted (strict discipline replaced rehabilitation ideals, which altered the treatment of juvenile criminals and vagrant children), and the Komsomol's autonomy was curtailed. The entire Soviet Union will be under consideration here, as sources from both the countryside and the cities, as well as several Socialist Republics such as Soviet Ukraine, have been investigated.

² J. Daly and L. Trofimov ed., *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis, IN 2009) 149-151.

³ 'Children and adolescents' here means those aged three to twenty-three years old. This range encapsulates all ages of those who left behind the primary source material used for this research. Many memoirists and interviewees explained that their earliest memories were from the ages of three or four. Naturally, it cannot be expected that such young children retain and fully comprehend things happening around them. Conscious reflection upon the environment is even rarer among children younger than three, so those have been left out here. The upper age limit of twenty-three covers the years of maturation of some people discussed in the primary sources, and it was the age restriction employed by the Komsomol (fourteen to twenty-three during the 1920s).

The topic of children and adolescents' experiences in early Soviet history has long been ignored in favor of political and economic histories and research into the lives of major figures like Lenin. Over the course of the last few decades, and especially after the opening up of archives following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the stories of groups which had previously been cast aside (e.g. national minorities, women, children) have been rediscovered by historians. The issue with many works focused on youths during the early Soviet era is that they tend to emphasize subjects such as laws, policies, regulations, the views of higher-ups on child rearing, family life and parents. In short, while these publications are very valuable, they often explore *the world around* children and adolescents and the way *adults* affected this world instead of the actual experiences of youngsters themselves.⁴ My aim is therefore to foreground their experiences by letting young people speak for themselves through the primary sources (memoirs, autobiographies, interviews, diaries) they left behind.⁵ Their words, combined with historical backgrounds and further analyses, create a clear and nuanced image of what youngsters collectively went through, as well as how their diverse experiences compare to each other.

⁴ A.E. Gorsuch, 'Soviet Youth and the Politics of Popular Culture during NEP', *Social History* 17:2 (1992) 189-201: 190. Catriona Kelly's book, though essential reading for everyone occupied with family, motherhood and young people in the context of early Soviet society, is an example of this. The majority of her work is occupied with discussions of how adults influenced children's lives in their roles of policy makers, educators, pedagogues, orphanage staff and parents. Not much space is devoted to the actual experiences of children and the way they put these into words. See: Kelly, *Children's World*. A fascinating counterexample is Sean Guillory's article on Komsomol Civil War memoirs, in which he juxtaposes the experiences of young veterans to official Komsomol rhetoric. See: S. Guillory, 'The Shattered Self of Komsomol Civil War Memoirs', *Slavic Review* 71:3 (2012) 546-565.

⁵ Some of these sources are contemporary, while others have been put to paper later on. When using interviews and ego documents, it is important to keep in mind that recollections of people, places and events may contain mistakes, instances of (sub) conscious (self-)censorship and moments of exaggerating or downplaying things in the face of knowledge gained afterwards. This is perhaps even more imperative when it comes to sources written during times of political upheaval or after a significant political rift – both of which certainly happened in Soviet history. Nevertheless, these sources are of undeniable value for historians, as they contain information about feelings, experiences, daily occurrences and other subjects that are mostly ignored in official documents.

Coming to terms with revolutionary surroundings

Daily life was deeply affected by the tumultuous events marking the first decade of Soviet rule. Yet, young people tried their best to maintain a sense of normalcy. Many memoirists talk of regular activities not much different from those before the Revolution. Thus, the early Soviet era was marked by the formation of a 'new normal' which combined circumstances from revolutionary and pre-revolutionary times. For most children and adolescents, their first encounter with the Revolution was simply seeing it happen before their own eyes. Zinaida Shakhovskaya was ten years old and a student at the Empress Catherine Institute for Young Ladies of Nobility in Petrograd when the February Revolution took place. She was playing with classmates when she heard 'a strange, *soon to become familiar*, sound: it resembled the dry and regular fall of hail and it was followed by shouting and screams and by the tramping of horseshoes on the pavement [my italics].' As shots were fired, panic broke out and the students were evacuated. Though they would later realize that a life-changing event had occurred, they did not fully grasp the seriousness of it all at first. For Zinaida and her peers, the first day of the February Revolution was mostly an exciting day which temporarily halted 'the tedious obligation to behave ourselves in a lady-like manner', as discipline broke down amid the chaos.⁶

Indeed, excitement was the first response of many youngsters after both the February and October Revolutions. Enthusiastic crowds in the streets of Petrograd and Moscow, spontaneous political meetings, and speeches on every street corner swept up children and adolescents as well.⁷

⁶ Z. Schakovskoy, 'The February Revolution as Seen by a Child', *The Russian Review* 26:1 (1967) 68-73: 68-70. Princess Zinaida Shakhovskaya was born in 1906 to a noble family owning multiple estates in the countryside. She experienced both requisitions by peasants and the arrest of family members as 'enemies of the regime'.

⁷ A. Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories of Revolution: Russian Women Remember* (London and New York, NY 1993) 63; S. Fitzpatrick and Y. Slezkine ed., *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War* (Princeton, NJ 2000) 36, 52; V. Alexandrov, *Journey through Chaos* (New York, NY 1945) 18. Vera Broido hardly got what all these spontaneous political meetings and speeches in the streets were about, as she was only nine at the time. Yet, she still felt herself part of those cheering and excited crowds, exuding a 'special warmth', as well as feelings of 'elation and joy'. See: V. Broido, *Daughter of Revolution: A Russian Girlhood Remembered* (London 1998) 81. Broido was born in 1907 and moved to St. Petersburg shortly thereafter. Her

Reality soon kicked in, however. Fear and anxiety took hold of people as violence became a regular phenomenon. In their writings and interviews, people recall endless gunfire, robberies and burglaries, barricaded streets, mass arrests, searches and requisitions – the latter three especially by Cheka (secret police) men and Red Army soldiers after October.⁸ In Moscow, schoolchildren created drawings of the horrible scenes outside their windows in October-November 1917 (fig. 1 and 2). By 1919-1920, with the Civil War in full swing, the cities and their inhabitants had undergone major changes. Transportation had ceased almost entirely, buildings had become dilapidated, litter covered the streets, and the people, ‘half dead from hunger and fear’, spoke ‘as if they were already in the next world’.⁹

Confrontations with death were hard to avoid in the cities, often traumatizing youngsters to the point of desensitization. Sometimes, horror stories were enough to have a lasting impact on children, though many also witnessed death directly.¹⁰ Olga Lawrence, born in 1914 to a bourgeois family, saw little revolutionary violence as the adults around her tried to shelter their children from the excesses. Yet, even she was confronted with death:

I used to see people slumped in doorways or lying on a bench – but obviously they were corpses. And if my sister said ‘What’s that chap

parents were Menshevik revolutionaries and always on the run for the tsarist police. When the February Revolution broke out, she was living with her mother in exile. In 1920, the family fled abroad to escape the worsening conditions under the Bolsheviks.⁸ O.C. Andreyev, *Cold Spring in Russia*, trans. M. Carlisle (Ann Arbor, MI 1978) 7-8, 76, 90, 92, 94, 137, 176-177, 180, 182-183; Alexandrov, *Journey*, 16-17, 21-22; Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 41, 44, 63-64, 101; Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of Revolution*, 33-34, 61, 64; Schakovskoy, ‘The February Revolution’, 71. Anna Litveiko (18) and her friend Taniya, both working for the Bolshevik district committee, participated in the requisitioning of timber from stores and private belongings after the October Revolution. She had this to say about it: ‘Tania and I had to go on searches and go through other people’s chests, cellars, and hideaways, and drag out sackfuls [sic] of sugar, grain, flour, and sometimes even weapons. We did not mind. “How come they’re hiding all this when people are starving?”’ See: Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 65.

