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## Biographical Canon in the Soviet Children's Literature of the 1930s: On the History of Formation

The article analyzes the history of the formation and development of the Soviet children's literature's biographical canon. This study traces the roots of Soviet biographical tradition to its origins in revolutionary eulogies, which were respectively rooted in the ancient traditions of life writing and Christian hagiographies of the saints. Many Bolshevik Party Leaders, like Vladimir Lenin and Sergei Kirov, had multiple books written about their childhood times; Stalin, however, stood as a unique exception: despite the flourishing of political biographies for children in the 1930s, Stalin's early life was kept out of public cultural discourse. This paper investigates the reasons for creating a biographical canon within children's literature, arguing that Stalin was the only exception to the rule. The article addresses the pedagogical approach that dominated these life-writing narratives, discusses the style of political biographies written for children, and analyses the creation of a new heroic pantheon for the upcoming Soviet generation.

'... there has never been a biography that would satisfy the most stringent requirements of scholarship.'

Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Kuehn 2001: 17).

### Introduction

On February 16, 1938, in a letter to literary critic and editor of the *Detizdat TsKVLKSM* Kirill Andreev, Joseph Stalin wrote: 'I am decidedly against publishing the *Tales about Stalin's Childhood*. The book contains masses of factual untruths, misrepresentations, exaggerations, and unde-

served glorifications.'" In that same letter, Stalin recommended 'burning the book,' even though he admitted that he felt sorry for the author.<sup>2</sup> The actual name of that never-to-be-published book's author was not mentioned by Stalin, but it is widely known that it was Vera Smirnova, a children's writer

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<sup>1</sup> The original text is the following: 'Я решительно против издания «Рассказов о детстве Сталина». Книжка изобилует массой фактических неверностей, искажений, преувеличений, незаслуженных восхвалений...' (RGASPI 1938: 57, 58).

<sup>2</sup> The original text is the following: 'Жаль автора, но факт остается фактом. ... Советую сжечь книжку' (RGASPI 1938: 57, 58).

and later the author of a biographical novel about one of the Bolshevik Party leaders, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, *Comrade Sergo* [Tovarishch Sergo, 1939]. No traces of that manuscript can be found in any of the archives.<sup>3</sup>

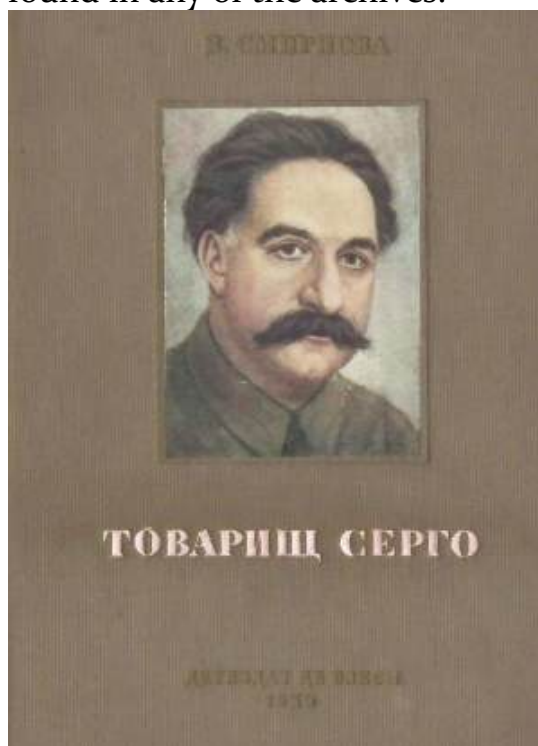


Fig. 1. A Cover of Vera Smirnova's *Comrade Sergo*.

In a series of interviews that were conducted in Moscow in 2019 for the purpose of gaining better understanding of childhood and school in the Soviet Union of the late-1930s and early-to-mid-1940s, one of the respondents (male, born in 1938)

<sup>3</sup> Neither in Smirnova's personal archive at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, nor in Stalin's personal archive, nor in the *Komsomol* archive.

told a story about his childhood games with the neighborhood children in 1943: children were playing a military game of 'Reds vs. Germans,' and one of the older boys proposed to impersonate Stalin. 'At the time, even us, 5-6 years old children, knew that it had to stop. Suddenly, we were all silent, went away, and the game ended there.' The respondent explained it in the following way: 'We read books about Chapaev, Kotovskii, and Kirov, looking at these men as role models, and we often impersonated them when playing military games. But Stalin was off limits: he was a God. Everyone knew that.'<sup>4</sup> So why was Stalin a sacrosanct figure to the extent that he could not be a part of such impersonation games?

Why was there no published biography of Stalin for children or book about his childhood years for children? This question cannot be answered without thoroughly investigating the biographical canon in Soviet children's literature, its development, and maturation

<sup>4</sup> A book about Kirov's early years, *The Boy from Urzhum* [Mal'chik iz Urzhuma, 1936] was, according to the respondent, his and many of his peers' most beloved children's book. Iurii Tsapenko, an interview conducted by Polina Popova (Moscow, July 1, 2019).

throughout the pivotal years of its formation in the 1920s-1930s. Stalin was an anomaly: all revolutionaries, Party leaders, and 'great people of the past,' except him, had their biographies published, and many of those were written in a didactic manner specifically for children. The article argues that the erasure of Stalin's childhood from Soviet children's literature of the interwar period was a deliberate political strategy controlled by Stalin himself. Thus, everyone had a childhood except Stalin. Lenin, who died in 1924, certainly did. His public image played a significant role in the children's literature of the 1920s. Historian Nina Tumarkin wrote: 'The absence of the living Lenin had encouraged the beginning of his cult' (Tumarkin 1997: 130-31). But it was as much his physical absence as it was the efforts of the Party to maintain the hard-earned political stability in the country and the authority that, many believed, Lenin had provided. By contrast, in the 1930s, with the emergence of socialist realism in literature and in other art forms, Stalin's public image was added to the Soviet political pantheon. Literary scholar Katerina Clark argued that the socialist realist novel in general rested on 'canonical ex-

emplars' which were collected and affirmed after the 1934 First Writer's Union Congress (Clark 2000: xii, 27). Clark wrote: 'Biographies have commonly been a medium of political legitimization. In ancient Rome, emperors often had their biographies rewritten to demonstrate their genealogical links with the gods. In the Soviet context, the corresponding privileged origin was an association with Lenin' (Clark 2000: 122). However, Stalin shaped his own public persona, and hence it was always the exception, never the rule.

