

Review

Examining the Policies and Actions of the Soviet Union towards Children

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Accepted 23 May 2014

From the beginning of the Soviet Union until its eventual downfall, their policy towards children remained consistent, as shown by analysis of primary source documents that deal both directly and indirectly with the topic of children within the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was focused not on the children as individuals deserving of protection in their own right, but instead, the Soviet government repeatedly ignored the needs of the children or even exploited them for its own gain. Additionally, towards the end of the 20th century, the Soviet Union realized that it could not support itself at their current population rate and began to actively encourage birth which resulted in supporting children. These three different courses of action of the Soviet Union towards children culminate in an overarching policy of utilitarianism in that the Soviet Union was more concerned with perpetuating its ideology than with the lives of children that were dependent on the government.

Key Words: Soviet Union, children, propaganda, history, utilitarianism, domestic policy, ideology

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Soviet Union and the children in the Soviet Union is one that heavily leaned towards benefitting the Soviet Union. The Soviet government was willing to take care of them and supply for their needs when it was convenient or advantageous to them but they were also willing to use them for their own benefit or ignore them if they were not prepared to deal with them. This course of actions can only be described as utilitarian, seeing these children not as individuals in their own right but instead as tools to further the Soviet ideology. The Soviet Union's policies towards children in the twentieth century was strictly utilitarian in nature, as shown both through documents that directly address the children and through documents that deal with them on a more detached basis.

In the beginning years of the Soviet Union, they were

not in a position to pay much attention to the children in the country, especially those that did not have parents or homes. This falls in line with their utilitarian view in that they could not see a use for the children, and therefore proceeded to not pay them any significant attention. In the passage 'Homeless Children', written by Walter Duranty, a journalist for the New York Times and Soviet sympathizer, in his book, which detailed his time spent in the Soviet Union, *I Write as I Please*, Duranty(1935) depicts the horror and hopelessness of the plight of the homeless children (Duranty, 1935). *I Write as I Please* was written in 1935; however the events described occurred in the spring of 1922.

The years leading up to 1922 were not prosperous by any stretch of the imagination. Because of food shortages, disease and malnutrition ran rampant

throughout the country and killed eight million people from 1918 to 1920 (Service, 2009). Many of those who died had children and with their deaths, these children became orphans without homes or a way to support themselves. Additionally the Civil War from 1918 to 1921 left many children orphans as well as disrupting many families, resulting in many homeless children who were not orphans in the strictest sense of the word (Service, 2009).

Duranty, while living in Russia visited many places during his stay. The one depicted in 'Homeless Children' is a children's home in the town of Samara, along the Volga River. He was appalled by the conditions there and said that it was fit more for animals than for people, especially children. He said that children were picked up off the streets by local authorities, and then sent to the children's home by the hundreds (Duranty, 1995). However, there were so many children that they could not be cared for adequately.

In his book, he described a meeting with a woman in charge of the children's home that he visited. She is in charge of taking care of hundreds of children, with no resources such as food, medicine, or soap. In addition to this difficulty, she is also tasked with doing so with only three helpers. She is doing all of this without any substantial help from the Soviet government. She makes it abundantly clear that she alone is taking care of these children and that there is no way that she could get enough supplies from the city government in order to meet their needs.

The Soviet government was not taking care of these children, instead leaving it to her. They were only bringing more and more children to her door, leaving them to die without offering assistance. During this time, this was typical of the Soviet Union. They were still establishing themselves and were more worried with preserving the workforce which was threatened by the famine than with keeping the orphans alive. Duranty describes the government as "overwhelmed" and also says that the most prevalent characteristic of the people there is "exhaustion" (Duranty, 1935).

However, Duranty is careful not to place blame on the Soviet Union, due to his sympathizing with the Soviet Union. He instead chose to characterize them as fellow sufferers of this famine who were simply unable to help. This is likely why the Soviet Union was open to publishing accounts of this issue of homeless children. They also were not portrayed as the oppressor and that would make them more comfortable, as well as the fact that more than ten years had passed since the events that Duranty experienced. This is yet another example of their utilitarianism. Duranty's account could not harm them and could possibly help them and therefore it was allowed.