⁹ N.N. Berberova, *The Italics are Mine*, trans. P. Radley (New York, NY 1992) 95; Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 7; Broido, *Daughter*, 114, 121-122, 127.

¹⁰ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 93, 128-129; Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 74, 64; Alexandrov, *Journey*, 16, 20; T. Alexander, *Tania: Memories of a Lost World* (Bethesda, MD 1988) 3-4, 12.

doing there?’ My aunt would say ‘Oh, he’s asleep; he’s asleep; don’t disturb him.’¹¹

During the 1919 siege of Petrograd by White Guards, Vera Broido, as a member of the Red Scouts, was called upon to perform chores for the hospital. She later described one of her most shocking tasks in an unexpectedly neutral way: loading people who had collapsed or died in the streets on a sledge or cart, and dragging them to the nearest hospital or emergency center.¹² Anna Osipovna Litveiko, a young Bolshevik at the time of the October Revolution, recalled her first close-up encounter with death in more emotional terms:

At one point I saw a man in a trench coat lying face down in the street next to the boulevard. There was still shooting going on, so I decided to move him into a doorway first, and then bandage him and send for the stretchers. He was heavy, and the shooting would not stop. I was talking to him, but he did not respond. I bent down and turned his head face up: his eyes were immobile and seemed to be made of very pale blue glass. (...) I had never seen a dead person up close before. I felt terrible because there was nothing I could do.¹³

House searches, requisitions and arrests also occurred in the countryside. It took longer for the Revolution to reach the provinces, so some peasants were still able to live normally for a period of time. Soon, however, violence swept the countryside. Red and White soldiers committed atrocities, spreading fear through looting, fighting, and murdering innocent people.¹⁴ Adolescents and

¹¹ Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 100.

¹² Broido, *Daughter*, 125. Similarly, Marina Yurlova has described her stepping around dead bodies after leaving a Muscovite hospital in September 1918 in a very calm and unemotional way. By that time, she had already seen many deaths on the battlefield. See: M. Yurlova, *Cossack Girl* (London 1934) 211. Yurlova was born in 1900 in a small village in Southern Russia. She was the daughter of a Cossack colonel and voluntarily joined the Cossack Army in 1915. In 1917, she suffered shell shock from an explosion during battle, and in 1918, she joined a Czechoslovak regiment of the White Army to fight against the Bolsheviks.

¹³ Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 64.

¹⁴ E. Fen [pseudonym for Lydia Vitalievna Zhiburtovich], *Remember Russia 1915-1925* (London 1973) 95, 97; Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 108, 114-115, 117, 121; Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 37, 40, 43, 48; Berberova, *The Italics*, 101; N.L.

children witnessed all of this and feared for family members living in regions made inaccessible by war and revolution. One harrowing anecdote is that of Princess Sofia Vachnadze (born in 1908), who vividly remembered how she and her sisters, on the run from Bolsheviks who had threatened their family because of their wealth, tried to sabotage Red Guards' executions of train passengers deemed subversive while on their way to Kharkiv, Ukraine:

[M]y younger sister said, 'Now, I think we're coming to a station, now all you girls (that's my elder sister and myself), gather your saliva, as much as you possibly can, full mouth. And then, as the Red Guards pass us, see that you spit right in the middle of their gun, because that way we'll save lives. Because when the gun's all wet inside, it won't shoot properly.' We did our best to save lives. Whether it managed to save them or not I can't say, but we did our best.¹⁵

Not just soldiers – from all sides – contributed to the explosion of violence in the countryside. Many memoirists also describe how peasants acted out of spite and revenge, robbing and killing those who had benefited from life under the tsarist regime, and pillaging and burning down estates of former landlords.¹⁶ After the February Revolution, farmers forced their way into one of the estates owned by Zinaida Shakhovskaya's family, and threatened to set a building on fire. At another one of their estates, no violence took place at first, as the family was friendly with local villagers. When they did present demands, agreements were worked out peacefully, and some townspeople even defended them against 'urban propagandists' agitating for attacks on the rich. In the end, it was Red soldiers, not peasants, who took over the estate, murdered Zinaida's relatives, and arrested her mother.¹⁷

In their responses to all this violence, an interesting discrepancy could be felt between children and adults. Some youngsters were simply too young to react fearfully, as was Olga Lawrence, who was only three years old when

Ptaschkina, *The Diary of Nelly Ptashkina*, trans. P. de Chary (Boston, MA 1923) 36, 56; Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 61, 108; Z. Schakovskoy, 'The October Revolution as Seen by a Child', *The Russian Review* 26:4 (1967) 376-390: 387-388.

¹⁵ Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 26, 28. See also: Alexandrov, *Journey*, 35.

¹⁶ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 80-82; Yurlova, *Cossack Girl*, 189-192; Alexandrov, *Journey*, 30-31.

¹⁷ Schakovskoy, 'The February Revolution', 72; Schakovskoy, 'The October Revolution'.

the Revolution took place. She was brought into the cellar of her Petrograd home during the shootings and thought the experience was riveting, even though – and perhaps partially because – she had never seen grownups act like this: ‘I just remember everyone being unaccountably frightened and worried and snappy, and fairly unlike the solid grownups that one had known. [Y]ou realised that grown people could (...) be frightened’.¹⁸ Others reacted with excitement to the Revolution while their parents were anxiously sitting at home. Some described adults as ‘cowards’, leaving hard tasks up to the young ones while refusing to run any risks themselves. For many young people, it was difficult to place themselves in adults’ positions and gain understanding for their attitudes and actions.¹⁹

Food

Material conditions gradually worsened throughout the revolutionary years. In the cities, families lived in overcrowded communal apartments while suffering from major shortages. Fuel and firewood ran out, so people looked everywhere for things to burn to keep warm. Perhaps the most pressing day-to-day issue was the lack of food.²⁰ S. Mikhailov, a sixteen-year-old high school student, described the impact of shortages on Moscow and its inhabitants in 1919 as follows:

Should you walk the streets, you will see such a picture. A group of people, armed with makeshift iron crowbars, swarms around the ruins of a house trying, among the collapsed plaster and broken bricks, to find some splinters or pieces of wood. (...) All this destruction makes poor Moscow similar to a city that has suffered a huge fire or a powerful bombardment. (...) Hunger and cold – these are the two main enemies of the Muscovites. (...) Yet I am far from giving in to

¹⁸ Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 96.

¹⁹ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 170, 183; Alexander, *Tania*, xvi. Marie Allan (born in 1902), for example, was sixteen years old when she dressed up as her mother, who had been too afraid to visit her husband in prison. See: Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 89-93.

²⁰ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 9-10, 92; Daly and Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution*, 176; Broido, *Daughter*, 80.



