4-2019

Defining the Ideal Soviet Childhood: Reportage About Child Evacuees from Spain as Didactic Literature

Karl D. Qualls
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications

Part of the European History Commons, Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, and the Political History Commons

Recommended Citation

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.
Defining the Ideal Soviet Childhood: Reportage About Child Evacuees from Spain as Didactic Literature

Karl D. Qualls

During their 400-mile walk from Málaga to Valencia, the five Molinas children, ages six to thirteen, endured lethal attack from land and air. Having already lost one of her children to the war, their mother decided to send her remaining children to the Soviet Union, although France and Belgium were also possibilities. “Many [families] cried. My mom cried,” one of the children told a Soviet reporter. “Me – no. I knew that in Russia it would be good.” The story of Remedio, Alfredo, Carmen, Manuel, and Francisco, while extreme in some respects, shares much with the stories of other refugee children. In what was thought by most participants to be a short-term evacuation to avoid bombing, some children thought it could be an exciting getaway, an adventure. For others, it was a frightening leap into the unknown. There is little typical about evacuation stories except the assurance of change. The stories of the nearly 3,000 Spanish refugee children as they transitioned in 1937–1938 from Civil War Spain to the USSR became didactic tools for Soviet mythmakers. Journalists and authors narrowed the official public narrative about the children’s experiences on arriving in the USSR so as to construct the children as heroic symbols and models of the ideal Soviet childhood to which they adapted.1

I would like to thank the Howard Foundation and the Research and Development Committee at Dickinson College for funding to support this ongoing project.

1 Quote from A. Gudimov, “Gosti iz Ispanii,” Izvestiia, April 8, 1937. This is not the first study to look at children and youth as heroic models and symbols, and the Spanish children were neither the first nor last example. Pavlik Morozov and Zoya Kosmodemianskaia are certainly the best-known. See Catriona Kelly, *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London, 2007); Adrienne M. Harris, “The Lives and Deaths of a Soviet Saint in the Post-Soviet Period: The Case of Zoia Kosmodem’ianskaia,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*
Stories about Spain’s Civil War and the intervention by Germany and Italy had filled Soviet newspapers and short films for nearly a year. Children born in the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1939) lived during a tumultuous time: The monarch was overthrown, political violence increased as successive socialist and conservative governments seized power, and private and public debt grew as the economy faltered. Daily briefs from the various front lines of the Civil War were usually front-page news and accompanied by stories of German and Italian collaboration with General Francisco Franco, and communications from Spanish leaders with the Soviet Union and international bodies about the plight of the people and the democratically elected government in Spain. Throughout 1936, daily columns in Soviet newspapers kept the public informed about the progress of the war. In addition, periodic campaigns to raise money and awareness brought the war to a personal level. During September 1936, for example, the pages of the Communist Party’s newspaper Pravda carried stories about women’s meetings and fundraising for the women and children of Spain, including articles about individuals, families, and groups giving money for the cause. Short films such as Spanish Children in the USSR (1937) portrayed “apocalyptic images of a darkened and terrorized Spanish Republic” followed by “daybreak in sunny and tranquil Moscow.”

As the Spanish children began to arrive in the USSR in 1937, they entered a country undergoing profound changes, which led writers to use the stories of the niños as a tool of persuasion. In the Soviet Union, the 1930s was a decade of Stalin centralizing power and industrializing the nation as the country turned inward and sought to create “socialism in one country.” At the end of the decade, however, the Great Terror was at its height, and the search for enemies of the people left many children parentless when the secret police arrested their families. On top of the paranoia and fear caused by these internal convulsions, there was a growing fear that the war in Spain was only a prelude to a much larger conflict with Germany. Adolf Hitler had been stating for more than a decade that Germany and the Soviet Union could not coexist, and the

---

53(2–4) (2011), 273–304. Children continued to find resonance in Cold War culture. See, for example, Margaret Peacock, Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War (Chapel Hill, 2014).

