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Saints in the Making: The Quasi-Religious Rearing of Soviet Children

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Abstract

Children as the proverbial 'future' had figured prominently in public imagination in pre-Soviet and Soviet Russia. Both societies attempted to assume moral and intellectual responsibility for the upbringing of the young. The Soviet era, however, has demonstrated perhaps the more determined and sustained efforts of a whole people to shape and mold the future epitomized by children. The clairvoyance of the Soviet state machine in its desire for self-propagation resulted in a well thought-out and meticulous rearing of children. Soviet political propaganda directed at children would pursue the cultivation and dissemination of values which very much resembled those of Eastern Orthodoxy. The quasi-religious tone of social and political culture in general betrayed a link with the past that Soviet functionaries both consciously and unconsciously pursued. This paper will give some attention to the original context within which the Byzantine and Russian religious traditions arose and the further context within which they were transformed. What follows does not claim to constitute a comprehensive appraisal of the social upbringing of children throughout the entire length of the Soviet regime. The paper will examine those elements of Soviet appropriation of the Byzantine and Russian religious traditions which appeared more pronounced, if not explicit.

Keywords: Byzantine, Russian, Soviet, hagiography, iconography, children

1. Introduction

Children as the proverbial 'future' had figured prominently in public imagination in pre-Soviet and Soviet Russia. Both societies attempted to assume moral and intellectual responsibility for the upbringing of the young. The Soviet era, however, has demonstrated perhaps the more determined and sustained efforts of a whole people to shape and mold the future epitomized by children. Without doubt, "children are the weakest and most fragile members of their families as well as of the society in which they live. At the same time children embody a potential for growth and renewal that is greater than that of anyone else" (Horn, 2007, p. 262). This potential replete with promise would be channeled methodically and systematically by the Soviets to meet the new historical circumstances.

The clairvoyance of the Soviet state machine in its desire for self-propagation resulted in a well thought-out and meticulous rearing of children. Soviet political propaganda directed at children would pursue the cultivation and dissemination of values which very much resembled those of Eastern Orthodoxy. The quasi-religious tone of social and political culture in general betrayed a link with the past that Soviet functionaries both consciously and unconsciously pursued. This paper will give some attention to the original context within which the Byzantine and Russian religious traditions arose and the further context within which they were transformed. What follows does not claim to constitute a comprehensive appraisal of the social upbringing of children throughout the entire length of the Soviet regime. The paper will examine those elements of Soviet appropriation of the Byzantine and Russian religious traditions which appeared more pronounced, if not explicit.

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2. Eastern Orthodox Hagiography and Iconography

The pre-Bolshevik Russian society, particularly its peasantry, was reared on the *Lives of Saints,* a genre of literature spurred by the miraculous acts and sagacious sayings of holy persons. Russian hagiography found its inspiration in the Byzantine precursor which emerged in the fourth century with the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria. "It was largely thanks to its message and original composition that this text generated a remarkable chain of imitators, successors and responses" (Efthymiadis, 2011, p. 9) in the East and the West alike. Byzantine hagiographic literature proved to be an ample reservoir for the budding Slavic religious traditions. The abundant translations of the former and their formidable authority helped the Slavs see themselves as rightful heirs to the apostolic legacy (Lunde, 2011, p. 369). Even though ancient Russia, or Rus', was baptized only in 988 and the nascent production of its own hagiographical texts is traced to the following century, in Russian saintly biographies, "local Christianity and the local past are seen not just as a 'copy' of the universal faith and history, but rather as a continuation of that great chain of events, people and places which makes up the history of salvation" (Lunde, 2011, p. 370).

The abundance of hagiographical genres highlights the heterogeneous nature of sainthood. Life, or *vita*, for example, represents a biography of a person whose holiness becomes a corollary of her Christian life. A distinct characteristic of a holy person is his performance of miracles, many of which are posthumous (Hinterberger, 2014, p. 29-33). The *vitae* of St. Macrina, St. Euthymius, St. Sabas, or of St. Theodore of Sykeon are good examples of such thematic orientation. Another principal hagiographical genre that would serve as a powerful medium for edifying the church was that of martyrdom, or *passio.* Sanctification is achieved here via a brutal death stemming from one's unwavering allegiance to Christ in defiance of pagan rulers (Hinterberger, 2014, p. 28). Some of the early examples of the *Acts of the Martyrs* include the *passions* of St. Perpetua, St. Akakios, St. Euphemia, and St. Kyriakos, among many others.