Fig. 1 and 2: 'Civil war in Moscow' (above) and 'Siege of a house' (below), unknown authors, Moscow, October-November 1917. These works are part of a collection of 150 drawings created by boys aged eight to fourteen who were tasked to draw what they had seen on the streets of Moscow. They were given to the Moscow Historical Museum in 1919 by Vasilii Voronov. Part of the State Historical Museum exhibition 'The Great Russian Revolution Drawn by Children' (2017). Oleg Krasnov, 'Revolutionary Moscow drawn by child witnesses', *Russia Beyond* (April 27, 2017) https://www.rbth.com/multimedia/pictures/2017/04/27/revolutionary-moscow-drawn-by-child-witnesses_751488 (accessed June 21, 2026).

depression and melancholy. I firmly believe that this difficult time will pass and that there will come a better one (...) And in order to achieve this, it is necessary to work, work, and work, and not give in to depression or sadness.²¹

While Mikhailov tried his best to remain hopeful, others quickly accepted their new, harsh reality. Bad rations and unsavory foods became the order of the day. As food became increasingly scarce, people ate whatever they could find. On the menu were sticky black bread, sometimes more so consisting of straw, old coats, and dust rather than flour; raw potatoes and peels; soup containing herring heads; millet; and, if they were lucky, horse, dog, or cat meat. Bits of frozen milk and *pastila* (small squares of pressed fruit paste) were seen as treats.²² When Olga Lawrence's aunt brought home grains, the family 'sat there (...) removing the [mice] droppings from the grain and then washing it, cooking it, and putting it in our mouth [sic]'.²³ As all shops were closed except for the state distributions stores, standing in queues for hours to receive one's meager rations became a staple of daily life.²⁴ Marie Allan remembered how she and her sisters would work the queues to get bread:

Katherine would start first at seven o'clock; she would stand in the queue, and then Emilie would join her at ten or eleven, and then I, being the eldest one, used to go at two or three in the morning, and then sometimes at six o'clock the van with the bread would arrive. (...) [T]he bread was not good, but it was better than none.²⁵

Despite everything, even when it came to food, people tried to stay optimistic and maintain a degree of normalcy. When Irina Sergevna Tidmarsh (born in

²¹ Daly and Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution*, 176-177.

²² Broido, *Daughter*, 122; Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 43, 62, 89, 97, 109; Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 14-15, 92, 127, 181; Berberova, *The Italics*, 127; Ptashkina, *The Diary*, 19.

²³ Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 100.

²⁴ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 11-13, 76, 92; Berberova, *The Italics*, 93; Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 42, 89; Schakovskoy, 'The February Revolution', 70; Broido, *Daughter*, 81.

²⁵ Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 90. The situation was much the same for Vera Broido, who queued for food all day, only to be disappointed when supplies failed to arrive or were limited to just bread or *vobla* (dried and salted fish). Sometimes, fights even broke out between those standing in line. See: Broido, *Daughter*, 103-104.

1903) had her sixteenth birthday, cakes were made from potato peels.²⁶ Similarly, the birthday of Vera Broido's friend Igor was celebrated amidst worsening conditions in Petrograd in 1919, as their mothers succeeded in scraping together some old flour and carrots:

With the help of these treats they concocted a birthday dinner of three courses! First came the soup of carrots in hot water, then a pie made of flour mixed with water and stuffed with chopped carrots, and 'tea' (plain hot water) with half a fudge each. We sat over this meal for a long time at the kitchen table, relishing every bite and sip, and when we finished, Igor patted his tummy and said with feeling: 'If only we could have such a feast every day!'²⁷

Though the physical and mental impact of food scarcity on young people was significant, even in this area they managed to show resilience and a remarkable ability to adapt to new normalcies.²⁸

Education

Arguably one of the most important elements of youngsters' daily lives was schooling, which – perhaps surprisingly – continued just as fervently during the first decade of Soviet rule as in pre-revolutionary times. Education was one of the foremost concerns of the Soviet regime. The idea was to not only teach students how to read and write, but also to become politically literate, knowledgeable on hygiene and fitness, and appreciative of self-discipline, art, and rational collectivism. School was thus meant to prepare children for a life

²⁶ Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 61-62.

²⁷ Broido, *Daughter*, 123.

²⁸ For an example of the psychological impact food depravity could have on children and those around them, see: Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 130-131. Not all children had it as bad. While Taniya Aleksander and her family were also struggling with food shortages in newly independent Estonia, her experience stood out compared to that of most youngsters. Once, she created a treat with her brother called 'goggle-moggle' by mixing egg yolks and whites with sugar. At that time, eggs and sugar were nearly impossible to come by in most Soviet cities. See: Alexander, *Tania*, 11.

of productive labor and useful citizenship, as was deemed fit for the 'New Soviet person' shaping communist society.²⁹

Some changes were already implemented after the February Revolution and expanded by the Bolsheviks later on. All schools were made co-educational and pupils sat on committees that determined the curriculum, established clubs, and invited lecturers. Schools even got their own 'soviets' of teachers and students in which all opinions were of equal weight.³⁰ Though politics certainly invaded the classrooms,³¹ in general, school remained much the same and youngsters of all sociopolitical backgrounds tried as hard as ever to keep up with their studies. Olga Andreev and her sister Natasha, for example, managed to graduate from their gymnasium in the spring of 1919 while the Civil War spread throughout the country and their family was evading the Bolsheviks.³² That same year, Princess Sofia Vachnadze and her

²⁹ A.J. Haines, 'Children of Moscow', *Asia* 22:1 (1922) 214-219: 214; Kelly, *Children's World*, 66-67.

³⁰ Kelly, *Children's World*, 64, 527; Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 40, 62; Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 84, 88-89; Haines, 'Children of Moscow', 215. School soviets also worked as distribution agencies for foreign relief goods. As Anna J. Haines, a relief worker for the American Friends Service Committee, described it: 'At the end of the month, we received business-like reports from the presidents of the soviets. One twelve-year-old (...) read us a neatly phrased memorandum of thanks and then politely informed us that his school was lacking a pound and a half of its allowance.'

³¹ For example, religion was abolished as an obligatory subject, text books became politicized, and portraits of revolutionaries were hung on classroom walls. See Berberova, *The Italics*, 82, 84; Kelly, *Children's World*, 528-531. The students themselves were also occupied with politics. When Olga Andreev went to the Popov gymnasium in Moscow in the fall of 1917, 'The entire school was involved with the Revolution. For the most part students at the Popov belonged to liberal circles. During intermissions, the schoolyard was a beehive humming with political discussions. Socialist Revolutionaries, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Cadets defended their own views and argued loudly.' When she returned after the October Revolution, the mood had shifted: 'During intermissions the schoolyard no longer hummed with heated political arguments. If by any chance these flared up, they became at once bitter and even violent. The students from Bolshevik families were delighted. They had become assertive and went around smiling complacently.' See: Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 89, 91. See also: Berberova, *The Italics*, 81.

³² Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 120-121. When the youngsters tried to rejoin their old school in 1920 (despite having graduated already), their request was denied as they were seen as 'dangerous social outcasts'. See: Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 246-247. Olga Chernov Andreev, born in 1903, was the adopted daughter of Socialist Revolutionary leader

sisters graduated in an area occupied by Whites.³³ Of course, it was not easy. Vera Broido's school stopped teaching in the winter of 1919 as classrooms became too cold and shortages of books and paper too pressing.³⁴ When Nina Berberova was attending preparatory university classes in 1920, Rostov fell to the Reds. She kept studying there as long as possible, even though she had difficulties concentrating and 'professors were tormented by fear and hunger'.³⁵ Despite such distressing circumstances, young people continued to commit themselves to their studies, which helped them cope with their insecure surroundings and keep an optimistic eye on the future.³⁶ As Nelly Ptashkina wrote in her diary in 1918:

[I]t seems to me that if I work hard and diligently I shall be able to enter the gymnasium in the autumn. In comparison with what is going on now my preoccupations concerning my studies may seem trivial and absurd, but I do not feel that it is so. (...) Whatever turn events may take, whatever may happen in Russia, nothing can stop the march

Viktor Chernov. Her memoirs describe the years 1917-1921 as experienced by a family fleeing from the Bolsheviks. Viktor Chernov (1873-1952) was the leader and theoretician of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, Minister of Agriculture in the Provisional Government, and chairman of the Constituent Assembly. The SRs fought for peasants' rights and took the lead after the February Revolution, but were ousted when the Bolsheviks seized power.

³³ Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 31. See also: Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 109; Berberova, *The Italics*, 126.

³⁴ Broido, *Daughter*, 124-125.

³⁵ Berberova, *The Italics*, 100-102. Nina Nikolaevna Berberova was born in 1901 in a bourgeois milieu, though she felt more connected to the intelligentsia. Her father had studied at Moscow University and was a state councilor, while her mother came from a politically influential and wealthy family of landowners. In 1922, after the expulsion of the *intelligenty* was made possible by the NEP, she left Soviet Russia.

³⁶ Fen, *Remember Russia*, 75. Lidiya Zhiburtovich even felt like she lost her entire purpose when she did not return to her university in Petrograd because of shortages there. Her studies gave her a sense of achievement and satisfaction, and the Revolution forced her to give that up. See: Fen, *Remember Russia*, 83-84, 86. As with everything, experiences differed widely. Vera Broido did not have any prior experience with formal education upon entering school in 1917. She strongly disliked it for a long time, particularly because she was bullied for being the only girl after schools became co-educational. See: Broido, *Daughter*, 80, 108-109.

of time. The years will pass, I shall grow up and enter life. What do I need then? Education and knowledge.³⁷

Leisure time

Even in the most difficult situations, children and adolescents had to find ways to fill their spare time. In many cases, their activities were similar to what they would have done before the Revolution. One pastime that turns up repeatedly in their writings is reading. Regardless of their age, gender, social background or the pressing circumstances they were in, reading was the ultimate way for young people to escape reality or further their own education. Most of Taniya Alexander's books were lost when her family evacuated their house in Estonia, but she did recall owning a children's ABC-book at the age of four and enjoying the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen.³⁸ To Olga Andreev, books by Shakespeare, Gogol, and Leskov were a 'salvation'. When she was arrested together with her sisters and mother, they were thrilled to at least get their books back. Reading kept their spirits up and made their endless hours of spare time in prison bearable.³⁹ For Vera Broido, works by Dickens, Hugo, Dostoevsky, and Gogol provided an opportunity to forget the chaotic world of revolutionary Petrograd. Half-frozen and half-starved, the only thing for her to do was 'to go to bed, pile everything available on top of me and find oblivion in a book'.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ptashkina, *The Diary*, 30-31, 45-46. Nelli L'vovna Ptashkina had just turned seventeen when she died in a rock climbing accident in France on July 2, 1920. Her diary about her years in Moscow and Kyiv during the Revolution and Civil War was published in 1923 as a memorial. It is a unique text showcasing the views of a girl struggling to come to terms with her changing surroundings.

³⁸ Alexander, *Tania*, 12. Taniya Alexander, born in 1915 in Petrograd to an affluent family, started writing her memoirs in 1980. In the spring of 1918, six months after the October Revolution, Taniya and her five-year-old brother were evacuated to their father's estate in Estonia (which had gained independence from Russia in 1920 after the collapse of the Russian Empire). Her father, a member of the Baltic landed nobility and a tsarist diplomat, was murdered in 1919, while her mother, who came from a wealthy Ukrainian family, was still in Petrograd.

³⁹ Andreev, *Cold Spring*, 16, 225-227.

⁴⁰ Broido, *Daughter*, 80-81, 107-108. See also: Berberova, *The Italics*, 98, 111; Ptashkina, *The Diary*, 16-17, 93; Fen, *Remember Russia*, 86; Broido, *Daughter*, 98, 131; Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memoires*, 44, 99, 108.

Another way for youngsters to spend their free time was going to concerts and plays. After the Revolution, cultural life did not halt and people still visited theaters. Olga Andreev's mother, for instance, took her to see the opera singer Chalyapin at the People's Hall in Petrograd several times in the winter of 1917-1918. Vera Broido went to the same concert and saw many plays, enjoying herself so much that she was able to block out everything around her.⁴¹ A similar escapist sentiment can be seen in Nelly Ptashkina's diary. She often wrote about her trips to the Artistic Theatre in Moscow and emphasized how these visits provided 'a temporary respite from reality'. She pondered the question whether such entertainment was appropriate in times like these, but she simply needed it to keep up her spirits.⁴²

For young children, play remained a staple of daily leisure activities, though games reflected children's political surroundings more than ever. After the Revolution, the view that play should be regulated and more education-centered gained ground. Individual games and 'non-rational' forms of leisure such as card games and scribbling graffiti were criticized, while sportsmanship and political 'mass games', such as the anti-Fascist one organized by Muscovite Pioneers in 1924, were promoted. Children also incorporated historical events in games on their own account. In *Search and Requisition*, boys played 'Red Guards' and girls played 'The Swindler' and 'The Fat Bourgeois'. At one point, the 'soldiers' would burst in, punch and kick the girls, and requisition items. War games remained popular over time and were

⁴¹ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 93; Broido, *Daughter*, 84, 99, 114-115, 118-119. See also: Berberova, *The Italics*, 89; Schakovskoy, 'The February Revolution', 73; Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memories*, 62-63. As public transportation had ceased in Petrograd and people were afraid to walk the streets at night, it was easy to obtain good seats. Tickets were sometimes given out for free to youths, as was the case for the children's theatre in Moscow. For more on children and youth theater during the early Soviet years, including ways in which these were politicized, see: Kelly, *Children's World*, 465-467; Haines, 'Children of Moscow', 217-218.

