

**LESSONS ABOUT THE SOVIET POLITY LEARNED  
FROM STALIN'S YOUNGEST VICTIMS:**

**CHILDREN OF ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE**

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## **Executive Summary**

Interviews in 2005-2007 with thirty-five children of parents designated as “enemies of the people” because of their national or class background during the 1930s and 1940s offer insight into how the Soviet regime retained the loyalty and quiescence of its citizens. I conducted these interviews in eight cities of the Russian Federation, extending geographically from the White Sea in the far northwest to Akademgorodok in western Siberia. The subjects were born between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s. Their categories of enemy status included wealthy peasants (“kulaks”), pre-revolutionary gentry, members of non-Bolshevik socialist parties before the Bolshevik Revolution, citizens of the borderlands between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany or nations occupied by the Soviet Red Army after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, Communist Party members who evoked disquiet among the Stalinist leadership, socialist immigrants to the Soviet Union from capitalist countries, and ordinary workers caught up in the random sweeps of the Stalinist repressions. As children, these Soviet citizens lost one or both parents, their homes, often their relatives and friends, sometimes their birth identity, usually health because of physical deprivations, and unfettered opportunities for higher education and full membership in the polity otherwise open to non-stigmatized persons.

## **Introduction**

Interviews in 2005-2007 with thirty-five children of parents designated as “enemies of the people” because of their national or class background during the 1930s and 1940s offer insight into how the Soviet regime retained the loyalty and quiescence of its citizens.<sup>1</sup> I conducted these interviews in eight cities of the Russian Federation, extending geographically from the White Sea in the far northwest to Akademgorodok in western Siberia. The subjects were born between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s. Their categories of enemy status included wealthy peasants (“kulaks”), pre-revolutionary gentry, members of non-Bolshevik socialist parties before the Bolshevik Revolution, citizens of the borderlands between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany or nations occupied by the Soviet Red Army after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 1939, Communist Party members who evoked disquiet among the Stalinist leadership, socialist immigrants to the Soviet Union from capitalist countries, and ordinary workers caught up in the random sweeps of the Stalinist repressions. As children, these Soviet citizens lost one or both parents, their homes, often their relatives and friends, sometimes their birth identity, usually health because of physical deprivations, and unfettered opportunities for higher education and full membership in the polity otherwise open to non-stigmatized persons.

In 2008, a young Russian citizen who had transcribed three of the taped interviews exclaimed, “How could these people stay in the Soviet Union? How could they live out their lives under the Soviet government after all it had done to them?” Their testimonials of loss shocked her; their survival as productive Soviet citizens amazed her; the mystery of how they

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<sup>1</sup> Moscow, St. Petersburg, Arkhangel’sk, Vologda, Staritsa, Smolensk, Akademgorodok, Kotlas. All interviews complied with the requirements established for this project by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research of the University of New Hampshire.

made their lives while keeping some kind of peace with the Soviet regime stumped her. The full complement of interviews, with other documentary and oral history sources, offer some answers to her question.

One piece of the puzzle is that these children grew up without hearing criticism of the regime or knowledge of their parents' true fates. The most common feature in the stories of these survivors of Soviet repression is that the adults who cared for them after their parents' arrest were scrupulous in their silence about the true fate of their parents and the injustice the Soviet state had visited upon them. Criticisms of the Soviet state were taboo in their private domain. In the public domain, school and Communist youth organizations were the children's most important social and political experiences. This was less true for children deported to Siberia to special settlements as kulaks/exploitative peasants in the early 1930s or as citizens of Soviet-occupied nations after 1939. But for children from the Soviet Union proper who were not from the villages targeted by the dekulakization campaign, the world they inhabited as partial or full orphans passively endorsed or actively celebrated the Soviet order.

The second seedbed of their loyalty to the Soviet system was World War II, or as it is called, The Great Patriotic War. Wartime worsened their dislocations and physical deprivations, in some cases increased their losses of close relatives, and exposed their multiple vulnerabilities. Even so, the wartime experiences on the home front were so global that children of enemies of the people were often able to reintegrate into Soviet society. Such reintegration obscured their stigma and enabled them to contribute to the Soviet war effort as teenagers or young adults. When Soviet victory came in 1945, they could claim it as partially their own.

