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Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War 1941-1945*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, xiv + 266pp., £55.00 h/b.

Olga Kucherenko, a Research Fellow at St. John's College Cambridge, has produced a fascinating study of Soviet children's participation in hostilities on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1945. Although children have been actively engaged on the battlefield, or close to it, throughout history, the temptation today is to treat child soldiers as the recent product of post-colonial wars in parts of Africa and Asia. This carefully researched monograph reminds readers of how over 60,000 Soviet children came to be active combatants. It uncovers a story which despite the voluminous literature on the Great Patriotic War has, until now, eluded systematic investigation. Kucherenko's study overcomes the inaccessibility of primary evidence, which has hitherto hindered research, and succeeds in combining an impressive array of newly unearthed archival materials, oral testimony and evidence from film, literature, and published sources.

*Little Soldiers* expands our understanding of the experiences of Soviet child soldiers, beyond the adoption of stray children by Red Army units as *vospitanniki* (army wards), with which many readers will be familiar. Added to the stories of 'sons of the regiment' are those of: enthusiastic adolescent volunteers who besieged mobilization centres, lied about their ages, bombarded the authorities with letters demanding to be sent to the front; orphaned and traumatized children stranded behind enemy lines who joined partisan bands seeking protection and survival; and approximately 5,000 boys trained in naval cadet schools many of which saw action on cruisers, destroyers and patrol boats during and after the war. The experiences of these groups, their physical and psychological state, and the duties they performed are brought to life through a skilful combination of published memoirs, oral history interviews and archival documents, in particular children's letters, drawings, contemporary interviews and official reports. Despite the importance of this examination of the combat deployment of Soviet adolescent the book's central thrust lies elsewhere.

The book is divided into two parts, each with its own introduction and overview. Part One provides a critical context for understanding Soviet child soldiers. It reconstructs the ideological, social and economic background to children's participation in hostilities, the

factors motivating adolescents to fight, and the role the state played in encouraging and recruiting minors. Kucherenko argues that children's, 'willingness to fight was a reflection of the social norms accepted and cultivated in Soviet society' (p.9). Therefore, an exploration of the political and social processes shaping children's identities provides an opportunity to discover what motivated their enthusiastic demands to fight. The case is built over three chapters, via an examination of educational and upbringing practices, that the state helped promote the notion of child participation in warfare. Chapter One evaluates the impact of state propaganda on children's individual and collective psyches. Brief examinations of family, school, children's literature and cinema, and the young pioneer movement emphasise how collectivism was inculcated. The various agents of children's socialization, having taught that heroic sacrifice for the collective was expected, unintentionally fostered the notion of adolescent participation in war. For some youthful volunteers armed service was a logical continuation of their devotion to the common cause. Chapter Two looks at the construction of the image of the Soviet Motherland in children's culture. Kucherenko demonstrates how, as the Soviet Union prepared for war in the 1930s, children's literature, press, film and theatre were saturated with patriotic propaganda. The effect of which was to make many youths feel personally responsible for the fate of the country, and move some to fight to defend it. Chapter Three examines more conscious attempts to mobilize the younger generation. Children were readied for war by military training, war games and a stream of propaganda placing juveniles on the frontlines. The ubiquity of martial motifs in children's popular culture influenced children. Many derived a mistaken impression of war as an heroic, exciting and risk-free adventure, which encouraged others to expect and demand the opportunity to fight.

These issues remain to the fore in Part Two, although the focus shifts from the development of patriotic discourse in the 1930s to the events of the Great Patriotic War. In its four chapters Part Two assesses effectiveness and ability of propaganda to inspire belief and prompt action amongst children. Chapter Four assesses propaganda's impact in practice. As war began children were not mobilised for military service. There was no intention to place children at risk. Yet, the mixed messages created by propaganda unintentionally encouraged the bravest youngsters to volunteer or seek out the front. Chapters Five, Six and Seven, which contain the bulk of the work's original research, provide case studies of the three categories of child combatant under consideration: *vospitanniki*, child partisans and naval cadets. These case studies focus on the experience of child soldiers, as well as the efforts of

state representatives, officers and adult soldiers to manage adolescent military participation. These chapters succeed in weaving harrowing personal testimony, and a wealth of new material, into a broader analysis of what motivated individual youths to fight. The emphasis shifts from those ideological factors pushing children to fight, towards a consideration of personal and individual motivations. Faced by a war of annihilation child soldiers particularly partisans had little choice. War created a pool of hungry, vulnerable and vengeful potential recruits.

Overall, this work approaches Soviet child soldiers not just an important example of child soldiering during modern industrialised total warfare, but also a means of testing how far ideology and patriotic propaganda influenced Soviet society's youngest generation. Kucherenko concludes that the extraordinary behaviour of otherwise ordinary Soviet children was the product of the 'unique social and psychological atmosphere established in the Soviet Union during the 1930s – 40s...' (p.254). *Little Soldiers* is an engaging contribution to the study of the socialization of Soviet children, the effectiveness of Stalinist propaganda, as well as the social history of the Great Patriotic War. Scholars and students with a variety of interests in the 1930s and 1940s will find much of interest here.

(982 words)