



Orphanage No. 7 in Taganrog.



"Only together!", is the message.

RELIC OF THE GULAG OR SOCIALIST WELFARE?

THOUGHTS ABOUT AN ORPHANAGE IN SOUTHERN RUSSIA

by **Håkan Blomqvist**

The lonely whistle of the diesel locomotive at the factory wends its way into the dormitory where the clatter and bang of freight being loaded and unloaded is mixed with the sighs and murmurs of sleeping children. The floodlights at the entrance to the Iron & Steel Factory cast a pale light through the windows, over teddy bears and lace bedspreads arranged in neat piles. From a sagging armchair in the hall, the night monitor squints slightly at a half-asleep child on the way to the toilet. It is nighttime at Orphanage No. 7 in Taganrog. And the fog from the Sea of Azov settles quietly over the city in southern Russia.

What kind of place is this, where about sixty children of various ages romped and jostled just a little while ago as they brushed their teeth and got ready for bed? Is it a relic of a massive system of children's gulags from the days of the Soviet system, as implied by Human Rights Watch in a December 1998 report? The organization acknowledged that the gulag prisons of the Soviet Union were closed, but stated:

Yet today, in another archipelago of grim state institutions, the authorities of the Russian Federation are violating the fundamental rights of tens of thousands of innocent citizens: children abandoned to state orphanages.¹

The report gave the impression that systematic abuse, violence, and discrimination are part of everyday life for the hundreds of thousands of children estimated to be living in Russian orphanages around the turn of the millennium – a number that had actually gone up in the 1990s.²

The separate world of giant orphanages was historically, according to Human Rights Watch, a reflection of the Soviet philosophy of collective action and discipline that guided the institutions erected to house millions of war orphans during the first half of the 20th century. But instead of dismantling the system and living up to the 1990 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Russian government had allowed the institutions to continue operating. Based on the alarming

report, Human Rights Watch formulated a large number of recommendations to the Russian government to bring to a halt the abuses and guarantee children's rights. These were urgent demands in the difficult reality of the Russian transformation.

But can the Russian and formerly Soviet orphanage system be understood mainly as a relic of the gulag system? Based on many years of working with family support for an orphanage in southern Russia, my intent in this article is to put the experience as it was lived in a historical perspective and to discuss questions surrounding the Soviet and Russian orphanage system.

TRETIKAK'S ORPHANAGE EXCHANGE

"This is Group Room Four, with Nadia, Zyenya, Dima . . . Come, children, we have a visitor from Sweden!"

How many Swedish parents and siblings have at this point



Celebration in the dining hall with Swedish guests from the Tretiak Orphan Exchange.



The dormitories are decorated in the most imaginative way.

been shepherded round Orphanage No. 7 in the industrial city of Taganrog in southern Russia by Rita Logvinenko, director of the orphanage for the past 30 years? It was Rita who accompanied the first group of children from Taganrog to Arlanda International Airport outside Stockholm in June 1991. The summer before, Vladislav Tretiak, Soviet ice hockey legend and goaltender for the Moscow Central Sports Club of the Army (CSKA), and Stig Nilsson, chairman of the Swedish Ice Hockey Association, had broadcast an appeal to Swedish radio listeners: “More than a million orphans are living in orphanages in Russia. Is there anyone out there who can take in a child for a few weeks next summer?”

That same year, Swedish Television had just shown a much talked-about documentary about children in Romanian orphanages.³ The documentary had shaken a great many people – and several felt called upon to do something. Whether the place was Romania or Russia seemed not to make much difference. My wife and I were among those who responded.

THE FIRST GROUPS of Russian children arrived at Arlanda in June the following summer. They came from orphanages in Moscow, Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg), Tula, and Taganrog. All told, there were 97 girls and boys aged 7 to 17, wearing washed-out tracksuits of Soviet cut, with colorful bows and barrettes, floral cardigans, and shy smiles. The summer vacation program, with its mutual visits and support initiatives, the forging of bonds of friendship and family, good experiences and bad, has now been going on for twenty years under the auspices of the Tretiak Orphan Exchange organization. Several orphanages have joined the program over the years, some have dropped out, and the children who have participated can be counted in the thousands. The first groups have long since grown up and left the orphanages, and are living adult lives, often with families of their own in Russia or, in some cases, Sweden. For Swedish parents, the experience gave them insight into the world of Russian orphanages, which has changed with the transformation of Soviet society into today’s Russia.

ORPHANAGE NO. 7

Tolko vmestie my družny
tolko vmestie my silny

Only together are we friends Only together are we strong

An appliquéd textile wallhanging in the vestibule illustrates the Russian folk tale about the turnip. A Russian peasant family standing outside a little cottage as the sun is rising. An itty-bitty mouse happily cavorting over a gigantic turnip. Everyone on the farm has been working together in an attempt to pull up the turnip, but to no avail – until the little house mouse pitched in. And pop! With the combined strengths of everyone and help from the tiniest creature on the farm, the turnip is out of the ground.

“Only together” is the message.

This is not only something that welcomes the visitor. At Orphanage No. 7 in Taganrog, the philosophy imbues everything: weekdays and holidays, education and recreation, mealtimes and bedtimes.