Historian Karen Petrone explored the topic of Stalin's unique place in Soviet culture of the 1930s and concluded that he held the position of a caring yet strict father of the Soviet family: because the patriarchal social order was discursively reestablished in the beginning of the 1930s, the father (Stalin) had to always discursively situate himself above the Soviet 'family' (Petrone 2000: 56). This was exactly why Stalin did not fit into the children's biographical framework: he carefully curated his image, not allowing any scrupulous investigation into the nature of his childhood and early years, which were the traditional source of tales about virtuous political and historical

heroes. Some historians claim that Stalin's resistance to his own biographies was due to the fact that he didn't want to encourage his cult of personality (Roberts 2020: 27-28). Others insist that he was careful about curating the story of how his personality was formed (Kotkin 2014: 735). However, both sides agree that Stalin was in control of his life's narrative and extremely keen to prohibit any publications about his childhood, especially those written for children.<sup>5</sup> Such strict control could be partially explained by the flourishing of children's literature in the early 1930s: during these years, it saw unprecedented attention and economic investment, yet it was still not fully controlled from above.<sup>6</sup> In such an atmosphere

of relative freedom, a biographical subject was not in control of the facts of their biography anymore – an unthinkable scenario for such an authoritarian leader as Stalin. Writing about his childhood would inevitably make him equal to other heroes of the Revolution, undermining the uniqueness of his position of being nothing but 'a small man placed in extraordinary circumstances' (Suny 2020: 4).

### **The Soviet Biographical Tradition and its place within Literature for Children**

The Soviet biographical tradition in adult literature arose from the literary traditions of obituary.<sup>7</sup> The auto/biographical discourse of the early revolutionary obituaries was rooted in the idea of service for the greater good (of the state). For the first time, this discourse of martyrdom for the sake of the revolu-

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<sup>5</sup> Historian Geoffrey Roberts wrote about Stalin that his life was 'one long performance in which he played many different parts,' often using 'an element of performance' in presenting his own persona to the public. But at the same time, as Roberts argued, 'Stalin was too intelligent and self-aware to believe the panegyrics of his own personality cult' (Roberts 2020: 4, 16).

<sup>6</sup> Literary scholars and historians of children's literature are divided in thinking of Soviet children's literature in terms of it being a 'safe space' for writers – an idea first introduced by Marietta Chudakova and later supported by Igor' Kondakov. Nowadays, such an idea is supported by the Canadian

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literary scholar Megan Swift. While Russian-French historian of children's literature Svetlana Maslinskaia believes the opposite to be true – that Soviet children's literature, even during the years of political purges, in the 1930s, was never a stale shelter for the writers, but rather a space for innovative works and continuation of the pre-revolutionary tradition.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Soviet obituary traditions see Clark 2000 and Brooks 1991.

tion (and future communist state) was shaped in Lenin's 1910 obituary of Ivan Babushkin, published in the *Rabochaia gazeta*. This obituary was in fact a first short political biography. According to the historian of children's literature Marina Balina, this obituary's literary structure laid the ground for the establishment of the genre in general – it had all the components: the 'hero' entered a revolutionary struggle, which was presented as a second birth, and then he perished fighting (Balina 2002: 245). Historian Marina Mogilner in her book about the mythologized biographical and autobiographical writings of the radical activists argued that those revolutionaries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed history into myths, while literary myth-making became their form of self-reflection: for revolutionary intellectuals, the ideal literary reality, thus, became a normative one (Mogil'ner 1999: 8, 22). Socialist revolutionaries, like, for example, Vera Zasulich, remembered and described the famous Nechaev case in literary terms, not as lived reality (Mogil'ner 1999: 26). This was not the only case: one that is more closely related to this study is that of the young revolutionary Soso Dzhughashvili who reinvented himself

against the backdrop of Georgia's end-of-the-century traditional patriarchal society (Suny 2020: 70-71). Stalin's self-mythologizing is confirmed by another scholar, Mikhail Vaiskopf, who argued that Stalinism inherited the radical leftist mythic-epic tradition from revolutionary Bolshevism (Vaiskopf 2001: 167).