2 Pravda, September 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 1936; Daniel Kowalsky, “The Soviet Cinematic Offensive in the Spanish Civil War,” Film History 19 (2007), 13. See Gosudarstvennyi arkhiw Rossisskoi federatsii (State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow; hereafter, GARF) f. 8009, op. 20, d. 45, ll. 1–22, for one of the first extensive reports on their arrival.
success of new German technologies and tactics in Spain caused a great deal of concern in the Soviet Union as it continued to industrialize and Stalin slaughtered much of his officer corps in the Great Terror.

There was also a fear, justified or not, that Soviet children were becoming more unruly. Therefore, in 1937, just as the niños were arriving, the Commissariat of Enlightenment introduced dramatic educational reforms to strengthen discipline and improve education. The foundation of many of the reforms came from the teachings of pedagogue Anton Makarenko and his calls for discipline, manual labor, and self-government. Soviet press reports and Elena Kononenko’s book *Little Spaniards (Malen’kie ispantsy)* simplified the range of experiences the children reported and about which Soviet officials were aware. Because journalists and Kononenko operated under a censorship regime, scholars can also read their writings on the young Spaniards not only as reportage but also as a type of instruction manual for the ideal childhood. Soviet writers transformed the arrival experiences of the niños into tales of state oversight and accommodation that would lead to disciplined and happy children prepared to work hard for the greater good.3

RESPONSES TO EVACUATION AND RECEPTION

On March 22, 1937, the first Spanish children were evacuated to the Soviet Union. After German pilots bombed Guernica the following month, four more ships, the last in December 1938, carried nearly 3,000 children, mostly from leftist families, to various parts of the Soviet Union, the only country that had come to the aid of Spain’s democratically elected republic. The Basque government’s Department of Social Assistance and Culture, along with members of the Communist Party of Euskadi and International Red Aid, a Comintern-affiliated organization that aided Republican soldiers and citizens, secured safe passage out of the country for thousands of additional children. Unlike the other countries that received evacuated Spanish children – including France, Great Britain, and Belgium – the Soviet Union paid all costs during the children’s residence in their new homeland. Moreover, the Soviet Union, fearing

---

that their parents' political loyalties would put the children at risk, was the only European country not to send the children back to Spain after the Civil War concluded. Therefore, the USSR created a network of boarding schools exclusively for the Spanish evacuees and their adult caregivers; these closed only in 1951 as the youngest evacuees moved into higher education or work.4

Letters from the children and more recent oral histories show a wide range of responses to the displacement from Spain and resettlement in the Soviet Union. Loss and fear of the unknown punctuated stories of the 1937 evacuation, but many stories also carried a sense of hope in finding a safe place to live. The reception and treatment awed some children; others reported a sense of dislocation in a foreign culture.

Fear dominated many children’s memories of their evacuation from Spain because the Republic’s enemies had no intention of letting Spanish children leave the country. A child on the second expedition recalled, “I remember the day we had to leave they were constantly bombarding the port and we could not go. We left the next day escorted by a Soviet submarine.” Adolfo Cenitagoya remembered bombs and shells from German Junkers falling near the old French ship that carried him from Spain. The voyages were arduous. Narrators remembered the dark of the cargo hold where they bedded down on mats to the sounds of crying children all around. Retching was frequent as people tried to overcome loss and seasickness. The ocean was “as bad as the Germans,” an evacuee recalled. Unfortunately for Ana del Bosque Arín, who had just seen the

film *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, the crew of the *Sontay* was mostly Chinese. Like others, Ana remembered the discomfort of the rolling waters, uncomfortable mats, and the feeling of being trapped below decks because the Chinese mariners frightened her too much to walk the corridors of the ship. One evacuee in the cargo claimed, “The treatment in the Chinese ship was horrible, we were all in the hold, everyone vomited. All the time they gave us rice to eat and the rats that were in the ship were like cats. Moreover, the whole way we could not change clothes or anything.” Another remembered being “dizzy all the time” and asking to go home. Many simply could not eat in such conditions. The journey itself was often described in negative terms: “everyone sleeping on mats in the ship’s hold,” “throwing up on ourselves,” going “without eating,” “children crying.”