Besides its reliance on the Byzantine hagiographical literature, Russian Orthodox tradition is also influenced by the Byzantine religious art which provided methods and models to the Slavs who, in time, would exercise their own creative iconographic genius. The subject matter of iconography includes portrayals of Christ, Mary, and saints, as well as Biblical and ecclesial imagery. Eastern iconography would function as "theology in color" (Trubetskoi, 1973) and Scripture of the illiterate. As sacred images, icons have a long history of veneration in the Christian East: they are revered as effective vehicles of prayer, religious education and spiritual knowledge. It is typical for saintly biographies of Byzantium and Russia to show a sanctified life as commencing in birth or childhood and culminating in death. An eleventh century model of Kievan hagiography, the *Life of Feodosii,* for example, borrows liberally from translations of Greek texts, such as *Life of Antony*. The piece is representative of its genre as it describes the saint's virtuous journey from childhood to his last days (Lunde, 2011, p. 373). A much later Russian saint Ignatius Brianchaninov was also known for his religious piety which he displayed from an early age. Analogously, in iconography, the life of a saint is narrated in a linear fashion, scene by scene, albeit in color. A Russian icon of St. Nicholas, dating from the fifteenth century, depicts a number of chapters from the saint's life, including those of his birth, infant baptism and finally burial.

Both hagiography and iconography exemplify ideal children, whose character foreshadows the kind of grown-ups they will become. In the *Life of Antony,* the reader encounters a young Antony who is respectful of his elders, both at church and home, and desires little, if anything, in terms of the material. Growing up, Antony persists in prayer and vigil. He eventually becomes widely known for successfully warding off demons, which are relentless in their physical and psychological assaults on the adult ascetic.

3. Soviet Appropriation of Eastern Orthodox Religious Traditions in the Rearing of Children

The all-pervading pull of Eastern Orthodox hagiography and iconography on Russian culture cannot be overestimated. In spite of deliberate, and often bloody, breaks from the past, Soviet society maintained a certain degree of continuity with the religious traditions of pre-Bolshevik Russia. Soviet hagiographers would revise and rewrite familiar stories in crafting the image of a Soviet citizen in the making: without a doubt, "old language could serve a new purpose" (Peacock, 2014, p. 71). The essential ingredients of spiritual formation like devotion to a monistic cause, physical labor, or discipline would still carry over into the Soviet milieu where they would retained their relevance. Moral, intellectual and physical upbringing of Soviet minors would be carried out thoroughly and uniformly.

Felicity Ann O'Dell (1978) has noted: "In the Soviet Union . . . official concern for character-education is strong; it is accordingly centrally controlled and planned to the greatest possible extent. . . . Every attempt is made to guide the socializing agencies of school, home, peer group and mass media in the same desired direction" (p. 50). One of the most effective ways that the Soviet society directed the minds of the young was via its reading material. Prior to 1917, both Russian nobility and peasantry found the *Lives of Saints*—published by the church—tremendously didactic: the holy people from the pages of *vitae* provided much guidance and many examples for emulation. Children's books published in Soviet Russia invoked parallel hagiographic elements by portraying a new generation of extraordinary human beings who transcended any physical limitations in feats of astonishing spiritual/moral struggle. Nina Tumarkin (1997) has argued: "The life stories of revolutionary saints and heroes were the latter-day replacements for the saints' lives" (p. 216). Going back to the Byzantine era, Christian writers used an ancient rhetorical tool of the *enkomion* aimed at praising worthy individuals.[2] Some of the ways that the Byzantine Christians reworked the pagan material was by amending the four cardinal virtues of the ancients and relating saints to scriptural rather than antique figures of renown (Hinterberger, 2014, p. 37). "In short, this expressed antithesis between the Christian and the pagan *enkomion* involves a transitional phase when a new kind of *enkomion* was being established, in order to support a new ideology" (Hinterberger, p. 38). Likewise, the Soviet *enkomion* operated by means of identifiable models that resonated with the masses who, in the words of "The International," "[will] change henceforth the old tradition and spurn the dusts to win the prize."[3]

Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state, is naturally at the top of a new hierarchy where he is pictured "as a saint, a Christ, or an anointed tsar. He was idealized, heroized, and romanticized beyond recognition" (Stites, 1991, p. 120). Illustrated biographies of Lenin targeting the young audience enjoyed a formidable circulation. The leader of the new people "appears in hagiography so often as a skier, hiker, swimmer, and chess player that one wonders how he found time to make a revolution," has quiped Richard Stites (1991, p. 118). Unambiguously religious, the images of Lenin intended to be instructive and edifying. Since he was a little boy, Lenin cultivated healthy habits of mind and body: he strove to be learned,[4] self-effacing, honest, industrious, brave, and mobilized. His adult life of virtue is particularly demonstrative in his unremitting self-sacrificial *modus operandi* for the sake of the world proletariat. He comes close to becoming a martyr in 1918 as a result of an assassination attempt on his life by a disenchanted Russian Jewish revolutionary. Tumarkin (1997) has argued that "the Commissariat of Enlightenment had introduced the propaganda of Leninism among children as a conscious policy." In doing so, "it had posited two long-range goals: children saturated with Leninism were to grow up loyal to the party Lenin personified; and they were to find in him a role model more powerful than their parents" (p. 242).

Throughout most of the Soviet period, school readers would abound in stories about Lenin. The colossal significance of the Communist saint for Soviet children is tirelessly underscored by the hagiographic imagery. Lenin the kid quickly learned the moral discomfort of deception. Having stolen some fruit from the family kitchen, he was confronted by his mother. Volodia admitted his guilt and promised to never steal again, the promise he kept for the rest of his life. Young Lenin is intentional and effective in terms of self-improvement—he is an exceptional child who sets a striking example for other kids to follow. There are a lot of coming of age stories in which Lenin is depicted as a conscientious adolescent, sympathizing with the Russian have-nots and envisioning a new Russia, free of maltreatment of peasants and workers.

As an adult, according to the same school readers, Lenin has an affinity with children. In many ways, he is guileless himself. Christ-like, he cares for children very much and treats them with both tenderness and respect. Children can't help but reciprocate (O'Dell, 1978, p. 101-102). The state-sponsored making of a saint is evident in many other stories for schoolchildren. While evading an arrest by the Russian Provisional Government in the summer of 1917, Lenin went underground in a village of Razliv, on the shores of the Gulf of Finland. His life in hiding for the cause of the revolution was full of privation. The subversive ascetic built a hut of tree branches and hay, and made do with scarce resources.

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[2] This literary form has its roots in the eulogies for the gods of the Graeco-Roman world.

[3] This is the British version of "The Internationale." The American translation of the same verses reads, "The earth shall rise on new foundations: we have been nought, we shall be all!"

[4] Not all *vitae* of the saints made a point to highlight the schooling of the holy persons in question. However, the more ecclesiologic ally or aristocratically prominent individuals would have some attention in their biographies given to their education.

In another hagiographic episode, Lenin is single-minded in his political piety: all of his energy—at the expense of his health—is being spent assiduously on continuing his studies of Marxism and revolutionary work (O'Dell, 1978, p. 101). Soviet hagiographers also explored lives of other Communist heroes who could teach Soviet children a lesson or two about true citizenry in "heaven on earth" created by Lenin. One of them is Yakov Sverdlov, a comrade of Lenin, who had very humble beginnings. Sverdlov was an avid reader and auto-didact. The period between 1906 and 1917 was marked by his frequent arrests or exile. Despite these hardships, Sverdlov never gave up reading; he even taught literacy to his fellow prisoners. O'Dell has observed: "Thus two favorite virtues—loving learning and never wasting time—are emphasized here by holding up to the child a revolutionary hero model" (O'Dell, 1978, p. 103). In school readers, these and many other virtues, aiming at proper character building, are impressed on Soviet children via a variety of personages, both historical and fictional. Akin to the early Christian discourse on orthodoxy, that is, the right belief and worship, in keeping with the Soviet ideology "[t]he one 'correct' way of behavior is clear, leaving nothing at all to be said in favor of any other approach" (O'Dell, 1978, p. 48).