Thus, for Lenin's 1910 obituary of Babushkin, the facts of Babushkin's biography are only important as a matter of potential political agitation and a didactic story, and not for nostalgic or personal reasons. Everything personal is omitted in the biography, while only the facts that are useful for creating the image of a perfect fighter are left. For example, Lenin called Babushkin 'a people's hero' [*narodnii geroi*] and referred to him as a 'shock worker' [*rabochii-peredovik*]. Although this was an honorary title, it was also one that generalized a person's life (Lenin 1910: 4). Yet, for egalitarian purposes, any revolutionary fighter had to have a human personality. This was precisely why small and seemingly non-important details known only to the relatives mattered. The humanizing effect of childhood was used to great effect in the new Soviet children's literature, which presented a distinctly new temporality of

childhood. Childhood recollections by family members who could remember and/or reconstruct the early years of a revolutionary hero were central to creating stories for the new Soviet generation (born after the revolution of 1917). This humanization went alongside the presentation of the protagonist as a hero. As a result, on the one hand, the child protagonist appeared human; on the other hand, he or she could appear as a hero worth emulating. These literary schemes would later be used for the biographies of the famous Bolshevik leaders: this was the case of the book about Iakov Sverdlov's life written by his second wife, Klavdiia Sverdlova. Similarly, Ordzhonikidze's wife, Zinaida Ordzhonikidze, or Kuibyshev's sister, Elena Kuibysheva, wrote children's books about their relatives' heroic paths within this particular framework. As a rule, relatives and people who were previously close to the late famous political actors, became the narrators of their life stories. Closeness to a revolutionary guaranteed that the story was perceived to be truthful. Such an approach created a peculiar dichotomy within the narrative: the documentary element was guaranteed by detailed knowledge of the heroes' childhood; yet as children's

literature any such text required an entertaining moment, thus inviting a number of fictional elements into the narrative.

### **Revolutionary Biographies and Its Place within Russian Literary Tradition**

The Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin wrote about ancient autobiographical novels, arguing that they were based on 'a new type of biographical time and a human image constructed to new specifications, that of an individual who passes through the course of a whole life' (Bakhtin 1981: 130). Bakhtin paid special attention to Plutarch's biographies (c. AD 40-120) as the 'energetic' type of biographical writing where 'the full existence, the essence of a man is realized not by his condition, but by his activity' (Bakhtin 1981: 140-41). An ideal of the new realism of both public and private was reflected in Plutarch's biographies of Alexander the Great, Diogenes, and others. Thus, modern European biography is rooted in both individualism and rationality (Valevskii 1993: 28, 45). The first quarter of the nineteenth century was the time when the format of Plutarch's biographical writings was actively adapted into the Russian literary canon

and dominated the historical narrative.<sup>8</sup> 'The Plutarchs' came into the space of children's literature in an unusual way by providing the name for the whole genre. The first historical writings aimed at children appeared in Nikolai Ivanovich Novikov's *Detskoe chtenie dlia serdtsa i razuma* [Children's Reading for Heart and Mind, 1785-1789] (Balina 2020: 184). Nikolai Novikov (1744-1818) and other writers had a long-standing commitment 'to assimilating the classical heritage,' which strongly influenced early Soviet children's literature (Kalb 2008: 13).

The biographies of famous people of the past called *The Plu-*

*tarchs* [Plutarkhi] were first read to the children of aristocrats educated by French-speaking governors and governess, as the educational system for the children of Russian nobility was based on home schooling and French teachers were prevalent (Hellman 2013: 22). The emergence of the modern concepts of childhood and the child-reader in Russia happened under the influence of French Enlightenment philosophy (Olich 2009: 18). The first edition of *The Plutarchs* was the French edition *Plutarch for young men* [Plutarkh dlia iunoshestva, 1809], which was translated into Russian and published in 1809. Later, that book was adopted by the French writers Catherine-Joseph-Ferdinand Girard de Propiac and Pierre Blanchard and then translated and published in Russia by Fedor Glinka in 1816 as *Plutarch for young women* [Plutarkh dlia molodykh devits, 1816] (Setin 1972: 60-61). Educated young men and women of the first quarter of the nineteenth century modeled themselves and their social behavior on the Roman political predecessors about whom they read in French literature (or French literature translated into Russian) (Balina 2007: 323-53). In the second half of the nineteenth century, historical and

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<sup>8</sup> Embracing antiquity (especially that of the Ancient Rome) as a cultural model was not new to Russia: the idea of Rome was adapted to and included into Russian cultural discourse in two forms – metaphorical (through literature) and visual (through architecture). (Balina 2007: 323-53) The latter was adopted by Peter I as early as in the first half of the eighteenth century, whilst the deep interest in the Ancient Roman literary forms and genres peaked during Alexander I reign (1801-1825) in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Precisely because before the nineteenth century, Russia knew no tradition of civil non-Christian biographical description, though Christian 'life writings' (*zhitiia*) of the saints were also didactic and in that way, similar to the secular hagiographies. (Averintsev 1973: 240)

biographical literature for children rooted in *The Plutarkhs* [Plutarkhi], flourished (Setin 1972: 142). The genre became established in Russian territories through the non-religious biographical tradition of classical antiquity. What role did these observations and facts play within children's literature? Nineteenth century writers followed the tradition of *The Plutarkhs* [Plutarkhi], whom they had themselves read as children: they skillfully merged actual historical knowledge with didactic pedagogy, combining them with an adventurous plot that gave rise to an enduringly popular genre of children's literature in Russia (Balina 2018, 120). Historical semi-fictional novels based on the lives of Peter the Great, Alexander Men'shikov, Alexander Suvorov, Grigorii Potemkin, and many others were among those written for children and young adults all throughout the nineteenth century.

Overall, the biographical canon was fully formed in Russian children's literature during the nineteenth century. Some of the major values propagated to children in the biographies were honesty, service, and martyrdom for the greater common goal. Paradoxically, these very virtues were the ones in demand by the new revolutionary culture. They

were successfully adapted by twentieth century writers and started to serve the new ideological demands. A new generation of Soviet literati in the 1930s simply added a new political dimension to traditional characteristics of the hero's path. Soviet children's writers did not need to invent them from scratch: an already well-established biographical canon was simply 'repackaged' for the new political reality and historical purposes. The virtues of service and martyrdom were easily adapted to the politically new post-revolutionary environment.