The orphanage was founded in 1948 to house war orphans. The Taganrog Iron & Steel Factory (Tagmet), the biggest industry in the city, donated one of its buildings. The 1930s building served originally as accommodation for traveling engineers and others with temporary assignments at the factory. The two-story building is surrounded by a high barred fence and shaded by poplars and weeping willows. The enormous industrial plant is on the other side of Zavodskaja, Factory Street, where streams of factory workers pass on the way to and from work. The street is lined with small kiosks selling tobacco, alcohol, candy, and bread. There are fruit stands and fish is hawked from the back of trucks, and newspapers for sale are spread out on the ground. No trams or buses rattle by. Zavodskaja is a peaceful side street compared to Dzerzhinskaja around the corner, which is always busy with traffic on the way downtown.

The orphanage has a small ball field and a concrete playground. A flower garden and pergola have been laid in the courtyard formed between the older buildings and a newer wing. Apart from the muted racket from the factory, the orphanage is in a very peaceful spot. The sounds of kids laughing and playing in the playground or on the way to school echo between the factory and the residential houses. In autumn 2006, when I made these notes, there were 62 children residing in the orphanage. Today, in 2011, there are somewhat fewer. During the twenty years we have been in contact with the orphanage, the census peaked at more than

90 children, at which times the dormitories and group rooms were crowded.

The children range in age from four to eighteen – in theory, that is. A few young adults who have been accepted to institutions of higher education have been permitted to stay a couple of years longer. For smaller children, including infants, there is an infants’ home on the other side of the Iron & Steel Factory, near the sea. There are another four orphanages in Taganrog, and a total of 44 in the Rostov region (2006).

For now, the children are divided into six groups of mixed ages, with first-graders and teenagers in the same group. The idea is that the older kids will teach and take charge of the younger ones, helping them with their homework and other chores. Every group has its own group room, most of which are on the second floor of the older building. A couple of groups are housed on the ground floor behind the big entrance hall, where a large stuffed tiger once welcomed people to the visitors’ sofa. The tiger’s duties have now been taken over by a pitch-black Bagheera.

The group rooms function as both study and living rooms. They are comfortably decorated with bookshelves, sofas, pictures, potted plants, and soft rugs. The whole is furnished with a central work and dining table big enough for the entire group, and a relaxation corner with a TV and some kind of sound system. There are aquariums in several group rooms, and one is home to a guinea pig and hamsters. The children do the cleaning and upkeep themselves, taking care of the plants, the aquarium fish, and other things. In November 2006, the kids are busily putting up new curtains after several windows in the orphanage were replaced. While some are gathering the curtains onto rods, others are washing the windows and cleaning up after the workmen. Clearly, the groups think of the rooms as their own and take care of them, often at the big-sisterly urgings of teenage girls directed to the younger boys.

EVERY GROUP HAS two *vospitateli*, teachers or educators, with emphasis on the educational mandate. The educators, all women except one specialist art educator, have worked at the orphanage for a long time and have followed the children from an early age. Although Tatiana or Sveta or one of the others can certainly yell when necessary, the atmosphere is far from harsh and authoritarian. There are admonitions here along with silliness, high spirits along with a little more strictness, depending on personal inclination and the function of



Each room has its own theme and competes with the others.



Countless hours are spent on designing, sewing, and decorating. The children do the cleaning and upkeep themselves.



the group. The climate might be characterized by words like “tightness” and “closeness”.

The group is something of a family collective, one of harmony and security, and there is thus a strong element of social control. It might feel scary to a newcomer at first, but might also seem like a potential source of safety. The task of the educator and the older children is to help the new child meld quickly with the group, as he or she is given a place at the table and a share of the attention the older ones give to the younger.

EDUCATION, UPKEEP, AND THE ARTS

Schoolchildren do their homework in the group rooms. The children of Orphanage No. 7 attend School No. 25, a fifteen-minute walk away. The school takes pupils from the first through eleventh grades. Teaching is provided in morning and afternoon sessions, so the group rooms can provide a fairly calm study environment when half the kids are at school. The children keep their books, pencils, and other supplies in cupboards, where each child has a designated space. It is not really as neat and tidy as it sounds, and when visitors come unannounced, the scene is one of relaxed disorder. The group rooms are thus used both as workplaces and as recreation rooms where the kids drink tea in the afternoon and chill out in front of the TV.

Rita Logvinenko’s director’s office and the educators’ offices are also located here in the older building. The doors are always open to the kids. There is a library and adjacent computer room, a sewing room, and a linen storeroom for bedding, towels, etc. A small gym with a rowing machine and wall bars has been set up in the upstairs hall, where there is also a small doctor’s office. There is a large assembly room for concerts, dances, and games in the basement.

The newer, attached wing houses a laundry room, a commercial-size kitchen, and a dining hall on the ground floor, and the children’s dormitories on the upper floor.

In the dining hall, which is big enough for all the kids at once but where meals are served in shifts to accommodate school hours, the smallest children sit at special mini-tables and mini-chairs. A mural with fairy tale motifs decorates one wall. The food is served at the tables by the older girls who have been assigned the task for the day. The meal often con-

sists of soup – *borscht* or *solyanka* –, bread, and tea.