Other children narrated a sense of loss during evacuation and their journey to the USSR. Separation from parents was as disturbing as the war raging around the children. Unlike the willing departure of the Molinas children, one boy recalled “screaming and crying all the time because I did not want to leave anything. My mother would never forgive herself for sending me to the Soviet Union,” while another stated, “Like many, I came here deceived. I did not want to come.” The evacuation, punctuated by feelings of loss and fear, forced children to leave behind everything they knew. Family and friends usually remained in war-ravaged Spain, leaving these children initially with nothing but hunger and tears. “We missed everything,” one child recalled, “we missed our homeland, we missed our parents, we missed our religion, we missed a Spanish education, we missed everything because we were very little.”

---

Separation was too much for some children who then tried to run away. Even though they were told it would only be a three-month evacuation, the Mezquita brothers hid on the Havana’s lifeboats hoping to return to Spain rather than carry on to their destination. Others, like Carlos Roldán’s brother, who was hospitalized in the USSR with measles and therefore separated from his brother, escaped (although briefly) from an institution so as not to be parted from a sibling.6

As traumatic as the fear and loss of evacuation and transport were for some children, other niños felt relieved to escape the violence, poverty, and hunger that had accompanied bombing and fighting in Spain. The fear of war and the arduous journeys across rough seas patrolled by German submarines made landfall in a peaceful town a pleasant change for many of the children. It was “like reaching paradise after being in hell”; the children lived “like princes and princesses, being educated in the best manner possible, like being in Paradise.” Ángel Rodríguez remembered his mother insisting that her children go to the Soviet Union. Once she had made the decision and completed the paperwork, all that remained was the agonizing wait underground where “windows in the basement were shut with sandbags to protect us against the guns. We had to run to that basement five or six times a day, covering our ears not to hear the whistle of bombs that were dropping near our home.” When Ángel finally boarded a French ship in Gijón, he was relieved because officials assured the children that they would return as soon as the war was over. Another former evacuee remembered that her parents had “sent all us children thinking that now we were on vacation for three months.”7 They did not know that three months would turn into a lifetime for most of them.

Although most children remembered their first days in the USSR much more positively than the evacuation and journey, some reported ill treatment on arrival. A few were not enamored with the USSR despite the large crowds, flowers, music, and treats that greeted them on their arrival. Some of the children even took exception to their treatment. The children were

6 Colomina, Dos patrias, tres mil destinos, 21; Devillard, Los niños españoles en la URSS, 78; Alted, Los niños de la guerra de España en la Unión Soviética, 52, 80. An August 1937 report showed that 70 percent (1,053 of 1,498) of the children were placed in sanatoria because of illness: GARF f. 8009, op. 20, d. 45, ll. 14–22.

filthy and louse-ridden after the long journey, so showers and a change of
clothes were the first priority for the Soviets. At this point, cultural
differences sometimes came to a head. Before they even stepped on
Soviet soil, one official called the *ninos* “frighteningly undisciplined”
when compared to Soviet children. Antonio Martínez remembered that
a row of sorts started when the girls and boys, although only a few years
old, were told to shower together, which was apparently scandalous to
those raised in Catholic Spain. Children also complained that Soviet
officials took material goods—sometimes the children’s only tangible
connection to home—from them. Although many children arrived in
tatters and welcomed the crisp uniforms they were given on arrival, others
wanted to keep their clothing. One woman reflected on her first experi­
ence by noting that her clothing “was made of ... smocking [*nido de
abeja*], which was very fashionable then and I looked so good in it, and
suddenly they give me the same as everyone else, and I never saw the other
dress again ... where can it be? ... but oh well.” She expressed a desire to
keep her finery and individuality, but in the end she seemed resigned to her
fate. For other children, clothes had an even more personal meaning. One
woman recalled that her “mom made us a couple of little black dresses ... 
when my father died ... [W]e took very few things [to the USSR] but what
bothered me most was that Mom bought us raincoats because we had no
money for coats, and they took them away from us ... they made us tear
up the only Bible we had.” The dresses represented a connection with her
father and the raincoats symbolized the family’s financial sacrifice for the
children. The disposal of the Bible was an immediate recognition that the
girl’s religious traditions and identity were no longer going to be part of
her public life.8

