

Encounter of pro- and anti-war ideologies in Russian children's literature (2021–2024)¹

Sita Antel, Elizaveta Chukhanova, Mariia Gorshkova, Simon Sergeev

Abstract

Our project studies the role that fiction and non-fiction for the young audience play in present-day Russia and, more specifically, in the conceptualization of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In four critical essays we explore the representations of the military/war-time experience in four editions for children, two of which are created and disseminated with the assistance of the state (*Azbuka o Vazhnom, Zhit – Rodine sluzhit*), and two others are published by independent publishing houses (*Zver 44, Voina vs Detstvo*). Our goal is to compare attitudes towards the war and broader, general ethical systems, communicated through these texts, and artistic devices, used to achieve these goals. We demonstrate that there is an ongoing ideological battle between the official political and liberal narratives in the children's literature in Russia.

Literature review and context

If a person who grew up in the Soviet Union happens to hear the line “Когда был Ленин маленький, с кудрявой головой,” they, most likely, will immediately continue: “Он тоже бегал в валенках по горке ледяной.”² This couplet is a folklorized version of one of numerous poems about Lenin, written shortly after the October revolution and disseminated in schools and kindergartens throughout the Soviet period.³ The broad dissemination of children's texts about the leader of the Russian revolution exemplifies attempted political indoctrination of children through literature. Texts that presented the party leader in a favorable way (in this case, approachable and relatable) were popularized with the assumption that through constant repetition children would learn this appealing image and will later accept the ideology, associated with this person, more easily.

Simultaneously, if a Soviet adult heard “Таракан, таракан, тараканище”⁴ – a line from Kornei Chukovskii's children's poem, where animals crown the cockroach as their leader and

¹ Revision of the draft version Dr. Dominick Lawton

² ‘When Lenin was young and curly-haired, he used to also run along the icy slide.’ (Here and below, if not indicated otherwise, the translations are mine – MG)

³ A representative collection of Soviet children's poems about Lenin can be found, for instance, in Olga V. Bogdanova and Vladimir A. Gutorov, “‘Samyi chelovechnyi chelovek’ v literature stoletii (chast' pervaya).” *Vestnik Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii*, Vol. 22, No. 4-2 (2021), 105-117.

⁴ ‘Oh the cockroach, the cockroach, the giant cockroach.’

then suffer under his unjust role, until a daring sparrow eats him in one swallow – chances are, they would smile understandingly and assume that the speaker was hinting at Stalin.⁵ While “The Giant Cockroach” was written before Stalin came to power and therefore was not, in actuality, targeting him personally, in the years of Stalin’s reign this text acquired a personalized political reading both for the authorities and for the oppositional persecuted intellectuals. More broadly, as this example shows, both sides recognized that reading of certain children’s texts could become a performative political action and an act of civil disobedience.

These two examples demonstrate that in highly politicized societies children’s literature can be a key instrument of ideological fight. In autocracies the state willingly allocates resources to communicate its values to the next generation, as it will guarantee the continuity of heritage and long-term stability of the system, and literature serves as one of the main means of indoctrination. The opposition, despite the obvious disbalance in power and resources, attempts to counter the official narrative and offer children alternative value systems and behavioral patterns.

While in some cases children’s literature becomes an arena for an open cultural war between pro-government and oppositional thinkers, more often it functions as a certain “grey zone” where different meanings coexist for different target audiences. As children are considered “too young” to understand hidden subtexts, the censorship of children’s literature can be less attentive to potentially problematic implications than that of adult books and, as a result, children’s literature can be less strictly controlled. Consequently, in highly regulated autocratic societies children’s literature can serve as a sanctuary for authors, whose adult works are unpublishable (Daniil Kharms and Nikolai Zabolotskii being two well-known examples from Soviet history). Further, children’s literature can become an outlet for politically unorthodox ideas and aesthetically criticized experiments with form. When this is the case, children’s texts acquire a second audience: politically engaged and artistically sophisticated adults, capable of decoding the text. These two audiences influence each other, turning a children’s book into a multi-layered palimpsest and a field for an intellectual debate.

⁵ For example, the political prisoner Evgeniia Ginzburg, soon after she was released from the camp, but was still in exile, received a copy of “The Giant Cockroach” as a present for her daughter from who she believed to be a close friend. Later, upon that friend’s encouragement, she read from it for a narrow circle of fellow political prisoners. While reading, she made significant pauses in the most symbolically loaded parts. Thus, in a context of severe self-censorship, the reading became a form of a political discussion. Later she found out that the gift and the reading were in fact a provocation, she lost her job and risked further arrests. Evgeniia Ginzburg, “Tarakanishche” in *Krutoi marshrut* (Moscow, Sovetskii pisatel, 1990). The political reading of Chukovskii’s poem was intensified by its association with a later canonical text, Osip Mandelstam’s famous 1933 anti-Stalin poem (“Oda Staliny,” “Ode to Stalin”). There Mandelstam depicts Stalin as a cockroach (“Тараканьи смеются усища // И сияют его голенища,” “His cockroach giant mustachios grin // His jackboots shine around his shins” [Translation by Gregory Freidin, published in Gregory Freidin, *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and his Mythologies of Self-Presentation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 242.]) It is unclear whether Mandelstam’s metaphor was a conscious allusion to Chukovskii’s text, but its emergence resignified Chukovskii’s poem in the anti-Stalin intelligentsia circles, assigning it an unequivocal political reading.

Our project seeks to study the role that fiction and non-fiction for the young audience play in present-day Russia and, more specifically, in the conceptualization of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In four critical essays we explore the representations of the military/war-time experience in four editions for children, two of which are created and disseminated with the assistance of the state (*Azbuka o Vazhnom*;⁶ *Zhit – Rodine sluzhit*⁷), and two others are published by independent publishing houses (*Zver 44*;⁸ *Voyna vs Detstvo*⁹). Our goal is to compare attitudes towards the war and broader, general ethical systems, communicated through these texts, and artistic devices, used to achieve these goals.

Historical background: childhood and children's literature as an ideological tool

Generally, in the moments of political mobilization of society children as a social group and childhood as a theoretical concept typically enjoy increased attention. For the state the young generation is a potential resource which can establish the continuation of their agenda and grant the stability of the system. Therefore, in the periods of political struggle and instability governments are more likely to willingly invest into promoting their key values among children. Socialists' educational program can serve as a characteristic example. The socialists aimed at the creation of the "new man," free from the individualistic bourgeois mentality of the imperial past, and children's education became both the central metaphor of the process of forging of the new Soviet man and in practice the primary target of the state's ideological efforts.¹⁰

One of the main instruments of indoctrination is children's literature. Thus, the early Soviet Union launched a massive campaign to develop and popularize a corpus of texts that conveyed collectivist values. Soviets' assessment of the importance of the children's literature as an ideological force becomes clear from the programmatic 1918 *Pravda* article¹¹ by L. Kormchii (Leonid Iulianovich Piralis), a prominent early Soviet children's writer and editor of a children's literary journal. He calls children's literature a powerful weapon of upbringing ("важное оружие воспитания") and therefore calls for a conscious reworking of the corpus of available texts for children, based on the collectivist and class-conscious approach ("очистить <детскую литературу> от яда и мусора предыдущих лет", "to purify children's literature from poison and trash of the previous years"). In response to this demand, a series of institutions was organized in the Soviet Union soon after the revolution, responsible for unification of children's literature, such as the State Commission on the Public Education (Государственная комиссия по народному просвещению) and the Institute on Children's Reading (Институт по детскому чтению).