The dormitories on the upper level are ten in number and decorated in the most imaginative way. The groups do not sleep together – the kids are separated by sex and age. Each room has its own theme, expressed in wall decorations, curtains, bedspreads, and toys. One of the little girls’ dormitories might look like a pink princess’s room, with ruffles and bows and canopies over the beds. A boys’ room might feature race cars or nautical gear. The dormitories compete with each other for imaginative elegance, and countless hours are spent designing the special touches, which may change over time. Bedspreads, pillowcases, and curtains are sewn at the orphanage, and the children make the decorations themselves, under the guidance of the art educator.

The hall leading to the dormitories is kept closed during the day. As at the entrance to the orphanage and by the public phone, children sit, like security guards, next to the stairs up to the dormitories. Children cannot go upstairs during the day without asking for permission.

The toilets and washrooms are adjacent to the dormitory area. The toilets used to be of the “hole in the floor” variety, four in a row, with no cubicles or doors. There was virtually no privacy while going to the toilet or brushing teeth before bed, but boys and girls were ushered in by dormitory so they would not collide, and a rag doll denoted whether boys or girls were using the toilets. Installation of new WCs in separate toilet cubicles started in the last year or so. Buckets, brushes, and scouring cloths on hooks marked with group numbers are telltale indicators of shared responsibility for keeping the washrooms and toilets clean.

BY THIS TIME, the educators have long since gone home, and the “night monitors” have taken over. They are often older women clad in white lab coats, who make sure bathroom visits and getting to bed – mainly for the smaller children – proceed in an orderly fashion. The head night monitor used to have a minimal office next to the stairs, but it has been converted to a bedroom for two teenagers. One of the women on the night crew keeps watch on a sagging sofa illuminated by a night-light until wake-up time in the morning.

There are forty people on staff at the orphanage: one director (Rita Logvinenko), three vice-directors, and fifteen educators, including a special-needs educator, an arts and music educator, and a vocational instructor. There is also a

doctor, who has a small examination room and infirmary, and a dentist (certain weeks), a nurse, the night crew, and “technical staff”, meaning cooks, launderers, a driver, and technicians. Pay (as of 2006) ranges from about 2,000 rubles a month for technical staff, night crew, and kitchen staff up to about 4–6,000 rubles for educators. This can be compared to 15,000 rubles a month for a school principal and 8,000 for qualified primary school teachers and for shift workers at the Iron & Steel Factory.

Alongside schooling, activities include tasks related to running the orphanage, covering everything from cleaning and serving meals to tending the garden. There are also lots of organized recreational activities such as sports, sewing, painting and crafts, singing, music, dance, and drama.

Musicians and other culture workers often visit the orphanage. And the children are taken on outings, preferably to museums, concerts, and theatrical performances. Orphanage No. 7 in Taganrog is far from being a dumping ground or storage facility for abandoned children. It is one of a couple of thousand orphanages of varying quality in today’s Russian Federation.⁴

ADVENT OF THE SOVIET ORPHANAGE SYSTEM

The rationale behind the advent of the Soviet orphanage system was the catastrophic number of “wild” children – *besprizhornie* – wandering around without homes or supervision after the war and revolutionary years of 1914–1921. The problem involved about seven million homeless children and it was the task of the new Soviet authorities to deal with the catastrophe.⁵

Responsibility for the welfare of orphaned and homeless children age three and up was assigned to the People’s Commissariat for Education, *Narkompros* – equivalent to the later Ministry of Education – under the leadership of Anatoly Lunacharsky. Responsibility for children in Soviet orphanages was thus tied to the Russian education system early on. This was, according to historians of the Soviet orphanage system, an ideologically significant choice: child welfare was not to be limited to protection and care, but should also educate and foster the citizens of the new society. The model ended up remained essentially unchanged for the entire Soviet epoch, with continuity into our times.⁶



Aesthetics is highly valued. Orphanage No. 7 as painted by one of the children.



Relaxed disorder in a group room with a feeling of "togetherness".

Radical laws against child labor, child abuse, and exploitation were passed during the initial years of the Soviet regime, but also against adoption (1918), which had been criticized as tantamount to trafficking in children as cheap domestic and farm labor.⁷ Children were given the right to shelter, food, schooling, and a secure childhood. If a child had no parents, either foster parents, preferably relatives, would step in, or society would provide pedagogically based care and welfare in orphanages.

These proud goals, however, stood in stark contrast to the growing millions of orphans, while the economic capacity to realize the goals was decimated during the civil war and the disintegration of the Russian Empire. At the same time, the revolution and Bolshevik government for ideological reasons had dissolved or incorporated the charitable institutions that had operated under the monarchy.⁸ Charity was perceived as a way for the upper classes to buy a clear conscience or for the church to exert its power. Organizations like Save the Children with connections to states that had intervened in the Russian civil war were dissolved.⁹ Consequently, responsibility for addressing the disastrous situation fell entirely upon local Soviets that lacked the resources to attain the goals. Instead, they were forced to build on the former empire's dilapidated shelters and forcibly requisitioned churches, stately homes, and other emergency facilities, which were often overcrowded and suffered from dreadful sanitary conditions and shortages of food, heat, and qualified staff, such as care workers and teachers. In 1921, about half a million of the masses of homeless children were sheltered in more than seven thousand facilities designated as orphanages. Another hundred thousand or so had been placed in foster homes.¹⁰