⁴² Ptashkina, *The Diary*, 13, 43, 49-50, 70, 93, 105. Cinema, too, provided a break from everyday life for youngsters during the 1920s. That is part of why imported Western films were much more popular than dull, agitational films from the Soviet Union – even among politically active youth. One fifteen-year-old candidate member to the Komsomol wrote in 1927: 'I like films about the lives of workers and agitational films least of all. We see all of that in our own lives. I'm sick of it, and at the movies I want to take a break from my everyday life.' See: Gorsuch, 'Soviet Youth', 192-195.

adapted to whoever was fighting (e.g. 'Reds versus Whites').⁴³ Children did not always grasp their revolutionary surroundings, but they (subconsciously) adapted to them through play. While the Red Army was invading Estonia, Taniya Alexander and her brother did so as well:

It is hardly surprising that the events we were witnessing should affect us as children, but it is also true that we were too young to realise their seriousness, and we treated them more as a game. (...) One day we were not to be found and Mariussa [the nanny] ran downstairs to look for us. She found us under the huge dining-room table. 'Don't come too close,' said my five-year-old brother, 'we are playing Bolsheviks.'⁴⁴

Finally, some children spent their time playing with toys, though even these did not escape the Revolution. Under the Soviet regime, toys were hard to come by, as 'frivolous' items for young people were seen as pedagogically undesirable and the production of consumer goods dropped. Even if they were available, toys were still an unobtainable luxury for most.⁴⁵ In general, children understood and accepted that they could not get new toys, but that

⁴³ Kelly, *Children's World*, 430-432, 435; Kelly, 'Future Race', 267-268; Haines, 'Children of Moscow', 216. The sad irony is that such games sometimes came eerily close to the realities of children. Consider the following account of fourteen-year-old N. Borodin, who saw real-life 'Reds versus Whites' battles during the Civil War: 'The pupils of our school were also split into White, Red and neutral just as their elders were at home. (...) The Reds shot our headmaster Bogaevsky dead, because he was a White. The Whites hanged the teacher Gorobtsov, because he was a Red. The Reds shot my schoolmate Obukov and his six-year-old sister, because they sympathized with the Whites. The Whites shot the boy Soloviev and his old mother, because they sympathized with the Reds. Our school no longer existed. The teachers and pupils were either fighting or helping one or the other side, and many of them were killed.' See: Guillory, 'The Shattered Self', 553. The 'Young Pioneers', created in 1922, was the junior branch of the Komsomol meant for youngsters aged ten to fourteen. The 'Little Octobrists' was the youth league for children aged seven to nine, and was more associated with leisure than with politics. For more information, see: Kelly, *Children's World*, 62, 76-77, 547-549; Kelly, 'Future Race', 257, 260; I.A. Tirado, 'The Komsomol and the *Krest'ianka*: The Political Mobilization of Young Women in the Russian Village, 1921-1926', *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 23:1-4 (1996) 345-366: 362; A.M. Platoff, 'Soviet Children's Flags', *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology* 17:1 (2010) 63-84.

⁴⁴ Alexander, *Tania*, 7.

⁴⁵ Kelly, *Children's World*, 443.

did not make it easier for those around them. Olga Andreev and her sisters once passed a shop displaying a small toy bunny in the window. Adya, her younger sister, noticed it, but the scant amount of money they had was meant for food:

Natasha and I looked at one another, but we did not stop. Each of us knew that we had very little money left. We had to save it to buy fresh vegetables to give Mother against scurvy. Adya, who had never made a fuss or asked us for toys, was only ten years old. Why didn't we, the older ones, sense how much she wanted this bunny, although she would have never asked for it? (...) Our refusal to please Adya remains in my mind as one of the instances of what Alexei Remizov calls 'the irreparable.'⁴⁶

Fear, somberness, confusion, and insecurity brought about by the Revolution plagued youngsters, yet they did everything they could to adapt to the 'new normal'. In doing so, they stayed realistic, and in some cases even hopeful and cautiously optimistic. For Nina Berberova, it was crucial to leave the past behind and start looking towards the future. Despite scarcity and the failure of the counterrevolution, at least they were still alive.⁴⁷

Children of revolutionaries

While violence, food shortages, education and leisure activities formed a part of most children and adolescents' 'new normal' during the first decade of Soviet rule, some had experiences that were more peculiar to their sociopolitical backgrounds and incentives. Two such groups were the children of revolutionaries, and the youngsters that became political activists on their own account. Their experiences were similar in that political circumstances played a major role in the way they lived through the early

⁴⁶ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 243.

⁴⁷ Berberova, *The Italics*, 105. As Nelly Ptashkina put it: '[I]t is impossible to sit down and wait for what is coming. *One must live one's own life* and try to forget that everything is liable to come down on top of you at any moment. *One must live*. The present times completely destroy individual life: we are obliged to force ourselves to live [her italics].' See: Ptashkina, *The Diary*, 79. See also: Ptashkina, *The Diary*, 20, 35, 40-41, 87, 103, 106.

Soviet years. At the same time, the differences were significant between those who joined the Bolsheviks and those who stuck to the losing parties because of their parents. According to historian Katy Turton, the presence of children in the revolutionary movement has not received much attention from scholars. They have mostly been overlooked in favor of research into their parents' lives and the workings of the revolutionary parties. This may be because some of them were simply too young to truly be aware of their politically charged milieu, thus limiting their ability to reject their parents' lifestyle, even if they disagreed with it. Nevertheless, children played an important part in the revolutionary movement both before and after the Revolution, regardless of their age and specific political affiliations.⁴⁸

For instance, children were used by their parents for revolutionary activities. Though the youngest ones sometimes formed a danger for the movement as a careless gesture or slip of the tongue could easily betray party agents, they were often seen as trustworthy 'conspirators', suitable as lookouts or decoys. Police officers might be less suspicious of a mother carrying around her children, while they could actually be hiding illegal items. Some youngsters were even deployed to smuggle letters into prison during visits to their parents, or to deliver messages to various party members in the city.⁴⁹ Such work was risky. Olga Andreev, only sixteen at the time, was once asked by her stepfather Viktor Chernov to visit a store to let someone know where the next Socialist Revolutionaries (SR) meeting would take place. When she went there, Chekists caught her. Olga was arrested with everyone else in the store and brought to the Lubyanka prison. There, a woman tried to hang herself in their cell. Olga, her sisters and their mother were arrested again later on and held as hostages in an attempt by the authorities to find out where Chernov was hiding.⁵⁰

Indeed, life in a family of revolutionaries could be dangerous and cause many hardships for children. They dealt with the privations of living an underground life, issues in continuing their education, traumatic police searches, and stifling secrecy.⁵¹ Feelings of loneliness, isolation and fear while

⁴⁸ K. Turton, 'Children of the revolution: parents, children and the revolutionary struggle in late imperial Russia', *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5:1 (2012) 52-86: 53-54.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, 54-55, 62, 65, 69, 72.

⁵⁰ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 143, 145-148, 152, 230, 281.

⁵¹ Turton, 'Children', 64, 68-69; Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 30. Though Olga Lawrence was the daughter of bourgeois rather than revolutionary parents, her anecdote about

in hiding greatly impacted them. Olga Andreev and her sister could not go to university or get jobs because the Bolsheviks were searching for their stepfather. She points to her isolation in her memoirs, stating that her family led ‘an underground cavelike existence’, and that friends refused to meet them out of fear.⁵² Vera Broido felt much the same. When the February Revolution started, she and her mother returned to Petrograd from exile. Her mother plunged into revolutionary work and became Secretary of the Central Committee of the Menshevik Party, while her father was released from prison and became a member of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. Vera was left in the care of others as her parents were working. This made her feel lonely and like a burden, especially because she was not yet old enough to really grasp what was going on around her:

[W]here did this leave me? Washed up on a lonely beach, all alone – that is what it felt like. And with not a clue as to what was happening. If only the family meals had continued, with at least one parent present and guests coming and going, I would have gleaned from the table-talk what was going on: I was after all nine years old. But there was nothing of that kind.⁵³

All of this does not mean that children of revolutionaries were not excited about the prospect of revolution and being a part of their parents’ socialist activities. The February Revolution (and later the October one as well, for those born to Bolshevik parents) was a dream come true for most, as

having to hide her mother’s diamond brooch (from when she was a lady-in-waiting for the Tsarina) in one of her toys is typical: ‘I remember perfectly well these soldiers coming in, and my mother looking very white, and they started searching around. Then one of them picked up my teddy bear and said “Aha, a toy. Sometimes we find other toys inside. Here, give us some scissors.” And I, forgetting that we’d been told not to speak to the soldiers, said “No, no, no, you can’t cut up my teddy bear.” And yelled most horribly. And the soldier was only about 20 – and here was this yelling little girl – and so he said “Take it, take it.”’ See: Horsbrugh-Porter, *Memoires*, 101.