⁶ 'ABCs about what is important'

⁷ 'To Live is to Serve the Motherland'

⁸ 'Beast 44'

⁹ 'The War vs Childhood'

¹⁰ For a discussion of the Soviets' efforts to create an idealized image of post-revolutionary childhood and its ideological implications, see Part 1, Chapters 2, 3, of Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1917*. (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2007); Chapter 5 of Andy Byford, *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹¹ L. Kormchii, "Zabytoie oruzhie. O detskoi knige." *Pravda* (Moscow), February 17, 1928, no. 28, 3.

When a society experiences a traumatic situation that causes civic unrest, children's literature can become an arena for an ideological fight, which both sides use as a space and a method to formulate and disseminate their (opposite) agendas. For instance, one could observe such polarization of children's literature in the Russian Empire on the eve and during WWI. The government flooded the market with "patriotic" materials, journals that published text that glorified military experience, received governmental financial support and help in distribution.¹² As Aaron Cohen¹³ shows, these materials became a point of concern among liberal Russian educators, who were critical of Nicholas's rule and of absolutism as a political system in general. They viewed their pedagogical goal in fostering a democratically minded generation that will bring the much-needed liberal reforms to Russia. They perceived the governmentally funded patriotic materials which promoted radical patriotism by dehumanizing the enemy as a threat to their pedagogical program. They argued for an alternative educational model, which fostered universal humanistic values through promoting "the spirit of human compassion, moral responsibility, and true citizenship [grazhdanstvennost']".¹⁴

The reasons to turn to children's literature as a space for ideological battle are multiple. On the one hand, both sides see the next generation as a weapon, whose cooperation will ensure the prevalence of their values in the long run. On the other hand, children's literature simultaneously allows the authors to talk to adults and to influence them as well. Its didactic language can serve as a form of social hypnosis. In autocratic societies writing for children has become a form of Aesopian language that allows more daring political critique than adult literature.

Childhood and Children's Literature in Contemporary Russia

Present-day Russia is going through a tremendous political and social crisis and, as in the situations I discussed above, it is accompanied by a rise in attention towards childhood. Governmental attempts to indoctrinate children through schooling are well-documented: weekly lessons, entitled "Conversations on important affairs," which explain the foundations of present-day Russian ideology, have become a mandatory part of the curriculum; resistance to participation becomes a political statement.¹⁵ The case of Masha Moskaleva, a six-grader, who

¹² Kornei Chukovskii, who before the October revolution was a member of the Kadet party and in his literary criticism conveyed liberal views, noticed that in 1909 patriotic children's journal *Zadushevnoe Slovo* was recommended for subscription in cadet academies by the Chief Directorate of Higher Military Educational Establishments. Chukovskii argued that this journal published a disproportionate number of war-related stories which glamorized military experience and encouraged children to join the army. Kornei Chukovskii. "Material o detskikh zhurnalakh," in Kornei Chukovskii. *Sobranie sochinenii: v 15 tomakh*, t. 2 (Moscow: Terra—Knizhnyi Klub), 574-575.

¹³ Aaron J. Cohen, "Flowers of Evil: Mass Media, Child Psychology, and the Struggle for Russia's Future during the First World War" in *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, ed. James Marten (New York: New York University Press, 2002)

¹⁴ Ibid, 45. A characteristic example of the approach of liberal intellectuals and pedagogues of the Russian Empire to the representation of the war for children is the 1915 collective volume *Deti i Voina. Deti i Voina: Sbornik statei* (Kyiv, Izdanie Kievskago Filibevskogo Obshchestva, 1915).

¹⁵ The following article offers multiple examples of children being forced by the school authorities to participate in the classes against their own and their parents' wish: Alla Konstantinova, "Teach kids... so that they are proud of

drew an anti-war picture and whose father was consequently accused of “discreditation” of the Russian army and jailed,¹⁶ clearly shows that the government considers the indoctrination of children a matter of national importance and that children’s minds have become a territory of the battle between the authoritarian state and the liberal opposition. Children’s literature, as during WWI, has become a place of political discussion. On the one hand, we observe the publication of a large number of governmentally funded “patriotic” books. On the other hand, we see a rise in anti-war and anti-totalitarian books.

The use of children’s literature as an ideological tool and, more specifically, the role it plays in conceptualization and explanation of the war in Ukraine has so far received less scholarly attention than ideologization of formal¹⁷ and extracurricular¹⁸ education. A few conference panels touched upon the topic,¹⁹ and a few journalistic materials that explored either pro-war patriotic²⁰ or anti-war²¹ children’s cultural production, but, to our knowledge, no academic works that attempt a comparative analysis of “pro-” and “anti-” war children’s literature have to this date been conducted. Our present project is an attempt to open up the field for future studies.

I. Pro-War text: Азбука о Важном

Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality was the official imperial doctrine of Tsar Nicholas I. However, while it has been almost two hundred years since his death his ideas about Russian

the war.” Russian school children threatened with expulsion for refusing to attend ‘Important Conversations’.” Mediazona, September 14, 2022. <https://en.zona.media/article/2022/09/14/brainwashing>

¹⁶ About Masha Moskaleva’s case see, for instance, “‘Dad, you are my hero’ A Russian court sentenced a single father to two years in prison after his daughter submitted an antiwar drawing at school. But the defendant fled from under house arrest the night before.” Meduza. March 28, 2023. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/03/28/dad-you-are-my-hero>

¹⁷ A prominent field of study is the comparative analysis of Russian history textbooks. Diachronic analyses conclusively demonstrates how the textbooks adapted for the dominant historical narrative. See, for instance, Rustam Almaev, Vladimir Antonov, Ildar Baishev, Marat Yanborisov, “History School Textbooks Evolution in Russia” in *Humanistic Practice in Education in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Irina Murzina (European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences. European Publisher. Vol. 93), 34-44.

¹⁸ See, for instance, a description of the development of military-patriotic clubs (*iunarmii*) in Jonna Alava, “Russia’s Young Army: Raising New Generations into Militarized Patriots” in *Nexus of Patriotism and Militarism in Russia*, ed. Katri Pynnöniemi (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), 249-282.

