Julie K. deGraffenried

*Sacrificing Childhood: Children and the Soviet State in the Great Patriotic War*

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In this slim volume, Julie M. deGraffenried sets out to make two contributions to the historiography of childhood in the Soviet Union. The first is to grant children’s experiences during World War II their due as a chapter in the history of Soviet childhood. The second is to define that chapter of the Soviet state’s policies on children as “sacrificing childhood.” She accomplishes both goals. Her evidence comes from extensive research in Russian state archives of the Soviet era; Soviet print, graphic, and film media during the war; and published primary and secondary sources. The twenty-seven illustrations in this volume enhance readers’ understanding of what it meant to be a Soviet child during World War II. DeGraffenried’s straightforward argument and direct writing style make her volume appropriate for undergraduate students.

DeGraffenried adds to the growing coverage of Soviet children’s experiences during the war. She notes that Catriona Kelly’s *Children’s World: Growing up in Russia, 1890–1991* (Yale University Press, 2008), “says surprisingly little about the war...or its effects on the Soviet construction of childhood” (3). She acknowledges Olga Kucherenko’s work on Soviet children during the war, including her *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945* (Oxford University Press, 2011). She cites documents from Semyon Vilensky’s compilation, *Deti gulaga, 1918–1956* (Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratiia”, 2002), but not the chapter on the experience of children of repressed parents during the war in Frierson and Vilensky, *Children of the Gulag* (Yale University Press, 2010). She does not mention Jessica Gorter’s brilliant documentary film, *900 Days* (2012), which provides some of the most devastating testimony on record from child survivors of the Leningrad blockade, or Father Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), which comprises almost unbearable oral testimonies from survivors who witnessed Nazi atrocities as children in Ukraine.

DeGraffenried’s discussion of the Soviet state’s construction of “sacrificing childhood” as the prescribed norm for childhood during the war is the strongest aspect of this work. The book’s title deserves some discussion. The simpler choice would have been “Sacrificial Childhood.” Her decision to use “sacrificing” underscores the fact that the Soviet state expected Soviet children to be active in making sacrifices, that sacrificing was to be a continuous state of being, and that the state mobilized children for the war effort just as they mobilized other citizens. Most of all, they mobilized children to self-sacrifices.
This was a sharp about-face from the Stalinist promises of a “Happy Childhood” before the war. DeGraffenried states early on that “self-sacrifice during the war had nothing to do with personal happiness or security and everything to do with patriotic duty” (7). The Soviet state sacrificed a happy childhood for Soviet children during the war, and enjoined Soviet children to sacrifice their own well-being as an active choice. DeGraffenried offers the official revisions made in 1942 to the Young Pioneers’ commandments and prescribed daily habits as evidence of the new moral order. For example, in the move from the commandments and daily habits dating to 1923, the 1942 Young Pioneer code made clear that, “Refusal or inability to work was associated with ‘sissification’ (Commandment #8), softness, emasculation and inability to meet the state’s standards for truly patriotic children. Introversion, acts of kindness, and emotional fitness would not aid the effort and were, therefore, expendable” (81).

Comparing other belligerent powers’ domestic wartime media and policies concerning children, deGraffenried finds the Soviet case the most brutal. Soviet media items directed at children to mobilize them to self-sacrifice were the very antithesis of anodyne tales of heroism. One strain, unsurprisingly, dehumanized the enemy. “Rather than shield children from violence and animosity, the state nurtured it and fed it” (96). She includes a telling photograph of children’s faces as they look up into the faces of the corpses of their neighbors, executed by hanging in 1944, presumably by Red Army soldiers upon recapture of occupied lands (97). DeGraffenried stresses that the Soviet media campaign went beyond the shared feature of wartime propaganda that dehumanized the enemy to an extreme of immersing children as fully as possible in war’s dehumanization.

Soviet children experienced “the horrors of war” as daily life in the large stretches of territory occupied by Axis troops; the Soviet state did not “sugarcoat” that reality, but “preferred to exploit it” (91). She finds the use of “narratives about torture and death – even of children – for children,” including “graphic stories” about rape and executions, especially distinctive to the Soviet Union (91–92). Brutalizing, desensitizing stories published as the handiwork of their own Soviet journalists in newspapers and children’s magazines, also broadcast over Young Pioneer Radio, added to the Soviet child’s wartime traumas. DeGraffenried makes the Soviet state’s intentional vicarious brutalization of Soviet children beyond the front lines indisputable.

DeGraffenried fails to maintain the ideal of the historian’s dispassion. Her tone sometimes betrays her shock and disapproval of what Soviet leaders demanded of, did to, and permitted to happen to Soviet children during the war. Surprise escapes when she writes, “Imagine the horror of a granddaughter whose grandmother prepared to eat her!” (36). The accompanying endnote