Duranty's account shows the state of the children who did not have the benefits of parents or other familial connections. Because of both the Civil War and the other

tragic conditions such as famine, they were alone in the world and many of them died. Duranty does not provide exact numbers of the children that were in these conditions but he does paint an exceedingly vivid picture of the horror that was inescapable for these children.

This maltreatment of orphaned and abandoned children by the Soviet government was largely due to the fact that their infrastructure was not yet developed and they were more concerned with acquiring and maintaining political power. However, in 1922, the Communist party was fully established in Russia, leaving them to begin to build their society. This marks a shift in their utilitarianism. They found a way that they could make the children in the Soviet Union useful. In order to make their ideals stand the test of time, they knew they had to have some way to educate the younger generation. That is the situation that Bukharin, a member of the Bolshevik party since before the October Revolution in 1917, (Bukharin, 1888-1938) addresses in the speech 'Bringing Up The Young Generation' given on October 19th, 1922 (Rosenberg, 1984).

Bukharin gave this speech in order to propose a clear set of action for inducting the younger generations into the communist party. After the tumultuous five years following Tsar Nicholas II's abdication, any government that wanted to stay in power in Russia would have to create a legacy for themselves, and that was best accomplished by teaching the children to follow their prescribed set of ideals, in this instance, those were the ideals of communism. Bukharin realized this and in his speech began to set forth a plan for teaching the ideals of communism to the young generation that would be responsible for carrying them out when the current leaders were no longer present (Rosenberg, 1984).

From the assertiveness of Bukharin's language in the speech and from his high ranking in the communist party, it was clear that he expected to be heard and for his words to be highly influential in the process of leading the younger generation. Bukharin was a highly prominent and longstanding member of the Communist party, so his words would have held greater weight than if he was merely a common citizen giving an unsolicited opinion (Bukharin, 1888-1938).

But within the communist party, Bukharin was in the "right wing." He was willing to compromise for the good of the country, especially if it meant that the end goal of a socialist society would be accomplished sooner. However, this flexibility does not appear in this speech. He repeatedly uses forceful terminology such as "must" and "imperative" (Rosenberg, 1984). In a single instance, this could be credited to the translation, but when repeated so often, it shows that Bukharin was unwavering in his plan for the youth of the communist party.

Bukharin's suggestions were highly influential in the carrying out of the youth organization known as the

Komsomol, the official league for young communists, even though it was formed in 1918. His ideas are most clearly seen in how enveloping the organization was, nearly everyone from ages fourteen to twenty-eight was a Member (Of Russian Origin, 2014). That, in conjunction with the policies and practices opposing alcohol (Gorsuch, 2000), are heavily featured in Bukharin's speech concerning how to bring up the young communists (Rosenberg, 1984).

In summation, Bukharin's speech concerning how to raise effective communists was delivered in a time when Russia was beginning to be able to involve themselves in more social issues due to the resolution of the recent famine and the Civil War. Bukharin's ideas and plans set forth in his speech are clearly manifested in the actualization of the Komsomol, the group designed to educate and bring up young communists.

But the Soviet government was not altruistic in its treatment of children. It wanted to pass down its ideology down to the younger generations but it was also willing to exploit children in order to sway others to its point of view. Although they often had policies bettering the children, they also had more utilitarian policies that took advantage of them for the betterment of the Soviet Union. The video termed 'Homeless Children in Moscow' was produced in 1926 as part of Communist propaganda meant to discredit the New Economic Policy, or NEP (Nepmen, 2014). The New Economic Policy was introduced by Lenin in March of 1921 and was a severe departure from the previous communist policies (Siegelbaum, 1921). Because of its hints of capitalism, it was also in direct opposition to the communist ideology. Because of the NEP's unpopularity, particularly with Stalin, this piece of propaganda was introduced.

This video was made with the sole intention of being propaganda. There was no other purpose, either stated or unstated. The makers of this video mixed footage of homeless children with footage of the nepmen, a group of entrepreneurs that gained their name from the NEP, they were fundamentally traders in small goods and were made possible and therefore were those who benefited economically from the capitalist nature of the New Economic Policy (Service, 2009). The contrast between children living in abject poverty, shown on the streets in horrible condition and nepmen living in prosperity, shown visiting nightclubs and engaging in other highbrow activities such as reading the newspaper (Nepmen, 1924). This was meant to show the disparity in quality of life made possible by the NEP, a problem that communists believed would be solved with communism.