For all the fear, loss, and outrage they displayed, numerous children
expressed relief, hope, and wonder at their treatment and new opportu­
nities in the USSR. Frequently children wrote, or remembered decades
later, that their living conditions improved greatly once in caring Soviet
hands. In a letter home just two weeks after landing in the USSR,
Raimundo García reported that Soviet sailors had treated the children
well. Other children focused on the good food the Soviets provided, which
differed greatly from the hunger that they had felt in France while waiting
to change ships. José and Pilar Fernández, like many others, wrote to their

8 GARF f. 8009, op. 20, d. 45, l. 6; Alted, *Los niños de la guerra de España en la Unión
Soviética*, 80. Many leftists in Spain were still Catholic, including members of the Basque
father in Bilbao that their ship was not in the best condition for passage on rough and fog-obscured seas, but that music, flags, and excited crowds had greeted them at their destination, where they received new clothes. Another girl recalled that “on arrival we had chocolate cake and many gifts. Then they took us to a room full of toys. There we stripped and bathed, then came some doctors and they gave us a checkup.”

Food and material goods were most welcome. Isidro San Baudelio Echevarría’s letter to his brother noted that after his arrival in Leningrad, where music and the “Internationale” greeted his group, he started fattening up on bread and butter, cheese, café con leche, and rice pudding. Fortunately, he was also able to swim in the “free air” unmo­lested by shells and bombs. Ángel Gutiérrez recalled the journey itself quite fondly: “We had good and abundant food, and the sailors treated us with exquisite care and generosity. Everything seemed too fantastic.” Soviet elites often intervened personally. One niño recalled Marshal Aleksandr Yegorov’s visit to his boarding school. Yegorov inspected the food, the toilets, and even the children’s blankets. A few days after his visit, the children received new “beautiful, soft, and warm camel hair blankets” to replace their less-than-adequate ones. Carlos Roldán Alcalde noted more than six decades later that, each time he went to Leningrad, all he could remember was the music and sun greeting him as he walked down the gangplank.

The initial days in the USSR were memorable and full of wonder for many of the children. One of the older boys, fourteen-year-old Daniel Monzó Carbonell, wrote to his father and siblings that his arrival was filled with young Pioneers and waving flags, a “building that looks like a palace” with gardens and trees all around, a loving Russian official, and “everything we want.” The availability of toys also amazed fourteen-year-old Araceli Sánchez-Urquijo, but he was particularly impressed that at Leningrad’s northern latitude there was enough natural light that there were only a few hours of darkness. Twelve-year-old Enrique Undiano

9 AGC-Salamanca, PS Santander “o” 49/3, in Alted, Los niños de la guerra de España en la Unión Soviética, 59; Zafra, Los niños españoles evacuados a la URSS, 105; Colomina, Dos patrias, tres mil destinos, 27. Soviet officials reported children eating “colossal amounts” of vegetables and being troubled by repeated medical problems: GARF f. 8000, op. 20, d. 45, ll. 14–22.

wrote a letter to his mother and sister six days after reaching Leningrad. In it, he voices his fascination with the Soviet submarines and warships he encountered in port, and the four meals per day with unlimited bread and butter; fruit, cheese, and chocolate (both to eat and drink, apparently) topped his list of favorite things about Russia. He also noted with pleasure the abundance of entertainment available to the children, particularly the “billiards, swings, balls, tennis courts, bicycles, and cars with big pedals.”