¹⁹ For instance, at a round table “О научных занятиях на фоне войны” (‘About scholarly work against the background of the war’) Svetlana Maslinskaia, a literary scholar who focuses on Soviet children’s literature, mentioned that her professional competences gained new pragmatic meaning: now, in addition to her scholarly work, she gives public talks for librarians on propaganda in children’s literature. Aleksei Evstratov. “Kruglyi stol “o nauchnykh zaniatiakh na fone voyny” (Université Grenoble Alpes, May 15 2023 г.). Vmesto poslesloviia. In *ILCEA* [En ligne], 53 | 2024, mis en ligne le 01 février 2024, consulté le 27 avril 2024. <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/18573>

²⁰ Ex. Lola Romanova. ““Shakaly dlia nas – eto strany zapada”: kak v rossiiskikh detiakh vospityvaiut voinstvuiushchii patriotizm s pomoshchiiu spektaklei, rasskazov, mutfilmov i igrushek”. Novaia vkladka, March 5th 2024. <https://thenewtab.io/shakaly-dlya-nas-eto-strany-zapada/>

²¹ Natalia Beskhlebnia. “Detskaia literatura soprotivleniia.” Kholod. May 10, 2023. <https://holod.media/2023/05/10/detskaia-literatura-protiv-voyni/>

nationalism still live on, through the Russian Federation and Vladimir Putin. State controlled media has always existed in the USSR and Russia but has grown exponentially more militaristic in nature due to the full scale invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022. One of the most new and prominent state sponsored early education books is “Азбука о важном” or “ABCs about what is important”.

The book covers every letter of the Russian alphabet, and includes words alongside them that represent each letter. Activities such as drawing, coloring, connect-the-dots, and mazes are included throughout as well. Almost all imagery and words chosen ties back to Russia, the state, Russian history, and the military. This early childhood textbook meant for children from ages three to six was created in 2023 by the Social Initiatives Development Fund particularly for the Far Eastern Federal district of Russia.²² The Far Eastern Federal District is Russia's largest district covering about 41% of the country and incorporating over eight million people.²³ Additionally it is also one of Russia's most ethnically diverse regions including many Tatars, Koreans, Jews, Yakuts, Koryaks, and Nanai.²⁴ This could possibly be one of the reasons why “Азбука о важном” is so nationalistic, it is targeting an audience that is farthest from the more ethnically Russian capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow. As well as the fact that these far Eastern and Siberian areas are where Putin is recruiting the vast majority of his foot soldiers to fight in Ukraine from.²⁵ Primarily, rural Buryatia and Krasnoyarsk Krai, regions which are poorer than the West of Russia are better targets for military nationalism and being an ideological training ground for young soldiers. “Азбука о важном” is nationalistic, militaristic, and a propagandist text that uses Russia’s history, religion, and sentiments such as pride to foster Pro-Russian sentiments in young readers.

Power of the Army

From the first letter A we see a change from the usual “ананас” and instead see “армия” with the caption “defenders of our country and our pride”. A for Армия is shown next to an illustration of the ranks in the Russian Army as shown by stars, from Captain to Major General, instilling in children an idea that you can be honored by being in the army and you can elevate your status. Historically speaking, the Table of Ranks was instituted by Peter the Great in 1722 since the time of the Russian empire and was one of the only ways a peasant family or any person really could elevate their status into being a part of the gentry/aristocracy. While the Table of Ranks was abolished in 1917 under the Bolsheviks, military service was still a way to gain social benefits although less stratified than in Imperial times. In modern Russia joining the army remains one of the only ways to climb both the social and economic ladder in Russia, especially for those born in the rural East. Starting with Армия really sets the tone for the rest of the words

²² “Non Profit Organization Fund for the Development of Social Initiatives,” Office of the Representative of the President of the Russian Federation in the Far Eastern Federal District , 2021, <http://fipdv.ru/projects.html>.

²³ “About the Far East,” Eastern Economic Forum , accessed February 20, 2024, <https://forumvostok.ru/en/about/>.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ “Where Are Russia’s Newest Soldiers Coming From?,” The Economist, October 21, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/10/21/where-are-russias-newest-soldiers-coming-from>.

of the book as they were chosen to instill feelings of glory within Russian children along a feeling of motherland that has been fostered since age 3 and would make readers much more likely to fight for Russia when they reach enlistment age. B/v for ветеран/veteran which is described as “Veteran, The man who brought victory and peace to our country”. Once again this is idolizing the glory that enlistment can bring upon a common man, and that fighting is not an individual act but one that greatly impacts the entire nation. r/h which very aptly stands for репортёр/hero, includes captions which are militaristically focused. “Every warrior is a hero. He is going into battle today for freedom, for Russia. May the Lord give him strength” is the definition of hero. For E the words chosen are unity and unity of the Russian people with the caption stating, “The strength of our country is in the unity of the people!”. This part is incredibly important for the target audience, which is ethnically diverse Russians who might not feel as tied to Russia as they do to their individual culture. Inspiring nationalism among a country of many nationalities has been something that Russia has always grappled with, but it is incredibly vital if one wants to mobilize large numbers of people for a military or national cause.

God and Orthodoxy

The tie between Russian nationhood and Orthodoxy is one that Putin has been revamping ever since he first took office in the early 2000s. The Orthodox religion has become central to legitimizing the state through God and in return the state ensures the protection and advancement of the church. This mutualistic relationship is interesting but the interlacing Russianness with Orthodoxy is not a new idea and ties back to the Nicholas I imperial doctrine of autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationality. The blur between the lines of religious and national duty are evident in the text. In Г for гимн/гимн, we see the definition being “A song dedicated to the Motherland, a symbol of the state.” We also see a legitimization of the Army through God and religion represented in the text. In the section of the book “Б” we have the words God and brotherhood with the caption under God quoting a phrase from Russian commander Alexander Suvorov, stating, “We are Russians! God is with us”. The reference to an 18th century military commander is yet another ideological strategy of cultivating a nationalist narrative of historical continuity. This amalgamation of national identity, religious belief, and military duty pretty much sums up the entire tone of the text and of the modern Russian propaganda perspective. This quote is incredibly saddening when placed into the context of religious soldiers believing they are fighting a type of “God’s war” in Ukraine and have been brainwashed into thinking they are the army of God, when in reality they are just mere numbers to those actually calling the shots.

Weaponizing history

Throughout the text there are callbacks to Russia's history, both military victories, and the rhetoric of the three great phases, Russian Empire, USSR, and Russian Federation. Firstly, for Г which stands for hero we see the accompanying illustration of Dmitry Ivanovich Donskoy. He was a Muscovite prince who defeated the Mongols and has been mythicized in Russian historical memory.