### **The Soviet Biographical Canon for The New Soviet Children**

Soviet biographical children's literature did not come from the literary vacuum but was formed and informed by the fact that its authors had similar (if not the same) educational background. Thus, for children born during or right after the 1917 Revolution, the newly established political heroes had to be legitimized, but the literary framework of how to narrate those heroes' lives remained the same. The new children's periodicals of the mid and late-1930s – (*Baraban* (1923-1926), *Vorobei*, later

renamed into *Novii Robinzon* (1923-1925), *Pioner* (1924-2016), *Murzilka* (1924-now), *EZh* (1928-1935), *Zateinik* (1929-1953), *ChIZh* (1930-1941), *Kostër* (1936-1946, 1956-now) – began to establish the biographical canon of Soviet children’s literature. It was in those journals that many biographical articles were published.<sup>9</sup> The institution of children’s periodicals was a late-1920s to early-1930s Soviet phenomenon that flourished at the moment of the political ‘perfect storm’ between the end of NEP and the start of Stalinist Cultural Revolution in 1928. From the mid-1924, private publishing houses in the Soviet Union were gradually reduced, giving way to the centralized state-controlled publishing and, as a result, to the politicized state controlled discourse in children’s journals. The last volume of the old-fashioned *Novii Robinzon* was published in November of 1925 and soon the journal, highly criticized by paedologists and the *Komsomol*, was shut down<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The only work about Stalin’s life for children was published in the first volume of the 1934 journal *Kolkhozye rebata* – a carefully curated exception made only one time (although the article was made in the encyclopedia style, failing to give any details about Stalin’s childhood).

<sup>10</sup> Pavel Blonskii, one of the central figures of Soviet paedology, defined that

(Kolesova 1993: 34-35, 84-87). A similar fate awaited another popular children’s journal, *Baraban*, a bit later. The journals *Ezh* (a playful abbreviation of “*Ezhenedel’nii zhurnal*”) and *Chizh* (another playful abbreviation of “*Chrezvychaino interesnyi zhurnal*”) came to replace them.<sup>11</sup> *Pioner*, the first explicitly political journal for children launched in 1936, featured fictional works as well as special-interest rubrics, including stories about honorable Soviet men alongside special articles on world history (‘Travel through the Centuries’ [*Puteshestviia v veka*]), a special rubric that ran from 1936 until 1938) (Balina 2014: 12-13). We can see that many children’s journals of the interwar period, especially in the 1930s, started to showcase the biographical articles which served simultaneously as sources

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science as a ‘study of childhood’ (as opposed to ‘the study of children’). Another prominent Soviet paedologist and the editor of the journal *Pedologiya*, Aaron Zalkind, defined paedology in broader terms – as a universal science of human development (Etkind 1997: 261). In the Russian Empire, paedology began as a clinical and psychological study of early childhood. Later, the Soviets continued the late-Imperial paedological practices.  
<sup>11</sup> The word ‘*Ezh*’ in Russian means ‘Hedgehog,’ and the word ‘*Chizh*’ in Russian means ‘Siskin’ – those were the common protagonists of the traditional Russian fairytales.

of new historical facts and a space for introducing the heroes of the revolutionary times.

The new biographical genre of children's literature required either the rewriting of history or the ability to locate more bifurcating revolutionary moments in the past. History was to be presented as a set of climactic points of revolutionary changes, and it was history that adapted reality for the new circumstances. Naturally, the literary model established in *The Plutarchs* [Plutarkhi] could not work anymore because the ancient historical pantheon had to be purged, and new heroes with model behaviors needed to be found (Balina 2007: 324). This was precisely what the new biographical literature for children was concerned with. These searches for a *longue durée* history and the consequent need for the new paradigm of the Antiquity came hand in hand with the search for new knowledge and new heroes (this is how, for example, Spartacus, and not Plutarch or Socrates, became the number one figure of the Ancient Roman past). In that new paradigm, Stalinist writers and historians looked for the roots of revolutionary struggle.<sup>12</sup> That new paradigm also

necessitated the creation of a paratext – a multi-layered, multi-contextual textual work with commentaries that helped spread historical knowledge, with many footnotes that taught readers the necessary political and historical vocabulary.<sup>13</sup> Soviet historiography of the 1930s, thus, consisted of historical facts and politically correctly shaped individual stories.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the genre of Plutarchs survived well beyond 1917, carried by those who had attended pre-revolutionary gymnasiums and

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among the most privileged cultural workers – even architects who at the time were rebuilding the new Moscow using Ancient Roman motives, were behind writers in the Stalinist hierarchy (Papernyi 2002: 224-22). In 1937, historian Milii Ezerskii published a historical novel, *Aristonik* (for the 'Historical library of Detizdat's series) about the uprising of Roman slaves in Sicily. Ezerskii and the other soldiers of the front of the cultural revolution gladly 'adopted' Rome as a metaphor for eternal and indestructible social order (Balina 2007: 323-53). In Ezerskii's work, the author is omnipresent as a historical and moral guide to the Ancient Roman world for the young readers. Ezerskii revived the very Ancient Roman type of literature where text is merely a form of representation of the valuable for society knowledge from the 'perfect man' to the 'flawless youngster' (Arzamastseva 2003: 324-26).

<sup>13</sup> For more about the notion of paratext, see Genette 1991.

<sup>14</sup> For more on 'Historie' vs. 'Geschichte,' see Balina 2018.

