

Childhood under Stalin

James von Geldern

<http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/childhood-under-stalin/>

Children of the 1930s could rightly be called the first Soviet generation, whose formative years passed under the socialist system. The generation showed all the virtues and vices of the society it hailed from, and suffered all its ups and downs. Young volunteers brought industry to the vastness of Siberia and collectivized the countryside, often at the point of a gun. They were the most educated generation of Russians ever, the most literate, perhaps the most militant as well. The generation of the 1930s felt itself healthier than any before, immune to the psychoses and depravities that capitalist inequity had once produced. Togetherness and discipline did not mark for them a lack of individuality, it signified a healthy sense of self based in community.

This generation of great sins was also a generation of great accomplishments. It built the industrial city of Magnitogorsk in the open lands of the Urals, and would later overcome terrific hardship to defeat Hitler in the Great Patriotic War. Burdened with parents too old to be trusted by the party, these children sometimes suffered when their parents suffered. Yet if the Bolsheviks doubted or even wrote off vast sectors of the population –older people, women, peasants – as beyond the light of socialist reason, children were always thought malleable and saveable. Young people were provided educational and recreational opportunities that improved their lives and forged their socialist

consciousness, and many responding with unquestioning loyalty to party, state and leader. They remembered a decade of peace and contentedness, later shattered by a foreign invader. The slogan “Thanks to Comrade Stalin for our happy childhood” rang without irony for children who were cared for, believed in the society that cared for them, and accepted its structures of authority.

Even in these grim times children managed to preserve their sense of fun, and to find places to hide from the watchful eye of their elders. The standards of their guardians were rigorous, but they were also difficult to enforce. Grim though they could seem in theory, many a classroom or orphanage was in practice a Tom Sawyer paradise.