The number of homeless children declined drastically with the Soviet recovery during the market-oriented NEP period in the mid 1920s, to about one million.¹¹ The rebuilding of Russian society and the Soviet Republics began in these years in a kind of creative chaos in the midst of the severe privations of postwar destitution. Despite the dictatorship, pluralism existed in many areas, even in regard to family policy and child welfare, which were characterized by various currents of ideas and experimentation. Soviet family law was then regarded as the most radical in the world when it came to equality between men and women.¹²

The fundamental Marxist idea that the emancipation of women was dependent upon their economic independence

from men was in turn dependent upon paid employment on equal terms – which meant that childcare and housework had to be made a collective responsibility.¹³ The strong emphasis on collectivized household chores, meal provision, and childcare was also rooted in harsh reality during the civil war and military communism. Alexandra Kollontai, the Soviet government's first minister of social welfare, declared after the civil war that it was the Soviet government's duty to "assume responsibility for the care and welfare of small children, the economic protection of children, and true social education".¹⁴ The argument based on social education theory was combined with criticism of the paternal tyranny, alcoholism, and lawlessness against women and children of the outmoded, patriarchal family relationship. There were economic benefits to the collectivization of housework and childrearing as well. To have every individual family – or housewife, really – devote a large portion of their lives to household chores and childrearing was considered a waste of female labor that could be used to build the socialist society. Collective dining halls, laundries, and daycare centers were considered far more efficient than splitting up household tasks among millions of individual households.¹⁵

ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI rejected the notion that the communist society should take children from their parents and abolish families. A new, socialist family model would instead emerge through changes in the material conditions and the power of example.

"Society's" responsibility for the welfare of homeless and orphaned children was manifested in many different ways in the 1920s, from desperate emergency facilities to experimentation with a wide variety of educational and practical methods to readjust children who had fallen into alcoholism and prostitution, teach them a trade, and educate them. Radical theories of childrearing and education inspired by Leo Tolstoy's ideas at Yasnaya Polyana and those of international educators were tested in schools, boarding schools, and orphanages, which were often criticized for being too lax and individualistic.¹⁶ One of the earliest additions to the motley flora was Ukrainian educator Anton Makarenko's Gorky corrective labor colony outside Poltava, which was soon followed by several similar experiments. Accused of applying "regimental pedagogy", Makarenko underlined the importance of educational leadership, clear structures, and order in provid-

ing for the welfare of former street children. The individual would be subsumed into the collective and improved through vocational training and work. Corporal punishment was not to be used, but the child collective would be developed through peer fostering, with the older children held accountable to a common children's council for the younger children. Orphanages were to be run as self-governing colonies where the children would work in gardens and do other productive labor. Great emphasis was put on technical skills, character building, and arts education.¹⁷ Makarenko's ideas achieved an important breakthrough in 1927, when he was tasked with building up the "Dzerzhinsky labor commune", named after Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet security service. In 1921, the new Children's Commissariat had assigned Dzerzhinsky to quickly get roofs over the heads of the masses of homeless children. The child collective named after him was linked to the security service and became a great success, in part by contributing labor for camera manufacturing.¹⁸ At that point, Makarenko's ideas were not yet serving as guidance, but the recurrent supply crises of the NEP era and political conflicts within the Communist Party heralded a change.

Lunacharsky was deposed in 1929 and replaced by Andrei Bubnov, who was closer to the new leadership surrounding Stalin.¹⁹ A radical centralization of all Soviet social institutions was carried out with the first Five Year Plan and the collectivization of farming. From the economy and policy to culture and science, Soviet society was homogenized. The same thing happened to family policy and child welfare.

MAKARENKO AND THE STALIN ERA

The number of divorces, broken families, and abandoned children rose while birth rates declined during the revolutionary process of industrialization in the early years of the 1930s.²⁰ By then, the hardships of the NEP era towards the end of the 1920s had also affected the child welfare sector. Many orphanages had decayed, sanitary conditions had deteriorated, mortality and morbidity had risen. While the justification of the Five Year Plans was specifically that they would serve to overcome the difficulties of the 1920s, they also gave rise to a new wave of abandoned children.

They were the children of deported and imprisoned kulaks, farmers who had opposed the forced collectivization. They



A vision of a "childhood's world", as imagined by one of the children.



Music, singing, and dancing are important in education.



The children do well in regional sports and dance competitions.

were the children of victims of the political terror against "Trotskyites" and "enemies of the people", who were purged, imprisoned, or shot. And they were, of course, the children of starvation from the disastrous famine along the Volga in the early 1930s. Another factor was rapid urbanization and the dissolution of family ties, with children placed without supervision in hastily erected industrial cities with no social services and far away from the *babushka*.

THE LIBERAL FAMILY reforms of the 1920s were reevaluated in response to the dissolution observed. Under the laws enacted in the 1930s, parents could be held liable for their children's criminality and more easily lose custody for anti-social behavior and neglect of parental responsibility. At the same time, penal sanctions for serious crimes were lowered, new youth institutions for children convicted of crimes and "hooliganism" were established, and the orphanage system was expanded. Children and adolescents lacking supervision could be taken into custody in the expanding systems of labor camps, youth prisons, orphanages, and vocational boarding schools.