In addition to the abundant food, many novelties fascinated Enrique Undiano. Women’s equality and technology were novel to many of the children from the poorer parts of Spain. Electric trams were as foreign to Enrique as the women he saw driving the trains and working on the roads. The suburban Moscow camp, which he described as a “wonderland [jauja],” was a launching pad for his hopes and dreams. He looked forward to field trips to Lenin’s mausoleum and museum exhibits about the tsars and Republican Spain. In a month, he noted (probably mistakenly), he would begin training as an aviator. Whether he was correct or not, his brief letter detailed his hopes and dreams and the opportunities he saw in the Soviet Union, where even women could drive trains. The frequent and fond mention of food, entertainment, and exciting new opportunities both illuminate the ninos’ sense of expectations for a happy childhood and suggest the absence of such luxuries in wartime Spain.

PRESENTING THE NIÑOS TO THE SOVIET PEOPLE

It is clear that the Spanish children had varied perceptions of their journeys and arrivals, yet Soviet media edited these responses and gave to the reading public a unified and homogeneous understanding of the ninos and their lives. The crowds cheering the children’s arrival were “sufficient to paint a sharp contrast between the sun-drenched, joyful arrival in Russia and the panicked departure from the shrinking Republican zone” in Spain. Although film shorts likely reached a wide audience, they were brief and did not tell a child-centered story nor allow viewers to “know”


12 Zafra, Los ninos espanoles evacuados a la URSS, 101. “Jauja” refers to a place where one’s needs are met effortlessly. It would be equivalent to the Land of Cockaigne.
the subject. Written stories became a key vehicle for greater humanization of the children, and an elaboration of their stories sought to impart lessons as much as to distract from current problems in the USSR. Press coverage and film shorts simplified the many and varied experiences endured by the Spanish children into a more consistent and didactic narrative and created an impression much more positive than many Soviet officials discussed in private.13

In contrast to the mixed responses of Spanish children, however, the Soviet print media constructed an almost undifferentiated image of the children as escaping a dark life of fear, loss, and hopelessness and arriving in their new homeland comforted by abundance and good care and filled with hope, purpose, and opportunity. Journalists and writers painted a verbal picture, occasionally illustrated with photographs, that often told individual stories of the journey from darkness to light. In publications about the niños, we learn what the ideal childhood is supposed to be and, not surprisingly, it is the antithesis of everything the children had experienced in fascist-ravaged Spain, where exploitation and control by the landed elite (señores) and the Catholic Church continued. Soviet newspapers discussed the escape from the horrors of war and the children’s personal experiences with death, fear, and exploitation. Journalists’ accounts of the niños’ first days in the USSR reflected the experiences of some of the niños: enjoying abundant food and recreation, finding new friends among the Soviet Union’s many nationalities, exploring opportunities unheard of in Spain, and expressing a burning desire to learn and return to the fight in Spain. However, news stories omitted stories about disgruntled children.14

Unlike films, the written word provided implicit descriptions of an ideal Soviet childhood. Elena Kononenko’s book Malen’kie ispantsy (Little Spaniards), published by Detizdat, the main state-run press for children’s books, provided didactic lessons to young Soviet students about how the niños’ stories illustrated ideal Soviet behavior. In the late 1930s, Kononenko was embarking on a career writing about children’s behavior

and education. Her *Little Spaniards* was written in highly accessible prose for her young audience, and with more than 50,000 copies in print, the book would have been available for many children to read. She followed the lives of a diverse set of boys and girls – literate and illiterate, orphans and children sent abroad by their parents for safety’s sake, urban and rural, from Communist and from (seemingly) apolitical families – who experienced personal trauma before the decision was made to leave on the first voyage of evacuee children.¹⁵