There are several words that call back to historically important military victories, primarily WWII, which has been honored through large celebrations on May 9th since Soviet times. For the Immortal regiment was chosen, with the caption “gratitude and memory of those who defeated the Nazis” and an accompanying illustration of the eternal flame monument with the years 1941-1945 underneath. World War Two is an incredibly powerful part of historical memory for the Russian people as it has been ingrained into nationalist sentiments by the USSR and now by Putin’s Russia. Russia did play an integral role in the war, however the facts have been mythicized and inflated, turning victory day on May 9th into less of a historical celebration and more of a continued nationalistic display.²⁶ Additionally, WWII and the Soviet victory over Nazism has been used as a historical justification for the full scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin has himself claimed that “Ukrainian Nazis” is a major justification for his war, these claims are entirely unfounded, and it is a prime example of using a nationalistically charged event to inspire motivation and enlistment.²⁷ Another mention of WWII is under the letter T and is the T-34 tank. The tank is described in the book as being “The Victory Tank, the best tank in all of the Great Patriotic War” (WWII). This is honing in on the superiority of Russian military industry historically, which has an undertone of modern application as well. An illustration of the tank is provided next to the text which aids in visualization as remember this book is targeted towards young children. The army is obviously a central part of this text and this is only furthered by the letter F which stands for Fleet and Flag. Under Fleet we have a quote from emperor Alexander III which states, “Russia only has two allies: the Army and the Navy”. This quote is important because it establishes the continuity of heritage from the Russian Empire, through the USSR, and now to the modern Russian Federation. It also gives historical justification for the rhetoric that Russia is constantly surrounded by enemies, as Alexander III is basically saying that Russia can only ever rely on itself and must have strong armed forces to survive. This rings true for Putin’s Russia as well, as another of his named motivations for the attacks on Ukraine has been because of an “aggressive” NATO is a rehashing of the tale as old as time East vs. West standoff.²⁸ The flag section has some interesting historical illustrations in which it demonstrates how the three stripes on the modern Russian Federation flag each came from one period of Russian history. Once again this is a call back to Russia’s historical heritage, tethering modern Russia to the empire and union of its past, focusing on their land conquests and physical greatnesses. These constant reminders of Russian history and historical Russian military might are intentionally redundant. They are contributing to the cementing of the ideas of Russian dominance and love for one’s country into a young reader’s head.

Gender in the text

²⁶ Dan Bilefsky, Anton Troianovski, and Neil Macfarquhar, “What Is Victory Day in Russia, and Why Is It so Significant?,” The New York Times, May 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/09/world/europe/russia-victory-day-may-9.html>.

²⁷ Peter Dickinson, “NATO, Nazis, Satanists: Putin Is Running out of Excuses for His Imperial War,” Atlantic Council, November 8, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/nato-nazis-satanists-putin-is-running-out-of-excuses-for-his-imperial-war/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

When analyzing the textbook and its choices of illustrations and examples it became apparent that the target audience was young boys. There are countless depictions of male soldiers, male historical figures, and young school boy illustrations instead of young girls. The only two focused depictions of women in the book are for grandmother, mother, and teacher, which are clearly gendered roles. Obviously this is intentional as it is boys who will grow into men and serve the Russian army so nationalism needs to be built within them. However this left the question of how the Russian state sees the role of women in society. There are a few letters that offer somewhat of an answer to this. Firstly with ж which stands for женщина/Woman, the text describes a woman as “A mother, grandmother, sister. They must always be taken care of, they must be helped, they must be protected”. Also M for Mama, “the first and most important word.” These two examples fit perfectly into the classically Russian Empire Orthodox gender roles that have been reinstated for women in a post USSR society in which men are the dominant and women are the motherly subordinate role. It is important to note that this is a departure from the egalitarian gender roles that were pursued during the Soviet Union, where women were encouraged to join the workforce alongside men. *Азбука о важном* seems to ignore this, opting for the religiously charged and Russian imperial tradition instead. Within the gendered realm of the book it becomes clear that modern Russia wants to teach young girls that their goal should be motherhood and that as mothers they will be protected by strong militaristic men.

Азбука о важном in action

According to a deputy minister of the region their attempts with the book was to “present the letters already known to the children, but only with those words that reflect love for the Motherland.”²⁹ However when the intentions of this book are analyzed within the broader context of War in Ukraine, particularly as mentioned previously with the targeting of poorer rural areas to recruit soldiers, the pain that is brought by state inspired militarism comes to light. In an article titled “The No-Choice Matriarchy” from New Tab, an online magazine about life in Russia after the war in Ukraine, women whose husbands left to fight in the conflict are interviewed and the impacts of propaganda are incredibly apparent. Most notably from Amina who lives in Dagestan, not a region targeted directly by the ABCs book but one that suffers from the effects of state sponsored nationalism. Amina discusses her children in an interview, “I tell them that daddy is fighting on the side of good. They are very proud of him. The eldest keeps telling me that when he grows up he wants to join the military too. He draws tanks all the time and wonders why scientists can’t come up with a giant rocket so that we can win immediately.”³⁰ Here we can see the intra-generational effects of pro-war education such as “Азбука о важном”, in which the son will grow to become the father and be called away to fight for the motherland he has been trained to love. While this textbook has been created currently for the far Eastern

²⁹ “‘The ABC’s of What’s Important.’ Let’s Get Acquainted with Another Russian Textbook,” web log, *For Family Childhood and Education* (blog), September 22, 2023, <https://dzen.ru/a/ZO0k4cVJTwsTP1uA>.

³⁰ Darina Derevyagina, “The ‘No-Choice Matriarchy,’” *Novaya Vkladka / The New Tab*, March 13, 2024, <https://en.thenewtab.io/the-no-choice-matriarchy/>.

districts according to Russian state media channel it will soon be distributed to more regions further expanding the mentality that comes with pro-war education.

(Sita Adelaide Antel)

II. Pro-War Text: Жизнь - родине служить

The phrase “Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality” (“Pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost’”) invented by Count Sergei Uvarov, which in one way or another epitomized all Russian politics both before the Revolution and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is almost 200 years old. The theory of state nationality was an officially accepted ideology during the time of Nicholas the First.

“Going deeper into the consideration of the subject and searching for those beginnings that constitute the property of Russia (and every land, every nation has such a Palladium), it is clear that such beginnings, without which Russia cannot prosper, strengthen, live - we have three main ones:

1. Orthodox faith,
2. Autocracy,
3. Nationality”, Uvarov said at the report at the inauguration of the Minister of Public Education³¹.

It is worth noting that for the first time, Uvarov placed Orthodoxy in a more important position than the autocracy, but this trend continues to this day in a country where the church separate from the state has a huge influence on politics and propaganda.

Since Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church has significantly increased. According to the religious scholar Nikolai Mitrokhin, it has become a new "religious branch of government".³² For example, a law on insulting the feelings of believers was passed, spaceships and new factories are consecrated, the ROC receives money from the state budget allocated under federal programs, and Patriarch Kirill is guarded by state security.

In 2007, Vladimir Putin called nuclear weapons and Orthodoxy "the two pillars of Russian society" that guarantee the country's external security and moral health.³³ In 2012, Russian Patriarch characterized his presidency as "a miracle of God."³⁴

³¹ Sergey Uvarov, “ On some general principles to guide the management of the Ministry of Public Education”, October 27, 2017, http://az.lib.ru/u/uwarow_s_s/text_1833_o_nekatoryh.shtml

³² Nikolai Mitrokhin, “ The Russian Orthodox Church in the Age of Absolutism”, January 23, 2013, Vedomosti, https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2013/01/23/rpc_v_epohu_absolyutizma

³³ “ Russia’s Orthodox Church paints the conflict in Ukraine as a holy war”, The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/03/21/russias-orthodox-church-paints-the-conflict-in-ukraine-as-a-holy-war>

³⁴ Gleb Bryansky, “ Russian patriarch calls Putin era ‘miracle of God’”, Reuters, 08.02.2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE81722Y/>

Back in Yeltsin's time, in 1995, the Russian Orthodox Church established a Synodal Department for Cooperation with Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies. In 2001, it was headed by Archpriest Dimitri Smirnov, who later openly justified the war. He said: "It should be taken as a visitation of God."³⁵

Among other things, the department began spiritual training of officers - faculties of Orthodox culture appeared in Russian military universities. Six of the department's ten sectors are responsible for relations with law enforcement and military structures. Military chaplains in 2009 became a structural subdivision of the Ministry of Defense within the Russian Orthodox Church.