In their program of what they saw as moral upbringing of children, Soviet functionaries produced a legacy of iconography that skillfully complemented that of hagiography. Iconographic representations of Lenin, of course, took pride of place on the Soviet political iconostasis. Tumarkin (1997) has stated: "Posters, photographs, and busts of the leader were ubiquitous and took on the sameness of an iconography—the same resolute gaze on Lenin's face, the same bodily gestures and poses. Orthodox iconography had exhibited a similar stylization in the requisite hieratic gaze of Christ, the set hand gestures of various saints, and so on" (p. 244).

Soviet children were daily surrounded, whether at school or in the street, by the icons of Lenin and other Soviet leaders, which, just like the texts about them, defined and conveyed the world that Soviet youth inhabited. "Classrooms," in particular, "were inundated with Lenin's portraits after his death. Especially widespread were photographs and drawings of Volodia as a toddler, child, and youth, intended to facilitate the child's affection for and identification with Lenin" (Tumarkin, 1997, p. 227). Countless Lenin statues and murals served as a constant reminder that—in the words of a Soviet song—"Lenin is always alive, Lenin is always with you—in disquiet, hope, or joy. Lenin is in your spring, in every gleeful day— Lenin is in you and in me."[5] God incarnate, Lenin is proclaimed by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky as "more alive than all the living." According to the poet of the Russian revolution, "Lenin lived, Lenin lives, and Lenin will live."[6] Apocalyptic overtones are hard to miss here, especially considering that the Soviets hoped to bring Lenin back to life with advances in sciences. Commenting on the curious nature of the cult of Lenin, O'Dell (1978) has noted that its origins are "deeply rooted in Russia's past and its history demonstrate the pull of the irrational in the formation of Soviet political culture." To the scholar, the cult of the Soviet leader "shows how the new Bolshevik order . . . was itself molded by precisely those elements of old Russian culture that Lenin so desperately sought to destroy" (p. 3).

A new conceptual universe, conveyed through iconographic representations of ideal children themselves, also sought after a construction of cultural beliefs that would reinforce ideological consensus among the population from an early age. Margaret Peacock (2014) has pointed out: "The child became an icon for the transformative capacity of its country and an emblem of a modern future. It necessitated the increased intervention of the state into the lives of its constituents, and it created common cause for those who sought social change and revolution" (p.19). Visual tropes of ideal Soviet children displayed striking resemblances to those of the Christian East.
For instance, in many posters and illustrations in children's books, the Soviet young appear unreservedly respectful of authority personified by the Communist Party rather than God. They are devoted to schooling that is, studying the sciences and Marxism-Leninism rather than Scripture. They are empathetic to the plight of the exploited foreign neighbors that is, committed to proletarian internationalism rather than Christian missions or evangelism. They are playing the role of noble martyrs in WWII that is, voluntarily offering their lives as ultimate sacrifice to the Motherland rather than God the Father. These images gave Soviets "the tools and certainty that they needed to continue on, to avoid apathy, and to fall in line behind their country's leaders" (Peacock, 2014, p. 41).

[5] This is the current author's own translation of the lyrics to a Soviet song by S. Tulikov and L. Oshanin.
[6] Vladimir Mayakovsky (1924), "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin."