Writing during the Great Terror, when many Soviet children’s family and friends were being arrested, Kononenko told her young Soviet readers about the *niños*’ perseverance in the face of violence and loss. Remedio and her brother Francisco endured bombings and saw charred human legs and bloodied dogs amidst the rubble. José traveled with his father to the front, where a fighter with “blood oozing through the bandages” of an amputated leg confronted him on his arrival and where he found that his brother had been killed days before. Torres, the little orphan, became a grenade-thrower and was knocked unconscious in battle. Rosario lived among the orchards of Valencia, but, despite her poverty, she rarely ate any of the oranges because the orchards belonged to the *señores*. When her father lost his poorly paid factory job, they were evicted and forced to live in the forest. When Rosario’s father went to the front, she went to a home run by abusive monks; fascists later bombed the monastery after Republicans had taken over and improved it. Even more tragic was the life of Madrid’s children. Raphael had to become the man of the house when his father went to the front. Each day, the boy dodged bombs and bullets to get wood and food for a family so malnourished that his mother’s breast milk had dried up. When a bomb killed Raphael, his mother sent little Antonio to the USSR. Emilia and other children built barricades from cobbles and lived in a basement for weeks; they heard stories of fascists cutting off children’s fingers and burning them alive in the streets.¹⁶

In these stories, Kononenko informed her young readers about children who had suffered the violence of war but also poverty, capitalist

---

¹⁵ Kononenko wrote articles about crudeness and egoism, for example, which were part of a turn toward discipline in the classroom precisely at the time the Spanish children were arriving. See, for example, “Egoisty,” *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, March 21, 1938; “Grubost,” *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, January 3, 1938. *Sovetskaia pedagogika*, the regime’s new pedagogical mouthpiece, even discussed the latter. See S. N. Belousov, “Ob otklikhakh na stat’iu E. Kononenko – “Grubost’,” *Sovetskaia pedagogika*, no. 8 (1938), 144–52.

exploiters, and abusive clergy, none of which, of course, were to be found in the USSR after the Bolshevik Revolution. Children were in danger in other countries, she suggested, but in the Soviet Union they enjoyed the protection of the state and the party. Moreover, Kononenko showed the niños and their parents fighting for their freedom and against repression until it was time for them to leave home in order to be trained in the socialist motherland. Young Soviet readers were to take nothing for granted.

*Little Spaniards*, which focused on the first evacuees to the Soviet Union, also highlighted, among other things, the development of fraternal relationships, opportunities in the USSR unheard of in Spain, the abundance that greeted the new arrivals, and the courage of the children as they held back tears that flowed from memories of family and friends killed or left behind in Spain. The children arrived with no friends in the USSR, yet their heads swam with fantastic images of a snow-covered country where children went to school on skis and no trees existed. They “could not paint a picture of their future life.” When they finally reached Yalta at 11:30 on March 30, 1937, it was as sunny “as in southern Spain. The children shrieked from happiness and surprise.” They were warmly and immediately welcomed into their new families in a land full of sunshine, trees, and a happy childhood. A “throng [tolf] of people” gathered at the pier. They were smiling and cheering and throwing white and pink flowers in the air and playing music. Saragossa, waving his hand, cried out in two languages: “*Viva Rusia. Da zdravstvuet Sovetskaia Rossiia!*” He was answered with: “Long live the children of heroic Spain.” The Russian and Spanish children immediately formed a bond and “kissed and held each others’ hands tightly.” They spoke different languages, but the “children perfectly understood one another. They communicated with gestures, eyes, and smiles.” Everyone understood four words: Lenin, Stalin, communism, fascist. On the “big holiday,” the Spaniards learned about the friendship of peoples as Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Spaniards, Mongolians, and more led songs and dances.17

Kononenko’s description matches many of the niños’ letters and recollections about the outpouring of affection on their arrival, but she ignored the counternarrative of fear and loss. She instead showed children who could overcome trauma and quickly adapt to displacement; these were skills that were quite necessary at this time of the Great Terror. Despite language barriers, children were children, and the Soviets quickly put the

17 Ibid., 68, 69, 70, 78, 109.
Spaniards at ease in their new homeland. Kononenko’s story suggested that the Soviet Union was a land of opportunity where the state and the party would provide a happy life, abundant food, new friends, and many more gifts so that light could overcome darkness. Moreover, the insistence that happiness was a, if not the, goal of childhood mirrored the Western conceptions of the ideal childhood in the twentieth century.\(^{18}\)