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<sup>12</sup> Not accidentally, writers were among the most frequently purged, but also

real schools [real'nye uchilishcha], and later (in Soviet times) became children's writers. These people were very familiar with the genre, knew its canon, and preserved and handed over the 'genre's memory' to the new Soviet generation of children born after 1917. Still, the new Soviet Plutarchs had a key component in them, namely the martyrdom element, which was not necessarily novel for Russian literature. According to the Russian cultural historian, Sergei Averintsev, biographies and autobiographies reflect a highly individualized aspect of culture, but at the same time, biography is always responding to the question about how the personal life of its protagonist relates to the general historical process. Averintsev highlighted that biography was created as a result of the crisis of polis life in the IV century B.C. However, the first biographies were mostly investigating unusual biographical facts, while Plutarch revolutionized the genre, reorienting it from gossip and scandals towards historicism and monumentality. This means Plutarch's biographies had a moral aspect in them which permeated the text and ennobled the whole genre (Averintsev 1994: 637-58). However, the martyrdom element in the Soviet Plutarchs ful-

filled a didactic function, which they were to play in Soviet literature and pedagogy. The biographical works for children were to describe how a hero was prepared to die for his country ever since he was a child. This was exactly why the facts for such biographical works were carefully chosen and controlled from above by Party officials. Generally speaking, the new children's biographies were built upon a careful blend of real historical facts, adventurous fiction, and some skillful didactic propaganda.

### ***The Boy from Urzhum: Fact and Fiction in One Boy's Life***

A classic example of the interwar Soviet biographical canon in children's literature would be a series of biographical works for children about Sergei Kirov – a person turned into a Bolshevik martyr after his (supposed) assassination. American historian Matthew Lenoe, who studied Kirov's murder, noticed how 'memoir accounts of Kirov's youth and early political career... all appeared to be influenced by martyrology;' and moreover, contemporary commentators from the West who came to see Kirov as a moderate opposition to Stalin repeated the Stalinist

hagiography of Kirov as a political martyr (Lenoe 2010: 19). Born in Urzhum (Viatka region) in 1886, towards the early 1920s, Sergei Kostrikov (later – Kirov) became a prominent member of the Bolshevik Party after he served as the first secretary of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan in Baku, backed in that position by Lenin, Ordzhonikidze, and Stalin (Lenoe 2010: 58). In 1925, by the end of his Baku tenure, Kirov became a well-versed politician and a follower of Stalin's party line (for example, under Stalin's instructions, Kirov attacked Lev Trotsky 'factionalism' in January of 1925 during the denunciation of the latter). The real-life Kirov, unlike the Bolshevik hero portrayed in the many post-1934 biographies of him, 'understood that revolutionary politics were a dirty game' (Lenoe 2010: 43). By 1930, Kirov settled down in Leningrad becoming head of the Party organization of that region; while his wife, Mariia Markus, was appointed to 'cure' prostitutes of Leningrad after her volunteer work with homeless children in Baku in the late 1920s. Ironically, eyewitnesses of Markus's work claimed that her idea of therapy was reading the biographies of exemplary Bolsheviks to the former prostitutes (Lebina 1999: 95-96). And while her own hus-

band was known for having many mistresses, he was able to maintain an image 'as an upright, totally dedicated "proletarian" leader' (Lenoe 2010: 124). Kirov's images of a strong, kind, well-meaning man surrounded by children, could often be found in art, illustrations, and children's literature. Kirov's murder on December 1, 1934, sparked the infamous wave of political trials and purges of prominent Bolsheviks, among them Grigorii Zinov'ev, Lev Kamenev, and Nikolai Bukharin. The first Moscow trial of the so-called 'Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist center' began on August 19, 1936, overseen by Nikolai Ezhov, Genrikh Iagoda, and Andrei Vyshinskii, but managed by Stalin. There, Kamenev was explicitly accused of organizing Kirov's assassination (and admitted his guilt for obvious reasons). However, Kirov's image as a perfect Communist fighter-martyr started to form even before the summer of 1936, with children's literature driving the idea of his martyrdom. But the most important and canonical (from the biographical perspective) heroic image of Kirov was built upon different stories about his life, childhood, and his legacy written for children. In them, the history that surrounded Kirov's life was just another

window into contemporary Stalinist 'happy childhood' and the even happier communist future.<sup>15</sup> Kirov's biographies were didactic and created an image of a strictly positive hero who can be emulated. Thus, those biographical works fashioned a specific pattern of the Bolshevik martyr-hero's life – a pattern that could later be applied to any other Party leader or famous

dren's books, while Stalin did not need that literary *aqua vitae*, he was more than alive: he was above them all and seemingly immortal.

Fig.2. Elizaveta Kruglikova, S.M. Kirov with Children [S.M. Kirov s det'mi], engraving, exact year unknown, sometime in the second half of the 1930s.<sup>16</sup>



Bolshevik. With the exception of Stalin. Since heroes like Kirov came alive on the pages of chil-

The first work about Kirov's life for a children's audience was published in a special volume of the *Pioner* periodical published

<sup>15</sup> Here, the dichotomy '*Historie*' vs. '*Geschichte*' – of history (the historical background, true events, facts) and story (something that happens to a child) – is especially obvious (Balina 2018, 118-27).

<sup>16</sup> Virtual Russian Museum (<https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/engraving/s.gr.-8941/index.php>, accessed on February 20, 2024).

in February of 1935, dedicated entirely to Kirov due to his supposedly unexpected death. Writers Boris Zhitkov, Ben'iamin Ivanter, Andrei Nekrasov, and Boris Shatilov came together to depict Sergei Kirov's life and political career from birth to his assassination (later, in 1937, that volume would be published as a stand-alone book for children entitled *A Tale of Comrade Kirov* [Povest' o Tovarishche Kirove, 1937]). From the gifted boy Serëzha Kostrikov to 'chief of the Leningrad's Bolsheviks' [vozhd' Bol'shevikov Leningrada], the article traces a political odyssey of Kirov as a global Revolutionary hero. In the Dickens-esque story of Serëzha's early years, readers see for themselves how unusual and bright (yet somehow lonely) orphaned Serëzha was from the time he was a young child. As a result, readers can easily deduct how young Kirov was destined to become a hero: 'Serëzha Kostrikov had it all different from the others' (Pioner 1935a: 1).<sup>17</sup> Kostrikov's character, according to that biography, was formed by the trauma of witnessing the death of his politically like-minded friend, Iosif Kononov, from the hands of tsarist police.