With the organization of the 1930s, the Soviet orphanage system solidified into a structure in which the welfare of very young children and children with serious disabilities was managed by the healthcare sector, while other school-age children were placed in institutions for correction, vocational education, and labor.²¹ The link between the orphanage system and preparation for work and production was underlined when the Makarenko model of fostering and pedagogical development was elevated to the norm. Orphanages would not only provide care and protection, but also be designed as training facilities for responsible workers in the emerging Soviet industrial society.

NEW WAVE OF WAR ORPHANS

Stalin's 1930s brought contradictory lines of development in family policy and child welfare. On the one hand, the experimental ideas of the 1920s about new forms of family life were relegated to the history books. One ideal that was realized to some extent among the 1930s middle class of administrators, technicians, and elite workers was the modern socialist family, but in the context of a strong marriage with a traditional division of labor.²² Unlike the Western housewife, however,

the Soviet woman was supposed to work outside the home and society was supposed to provide the childcare.

On the other hand, millions upon millions of Soviet citizens were living under dire social privation, with absolutely no chance of forming families or keeping them together. And for the large orphanage population, the gap between institutional life and the ideal of the Soviet middle class was insurmountable. The strong collective upbringing and "regimental pedagogy" were hardly designed to prepare anyone for life in a socialist engineer's family. But for a disciplined labor force in heavy production and housing in a crowded *komunalka* or a factory shelter – yes. It was not unusual for former orphanage children to pine for and try to reestablish the well-organized "togetherness" of the orphanage, away from need and danger.²³ Others felt thoroughly prepared for their future lives as production workers and for the living conditions of most people in the Soviet working class. But they were also, in a way, prepared for the privations of the war years. It was entirely accepted that as young adults, the children of the orphanages would be part of the Soviet defense efforts of 1941. From life in the pseudo-military organization of the orphanages to an army unit or work brigade was not an insurmountable step.²⁴

THE RAVAGES OF the war and the devastating loss of life gave rise to yet another orphaned generation. With more than 25 million dead, mass expulsions, and shattered communities, millions of children were once again left without home or family.²⁵ Citizens were primarily encouraged to take in foster children and even, this time, to adopt.²⁶ At the same time, a law was passed requiring companies and collective farms to set up orphanages at their own expense to provide for the displaced children of war. The number of orphaned children took on the epic proportions of the civil war era, as did the shelters in overcrowded facilities with shortages of almost everything. Although many children were able to return to at least one surviving and relocated parent after the war and others were taken in as foster children, the overcrowded children's institutions were in a miserable state with regard to both material resources and personal supervision. After the war, millions of children were consigned to growing up with foster parents or in institutions of various types.²⁷ More than thirty years of war, civil war, repression, and social upheaval had shaped the childhoods of generations of Soviet children

– and made orphanages a feature of society as accepted and expected as schools and workplaces.

THE POSTWAR ERA

The death of Stalin in 1953 and the beginning of the Khrushchev era brought not only the dismantling of mass repression and the gulag system. Comprehensive programs for developing Soviet welfare during the reconstruction of the postwar years were also part of the "thaw", which included educational and recreational initiatives for children and teenagers.

A program to develop the boarding school system to extend to non-deprived children was developed in 1956. All Soviet children would be given the opportunity to attend a boarding school with high standards of education and housing. This would lighten the burden on parents and single mothers living in overcrowded conditions and the pupils would be educated to become knowledgeable and responsible Soviet citizens. At the same time, the existing boarding schools for institutionalized children would be given better conditions and higher status. But only about half of the planned one million children were enrolled at boarding schools by 1960, and the plans for millions more had to be scaled back. The official explanation was lack of interest among parents, but the project was also very costly and primarily attracted children from deprived environments and single parents who were not required to pay fees. Consequently, the boarding schools evolved, in practice, into institutions for the less well-off and not at all into the modern welfare communism the Soviet leadership had hoped for.²⁸

The plans were shelved and many of the boarding schools that had been founded instead became part of the institutional world of orphans and children taken into care by compulsory order. The number of children in Soviet orphanages declined sharply during the Khrushchev years as fewer and fewer children were taken into care while more of them left the institutions.²⁹

During the Brezhnev era that followed, the number of institutional orphanages and the number of registered children continued to decline sharply to fewer than 100,000 in about 800 institutions by 1985.³⁰ Life in the orphanages still followed many of Makarenko's ideas, but in demilitarized form and no longer with any direct ties to industrial production. Farm labor had become tending kitchen garden; quasi-military divi-

sions had become “family groups”. The latter were something of a reflection of the Brezhnev era’s stronger emphasis on the importance of the family, along with policies intended to slow the steadily rising divorce rate.

The intense debates on family policy in this era included demands to expand the childcare system and improve quality (smaller groups of children, a higher staff-to-children ratio) in order to facilitate women’s participation in the workforce and also objections that children were spending far too many hours in daycare and not being prepared for their future roles as responsible mothers and fathers in well-adjusted families. Stagnating birth rates, rising abortion rates, and declining school performance among the children of single parents were other themes of Soviet debates on family policy in the 1970s. These were years in which the number of children in Soviet orphanages continued to fall sharply and the large waves of orphans seen in the first half of the century abated.