All the abundance we should expect from reading late 1930s Soviet literature marked the Spaniards’ new lives. As several scholars have shown, Stalinist art and literature of the period began to portray consumption of goods as an aspiration for the new Soviet man and woman. Soviet fiction often commented on white table cloths and lamp shades as signs of material improvement in the 1930s. Kononenko listed numerous signs of abundance and state care enjoyed by the Spaniards: cocoa and hot pirozhki; volleyballs, bicycles, swings, toys, dolls, teddy bears, cars, and building blocks; beaches, fishing, flowers, nightingale songs, and the cypress and laurel trees most missed from home. Lest her readers think the Spaniards were interested only in material goods, Kononenko noted, “the young Spaniards especially liked to go to the children’s technical station.” Eating and playing were fine and part of a normal childhood, but a Soviet childhood also had to be practical. Here children learned about railroads, radio stations, needlework, and art. This recounting of the arrival story shows children who were grateful for the abundance of care and the gifts Stalin bestowed on them. They were impressed by all the food and toys and the beautiful surroundings. Yet, what did the “little heroes” like most? Practical learning and work that would prepare them to contribute to society in future years. In this year of displacement, fear, and chaos in the Soviet Union, Kononenko was assuring her young Soviet readers that the USSR would take care of them in return for their work for the collective. Even as families and schools began to be torn apart by the Great Terror, the state would protect and care for those who were willing to live according to Soviet principles.\(^{19}\)


Reports showed more than just happiness and abundance in a new fraternal environment; they also showed how the USSR helped the children adjust after their unhappy childhoods in Spain. “Spanish children are sleeping in their bedrooms,” reported A. Gudimov, “Occasionally a frightened cry is heard – the children dream of home with shells, machinegun fire, with sirens warning of an air raid.” Nightmares had an effect because the children were “frightened of noisy games” and, although they all drew well, they only sketched planes, fascist bombing, tanks, and shooting. All illustrations agitated them, and they were becoming nervous and not sleeping well. Soviet adults recognized the trauma (a word not used) and tried to distract the children from the horrors with play and by introducing them to new acquaintances. The art classes noted by Gudimov showed that Spanish and Soviet children did not share the same outlook. The Spaniards’ art depicted death and war, things “they had seen not long ago in their homeland … Our [Soviet] children drew trees, flowers, animals, passenger trains, the Metro, and the Arctic,” where Soviet explorers were making front-page news. Kononenko implied that a Soviet child could depict beauty, human possibility, and achievement because that is what life in the Soviet Union represented. When a girl who had drawn burning homes was shown how to draw a flower, it was progress for her: “Their childhood, stolen by the fascists, is returning to them,” wrote Kononenko. Soviet childhood was one of happiness and hopes. The Spaniards had to be taught how to become both happy and Soviet, which writers depicted as synonymous. A state could either steal childhoods or nurture children’s development, and even traumatized children could be taught happiness.²⁰

and schools, see Ewing, The Teachers of Stalinism, ch. 7. On children and the Terror, see Cathy Frierson, Silence Was Salvation: Child Survivors of Stalin’s Terror and World War II in the Soviet Union (New Haven, 2015).