<sup>17</sup> The original text said: 'У Сережи Кострикова все не как у людей.'

In many ways, that 1935 collection of biographical articles was based on Kirov's own autobiography, which he had falsified to a significant extent 'to make himself appear a more steadfast revolutionary;' he had exaggerated his prison term and changed the article of the Criminal Code under which he was convicted (Lenoe 2010: 28). But that is not so important, since Zhitkov and his colleagues based their writing on the pre-existing canon of the life of a hero, only adding some defined characteristics and facts from Kirov's life – a hero who had to overcome many obstacles and unfair treatment in order to grow into a confident man, only to be martyred for the sake of yet another revolutionary struggle. The authors then claimed that Kirov was betrayed by Zinov'ev 'and his party,' which was supported by Trotsky (Pioner 1935b: 26-27). That biographical work was full of illustrations: drawings depicting different episodes of Kostrikov's life around the time of the First Russian Revolution of 1905 and afterwards, when Kirov founded an underground printing house, and then his life during the October Revolution and the Civil War. Towards the very end, readers witness Kirov's political activity in the 1920s and early 1930s and read about his

path to becoming the Leningrad Party leader. The many simplistic drawings, which accompanied the story about Kirov's life, went in stark contrast to the very last illustration – a photograph of Joseph Stalin with Lazar' Kaganovich, Viacheslav Molotov, Kliment Voroshilov, and Sergo Ordzhonikidze standing by Kirov's casket. The significance of the choice for the final illustration of the story about Kirov's life can hardly be overes-

shifted the readers' attention from Kirov to Stalin whose figure was strategically located right in the center of the photograph observing Kirov's body with an affectionate paternal gaze.

*Fig. 3. Stalin and his political milieu standing around the dead body of Kirov. Illustration on page 33 of a special volume 2 of the Pioneer journal (1935).*



timated: first and foremost, the photograph added a realistic dimension to the otherwise fairy-tale like story aimed at middle-school children and young adults; second, it signaled that the death of Kirov is not a children's matter anymore – rather, it is a political all-Soviet affair; and finally, it quite literally

### **The Martyrdom of Kirov**

The martyrdom of Kirov was in many ways perpetuated by Stalin who himself edited the Politburo's announcement of the Leningrad's leader's death, which appeared in *Pravda* on

December 2 of 1934 (Lenoe 2010: 487). A campaign to memorialize Kirov through a series of public meetings and press coverage followed. Later, Kirov's martyr cult reached fantastic heights: up until 1953, his death was commemorated in a fashion almost similar to Lenin's (Lenoe 2010: 518). Kirov's figure truly acquired a cult status: 'The eulogies written by friends, co-workers and acquaintances provided plentiful source material to portray him as a tolerant and humane leader' who was nonetheless (supposedly) innocent enough to be betrayed by a conspiracy of traitors (Lenoe 2010: 524). Children's literature did not stand aside: biographies of Kirov for the younger audience continued to be produced. In the introductory article of the ninth volume of the 1936 *Pioner* journal, the death of Kirov was dramatized much more than in the 1935 *Pioner*.<sup>18</sup> Of course, a year and a half after Kirov's death, his biography was abridged, yet the volume was prefaced with an even harsher and politically more explicit article than the previous year, 'The Snake is Crushed' [*Zmeia razdavlena*], about the Moscow tri-

als and Trotsky's flight ending up in the 'garbage bin of history.'<sup>19</sup> In that same volume, Boris Zhitkov's shortened biography of Kirov including some new episodes was published as 'The Tale about Kirov' [*Povest' o Kirove*]. In it, Zhitkov zoomed in on how Kirov improved the functioning of the Leningrad harbor and how, under Kirov's watch, the maritime shipping in that harbor flourished after the Revolution; another part of Zhitkov's story was about Kirov's talented approach to the improvement of agriculture in the Leningrad region.

The books about Kirov's life were subsequently published and popularized in the late 1930s. One of them, 1936 Antonina Golubeva's *The Boy from Urzhum*, became a vivid example of political biography written for children; and it was an example of a classical socialist realist biographical novel, praised by many, including Anton Makarenko, who wrote a detailed review of it. Makarenko stressed how in Kostrikov's childhood as described by Golubeva, 'the beginnings of a colossal mission of service to people

<sup>18</sup> One of the sentences starts with 'He успела еще кровь Кирова засохнуть в коридоре Смольного...' (Pioner 1936: 5).

<sup>19</sup> The original text says: 'в мусорной яме истории.' (Pioner 1936: 4).

are already seen.<sup>20</sup> Golubeva's work was quite personal and the most important thing was that her book was about Serëzha Kostrikov. She wrote it for school children, so it was not about Sergei Mironovich Kirov, but more about how the protagonist lost his parents, how he grew as a revolutionary and gained the respect of his peers, and how he decided to leave his hometown. Golubeva's book had a somewhat happy ending, and her story concluded with Serëzha growing out of age into a successful loyal revolutionary. A young leader among his peers, he leaves the familial Urzhum to study at the Technological Institute in Tomsk.