Developments in educational theory and living conditions at orphanages for “normal” children under the Ministry of Education seemed to follow general developments in social welfare. (This was in contrast to the considerably harsher conditions in orphanages organized under the Ministry of Health, whose task was to care for children with various degrees of physical and mental disabilities. Conditions at Ministry of Health orphanages are not addressed further in this text.)

CHILDREN AT MINISTRY of Education orphanages were sometimes given priority admission to technical education programs, even as a demilitarized Makarenko model for collective fostering lightened up routines and increased contacts with the local community. Visitors to Soviet orphanages in the 1980s could describe them as environments characterized by dedicated staff and warm relationships to the children.³¹ The Brezhnev era of the 1970s also featured a significant expansion of palaces of culture, sports and recreation programs, summer camps, and other opportunities for leisure and summer vacation activities for children and youth.³²

But there was a grimmer side too. Under the more stringent political and social control of the Brezhnev era, placement in orphanages had evolved into an instrument of social repression and punishment that had not been experienced since the Stalin era. As the equivalent of child welfare boards, the resuscitated system of lay courts (“comrade courts”) was strengthened, and school personnel monitored their pupils’ family situations more strictly, a growing number of parents lost custody of their children. Actually, the trend was that an increasing percentage of children in orphanages were not orphans at all, but had been made “social orphans” through a legal process and placed in institutions.³³ This was not limited to situations of child abuse, alcoholism, or criminality. There were also cases in which dissidents and practitioners of religion had been punished by depriving them of custody of their children.

When glasnost made it possible to criticize the dark sides of Soviet society in 1986, the orphanage system was among the targets that elicited the greatest rage and despair. The extent of compulsory care orders and the grounds upon which they were made, the culling of children with disabilities and their relegation to a periphery of institutions with extremely scanty resources and low quality of care and welfare, former residents of orphanages who as adults bore witness to the lack of close family relationships that made their lives difficult forever after – all of this calls to mind a current Swedish discussion of the children in orphanages and foster care during the postwar era as “society’s stepchildren”.³⁴

An intense effort was begun that included investigations and committees in which social educators, children’s rights



How the orphanage system could be dismantled in favor of foster homes and support for at-risk families is a question debated in Russia.



The first groups of children who came in contact with the

activists, and others agitated for reform of the system. Under a new law enacted in 1987, the institutions were to be refurbished and children in orphanages given greater support in the form of clothing and housing when they left the institutions as young adults. Programs were begun to improve support and advice to at-risk families instead of placing children in orphanages, while the first initiatives were taken toward mobilizing popular charitable efforts through the formation of the “Lenin Children’s Fund”. This was named after the communist aid organization of the 1920s, which had at that time incorporated many “bourgeois” and church-based charity projects.³⁵ In the Soviet Union of the late 1980s, however, as Gorbachev’s brief years were coming to an end, the Lenin Fund would be utterly divorced from any socialist welfare dream in which the state provided for the “only privileged class” of society, as children were called. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the switch from the former planned system to a market economy in the 1990s, the Lenin Fund instead constituted the prelude to the new decades of charity, with a growing network of Russian and foreign charitable organizations, based on humanitarian and often Christian principles, replacing the crumbling Soviet welfare systems. This occurred as a fourth wave of hundreds of thousands of at-risk children swamped the former Soviet institutions in conjunction with the Russian “shock therapy” of the Yeltsin years in the 1990s.

ORPHANAGE NO. 7 in Taganrog was one of the former Soviet orphanages that came into contact with the new charity early on, in the form of summer vacation exchanges with Swedish host families. The reality Swedish visitors encountered in Taganrog and elsewhere, however, was not always of the dreaded kind – a destitute shelter for desperate children abandoned by the world – although such a description was at times apt, especially in reference to homes for the mentally disabled. What they found instead were tangible traces and elements of entirely different plans and ambitions.

The demilitarized Makarenko model for collective fostering was clearly present, and not only at the well-equipped and organized Orphanage No. 7, which often placed highly in regional sports and dance competitions. Order and structure prevailed, and still do: morning routines and bedtimes, meals and schooling, recreational activities and summers at camp

(former Young Pioneer camps) follow a schedule, and this is true not only for the younger children. Teenagers also have set times for studies and chores at the orphanage, as well as curfew and lights-out. Activities are characterized by collectivity and shared responsibility: the groups are responsible for their cleaning areas, kitchen or laundry duties, picking up purchases, and the like. They also compete with each other for the best cleaning and the most beautifully decorated dormitories. The “togetherness” that was the aim of the Soviet orphanage model of the interwar era is still conspicuous, both in their shared lives and organization of their accommodation, meals, sleep, and washing-up, as well as the older children’s day-to-day responsibility for the younger ones. There are no children’s councils or more formalized “chains of command” among the children at Taganrog, as there were in the former Soviet orphanage model, but the strong focus on sports and arts programs for painting, handicrafts, song, and music has a long pedagogical tradition.