²⁰ A. Gudimov, “Gosti iz Ispanii,” Izvestiia, April 8, 1937. For more on children’s art in the Spanish Civil War, see G. R. Collins, Children’s Drawings of the Spanish Civil War: A Collection of 153 Drawings by Children Living in Refugee Colonies During the War (New York, 1986); A. L. Geist, They Still Draw Pictures: Children’s Art in Wartime from the Spanish Civil War to Kosovo (Urbana, 2002); Aldous Huxley, They Still Draw Pictures! With Sixty Illustrations of Drawings Made by Spanish Children During the War (New York, 1938). In her study of children after World War II, Tara Zahra noted, “One central goal of humanitarian workers after the war was to restore both children and adults to their traditional roles, to make children into children again.” Only after the war did refugee agencies begin to think about children’s psychological needs. See Tara Zahra, The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families After World War II (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 9 and ch. 3. See also Kononenko, Malen’kie ispantsy, 86–87 (drawings pp. 57, 65).
Current events and political education also helped the Spaniards learn to become Soviet. Reading the news from Spain to the children every day caused them to want to be “just as courageous as their parents.” Pioneers from Dagestan wrote to the niños of their paramilitary training and readiness to fight. A Tatar Pioneer leader at the camp explained tsarist class oppression by noting that none of the palaces around Crimea had belonged to the people. The children, and the reader, were then to draw the connection to the señores of Spain mentioned in the story of Rosario’s life in Valencia. Revolution in Spain, then, could bring equality and happiness just as it had in Russia, Kononenko suggested. Political freedom was a treasure, a gift of Soviet life, but one for which people had had to fight. Vincente, for example, beamed at the honor of carrying the red banner. He could finally “openly carry the red banner for which the fathers and older brothers were now dying at the front.” Letters from home assured the children that the fascists would be crushed and urged the children to study hard so that they could be of use to society when the Republic won. To that end, “All the children,” Kononenko reported, “promised teachers and Pioneer leaders that they would study hard.” Kononenko’s depiction defined childhood as happiness derived from state-supplied care and bounty, but also as requiring diligence and commitment to fulfill one’s obligations to others. It was a happy childhood, but not one of carefree innocence.11

CONCLUSION

The Soviet Union, from its inception, viewed children as a precious resource. If properly raised, they would achieve the full realization of communism in the USSR. In the 1930s, as the USSR continued to grow into socialism and move closer to full communism, the Soviets stopped discussing the possibilities of reforming wayward children as they tried to ignore the ongoing problem. However, with the Great Purges removing more parents, teachers, and classmates from children’s lives, Kononenko’s discussion of the Spanish children in some ways served as a surrogate discussion about the role of the state and party in turning children into new Soviet men and women. As her young readers learned about their new Spanish comrades, they were also learning how to behave as Soviets and to view the state that sought to “fashion youths into productive, devoted members of a Communist society.” Although Kononenko, journalists,

11 Kononenko, Malen’kie ispantsy, 90, 91, 109.
and filmmakers deliberately ignored stories of trauma among the niños after they arrived in the USSR so as to highlight Soviet care and concern, we must not forget that many of the children remembered their time in the boarding schools as a wonderful experience under the kind supervision of the state. Numerous scholars have discussed the importance of families replacing institutions in the 1930s, but the Spaniards had no nuclear family in the USSR to which they could turn. The Soviet boarding schools for Spanish children served as surrogate families without the threats of counternarratives of ideal behavior that might often come from a nuclear family. Soviet authorities’ largess toward the Spanish children was clear to everyone; it even incurred the ire and jealousy of some Soviet citizens. The Great Purges and the parentless children they created necessitated greater attention to rearing children in a more disciplined environment. The pedagogical changes in 1937 could be seen as part of this turn, but so too could Little Spaniards and its stories of Soviet care overcoming the loss of parents and transforming children into hardworking, collectivist, and happy builders of tomorrow. Unfortunately, no evidence has been found about how readers used or received this book. Soviet readers knew well the myth of boy-martyr Pavlik Morozov, who fulfilled his duty to report his parents as enemies of the people only to be killed by relatives. Tales of the little heroes of Spain provided a more positive ending in which the Soviet state became a transformative agent, bringing children from darkness to light and providing opportunities unavailable to most in Spain. The reach and longevity of Little Spaniards did not match those of Pavlik Morozov, but it likely had a similar effect. The stories of extraordinary children staged the norms of Soviet childhood in which the regime’s beneficence protected, guided, and provided for children and brought happiness as they transformed into politically conscious and active adults.