The NEP, was instituted by Lenin in 1921, and Lenin suffered a stroke that led to his departure from politics and his eventual death on January 21, 1924 (Service, 2009). Even though Lenin was the main proponent of the NEP, it was still successful enough to last four years after his death. Stalin thought that this piece of propaganda

would sufficiently damage the reputation of the nepmen by attacking their lifestyle and sway public approval away from the NEP and towards his own plan. He was successful, due to pieces of propaganda similar to this video, as well as the political machinations of Stalin that only two short years after this propaganda was released, Stalin was able to institute the Five Year Plan (Service, 2009).

However, one has to question the ruthlessness of the communist party. They had adequate time and resources to find these homeless children, video them, and then compile the footage with that of the nepmen. But they then proceeded to implicitly blame the nepmen for the children's plight, when they were the ones that videoed them and then walked away. Clearly, the priority of Stalin and his government was not on the children, the children were merely a tool in order to bring down the NEP. This conclusively shows that the leaders of the communist party, in particular, Stalin, were more concerned with achieving their economic ideological goals through the use of propaganda than with actually solving the problem that they were blaming on the NEP and the nepmen. Reports do not have the children's way of life drastically improving for another 10 years, which falls outside of the Five Year Plan that Stalin was advocating for with this piece of propaganda (Von Geldern, 1936).

This propaganda worked exceedingly well and Stalin succeeded in getting rid of the nepmen. Collectivization had started in 1927, the first five year plan was drawing to an end and the second five year plan was planned to begin in 1932 since the first five year plan was so successful that it was completed in four years (Service, 2009). By 1932, the Komsomol, the communist youth organization was fully established. Public opinion was predominantly against collectivization and industrialization, the foundations of the first five year plan. In order to combat this, the communists needed to take action in order to influence public opinion to support their policies.

The communist party were experts at propaganda, as seen when the Bolsheviks rose to power, during the Russian Civil War and with nearly every event and opportunity (Okunev, 1920). As seen before, they were quick to use propaganda to sway people to their side. In this particular instance they aimed their propaganda towards children, particularly school aged children who were in the Komsomol, with the poem of Pavlik Morozov (Siegelbaum, 1934). This poem told the story of a loyal communist boy who, after his father betrayed the communist ideology by hoarding grain, turned his father in to the authorities and then was brutally murdered by his father in retribution (Doroshin, 1995). This shows yet another facet to their utilitarianism. They were manipulating children using other children in order to support the Soviet Union.

This poem was incredibly pervasive. Yuri Druzhnikov, a

writer who grew up during this time reports that there were two poems written about Morozov, in addition to a cantata for choir and symphony orchestra, an opera, a film, and eventually a monument and museum (Druzhnikov, 1993). Morozov was a martyr to the communist ideology and was treated as such. Druzhnikov also tells that "it is virtually impossible for someone not born and raised in the USSR to appreciate how all-pervasive a figure Morozov was (Druzhnikov, 1993)." The Soviet Union was wildly successful with their portrayal of PavlikMorozov and the propaganda that they created from him.

Even though this story was wildly successful, there is nearly no truth to it. Only one part of it can be confirmed. PavlikMorozov was a boy who was murdered by his father. However, he was not murdered after turning his father, a kulak grain hoarder, in. Druzhnikov found that after his father left his mother to marry another woman, Pavlik went to the authorities with false claims in order to try to force him to come back to his family. However, Pavlik's father was sentenced to prison and Pavlik became a regular informer for personal gain, a far cry from the boy in the poem who informed out of duty to his country. He was later found dead in the woods and no one is completely certain who killed him or why (Druzhnikov, 1993).

The true story of PavlikMorozov did not matter to the communists and holds no importance today. What is important is the influence that the myth held and the impact it had on the children of the day. He was portrayed as a martyr and that is how he was received and remembered. The communist propaganda aimed towards encouraging children to act as informers was certainly well received.

