Pavlik Morozov

Subject essay: Lewis Siegelbaum

If your father or mother had committed a serious crime, would you report it to the authorities? This was the question that the story of Pavlik Morozov posed to Soviet youth. In 1932, Pavlik Morozov, a fourteen-year old peasant lad was murdered allegedly in revenge for having denounced his father as a kulak who had hoarded grain. His murder resulted in a show trial in the Morozovs' village, Gerasimovka, in Sverdlovsk oblast. Pavlik was lauded as a Soviet hero — by, among others, Maksim Gorky at the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934 — and adopted by the Pioneers as their patron saint. Statues of the boy were erected in Soviet towns, his name was invoked at meetings and in oaths, and the story of his martyrdom was told in inspirational children's books.

According to Iurii Druzhnikov, a Soviet writer who investigated the legend of Pavlik Morozov in the 1970s, almost everything about it was factually inaccurate. Pavlik's father was not a kulak but the chairman of a remote rural soviet. Pavlik accused him not of having hoarded grain, but rather of having attested that a recently arrived kulak deportee was a poor peasant from Gerasimovka. Pavlik may have been motivated to denounce his father not out a(n extreme) desire to uphold Soviet law, but because Grigorii Morozov had abandoned Pavlik's mother to move in with a younger woman. The bodies of Pavlik and his younger brother were found in a forest a few months after the arrest of their father. Whether their relatives had murdered them remains unclear. Finally, Pavlik was not and had never been a Pioneer.

Despite official encouragement, children's denunciations of their relatives was not a frequent occurrence in the 1930s, although several instances were reported in the press. Informing on one's neighbors, workmates, and bosses was far more common. The main motives appear to have been envy, the desire to acquire additional living space, revenge for a personal slight, and outrage at perceived abuses of power or other injustices.