⁵² Andreev, *Cold Spring*, 8, 16-17, 103, 175.

⁵³ Broido, *Daughter*, 78-80, 82, 97. See also: Turton, ‘Children’, 58, 60-61, 65. By the time Vera turned eleven, she felt more capable of following political talk, which to her signaled her own maturation: ‘This was in a sense the beginning of my adult life. (...) It was as if a curtain had been pulled aside. I could not understand everything that was said, but I got a general impression.’ See: Broido, *Daughter*, 95.

revolutionary enthusiasm had been inculcated in them from a young age.⁵⁴ At nine years old, Vera 'began to worship Revolution as a kind of deity, to which all private concerns had to be subordinated',⁵⁵ and she was ecstatic when it finally arrived:

[F]rom my earliest days I had been taught to expect that universal festival, that fulfilment of all hopes. The REVOLUTION! My parents had lived for it; all their friends had lived for it; they had all been ready to die for it. I imagined it as something unspeakably glorious and wonderful. And now it had come!⁵⁶

Strikingly, even at a later age, it was often not the Revolution or even their parents' revolutionary activities these children looked back on with remorse. Rather, it was more so the way the Revolution turned out, and how their expectations were not met by reality. Olga Andreev has described how she lamented the course of the Revolution, as she had grown up with it as the ultimate ideal to strive for – one worth dedicating your entire life to.⁵⁷

Children and adolescents as political activists: Komsomol experiences

When the Revolution broke out, not just children of revolutionaries responded enthusiastically. Students and working-class youngsters took to the streets in droves, without having any prior political experience.⁵⁸ Ekaterina Olitskaya, born in 1899 to educated parents, was attending the Stebut Agricultural Institute for women in Petrograd when the February Revolution unfolded. The chaos in the streets, crowds of people, and gunfire did not scare her off. On the contrary: she and her friend Olya eagerly joined the demonstrations, despite fearful pleas from Olya's mother not to go outside. Notwithstanding her own bourgeois background, Ekaterina later joined the

⁵⁴ Turton, 'Children', 54.

⁵⁵ Broido, *Daughter*, 71.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 75.

⁵⁷ Andreyev, *Cold Spring*, 20.

⁵⁸ Fen, *Remember Russia*, 74; M. Neumann, 'Youth, It's Your Turn!': Generations and the Fate of the Russian Revolution (1917-1932)', *Journal of Social History* 46:2 (2012) 273-304: 282; Gorsuch, 'Soviet Youth', 192.

Congress of Student Socialists of Kursk Province and became a Socialist Revolutionary. She taught in workers' schools and helped with the sale of socialist newspapers. Many other students she knew joined the Mensheviks or the Bolsheviks.⁵⁹

The latter party grabbed hold of many working-class adolescents in Moscow. They participated in factory committees, youth unions and clubs, and established their own groups as outlets for revolutionary enthusiasm, often within a Bolshevik framework. These groups functioned as places for political agitation and enriched members' social lives through activities such as sewing, bookbinding, and literary discussions.⁶⁰ Anna Litveiko, born in 1899 to a family of factory workers, also took part in these youth organizations. At the time of the February Revolution, she was working at the Elektrolampa Factory in Moscow. Together with her friends, she joined the crowds in a rush of excitement: "The revolution seemed like a wonderful holiday. (...) We felt like adults for the first time. For the first time we felt completely free."⁶¹ Anna was chosen to sit on a factory committee and joined the Bolsheviks in March 1917. She agitated for the Party whenever she could

⁵⁹ Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 33-38. Ekaterina's enthusiasm waned once the October Revolution found its way to Kursk: 'I could not accept what was going on. I was dismayed by the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the closing down of socialist newspapers, and the banning of the SR Party.' Confusion, disintegration and moral collapse caused Ekaterina to become disillusioned with the Revolution. See: Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 39, 42, 48.

⁶⁰ D.P. Koenker, 'Urban Families, Working-Class Youth Groups, and the 1917 Revolution in Moscow' in: D.L. Ransel ed., *The Family in Imperial Russia: New Lines of Historical Research* (Urbana, IL-Chicago, IL-London 1978) 280-304: 281-282, 294, 296-297; Neumann, "Youth, It's Your Turn!", 281. Naturally, not everyone felt compelled to actively take part in the Revolution. Like Ekaterina, some young communists were disillusioned by the traumas and disappointment caused by violence and war, and eventually left the Bolshevik youth movement.

⁶¹ Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 49-50. Eduard M. Dune, seventeen at the time of the February Revolution, felt much the same as Anna when he joined the crowds: 'For the first time in my life I sensed the atmosphere of joy, when everyone you meet seems close to you, your flesh your blood, when people look at one another with eyes full of love. To call it mass hypnosis is not quite right, but the mood of the crowd was transmitted from one to another like conduction, like spontaneous burst of laughter, joy, or anger.' See: Neumann, "Youth, It's Your Turn!", 281. While the Revolution meant years of isolation and entrapment for Olga Andreev, it symbolized ultimate freedom for Anna and Eduard.

and set up the Union of Working Youth in the Moscow district of Presnya together with other young Bolsheviks. When the October Revolution came, the battles ‘felt like one uninterrupted day – the happiest day of my life’. In 1918, she went on to fight with the Red Army, and in 1919 she worked for the Komsomol Central Committee in the Caucasus.⁶² It was clear that urban youth provided enormous revolutionary potential for the Bolsheviks, and so their separate initiatives were united into the Komsomol in October 1918. The Komsomol organized adolescents aged fourteen to twenty-three, and its task was to institutionalize the communist upbringing of youngsters, thereby contributing to the creation of the ‘New Soviet person’.⁶³

Indeed, the first *Komsomol'tsy* saw themselves as the ‘constructors of Communism’, the ‘most active and revolutionary part of the working class’, and the ‘vanguard of the proletarian revolution’.⁶⁴ Yet, the relations between the Komsomol and the regime were multifaceted and complex, as were the experiences of Komsomol members. Weak party control and guidance in the 1920s meant that they had space to create their own subcultures, to act out differing visions of Communism, and even to challenge authority.⁶⁵ One prominent subculture was that of the older members; the ‘macho’, militant *Komsomol'tsy* that had often fought during the Revolution and the Civil War. For them, the Civil War and the policy of War Communism formed a kind of foundational myth on which they based their entire existence. The Revolution had given them power, authority, agency and the feeling of maturity, which they channeled into their love for revolutionary habits. Their dress – usually consisting of army tunics and boots, leather jackets, and workers’ caps (see

⁶² Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 49-50, 52-55, 59, 62-63.