Military-patriotic youth clubs began to appear at parish Sunday schools. At the same time, ROC priests performed rites of consecration of weapons, conducted politicized TV programs on the federal church channel Spas, and actively used rhetoric about the "host of Christ" or "army of Christ" in their sermons - it is the collective name of the angels.

From 2018 to 2020, the ROC participated in the construction of the "Main Temple of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation," known for its militaristic symbols - for example, the steps of the temple are cast from an alloy made from melted tracks of German tanks from World War II. In 2013, the Russian Orthodox Church officially supported Russia's foreign policy strategy, including the military operation in Syria. According to a 2011 statement by Patriarch Kirill, it is the duty of the Church to provide moral support to the Russian Armed Forces and to protect the spiritual and political sovereignty of the Russian Federation.

The Russian Orthodox Church supports the war in Ukraine³⁶ - because the Russian militaries defend their home, their Fatherland. This has been repeatedly stated by Patriarch Kirill. The actions of the head of the Russian Orthodox Church have been publicly condemned by many state and religious figures. Australia, Great Britain, Canada, Lithuania, New Zealand, Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Estonia have imposed personal sanctions against Patriarch Kirill.

In May 2022, three months after the start of Russia's full-scale military invasion, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church separated from the Moscow Patriarchate³⁷. The Church condemned the military actions in Ukraine and Patriarch Kirill's position on the conflict. The UOC proclaimed full autonomy and independence.

³⁵ Archpriest Demetrius Smirnov on the events in Ukraine: "This should be perceived as a visitation of God", The multiblog of archpriest Demetrius Smirnov, December 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0j36bG1exn0>

³⁶ Joseph Gedeon and Nahal Toosi, "The pro-Putin preacher the U.S. won't touch", Politico, June 22, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/06/22/patriarch-kirill-putin-russia-ukraine-00041388>

³⁷ Resolution of the Council of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of May 27, 2022, May 27, 2022, <https://news.church.ua/2022/05/27/postanova-soboru-ukrajinskoji-pravoslavnoji-cerkvi-vid-27-travnja-2022-roku/#2024-05-28>

At the same time, in October 2023, the Ukrainian Rada effectively banned the Ukrainian Orthodox Church because of its allegedly ongoing ties with Russia³⁸.

In December 2023, the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church released a book titled "To Live is to Serve the Motherland." ("Жить - родине служить") According to the compilers, it is a collection of proverbs, sayings, quotes from the Bible and instructions of the holy fathers. It is published in the website section "Books for the children".³⁹

Bishop Nikolai of Balashikha and Orekhovo-Zuevsky is the chief editor of the collection. The pocket-sized book was published in an edition of 3,000 copies.

For the first time the word "war" in this book is mentioned already in the abstract. "Proverbs help to evaluate their own actions and the actions of others, adjust to military everyday life and strengthen the will to win," - the authors point out.

Among the chapters of the book can be found the following: "Holy Fathers about war, peace and the Russian army" («Святые отцы о войне, мире и российском воинстве»), "The Russian land is all under God" («Земля Русская вся под Богом»), "If we will be called - we will not sweat: we will serve the Motherland" («Призовут — мы не потужим: Родине послужим»); "Without digging there is no life in the war" («Без рытья нет на войне житья»); "Rifle training - strength, bravery and skill" («Строевая подготовка — сила, бравость и сноровка»), "The steadfast soldier does not know the word "back" («Стойкий солдат не знает слова «назад»); "Keep the secret - keep honor" («Тайну храни — честь береги»), "On the enemies of our Motherland" («О врагах нашей Родины»).

The preface neutrally talks about what proverbs and sayings are, how they were created, what human vices ridiculed, but gradually the authors move on to pointing out what, in fact, the collection is devoted to - to proverbs and sayings about war.

"Many Russian proverbs represent the best qualities of our warriors: devotion to the Motherland, steadfastness, courage, endurance, readiness for a feat. Proverbs and sayings also reflect such military qualities as friendship, army camaraderie, mutual help in battle, love for the commander, etc.," the preface says.

Many of these proverbs are indeed Old Russian. For example, the expression "God gives power to whomever he wants" ("Бог дает власть, кому хочет") is first found in the Tale of Bygone Years ("Повести временных лет").

³⁸ Nurlan Gasymov, Gleb Mishutin, "Verkhovna Rada backs ban on Ukrainian Orthodox Church", October 20, 2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/10/20/1001581-verhovnaya-rada-podderzhala-zapret-ukrainskoi-pravoslavnoi-tserkvi>

³⁹ "To live is to serve the Motherland: Russian proverbs and sayings, quotations from the Holy Scriptures, admonitions of the holy fathers", sayings", <https://rop.ru/shop/product/zhit-rodine-sluzhit-russkie-poslovicy-i-pogovorki-citaty-iz-svyaschennogo-pisaniya-nastavleniya-svyatyh-otcv-izrecheniya>

Other proverbs and sayings, such as "The Russian land is all under God" ("Земля русская вся под богом") are mentioned in Vladimir Dahl's collection of proverbs and sayings, published in 1862.

The saying "Act according to the statute - you will win honor and glory" ("Живи по уставу - завоюешь честь и славу") refers to an even earlier time. It is attributed to the Russian commander Alexander Suvorov.

At the same time, some of the sayings in the book date back to World War II. These include, for example, "It is easier to live by the rules than to serve" ("По уставу жить - легче служить").

Proverbs and sayings are selected in such a way that they are a guide to action. Thus, among other things, the collection speaks of the need to be "obedient to every human authority", because "all authority is from God", and war is presented as a "God-pleasing" deed.

This book serves as a model of historical continuity, which is one of the main propaganda ideas of Russia. That is why it contains proverbs, sayings and sayings from different centuries, including some taken out of context.

It is also worth noting that despite the fact that the publisher of the book is the Russian Orthodox Church, it contains sayings from the Soviet era, when the main ideology of the country was atheism.

We have no record of this book being used in children's Sunday schools or in public schools or kindergartens. Perhaps it is used at the personal initiative of teachers, but perhaps it is only introduced to children by their parents.

It should be noted that a collection of proverbs and sayings with a similar title was already published in 1958. Of course, its publisher could not be the Russian Orthodox Church - the book was issued by DOSAAF (ДОСААФ - Добровольное общество содействия армии и флоту, Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Army, Aviation and Navy of Russia).