The myth of PavlikMorozov was successful with encouraging children to be loyal to the state. But this loyalty could not stand on its own. It needed a larger structure in which to reside, this was the Komsomol. By 1936, the Komsomol had already been fully established and was already functioning. However, in 1936, a program was published that detailed the purpose, function, protocol and everyday regular activity that the Komsomol was supposed to follow. This served the purpose of reiterating the goals of the communist party for the Komsomol and the goals that they had for their own future, a future that would be controlled by those children and young adults that had grown up with the Komsomol.

Due to this document, there can be very little doubt what the communist party valued and emphasized. They placed high importance on loyalty to the state above all else, saying that "the young generation of the Soviet Union must prepare themselves to defend their fatherland against any dangers and attacks on it by enemies (Komsomol, 1936)." This document never clarifies who exactly the enemy is, but the story of PavlikMorozov

makes it clear that the enemy may be within the child's own home.

As well as loyalty to the communist government, this document also contains a heavy emphasis placed on education. In the introductory paragraphs, it is stated that the Komsomol "educates young workers, peasants, clerks and intellectuals and forms them into men and women devoted to the Soviet Government."

This dual emphasis on loyalty and education comes as no surprise when viewed in the context of the domestic climate of the time. By 1934, Stalin was incredibly paranoid and looking for a way to remove anyone he viewed as a rival. The assassination of Sergei Kirov, Stalin's apparent successor in December 1st, 1934, (Siegelbaum, 1934) gave Stalin the reason he needed to justify his purging of his opponents and thus began The Great Purges. They peaked in the years 1936-1938, immediately before this document was published (Siegelbaum, 1936).

It was in this environment of terror that this document was written and published. It reinforced loyalty to the communist party above all else and placed heavy emphasis on educating the young generations about the communist party in order to ensure their loyalty. It was on these two principles that the Komsomol functioned. This, once again was incredibly utilitarian. They were focused on who the children may become rather than who they were in the moment.

The Soviet government used stories such as PavlikMorozov and institutions such as the Komsomol in order to teach and control the younger generations. But these would prove obsolete if there were no younger generations. In 1937, the Soviet Union conducted a survey. Usually a mundane task, it yielded shocking results. There was an expected growth of 37.6 million from the last census in 1926, a reasonable and healthy projection. But this was not the case. The increase was on 7.2 million, a devastating population gap. This shockingly low number was indicative of a multitude of unnatural death and a significantly low birth rate.

The effect of World War II also must be considered. It is estimated that around 26.6 million people lost their lives due to the war in the time span from June 22, 1941 to December 31, 1945. In addition to the lives lost due to WWII, the lives that never came to be also must be considered. An estimated 11.5 million children were never born as a result of the war (Ellman and Maksudov, 1994). When these two figures are added together, there is an estimate of approximately 38.1 million who were not alive in 1945 that would have been if not for the war.

It is with this in mind that the Vedomosti, the official publication of the Soviet Union which conveyed the laws, official acts, and decrees to the people, published a piece of legislation to address this issue on July 8, 1944. The legislation was the Increased Aid for Mothers and Children and Changes in the Divorce Laws, and it aimed

to encourage women to have children and to assist those women who had already given birth. This facet of utilitarian policy viewed children as merely numbers with which they could boost the Soviet Union. It paid no mind to the quality of living for the children, only that they must be born in order for the Soviet Union to prosper.

This legislation provided an allowance for those with children, with the amount increasing with the amount of children. It also laid out the requirements for maternity leave. As opposed to the previous policy of only granting allowances to those with more than six children, they now began granting allowances to those with more than two children. It also outlined specific amounts of the allowances, increasing with every child from third up until the tenth. However, there was a distinction between married and unmarried women. Married women received a larger allowance per child and it added per child up until the tenth, but only the allowance was only paid until the child was five years old. Unmarried women received a smaller amount and it only increased up until the third child, however, the allowance was paid until the child was twelve years old. In this document, the state assumed responsibility for orphaned and abandoned children.