⁶³ Neumann, “Youth, It’s Your Turn!”, 275-276. It is important to note that while Komsomol membership numbers increased drastically during the 1920s (by 1926, there were 1.75 million members), the number of members was never more than a fraction of the total population that was eligible to sign up for the organization. See: Neumann, “Youth, It’s Your Turn!”, 282; M. Neumann, ‘Revolutionizing mind and soul? Soviet youth and cultural campaigns during the New Economic Policy (1921-8)’, *Social History* 33:3 (2008) 243-267: 244; Gorsuch, ‘Soviet Youth’, 201.

⁶⁴ M. Neumann, ‘Youthful Internationalism in the Age of ‘Socialism in One Country’: Komsomol’tsy, Pioneers and ‘World Revolution’ in the Interwar Period’, *Revolutionary Russia* 31:2 (2018) 279-303: 282; M. Neumann, ‘Class Ascription and Class Identity: Komsomol’tsy and the Policy of Class during NEP’, *Revolutionary Russia* 19:2 (2006) 175-196: 176; Gorsuch, ‘Soviet Youth’, 189; Neumann, “Youth, It’s Your Turn!”, 278.

⁶⁵ Neumann, “Youth, It’s Your Turn!”, 278; Gorsuch, ‘Soviet Youth’, 201.

fig. 3) – and their speech exuded proletarianism, as did their behavior. Filthy apartments, drinking, smoking, hooliganism, and being unkempt symbolized to them the revolutionary freedom they had gained in the past few years.⁶⁶

This ‘rough worker youth’ movement was also a response to the NEP, which was a disappointment to many *Komsomol'tsy* who saw the partial return to ‘bourgeois culture’ and a market economy as a betrayal of their revolutionary, sociopolitical aspirations. To make matters worse, the military construction of socialist society as was promoted under War Communism was replaced by ideas on the *educational* building of Communism. With the campaign of *novyi byt* (the new way of life criticizing behavior such as smoking, drinking and swearing as ‘unrevolutionary’), authorities tried to eradicate the ‘proletarian culture’ popular among youngsters, as they believed it was holding back the revolution. Cleanliness, hygiene, political literacy, discipline, education and ‘morally right’ behavior now shaped the ideal image of the *Komsomol'tsy*. To the militant enthusiasts, *novyi byt* felt like they were stripped of their recently gained freedom and power in a patronizing campaign to once again turn them into children. They dismissed the Party as overly bureaucratic and conservative, and the clinical image they propagated as petty bourgeois.⁶⁷

To be sure, a different strand of Komsomol youth took *novyi byt* to heart. To the great annoyance of veteran members, they enthusiastically

⁶⁶ Neumann, ‘Youth, It’s Your Turn!’; Tirado, ‘The *Komsomol* and the *Krest'ianka*’, 358; I.A. Tirado, ‘Peasants Into Soviets: Reconstructing Komsomol Identity in the Russian Countryside of the 1920s’, *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 18:1 (2001) 42-63: 46; I.A. Tirado, ‘The Komsomol’s Village Vanguard: Youth and Politics in the NEP Countryside’, *The Russian Review* 72:3 (2013) 427-446: 427; Neumann, ‘Class Ascription’, 176, 180, 189; Neumann, ‘Revolutionizing mind and soul?’, Gorsuch, ‘Soviet Youth’; A.E. Gorsuch, ‘NEP be Damned! Young Militants in the 1920s and the Culture of Civil War’, *Russian Review* 56:4 (1997) 564-580; Neumann, ‘Youthful Internationalism’. War Communism is the collective term for measures adopted by the Bolsheviks between 1918 and 1921, including administrative centralization; the nationalization of banking, transport, foreign trade, and large-scale industry; the requisitioning of peasant produce; and the rationing of basic goods and services. See Fitzpatrick and Slezkine, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*, 39.

⁶⁷ Neumann, ‘Youth, It’s Your Turn!’; Neumann, ‘Class Ascription’, 180, 189; Tirado, ‘Peasants Into Soviets’, 49; Neumann, ‘Revolutionizing mind and soul?’, Gorsuch, ‘Soviet Youth’; Gorsuch, ‘NEP be Damned!’. Youngsters pushing back at the establishment is a phenomenon of all times, but the interesting difference here is that the establishment was fairly new, and that it had inspired young people’s revolutionary activities just a few years prior.

picked up discussions on sexual morals, hygiene, discipline, alcohol abuse and hooliganism. Some went further than the regime and held debates on whether playing football, dancing and wearing ribbons was compatible with the new norms and values.⁶⁸ However, both branches were only minorities in the Komsomol. Most *Komsomol'tsy* were against *novyi byt* simply because they liked drinking and smoking, while they also gladly profited from the 'bourgeois' culture flourishing under NEP in the form of Hollywood movies, flapper fashions and make-up. Neither the militants, nor the purists, nor the regime itself could fully get them to change their typically youthful ways.⁶⁹

Ironically, it was the cohort of young peasants, whom most urban members despised, that ended up dominating the Komsomol. By October 1922, 48 percent of members were peasants; and by the end of the NEP more than a million of them had joined. To them, the Komsomol was an opportunity to improve their economic situation and education, to obtain political positions, and to escape village life with its patriarchal and hierarchical structures.⁷⁰ By 1927, those who had been politically and militarily active during the Revolution and Civil War outgrew the Komsomol and gradually exited the organization.⁷¹ It was at this point that the regime got a firmer grip on the Youth League, treating it more and more as a submissive Party instrument.

⁶⁸ Tirado, 'Peasants Into Soviets', 49; Neumann, 'Revolutionizing mind and soul?', 247-248; Gorsuch, 'NEP be Damned!', 565; Neumann, 'Class Ascription', 180; Gorsuch, 'Soviet Youth', 191, 201.

⁶⁹ Tirado, 'Peasants Into Soviets', 50, 52-53; Tirado, 'The Komsomol's Village Vanguard', 436; Neumann, 'Revolutionizing mind and soul?', 249-251, 254; Gorsuch, 'Soviet Youth', 192, 195, 199-201; Gorsuch, 'NEP be Damned!', 575; Kelly, *Children's World*, 475.

⁷⁰ I.A. Tirado, 'The Komsomol and Young Peasants: The Dilemma of Rural Expansion, 1921-1925', *Slavic Review* 52:3 (1993) 460-476: 461, 464-465, 475; Tirado, 'Peasants Into Soviets', 46, 58-59; Tirado, 'The Komsomol's Village Vanguard', 427, 435, 440. The Komsomol in the countryside is a fascinating topic that unfortunately could not be explored in depth here. For more information, including the spread of the Youth League in rural areas, its reputation among peasants, its attitude towards women, and tensions between *Komsomol'tsy* supporting the Party's 'face the countryside' policy and members more so concerned with urban youths, see: Tirado, 'Young Peasants'; Tirado, 'The Komsomol and the *Krest'ianka*'; Tirado, 'Peasants Into Soviets'; Tirado, 'The Komsomol's Village Vanguard'; Neumann, 'Revolutionizing mind and soul?', 246, 257; Neumann, 'Class Ascription', 181-182.