Finally, Nikolai Byl'ev's 1938 *Stories about Kirov* [Rasskazy o Kirove, 1938] was a set of short stories, episodes from Kirov's revolutionary and military career, and his time in the Red Army. Unlike Golubeva, Byl'ev work was simple, concise, and stressed Kirov's closeness to Stalin, which was bordering on dependence): in the last story 'The Fire' [Pozhar], readers witness Kirov in Baku writing a letter to Stalin (Byl'ev 1938: 19). The book ends with the following episode:

<sup>20</sup> The original text says: 'Уже видны начала большого служения делу человечества...' (Makarenko 1937: 2)

after three days of putting out the fire and risking his life, Kirov returned to his office and finished his letter to Stalin without a single word about himself and his troubles (Byl'ev 1938: 24).

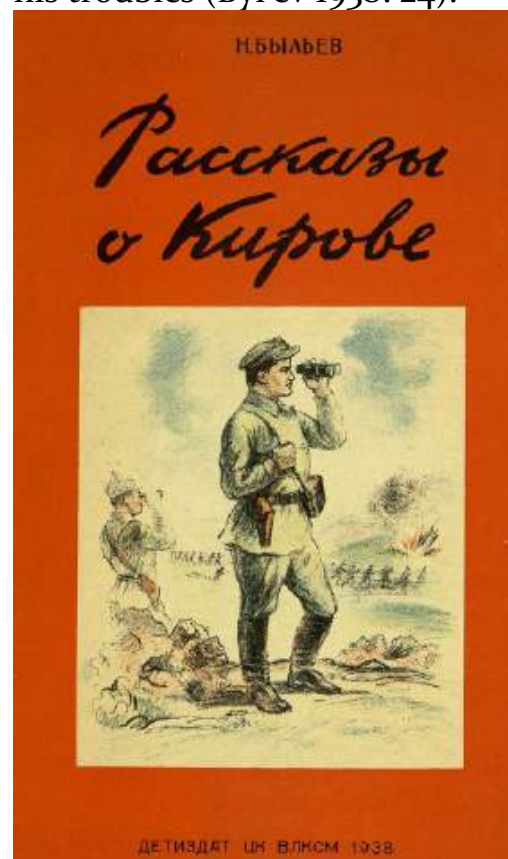


Fig. 4. A Cover of Nikolai Byl'ev's *The Stories about Kirov* – a set of fairy-tale-like short stories mostly about Kirov's military career. The cover is a vivid example of how even the biographical works and their illustrations were influenced by the general militarization of Soviet culture towards the late 1930s, with Kirov being presented as a military rather than a political hero – a model for future Red Army soldiers.

### The Soviet Biographical Canon for Children: Verbal Imperialism in Action

Kirov was not the only super-human hero figure in the Soviet children's biographical pantheon. The late 1930s witnessed an unprecedented amount of biographies of Party leaders and great people of the past published for children. It was the time of the Great Purges when everyone, whether perpetrator or victim, as historian Igal Halfin put it, 'always left behind a personal life and a verdict pertaining to one unique case' (Halfin 2002: 208). Historian Jochen Hellbeck claimed that 'the Bolsheviks were verbal imperialists,' stressing the importance of the 'script,' so to speak, for the Bolshevik biography and autobiography (Hellbeck 2006: 19).

At the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Soviet children's poet Samuil Marshak made an emotional statement to the effect that now Soviet literature for young adults of the 1930s 'is tackling the big themes.' 'Big themes' included those discussed by Stalin at his meeting with the German-Swiss writer Emil Ludwig – stories about true 'new popular heroes' [*narodnye geroi*], among them Ivan Bolot-

nikov, Stepan Razin, and Emel'ian Pugachëv (Marshak 1936: 22). In January 1936, the main children's literature publishing house, *Detizdat*, came under control of the TsK VLKSM, the Party's youth division. As a result, Soviet childhood, as well as pedagogy, were placed under the strict control of the Bolshevik Party. Marshak and other children's writers, along with the Komsomol activists, leaned towards an extreme rhetoric caused by the moment of canonization of the Soviet propaganda (Fitzpatrick 1979: 251). It was a game with no winners: writers either accused their fellow writers of writing in the 'bourgeois' style and not being fit to enter the newly emerging canon; or they were themselves charged and, in the best-case scenario, their books were never to be published.

With the growing demand for historical books for children, the late 1930s also witnessed the publication of many books about historical heroes of the Soviet past. In 1937, Evgenii Gerasimov and Mikhail Erlikh's *Shchors* was published – a detailed biography of the "Ukrainian Chapaev". In 1938, a book about Karl Marx, *The Great Teacher Karl Marx* [Velikii Uchitel' Karl Marks], which opened with Friedrich Engels's

speech at Marx's grave, was published by *Detizdat*. It had a number of biographical articles by Vladimir Lenin, Paul Lafargue, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Eleanor Marx, and Lazar' Kaganovich. In 1939, Stepan Zlobin published his fairy-tale-like book about the life of Stepan Razin – a Don Cossack who led a major peasant uprising in the seventeenth century. That was a very typical socialist realist book for children, where Razin was presented as not only a political rebel, but also a good father and a caring husband. That same year, Tat'iana Bogdanovich's *The Militiaman Serf* [Kholopopolchenets] about the peasant uprising led by Ivan Bolotnikov in 1606-1607, was published, a long book written in a pseudo old-Russian style presenting a more complex picture of the proto-revolutionary leader. In 1940, Lidiia Chukovskaia published *A Story of One Uprising* [Istoriia odnogo vosstaniia], a children's book about the 1750 Haydamak Cossack Uprising in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, led by Semën Nezhivii. The book features a heartbreaking scene of Nezhivii burying his four-year-old son who died from disease and cold weather; later he buries his wife, too. All of the three historical tales about peasant rebellions

were published within a year and had similar protagonists: strong, selfless revolutionary heroes, capable of love for their families, yet willing to become martyrs for the sake of fighting against the oppressive imperial regimes.<sup>21</sup> Overall, biographical