In rearing their children, Soviets also developed an elaborate political liturgy specifically for the young; while secular in aim, it betrayed strong religious influences. Carefully constructed rituals and symbols taught children to become social agents who would mobilize their peers and families in pursuit of a new society, "a city built on a hill [which] cannot be hid" (Matthew 5:14, New Revised Standard Version). The state-sanctioned youth organizations would take care of the young catechumens as they learned, step by step, a process of seamless integration into the Soviet political system. Joseph Zajda (1980) has written: "The Octobrist, the Pioneer, and the Komsomol youth organizations are huge Soviet collectives where the majority of schoolchildren and youth aged 7-17 are politically socialized. These collectives perform a vital role in character training, moral education, and political indoctrination. They reinforce and augment the Soviet ideology present in school curricula" (p. 146). The entrance into each of the three youth organizations is accompanied by rites of initiation, reminiscent of the Eastern Orthodox baptismal liturgy. During the admission ceremony into the Pioneer League, for example, middle school children would recite an oath pledging their allegiance to Lenin's teachings: "I, [first and last name], joining the ranks of the USSR Pioneer Organization named after Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, in front of my comrades solemnly promise: to love my motherland with all my heart; to live, study and fight in accord with the will of the great Lenin and the teachings of the Communist Party; to always follow the laws of the Pioneers of the Soviet Union."[7] The new members of the Pioneer family would have red scarves tied around their necks by their sponsors, seasoned Pioneer comrades who had coached their protégés for many months prior to the initiation ceremony.

Every Soviet school boasted the so-called Little Red Corners—also known as Lenin Corners— which comprised pseudo-shrines for all sorts of Soviet propaganda material, be it portraits/busts of Soviet political heroes or excerpts from newspapers, both national and local, highlighting advances of Communism. School children were expected to look after the objects of piety placed in Little Red Corners and assemble there for special political celebrations. This ritual reinforced almost a religious sense of community, or collective, which faithfully followed, in a unified gesture, a prescribed set of canons. Little Red Corners may have been intended to replace Icon Corners, special places in pre-revolutionary Russian homes designated as sacred spaces for familial icons. A display of icons would evoke a place of private worship where divine presence is experienced by the one praying before holy images. Another ritual in which Soviet children widely participated was the veneration of Lenin's relics. When Lenin died in January 1924, his body was embalmed and eventually placed in a mausoleum in the Red Square. Soviet schools would organize trips to Lenin's tomb to give young pilgrims a chance to pay their respects to the greatest of Soviet saints. Immortalized by the Soviet propaganda and now present to the worshippers in his relics, Lenin sustained his authority on the minds of Soviet children who would flock to the shrine in the center of Moscow as part of their ritual socialization.

Whether in Byzantium or pre-Bolshevik Russia, "[t]he focus/locus par excellence of a saint's cult is his/her tomb whence he/she continues to mediate for the benefit of the faithful" (Hinterberger, 2014, p. 33). Churches housing relics of some of the most revered Russian saints, like Sergius of Radonezh and Seraphim of Sarov, have been pilgrimage sites for Russian believers who seek after the plenitude of divine grace at the saints' final resting places. Correspondingly, Lenin's mausoleum and other numerous memorials dedicated to him—for example, his childhood home in Uyianovsk or the house in Gorki where he died—maintained his clout beyond physical death by allowing the initiates to partake in political *mysterium*. Tumarkin (1997) has argued, "Lenin cult rites and symbols that resemble forms of worship in the Orthodox tradition were likely to engage the masses" (p. 238). And children were the most gullible participants.

[7] This is the current author's own translation of the Pioneer oath.

4. Conclusion

The Soviet directives on the rearing of children appeared close in spirit to the teachings of Christianity: love members of your social collective, value hard work—physical and intellectual, be loyal to the instructions of your mentors. Both hagiography and iconography would be manipulated by the Soviet ideological machine that shaped the Soviet youth. The Soviet "storytellers" would 'protect' the young from "any old stories" and choose only those tales that were "fine and beautiful." The Soviet selectivity was guided by recognition of children as "most malleable" and thus "tak[ing] on any pattern one wishes to impress on [them]."[8] Day after day, Soviet youngsters would internalize the tenets of 'righteous' living as bade by the 'great' founder of the Soviet state. Their character education would be vigilantly supervised by the whole of society who saw children as future shakers and doers of the communist mission—always under the watchful eye of the omnipresent and omnipotent Communist Party headed by Grandfather Lenin.

[8] This is from a dialogue between Socrates and Adamants in Plato's *Republic*, Book II.