The annotation to the collection stated that its authors were Colonel A. Arseniev and Lieutenant Colonel M. Voronin, and the content included pre-revolutionary proverbs, sayings, sayings, as well as texts from the Great Patriotic War and postwar period. In addition, there were used materials published in various folklore editions, in the front press, in military district newspapers.

At the same time, because of the state policy of atheism, no statements of the "holy fathers" are given in the collection. This is its main difference from the publication of the Russian Orthodox Church.

(Elizaveta Chukharova)

III. Anti-War text: Зверь-44

The novel of Rudashevsky aimed at children up to 16 years old describes the war from the point of view of its main character - Biven'. Biven' and his team is a group of young adults which constantly face death to the degree that it changed their vision of the world. The use of the young adult as the narrator in this novel, at least to the Russian reader, communicates a sentiment present in the current Russian society when children have to grow up very fast and adults, in their obsession with the war, start to act like children. Apart from that, one of the main arguments of the novel is its pacifist message- *"Think of us as the third force. We are against those who go offensive. It does not matter on which side you are. If you start an offensive attack we consider it wrong."*⁴⁰

The novel's main characters' life is tied with the portable crematorium, Zver 44 which gives them an ability to stay neutral and safe on the battlefield such that they would not be attacked by any side in the conflict. Their everyday life consists of hard physical tasks of collecting and carrying rotten, dilapidated dead bodies of soldiers back to Zver. Zver is not only for cremating bodies or storing them, but it is also the main characters' home where they eat, sleep, and spend their free time. They are always surrounded by the presence of corpses with their smell and appearance both at home and their work. However, they seem to be very accustomed to this type of life. They are not scared to see the piles of dead bodies, destroyed cities, and ongoing rockets' fire. They tackle their hard tasks with indifference and almost no emotions. Due to that, it is hard to recognise that characters of the novel are only a group of young adults whose maximum age matches the age of the reader of the novel.

Interestingly, the author uses different euphemisms for different states of dead bodies which are frequently used by the narrator and main characters: *zhaba* for rotten corpses up until their body becomes as squizy as the toad's skin, *rusalka* for dead bodies found in the water, *shashlyk* for bodies of people which were burned alive. *Shashlyky* could be considered as most terrifying of all: *"shashlyky completely black, burned alive and tightly fused with their dresses. Their hands were spreaded so it seemed like they are stretched to us in hope that we will finish something started - burn them till they become piles of bones."*⁴¹ These euphemisms completely replace the use of the normal way of denoting the fallen soldiers. It is sort of the slang which Rudashevsky uses to transpire the degree of the psychological trauma of the main characters. To some extent this inner emotional tension could be paralleled with A. Balabanov's movie *Kochegar* which is, similarly to the book of Rudashevsky, is full of struggle for survival in the harsh environment.⁴² At the same time, it may seem as if the author depicts the main characters as indifferent and cruel for a purpose to say that people develop such qualities just to be able to survive. However, it is still a question how the author himself sees the characters.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 214

⁴¹ Ibid, 66

⁴² A. Balabanov, "The Stoker," October, 2010, <https://www.filmlinc.org/films/a-stoker/>

It is possible to trace the author's position towards characters and their actions through multiple scenes. On the one hand, the author criticizes the main character's ignorance, their lack of education and inability to read and count: *"we were promised various teachers. Geographer came for a couple of times with the globe and a teacher for writing who tried to teach us about cases in the Russian language. Fara was one of us who could read but for others it was enough that we could orient ourselves by the navigator and recognise signs under the levers of 'Zver'."*⁴³ The author draws main characters in the way which in the popular Russian language could be called- *Sapogi* or *Sapozhki* (the ignorant military personnel). It should be noted that this type of criticism of the main characters as quite limited and simple is the typical left critique in Russia of the military which might be seen as too harsh and dehumanizing. However, we may also see that the author considers the main characters with a degree of humanistic understanding and compassion. For example, the author endowed main characters with moral principles such as friendship and loyalty: *"someone else will care about him. I will never put my in-groups into danger."*⁴⁴ Furthermore, the episode when the main characters decided to break into someone else's abandoned apartment shows that Rudashevsky is more understanding and compassionate to such actions than critical. His sentiment could be described by the popular Russian saying: *nu chto podelayesh, vse zhe my lyudi...*⁴⁵ He does not make a satirical humoresque like previously trying to make fun of their ignorance and barbarism but is rather compassionate to the main characters. Probably, the moral behind is that there is always a need to put ourselves into the shoes of others. To some extent, this critique may be generalized to real life events when people may find themselves in similar situations as the main characters of the novel. At the same time, it is interesting to examine the author's overall approach towards different sides of the war.

Throughout the book the author multiple times suggests the idea that it is very hard to discern which soldier belongs to which side even in spite of their marks: *"by words and language two sides did not differ. Without the lines of tape on the left hand and right leg they would not even by themselves know whom to shoot."*⁴⁶ Furthermore, the narrator of the novel described one of the members of the opposite side as looking like his father: *"The commander of the opposite side looked a bit like my father. Just a bit. The same height, portly and unshaved. I regretted that we did not have binoculars."*⁴⁷ So we may conclude that both sides of the war in the novel were quite similar in their culture and appearance. This raises some questions. What are the real life conflicts that might be similar with such descriptions? At the same time, it might be quite interesting to examine the opinion of characters about the war.

Towards the end of the novel, the author depicts the conversation with between Sivy and Biven':

"I am tired (Sivy).

⁴³ Ibid, 129

⁴⁴ Ibid, 222

⁴⁵ Rus. translation: what should we do? we are all just people...

⁴⁶ Ibid, 175

⁴⁷ Ibid, 177

Because of what? (Narrator).

Because of everything, Biven'. Because of you. Because of all that is happening here. Because of tanks. Because of stoves. Because of the corpses. I have seen more corpses than living humans (Sivy)⁴⁸.

We may clearly see how Rudashevsky endowed his character, Sivy, with human emotions of sorrow and tiredness from the conflict while he was expressing his negative opinion towards the war. Interestingly, the conversation continues with the discussion of the side of the Sivy in conflict. This is a very important part since Sivy's position transpires one of the core messages of the book- there is no side in the conflict that should be supported since, it does not matter which side you are on, if starts to go offensive you will be always wrong: *"every arm supports the frontline. Chance to save the world will be given not to the one who is shooting the best, but the one who will reject shooting. Understand?"*⁴⁹ In it Rudashevsky might actually convey his personal position to conflicts and wars. At the same time, the date of the publication of the book, year 2023, may suggest that Rudashevsky's message is aimed at a certain conflict happening in this period.