⁷¹ Neumann, 'Youth, It's Your Turn!', 291.



Fig. 3: The first Komsomol members in Kyiv [MZ34.1]. Note their militant, proletarian style of dress. L.B. Popel, Skvyra, USSR (now Ukraine), 1926. Ella Orlikova, 'Golda Tsyrułnik and Lyova Slobodskoy with Komsomol Members' (interview with Zina Kaluzhnaya), Centropa (2001) <https://www.centropa.org/en/photo/golda-tsyrułnik-and-lyova-slobodskoy-komsomol-members> (accessed June 21, 2026).

Komsomol veterans: rhetoric versus reality

Following the October Revolution, many children and adolescents active in youth organizations joined the Red Guards. Of the Muscovite Red Guards, 43 percent were under twenty-five. Their desire to fight for revolutionary ideals would lead many of them to join the Red Army during the Civil War (fig. 4 shows a division of many young-looking soldiers). Quite often, these soldiers were Komsomol members.⁷² The Civil War was considered a heroic event within the Komsomol – one that inspired youngsters to sacrifice themselves for the construction of socialism. To stress this, the Komsomol set up Istmol (Commission of the Study of the History of the Russian Youth

⁷² Koenker, 'Urban Families', 299-300, 303; Neumann, "Youth, It's Your Turn!", 279, 282, 288. The Bolsheviks were not the only ones recruiting very young soldiers. Marina Yurlova was eighteen when she fought on the side of the Whites in a Czechoslovak regiment. While lying in hospital, the Bolsheviks tried to enlist her as well, even though she had been injured in battle. See: Yurlova, *Cossack Girl*, 218.

Movement), which was responsible for organizing celebrations centered around Komsomol soldiers. Istmol asked them to write memoirs about their experiences to promote the image of revolutionary heroism, but more often, their texts showed a discrepancy between pro-Civil War rhetoric and real army experiences. As Sean Guillory, who has researched these memoirs, points out: 'Alongside a narrative that framed the war as a 'heroic epoch,' veterans voiced confusion, personal loss, hardship, physical suffering, and fear in the face of death.'⁷³

Some Komsomol veterans did remember the Revolution and Civil War with excitement and saw it as a chance to build a new socialist order. For others, it was a period of endless trauma and chaos. Guillory argues that leaving for the front was a disruptive experience for many. Volunteering was seen as the ultimate act of political consciousness and sacrifice, but veterans' memoirs suggest that besides a sense of enthusiasm and joviality, insecurities and painful feelings of guilt towards loved ones were also very common.⁷⁴ Vera Broido recalled how one boy she knew had a doubtful expression on his face as he left to fight the White Army that laid siege to Petrograd in 1919:

Grisha (...) had been swept straight from school into the army and was now an officer. He and a small group of equally young men, many of pre-shaving age, were leaving for the front (...) He looked quite splendid, I thought, (...) but the smile with which he acknowledged my wave was rather uncertain.⁷⁵

Any adventurous and heroic dreams these poorly trained, young fighters had when they went to war quickly evaporated at the first signs of deafening noise and death. Mental illnesses and trauma caused by sleep deprivation, hunger,

⁷³ Guillory, 'The Shattered Self', 546-548. These memoirs differ tremendously from autobiographies written by students who wished to join Communist Party cells at their universities. They meticulously followed official rhetoric to be accepted. See: I. Halfin, 'From Darkness to Light: Student Communist Autobiography during NEP', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 45:2 (1997) 210-236. According to Matthias Neumann, the marches, demonstrations and acts of commemoration cultivating the Civil War myth within the Komsomol were also meant to drown out the memories of trauma, despair and loss which haunted many veterans. See: Neumann, 'Youth, It's Your Turn!', 288; Neumann, 'Youthful Internationalism', 280, 285.

⁷⁴ Guillory, 'The Shattered Self', 550, 553-554.

⁷⁵ Broido, *Daughter*, 121.

disease, torture and the sight of rotten corpses was not uncommon. Though there was an element of family-like comradery among soldiers, many still felt lonely and were forced to become desensitized to survive.⁷⁶ N. Rubinshtein even found battles ‘repetitive’ after he had managed to turn off his emotions and regain focus: ‘I was used to fire and there was no time to think about feelings. All the attention was ‘on the moment’ – Will we be attacked? When and from where?’ Much like the youngsters described above, death and gunfire became a banal part of everyday life for them; a ‘new normal’.⁷⁷



Fig. 4: A photograph of a division of young Civil War fighters taken after their return from battle against the White Army in Mongolia in 1921. Author unknown. Neumann, “Youth, It’s Your Turn!”, 280.

Conclusion

The experiences of children and adolescents during the Russian Revolution and the first decade of Soviet rule were diverse. All aspects of youngsters’ lives were impacted by the Revolution and Civil War. Violence and hunger quickly became a part of young people’s ‘new normal’, yet some things, such as education and leisure activities, saw a great degree of continuity. For children of non-Bolshevik revolutionaries, the results brought about by the Revolution were highly disappointing. They felt lonely, fearful and anxious, knowing that their safety was always at risk. No less dangerous were the lives

⁷⁶ Guillory, “The Shattered Self”, 555, 557-558, 561-562, 564.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, 557.

of youngsters fighting at the fronts. They were permanently scarred by the horrors they experienced, which forced them to grow up quickly. Upon returning, the Komsomol was there to take them in. The subculture of macho, militant and proletarian *Komsomol'tsy* gave them a place to act upon their newfound power, authority and heroic status. Even within the organization, however, experiences varied widely depending on one's habits, background, and response to the NEP and the regime's *novyi byt* campaign. Regardless of their exact life path, many adolescents showed an admirable amount of resilience in extremely trying times.

The regime's child rearing ideals and vision of the 'New Soviet person' could not have been farther removed from real life. General adversity and suffering made it hard for most to even care about official propagandistic narratives. Children in non-Bolshevik revolutionary movements were cut off from society, while Komsomol subcultures prevented adolescents from following the regime's guidelines. Besides the gap between official standards and reality, a more general discrepancy between generations also stands out in the sources. Adults' behaviors and reactions to revolutionary surroundings annoyed some young people, who either dismissed them as cowards or were unable to comprehend their fears. Children of revolutionaries were let down as their parents' predictions failed to come true, while young militants were not disappointed by the results of the Revolution per se, but rather by how older Bolsheviks retreated from revolutionary action and introduced the bourgeois world of the NEP. This could be labeled as a classic story of friction between generations, but the turbulent early Soviet context intensified these instances. Trauma was present in youths' experiences across the board. As violence, death, and starvation became part of their 'new normal', youngsters dealt with (sub)conscious traumatization caused by their surroundings. From dead bodies in the streets to gory sites at the fronts and murders in the countryside: young people witnessed these atrocities and became emotionally desensitized as they turned into everyday phenomena. This is perhaps the most important consistent feature in their experiences – one that haunted them and their descendants throughout their lives.

Acknowledgements: This article is a shortened version of a paper originally written for the MA History course 'The Russian Revolution Revisited' (2021). I would like to thank Dr. Henk Kern for his feedback and supervision during the writing of this paper, and for his enduring support during my subsequent academic endeavors.