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<sup>21</sup> Another Soviet author who attempted to write about Stalin's youth but was prevented by Stalin himself was Mikhail Bulgakov. The story of Bulgakov's attempt to bring Stalin's past to the stage at MKhAT in 1939 was once forgotten but later rediscovered by literary scholars and translators (including Ellendea Proffer, Marietta Chudakova, and Colin Wright) in the final quarter of the twentieth century. That episode echoed the earlier account of Vera Smirnova described in this article. Correspondence between Bulgakov and MKhAT employee (and later, theatre historian) Vitalii Vilenkin, along with Bulgakov's letters and those of his contemporaries, confirms that the writer completed his play about Stalin, titled *Batum*, rather quickly. In the first comprehensive biography of Bulgakov, literary scholar Marietta Chudakova drew parallels between the protagonist of Bulgakov's most famous work, *Master i Margarita* – the Master – and the author himself. In the late 1930s, amid the political purges, Bulgakov was torn between fear of the almighty dictator and his [Bulgakov's] natural drive for artistic success. However, the project was doomed from the start: Stalin prevented Bulgakov from traveling to Batum for further research and later reportedly wrote: 'All children and young people are alike. One shouldn't put on a play about the young Stalin' (Chudakova 1988: 632, 638-39; Wright 1995: 46). According to his wife's diaries, Bulgakov's interest in

works for children published in the late 1930s were tools meant to hone the political consciousness of the new, Soviet, generation of readers. They construed a particular moral universe with clear distinctions between good and evil and narrated the past in a way that conformed to the Party's renewed historical agenda. Within that framework, the childhood of the hero became central to the Stalinist regime's self-representation.

## Conclusion

The role of children and young people for the Bolshevik Party's self-image can hardly be overestimated. The Stalinist cultural revolution extensively focused on children in order to create a child-centered, rock-solid moral universe with established juxtapositions of right and wrong (Krevsky 2012: 114-15). The First Five-Year Plan and the rise of

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writing the play began in 1936, and the writer was not necessarily insincere in his fascination with Stalin's biography. However, the play proved unsuccessful: it paled in comparison with his other significant works in terms of depicting an individual in conflict with tyranny, while simultaneously portraying Stalin as merely an ordinary revolutionary rather than someone exceptional and destined for great political success (Wright 1995: 45-46).

the Stakhanovite movement introduced a family-like hierarchy to Soviet society, where ordinary people were treated as children of the big, happy family (Clark 2000: 119). As Katerina Clark argued, biographical writings of the 1930s were of the two types, 'fathers' and 'sons,' with Stalin emerging as national leader over all of them (Clark 2000: 123-24). In the interwar period, with extremely high child mortality (as well as the demise of pre-revolutionary charitable traditions) as a result of the Civil War, adolescents became a pressing issue, but also a solution, for the regime of the late 1930s (Gorshkov 2023: 4-6). Children born after the Revolution were forcefully disconnected from pre-revolutionary history, which lived on in the stories about the new revolutionary heroes. This generation was to be taught how to 'speak Bolshevik' through various art forms, including literature (the main one), art, architecture, theatre, and music; these children were to be raised, reforged, and reeducated as Soviet subjects (Dobrenko 2008: 52, 59). In many cases, the children's world of the 1930s was presented as a fairy tale come true, an idealized, picturesque image.

In some sense, the biographical genre of Soviet children's litera-

ture was built upon a number of such idealized fairy-tale-like stories. Many biographies of the prominent figures of Russian history, with their focus on childhood as a formative period of time, were subsequently published, yet only Stalin was left without a childhood. Famous Soviet political actors like Ordzhonikidze, Sverdlov, and Kirov, depicted in the years of their childhood, served as examples that children could learn from when emulating the heroes' passion for revolutionary activities. Stalin's childhood, however, was never part of the children's biographical literary canon. Stalin was not someone who could be imitated – he was above all of his political predecessors. It is important to stress that this was Stalin's own narrative strategy, which he controlled personally. Metaphorically, without a description of his childhood and early formative years, Stalin was truly immortal, which means that the usual combination of fact and fiction used in biographies was irrelevant in his case. He could not

have had a simple, ordinary childhood, like Lenin, Ordzhonikidze, or Kirov, because a story about such a childhood would inevitably show him to be vulnerable in one way or another, and with character weaknesses that all children have, even those who become powerful and famous as adults. Thus, within the Soviet children's biographical framework, he remained in charge of the carefully curated image of himself as the omnipotent Soviet 'father' who was supposed to be feared first and foremost. No childish pranks or weaknesses could be associated with his self-created image, leaving him the only leader within the Soviet children's literature biographical pantheon without a childhood.

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## List of Images

Figure 1: A Cover of Vera Smirnova's *Comrade Sergo* [Tovarishch Sergo, 1939].

Figure 2: Elizaveta Kruglikova, *S.M. Kirov with Children* [S.M. Kirov s det'mi], engraving, exact year unknown, sometime in the second half of the 1930s. *Virtual Russian Museum*, <https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/engraving/s.gr.-8941/index.php>.

Figure 3: Stalin and his political milieu standing around dead body of Kirov. Illustration on page 33 of a special volume 2 of the *Pioner* journal (1935).

Figure 4: A Cover of Nikolai Byl'ev's *The Stories about Kirov* [Raskazy o Kirove, 1938].