A number of allusions, especially ones pointing out the dynamics of the conflict, may suggest the idea that the war described by Rudashevsky is one happening between Russia and Ukraine: *"when the offensive attack slowed down. The main commander declared the first wave of mobilization. Most of the people left abroad. Waited for everything to come to its place. But it did not. The destroyed towns and cities were shown around the world."*⁵⁰ Those allusions are very approachable for young adults. A lot of people between ages 14-16 know something about politics. For example, at the time of the annexation of Crimea, the internet flooded with memes about "Krym nash," "Putin is a crab," etc. while most of the audience of those memes were young adults. So if this book were about the critique of the invasion of Ukraine, both adults and young adults would understand it. At the same time, we should recognise that any war throughout history may coincide with similar descriptions. Moreover we can not find from the current set of conflicts the one which would last as long and with such changes in the front line as the conflict in the novel. Interestingly, one of the characters of the novel observes: *"like as if we do not stay, but levitate in the cocoon of light- thrown from reality, imagined by somebody and forced to live in the world of his disturbed imagination."*⁵¹ One thing may be said without any doubt: it is a war created by somebody with disturbed imagination.

We might consider this novel as the child literature for adults, in this regard this book will find many counterparts throughout the history and genres. The political messages of the novel may be understood by informed adults and young audiences, however, its genuine humanistic messages is something that matters most and escapes the attention. First of them is about death

⁴⁸ Ibid, 211

⁴⁹ Ibid, 214

⁵⁰ Ibid, 80

⁵¹ Ibid, 60

as the terrifying consequence of armed conflicts. Second, is that adults act like children while they are so much obsessed with the war. And the last, which is one of the main importance, is the principle by which everyone who goes offensive is wrong.

(Simon Sergeev)

IV. Anti-war text “Война vs детство”

The graphic novel “Война vs Детство”⁵² by Kristina Kretova and Yuliya Brykova appeared in 2021 – before the full-scale invasion, but amidst the drastic increase of the militaristic discourse in Russian public speech in general and in education in particular. The book has a clearly declared pacifistic message: the annotation stresses that this is an anti-militaristic novel. The text is comprised of a collection of short stories, based on the interviews with child survivors of military conflicts that took place in the second half of the 20th century (Northern Ireland, Georgia-Abkhazia, Eastern Ukraine, Yugoslavia, Palestine-Israel). Each chapter is dedicated to one conflict. It consists of a brief encyclopedic summary and third-person narrations focalized through the eyes of children from each side of the conflict. The narrative appears in two forms: first as a graphic novel, where illustrations are accompanied by short quotes, and then as monolithic text.

Both the content and the meta-narrative about the production of the book underline the unifying pacifistic pathos: the authors refrain from any ethical assessment of the conflicts and present representatives of both sides as victims. The contributors, as is stressed in the introduction, come both from Russia and from Ukraine, thus through collective creativity overcoming the mutual hostility of their states. Let us discuss how the anti-war discourse is constructed in more detail.

The encyclopedic introductions use deliberately stylistically neutral language and avoid problematizing the causes of the wars. Passive voice and impersonal constructions are used most of the time (ex. боевые действия ведутся, конфликт связан с..., независимость была поддержана..., конфликт считается самым кровавым из-за происходивших этнических чисток, etc)⁵³, which waives the responsibility of individual actors and presents the war as an immanent and external evil force. A characteristic example of such demonstrative neutrality is the representation of the war in the Eastern Ukraine (the text is written before the full-scale invasion, but after the presence of the Russian regular army in the region had been proven):

Боевые действия на территории Донецкой и Луганской областей Украины, начавшиеся в апреле 2014 года, ведутся между вооружёнными силами и другими силовыми структурами Украины с одной стороны и вооружёнными формированиями

⁵² ‘The War vs Childhood.’ Kristina Kretova, Iuliia Brykova. *Voina vs detstvo* (St. Petersburg: Piter, 2021)

⁵³ ‘Combat operations are conducted, the conflict is associated with, independence was supported by, the conflict is considered the most bloody due to ethnic cleansings that took place’. Ibid, 52, 131, 29.

повстанцев (в основном сторонников самопровозглашённых Донецкой и Луганской народных республик) — с другой.⁵⁴

Civilians on both sides are presented as equally victimized. Typically, there are plot parallelisms in their stories, and each pair of stories depicts a specific social problem, associated with war. For instance, both protagonists of the stories about the conflict in Georgia – Abkhazia become refugees and throughout their adult lives process the trauma of displacement; in the cycle about the Eastern Ukraine both main characters miraculously survive a sudden bombing; girls from both the pro-Catholic and pro-Protestant families in Northern Ireland talk about the normalization of war in their childhood perception.

The unifying message of the stories is reiterated in the meta-narrative of the process of the book creation. The authors stress in the introduction that both Russian and Ukrainian artists participated in the project and admit that for them themselves the process of cocreation became a form of a dialog:

Если бы не Настя Мята, которая стала художественным руководителем проекта, в книге не было бы стольких замечательных художников из России и Украины, а я очень верю, что совместное творчество — это один из лучших видов разговора.⁵⁵

Thus, the process of the book creation has the same therapeutic effect upon its authors as its end result is intended to have upon its readers: they found the common ground in recognizing the war as absolute evil.

A characteristic feature of the book, typical, I would argue, for the majority of contemporary anti-war children's literature is its dual address: while it declares to target elementary-school children, its real audience are, it seems, the adults. The child narrator and the pictures are used as devices of defamiliarization that break the perception of normality, associated with the linear narration, and thus expose trauma. The book, supposedly intended for children, mentions many time-specific realia, unknown to the current elementary schoolers. For instance, in the description of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict:

А дома хачапури от бабушки, битлы из импортного японского кассетника, любимая песня «Изби́наха»... Только спустя годы понял, что это «A hard day's night».⁵⁶

⁵⁴ 'Combat activity on the territory of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine, which started in April 2014, are conducted by the Armed forces and other defense and law enforcement agencies on the one hand, and militant groups of rebels (predominantly, supporters of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics) – on the other.' Ibid, 52.

⁵⁵ 'Had it not been for Nastia Miata, who became the artistic director of the project, so many amazing artists from Russia and Ukraine would not have participated – and I strongly believe that collaborative creative work is one of the best forms of communication/conversation.' Ibid, 5.

⁵⁶ 'And at home you have your grandmother's khachapuri, 'bitly' (the Russian slang denomination of the Beatles) from the imported Japanese cassette player, your favorite song 'Izbinakha.' Only years later did I understand that it was "A hard day's night." Ibid, 40.

The cassette player is a long-gone technology that requires additional explanation; few Russian-speaking children know English and the Beatles' repertoire well enough to understand the humor of the misheard first line of one of their songs. More likely that these realia are a friendly wink at the protagonist's agemates – the generation that is currently 30 and older. The readers recognize the duality of the book's audience. In their reviews many mention that the collection is not intended for children, or is intended both for children and adults, or that they themselves, to their surprise, were impressed by the stories.⁵⁷ Among adults demonstratively pacifistic books such as this acquire an additional function, absent from the children's reading. As Natalia Beskhlebnaia from "Kholod Media" noticed,⁵⁸ adults display children's books with clear antimilitaristic titles in plain view in public spaces as a way to demonstrate their anti-war views.