As they did under glasnost, current waves of debate are running high in Russia about the future of the orphanage system, with a stated ambition to dismantle the orphanages in favor of foster homes – and support for at-risk families. The arguments against the system are not limited to reactions to neglect or concern for children’s rights and opportunities to grow up in normal family life. There are also notions about orphanage residents as a favored group of spoiled, demanding brats who “just take all the time and never give” and become a burden on society even after leaving the orphanage.³⁶ This type of prejudice is, of course, the polar opposite of the image of the Russian orphanage system as a relic of a Soviet gulag archipelago for children.

For the teenagers at Orphanage No. 7 in Taganrog who are playing Counterstrike on the computer beneath a portrait of Makarenko, on the other hand, reality is about preparing for the step from a protective – but also demanding – community to surviving as young adults in a Russian society that offers few bumper cushions. ✕



charity in the '90s have long since left the orphanage for another world.

references

- 1 Human Rights Watch, HRW, *Abandoned to the State: Cruelty and Neglect in Russian Orphanages*, New York 1998, p. 2. Certain aspects of the Soviet orphanage system have also been branded with the term "Children's Gulag" in a collection of documents published in the early 2000s by the Russian Mezhdunarodnyi Fond Demokratiya: Semyon S. Vilensky (ed.), *Deti GULAGA: 1918-1956: Dokumenty*, Moscow 2002. The volume is also available in an expanded English version: Cathy A. Frierson & Semyon S. Vilensky (eds.), *Children of the Gulag*, New Haven & New York 2010.
- 2 According to HRW, of a total of 600,000 children classified as being "without parental care", about 200,000 resided in state institutions, while the others were placed in various types of temporary shelters, institutions under police jurisdiction, or simply waiting for space in an orphanage. HRW reports that in the period of 1996-1998, 113,000 children per year had been "abandoned to the state", double the number in 1992, just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Figures reported on the number of children in Russian orphanages vary in the literature. According to K. Eduards's *Barn i Ryssland* [Children in Russia], published by the Swedish Embassy in Moscow in 2002, about a half million of the 35 million children in Russia were residing in orphanages at the beginning of the 2000s, a number that had risen steeply during the 1990s. According to a UNICEF situation analysis, *Children in the Russian Federation* by Carel de Rooy, November 2004, at the end of 2002 more than two percent of all Russian children, or almost 700,000, were either orphaned or without parental custody. Of this total, about 500,000 were living in institutions. In addition to these figures, UNICEF reported that there was a very large but difficult to assess number of street children not covered by the statistics. Moscow alone had an estimated 33,000 homeless children in 2002.
- 3 Agnes Ers, *I mänsklighetens namn: En etnologisk studie av ett svenskt biståndsprojekt i Rumänien* [In the name of humanity: An ethnological study of a Swedish aid project in Romania], Hedemora 2006, p. 47 f., recounts the various reports and news stories shown on Swedish television that garnered such attention in 1990.
- 4 In February 2009, the Russian Christian charity portal, *Deti-siroty Rossii i stran SNG* [Orphaned Children in Russia and the CIS Countries] www.cirota.ru (accessed 2009-02-10), covered 2,152 children's institutions of various kinds (orphanages, boarding schools, shelters, infants' homes, etc.). Accounts from the various institutions and articles about the situation within the orphanage world indicate that a large number exist under extremely difficult circumstances, while others bear strong resemblances to Orphanage No.7 in Taganrog.
- 5 Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova and Pavel Romanov, "Institutional Child Care in Soviet Russia: Everyday Life in the Children's Home 'Krasnyi Gorodok' in Saratov, 1920s-1940s", in Kurt Schilde & Dagmar Schulte (eds.), *Need and Care: Glimpses into the Beginnings of Eastern Europe's Professional Welfare*, Opladen & Bloomfield Hills 2005, p. 92. According to Bernice Q. Madison, *Social Welfare in the Soviet Union*, Palo Alto 1968, p. 39, there were two million homeless children in Russia before the revolution in 1917.
- 6 Judith Harwin, *Children of the Russian State: 1917-95*, Burlington 2001; Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia 1890-1991*, New Haven & London 2007.
- 7 The earliest Soviet legislation prohibited child labor under the age of 15 and limited work to six hours during the day for children between 15 and 18. During the labor mobilization of war communism in 1920, the law allowed children between 14 and 16 to work four hours during the day. This change was maintained in the labor law enacted in 1922. See Madison, op. cit., p. 37.
- 8 Anne White, "Charity, self-help and politics in Russia, 1985-91", in *Europe-Asia Studies* 1993, vol. 45:5, pp. 787-810. Database: Academic Search Elite.
- 9 According to Harwin, op. cit., p. 10, Save the Children was shut down, while the Red Cross, according to White, op. cit., 1993, was able to continue operating.
- 10 Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, op. cit., p. 92, state that in 1921 almost 350,000 children were being sheltered in more than 7,000 orphanages: more than 10 times the number at the time of the revolution, but a drop in the ocean compared to yet another 4,000,000 or so homeless children. According to Harwin, op. cit., p. 11, a total of 540,000 children were in shelter in 1921, a massive increase from only 30,000 in 1917.