This document shows the Soviet Union's response to their population conference. Its purpose was to motivate its citizens to have more children and to provide them with the means of caring for them. Its success is debatable, seeing as that the birth rate in 1938 was 38.3, (Timasheff, 1948) and in 1950, several years after the policy was enacted and World War II was over, the birth rate was 26.7 (Mauldin, 1976). This shows that the program, while well intentioned to help support the children, was not successful.

If the plan set forth in the Increased Aid for Mothers and Children and Changes in the Divorce Laws legislation in 1944 was effective, the government of the Soviet Union needed to prepare their infrastructure for an inundation of children. There needed to be a plan for the curriculum, a plan that would shape young minds in order to become young communists. There also needed to be clearly defined rules of behavior. These are things that are expected and found in every school system and the Soviet Union was no different.

The first document is the 'Soviet of People's Commissars of the RSFSR, Rules for School Children' which was published in October of 1943 (RSFSR, 1943). Even though it technically preceded the legislation that encouraged women to have children, these rules were still in place after the legislation was published. These rules include both the proper way to act in the classroom and the proper way to act in general. The Soviet government was not only concerned with the children's behavior while in class or school, they were invested no matter where the child was. It also includes the directive "to obey without question the orders of school director and teachers." This is hardly surprising considering the

totalitarian state that the USSR was, at this time, still under the control of Stalin. The Soviet Union viewed school not as a place for children to be educated for their betterment, but instead as a place where the children could be taught to obey and serve the Soviet Union for its betterment.

The other facet of Soviet policy towards the classroom, the 'Elementary School Curriculum' was published five years later in 1948 (Counts, 1957). It outlined the curricular requirements for the public education system and additionally stated the average length of the school year, which varied according to grade. It also laid out the number of hours per year that a typical student was expected to spend on a particular subject. The two highest were Russian language and literature, and mathematics. It also emphasizes the study of foreign languages, which begins as early as grade 5. These emphases reveal a glimpse of the long term goals and utilitarianism of the Soviet Union. They were training intelligent mathematicians, who could speak other languages yet were completely immersed in Russian literature and the Russian language, not merely educating young children. This is especially clear when contrasted with the United States elementary curriculum from the same time, which did not contain as much mathematics or emphases on foreign language.

These two documents explicitly and implicitly tell of the Soviet attitude towards school aged children. They were teaching them the competitive skills they needed to know, while also ensuring that they would remain loyal to the Soviet Union. They also were invested in their home lives as well, and demanded proper and obedient behavior in every situation. Their focus was not on the children's best interest but instead on how the children could help and support the Soviet Union and the Communist Party.

As shown in Bukharin's speech, 'Bringing Up The Young Generation' in 1922, (Rosenberg, 1984) 'The Program of the Komsomol' in 1936, and the 'Soviet of People's Commissars of the RSFSR, Rules for School Children' in 1943, the Soviet Union frequently reiterated their expected standards of conduct for their citizens, especially the younger generations. Bukharin's speech was given while Lenin was in control and both the 'Program of the Komsomol' and 'Rules for School Children' were published while Stalin was the head of the Soviet Union. However, in 1957, after Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev came to power and needed to reaffirm the moral standards of the citizens of the Soviet Union.

Khrushchev decided upon on the same means of communicating these standards as his predecessors, by publishing and then distributing the 'The Moral Code of the Builder of Communism' to the inhabitants of the Soviet Union and its satellites (Field, 1962). This document followed closely with those preceding it. Specifically, it put heavy emphasis on loyalty to the communist cause and to the Soviet Union above all else.

However, it differed in two significant ways. The first is the repeated emphasis on being a well behaved member of society, mentioned in the majority of the twelve tenets listed. Additionally, it specifically mentions the importance of and the necessity of “concern for the upbringing of children.” This is a significant departure from the previous three in that those three were addressed to the children and that this one is addressed to those who are responsible for children and are therefore capable of passing on these ideals to them in a less official manner. The Soviet Union’s emphasis on utilitarianism led them to be able to shift their rhetorical styles in order to best use the children to their advantage.