The children are used as protagonists, thus, not so much as to cause empathy in child readers, but to strengthen the sense of trauma.⁵⁹ The story of the Georgian boy Shota uses the imperfection of the child's memory to show how the war penetrates individual lives. Unlike the adult, the child accepts their experience as the default norm, unable to estrange the abnormalities of war. The section opens with the following line:

Детская память — точно мозаика. Много-много разных фрагментов, слой за слоем, в целое и не сложишь, но с этим живешь. Так и у Шоты...⁶⁰

and proceeds with a collection of both peaceful and war-time memories, where elements of peaceful routine, familiar to everyone are interlaced with realia of life, distorted by war.

Любимая игра с двоюродным братом — кто больше собрал отстрелянных гильз от «калашниковых». Дядя-военный застал за этим занятием и... подарил целую цепь патронов от пулемёта. Внушительно смотрелось. Гордые, сгибаясь под тяжестью, шли домой. А дома хачапури от бабушки, битлы из импортного японского кассетника, любимая песня «Избинаха»... Только спустя годы понял, что это «A hard day's night». Снаряд от БТР, найденный в саду, граната в кармане папиной куртки, пулевые отверстия в двери дядиной «копейки» — всё это для Шоты было тоже как

⁵⁷ "Retenzii na knigu "Voina vs Detstvo" Kretova, Brykova." Labirint.

<https://www.labirint.ru/reviews/goods/790535/>

⁵⁸ Natalia Beskhlebnaia. "Detskaia literatura soprotivleniia." Kholod. May 10, 2023.

<https://holod.media/2023/05/10/detskaia-literatura-protiv-voyni/>

⁵⁹ The use of the child as an imaginary audience or a narrator is frequently used as a device to process and conceptualize trauma. Extreme distress makes traditional linear narration, used to describe "normal life," unacceptable and forces authors to look for other narrative techniques. One of them is the use of the child narrator or focalization through the child's eyes, whose inevitably fragmented memory and limited cognition allow estrangement, necessary to demonstrate and process trauma. Thus, child narrator has been a widely used device in the Holocaust literature. See a comprehensive study of the child narrators in texts about Holocaust in Sue Vice. *Children Writing the Holocaust*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Child narrator as a device that allows to break linear temporality of narrative is discussed, for instance, in Katrien Vloeberghs, "Untimely Childhood in Literary Holocaust Memoirs and Novels for the Young" in *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring 2009), 51-61.

⁶⁰ Children's memory is like a mosaic. Many-many different fragments, layer after layer – you cannot put it together, but you live with it. Same is with Shota... *Voina vs detstvo*, 40.

игра. И счастливые вечера: уставший после работы отец, вся семья, собравшаяся для просмотра сериала «Санта-Барбара».⁶¹

Visual imagery, permitted by the form of the graphic novel, strengthens the message: thus, in the illustration of the quote above war-related objects from the memories are painted on the pieces of broken china; these distorted images are juxtaposed to a neat rectangle depicting a happy family watching TV. Thus, in this book visual imagery is used not only to make the story more accessible for children (as is typical for comic books), but to strengthen the message for adults.

To sum up, “Voina vs detstvo” is an antimilitaristic graphic novel; it presents the war as a depersonalized evil force and shows that all civilians are victims and their experiences are nearly identical. The book simultaneously addresses two audiences: children and adults. Perhaps, the adults are, in fact, the main audience. Both the child narrator and the format of the graphic novel are selected not only to make the text more accessible for children, but also as devices to record and process trauma that cannot be captured by traditional linear narrative. Among adult readers the book gains additional functions: it becomes a way to demonstrate their anti-war views publicly.
(Mariia Gorshkova)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the domain of children's literature in Russia vividly encapsulates the ideological tug-of-war, with works like “Azбука o vazhnom” and “Zhit — Rodine sluzhit” championing the pro-war narrative, while “Zver- 44” and “Voina vs Detstvo” advocate for anti-war sentiments. These books represent more than mere textbooks or bedtime stories, they are potent instruments wielded in the shaping of young minds, reflecting the intense ideological conflicts that permeate Russian society.

“Azбука o vazhnom,” with its nationalistic and militaristic content, serves as a primer for instilling state-sanctioned values, weaving a narrative that glorifies the Russian military history and promotes loyalty to the state. Similarly, “Zhit- Rodine sluzhit” echoes these themes, blending historical references with religious undertones to fortify the image of a patriotic and devout Russian identity. These books are not just educational tools but are strategic elements in a broader campaign to cultivate a generation that upholds and reveres the state's militaristic and

⁶¹ His and his cousin's favorite game – who found more empty cartridges from the “Kalashnikov” guns. His uncle – a military man – caught us doing that and... presented us with a whole cartridge belt from a machine gun. It looked impressive. Proud, loaded down with it, they went home. And at home they have their grandmother's khachapuri, 'bitly' (the Russian slang denomination of the Beatles) from the imported Japanese cassette player, his favorite song 'Izbinakha.' Only years later did he understand that it was “A hard day's night.” A missile of an APC, found in the garden, a grenade in the pocket of his father's jacket, bullet holes in the door of his uncle's car – all of that is like a game for Shota as well. And the happy evenings: father, exhausted after work, the whole family, gathered together to watch the “Santa Barbara” series. Ibid.

nationalistic ethos. These books are particularly powerful as they were both released after Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine, as if to act as a sort of justification of the war in the minds of young children as well as form mentalities of future Russian soldiers.

On the flip side, "Zver- 44" and "Война vs Детство" present a starkly different perspective, challenging the state-driven narratives and offering a critique of the glorification of war. "Voina vs Detstvo," through its graphic novel format and interviews with child survivors, humanizes the experience of conflict, highlighting the universal pain and trauma it brings, thus fostering empathy and a peace-oriented outlook. "Zver- 44," with its grim portrayal of war's dehumanizing effects, serves as a narrative counterpoint to the state's glorification of military conquest, emphasizing the loss of innocence and the destructive impact of war on human values and society. As much as the "Voina vs Detstvo," the latter text sends the universal-humanistic message rather than a subjective political view of the authorities. Its message is the condemnation of all offensive actions without regard to the side of the conflict.

These contrasting sets of children's literature not only illuminate the ongoing battle for ideological supremacy in Russia but also underscore the strategic importance of narrative in shaping the consciousness of the next generation. They reflect the broader societal and political dynamics at play, where literature becomes a battleground for competing visions of Russia's past, present, and future. Interestingly, while these different ideologies are all meant to be children's literature they all serve a different function from what children's books are meant to be. "Война vs Детство" also is aimed towards adults despite its purpose and "Azбука o vazhnom" is not really an alphabet learning book as it is written to be. These interesting niches show the complexities of creating war-time literature on both sides of the ideological spectrum. But it is through these narratives, children are introduced to the complexities of national identity, patriotism, and moral choices, shaping their understanding of their place in the world and their responsibilities towards it.

Hence, children's literature in Russia, through its divergent narratives, offers a window into the soul of a nation grappling with its identity, history, and future direction. The interplay of pro-war and anti-war books in this literary arena encapsulates the broader ideological struggle, highlighting the enduring power of storytelling in shaping societal norms and individual beliefs.

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