- 11 Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, op. cit., p. 93.
- 12 Helene Carlbäck, "Vision och verklighet: Kvinna, familjen och staten i det tidiga Sovjetryssland" [Vision and reality: Women, the family, and the state in early Soviet Russia], in Håkan Blomqvist & Lars Ekdahl (eds.), *Kommunismens hot och löfte: Arbetsrörelsen i skuggan av Sovjetunionen 1917-1991* [The threat and promise of communism: The workers' movement in the shadow of the Soviet Union 1917-1991], Stockholm 2003, p. 78 f.
- 13 Carlbäck, op. cit., p. 87; Harwin, op. cit., p. 4. For a coherent presentation of the underlying ideas and orientation of the new Bolshevik family policy, see William G. Rosenberg (ed.), *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, Ann Arbor 1993, chapter II, "The New Man and the New Woman: Sex, Roles, Marriage, and the Role of the Family".
- 14 Cited after Carlbäck, op. cit., p. 86.
- 15 See for example Trotsky's paper from 1925, "To Build Socialism Means to Emancipate Women and Protect Mothers", in Caroline Lund, *Leon Trotsky: Women and the Family*, New York 1970, p. 48.
- 16 On the radical ideas in education, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921-1934*, Cambridge 1979. William W. Brickman and John T. Zepper, *Russian and Soviet Education: A Multilingual Annotated Bibliography*, New York 1992, provide examples of early Soviet educational role models. Concerning problems of order and conduct, see Brickman and Zepper, op. cit., p. 31.
- 17 There is extensive literature surrounding Makarenko's educational perspective and projects. For background, I have used James Bowen, *Soviet Education: Anton Makarenko and the Years of Experiment*, Madison 1962.
- 18 See Jan Bergman, *Den ryska och sovjetiska fotoindustrin* [The Russian and Soviet photographic industry], Sundsvall 2006, on the Cheka's camera factory that produced the popular FED camera, or the "Fedka", after Felix Dzerzhinsky.
- 19 Brickman and Zepper, op. cit., p. 32, sum up the switch with these words: "The stage was now set for educational reaction." Bubnov was the People's Commissar for Education until 1937, when he was arrested, and executed by firing squad the following year, according to Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, op. cit., p. 93.
- 20 Harwin, op. cit., p. 17, cites the figure of 200,000 abandoned children in 1934.
- 21 Children with learning difficulties and minor disabilities were also separated and sent to special institutions, but under the control of the Ministry of Education.
- 22 Regarding the complex relationship between the centralized party state's encroachment in all areas and reawakened family ideals, see Cynthia Hooper, "Terror of Intimacy. Family Politics in the 1930's Soviet Union", in Christina Kiaer & Eric Naiman (eds.), *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia*, Bloomington 2006.
- 23 Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov, op. cit., p. 100.
- 24 Lennart Samuelsson, *Tankograd: Den ryska hemmafrontens dolda historia 1917-1953* [Tankograd: The hidden history of the Russian home front 1917-1953], Stockholm 2007, depicts how the Soviet industry that emerged during the first and second Five Year Plans was made convertible to war production. It seems possible to place the inner organization and correction of the orphanage system in a similar context.
- 25 Harwin, op. cit., pp. 20-23. The Soviet secrecy surrounding information about the number of victims and war orphans does not, according to her, permit more exact figures as to the scope of the new wave of orphans.
- 26 In the Russian Soviet Republic alone, according to Madison, op. cit., p. 45, 200,000 children were adopted during the period of 1941-1945. Massive numbers were taken in by foster parents, often by single mothers with children of their own.
- 27 Madison, op. cit., p. 175, states for 1963, so almost twenty years after the end of the war, the figures of 246,000 children in orphanages for "normal" children, 217,000 at boarding schools for children with mental and physical disabilities, plus about 5,000 with more severe disabilities.
- 28 Kelly, op. cit., pp. 260-263.
- 29 Harwin, op. cit., p. 30, states that the number of children in institutions declined only in the period of 1950 to 1958 from 635,900 to 375,000.
- 30 Here, as well, the figures seem uncertain, but according to Harwin, op. cit., p. 56 f, who relies on various sources, the fastest decline occurred in a ten-year period, from 172,900 children at 1,761 orphanages in 1965 to 108,000 children at 900 orphanages in 1975. Ten years later, this figure had fallen to 88,000 children at 760 orphanages. During the period of 1980-1985, the number of children without parental supervision residing at boarding schools increased from 54,000 to 65,000.
- 31 Harwin, op. cit., p. 58.
- 32 The number of children given access to recreational and vacation establishments in the Soviet Union increased according to Harwin, op. cit., p. 39, by more than 50 percent between 1970 and 1980, from about 12 million to more than 19 million.
- 33 The number of court orders by which parents lost custody of their children increased, according to a study cited by Harwin, op. cit., p. 51, from 6,100 cases in 1969 to 13,400 in 1976. Children removed from their homes under compulsory care orders made up one third of a total of 60,000 children in Russian Soviet Republic orphanages (under the Ministry of Education) in 1970.
- 34 Harwin, op. cit., p. 64. For a contemporary study and retrospective, see Clementine K. Fujimura, Sally W. Stoeker and Tatyana Sudakova, *Russia's Abandoned Children: An Intimate Understanding*, Westport CT. 2005.
- 35 Harwin, op. cit., p. 71; White, op. cit., 1993.
- 36 Child psychologist Yekaterina Tarasova, Moscow, at a seminar arranged by Tretiak's Orphanage Exchange, Stockholm 2010-03-20.