This minor departure in Soviet domestic policy regarding children is most likely due to the change in leadership. Khrushchev was significantly less paranoid than Stalin, therefore although loyalty was important to him, he was not as aggressive about pursuing it as Stalin had been. As evidenced by his proposal of destalinization at the 20th Party Congress in May of 1956, Khrushchev had a much more relaxed policy than Stalin. But that does not mean that he did not value the loyalty of his people, as shown by this document, he still wanted his citizens to remain loyal to both the communist cause and the Soviet Union.

In addition to the concrete aspects of education, such as the amount of time spent on each subject, there were also clear expectations for the less concrete aspects, such as the students’ attitude toward communism and the Soviet Union. In ‘Some Deviations in the Development of Personality of the Schoolchild and Ways of Overcoming Them’ an article published in *VoprosyPsikhologii*, a journal for psychologists and an academic audience (*Voprosypsikhologii*, 2014), Iurii V.Idashkin lays forth issues existing in the Soviet educational system and then ways to fix them (Idashkin, 1961).

Idashkin begins his article by describing the importance of well-educated, active, and productive members of society and also claiming that the educational society within the Soviet Union “society has declared a decisive and merciless war” on those who are not contributing in some manner. He then goes on to say that many of those who are now targeted are youths, and that their degeneracy is due to shortcomings in the educational system. Specific shortcomings, however, are not the topic for discussion. Idashkin focuses on the new plan for the schools, rather than on the failures of the former.

Idashkin asserts that the school alone is not sufficient, that other forces and influences are necessary to mold and form productive citizens. He emphasizes the importance of “the molding of the personality of a schoolchild.” To him, it is absolutely crucial that many aspects come together in order to mold children into good communists and obedient citizens. If the child is not properly molded, intervention is necessary.

This view is paralleled by the Brezhnev doctrine, which

states that the Soviet Union will act with military force towards any communist or socialist country whose government changes parties. The Soviets were willing to use force to perpetuate their ideology, both in foreign affairs and in the classroom. They did not wish for their children to grow up to be revolutionaries or poets, they wished for them to grow up as firm believers in communism and they were prepared to do whatever was necessary in order to make that happen.

But, once again, it would not matter what the children were taught if there were no children. The Soviet Union already was aware that they had an issue with population growth, which was tied to the birthrate, as shown in the census conducted in 1937. They attempted to solve this issue with the ‘Increased Aid for Mothers and Children and Changes in the Divorce Laws’ legislation in 1944. However, this was not as effective as the Soviet Union wanted it to be, both in the short term as previously mentioned and in the long term as shown in the census taken in the late 1970s.

This census confirmed the downward trend in birthrate that had been in effect from the time that the Soviet Union took power. From 1896 to 1897, in 50 provinces of European Russia, there was an average 7.06 total births per woman. This number steadily declined and from 1976 to 1977, there was an average of 2.36 total births per woman (Darskii, 1979). This was the exact opposite from what the Soviets wanted and what they tried to prevent with the rewards and incentives that they offered to women who gave birth to more children.

This brings up the question of why the Soviet women were not having children even when offered incentives by the Soviet government. The answer is simple. Soviet women did not want to have more children because they did not have enough room in which to raise them. In a program broadcast on Soviet Television in 1987, a woman with a single child, age 12, says “We have only one room. And it is precisely that which is stopping me from having more children (Urban, 1988).” Even though the Soviet Union was offering incentives to those with multiple children, such as bigger flats so that families could have more room, these incentives were too late in coming and children would often grow to the age of five before the families would be given a larger home.

The Soviet Union never solved this issue. The birth rate continued to drop until the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991. In 2011, the birth rate in Russia was 1.54 total births per woman, even lower than in 1979. This problem is still an issue in Russia today, showing that the Russian economy and quality of life has not yet completely recovered from the time spent as the Soviet Union.

In conclusion, the Soviet Union’s utilitarian policy led them to do what was best for the furtherance of the Soviet agenda and the agenda of those in power, regardless of what may have been best for the children. The Soviet Union ignored the children when it was

expedient and they used them as tools of propaganda. Even though they offered incentives to those who gave birth and made plans for education and community involvement, these actions were at all times focused on the continuation of the communist and Soviet ideologies, rather than what was best for the children. Even if children benefitted in either a direct or indirect manner, that was never the true goal. The Soviet Union planned to perpetuate itself and used its younger generations to accomplish this.

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