The third manifestation of their identification with the Soviet system was their profound commitment to education and gratitude to the system and the teachers who educated them. Even

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as their opportunities for higher education were often compromised and sometimes denied altogether, all interview subjects displayed exceptional valuation of education and recounted their various quests to acquire it. Further, many of them chose to work in education or research as adults. As teachers and scientists, they contributed to the Soviet enterprise they themselves most deeply valued. In those roles, silence about their misgivings about the Soviet state was a prerequisite for success. This requirement had the effect of making them unwilling accomplices in perpetuating the polity that had victimized them.

### **“Silence was our Salvation”**

The conspiracy of silence in the Soviet Union about the fates of parents arrested because of their ascribed status as political enemies of the regime extended from the Kremlin to the bereft children’s bedside. It often began at the very moment of the parent’s arrest. Inside the home, the usual fiction was that the parent was going away or had gone away on a business trip, a *kommandirovka*. The memoirs of Olga Sliozberg and the oral history reminiscences of her two children, Ella Silina and Aleksandr Zakgeim, recount a typical scenario, in their case, from 1936.<sup>2</sup>

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*Ella:* During the search, at night that is, these persons doing the search said, “Bid your children farewell.” So, Mama came in, my brother woke up. She told him she was going on a business trip. He said, “What is this, Papa went on a business trip, you are going on a business trip. If Masha (our house servant, our nanny) leaves, who will we stay with?” But I did not wake up. She just kissed me. And left.

*Frierson:* And when they took your father?

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<sup>2</sup> Aleksandr Iudelevich Zakgeim, Interview, Moscow, April 2005; Ella Iudelevna Silina, Interview, Moscow, April 2005.

*Ella:* I don't remember. I don't remember anything. How they took my father, I don't remember.

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*Frierson to Aleksandr:* And did you learn immediately what had become of your father?

*Aleksandr:* No, they arrested my father a month and half earlier, and Mama said that he had gone on a business trip. He less so, but Mama was then traveling a lot on business trips, that was the story people usually came up with. Then they arrested Mama, I remember both the arrest of my father and the arrest of my mother. But I remember the arrest of my father vaguely; there was a search at our home.

*Frierson:* So, that means this happened at home?

*Aleksandr:* It was at home, yes. And in a month and a half, they arrested Mama; that was on April 26, 1936. And before she left, she woke me up, kissed me, and left. But the official story from our relatives was that Mama was on a business trip.

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*Memoirs of Olga Sliozberg from the Journey:*

I opened the door. I was struck by the strange smell of boots and tobacco.

Marusia was sitting in the middle of complete destruction and telling the children a story. Piles of books and manuscripts were spread out on the floor. The wardrobes were open, and the linens were that were stuck in there were hanging out. I didn't understand anything, not a single thought came to me, it just became terrible, a presentiment of misfortune froze my soul. Marusia stood and said in a quiet, strange voice:

--It's nothing, don't kill yourself!

--Where is my husband? What happened? Was he hit by a car?

--Do you really not understand? They've taken him.

--No, not me, not him, that couldn't happen! ...How was he?

--He sat, pale, he gave me the watch to give you; he said that everything will be cleared up, that you shouldn't be upset. He told the children that he was going on a business trip.

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Of her own arrest, Olga remembered how she frantically sat during the four hours of the search at her desk, writing up the notes from a conference she had just attended. And then:

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The investigator directing the search, at last, grabbed me: ‘You would do better to say good-bye to your children!’

Yes, bid my children farewell. After all, I am leaving them. Maybe for a long time. This will be cleared up. It can’t be.

I went into the nursery. My son was sitting up in bed. I said to him:

--I’m going on a business trip, my little son, stay with Marusia and be smart.

His lips twisted:

--How strange! First Papa left on a business trip, now you are going away, suddenly if Marusia goes away – who will we stay with?<sup>3</sup>

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Maintaining this fiction often meant that children casually parted from their parents, not knowing that the separation would last a long time, and in many cases, forever. For the parents, this required stoicism of the highest degree, as Valeriia Gerlin’s recollection of her mother’s departure in 1937 from their dacha back to Moscow at the security police’s summons demonstrates.

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*Frierson:* And do you remember when your mama left?

*Valeriia:* I remember...Understand, well, I did not even cry, because they told me that it was for a total of two weeks.

*Frierson:* How did she contain herself?

*Valeriia:* She bore up, she bore up. In general, she also did not cry...Well, so we just accompanied her to the train platform there in Bykovo. She left, they didn’t take me to the train station, my aunt went to the city... I remember this very well. I remember that Mama was silent, sad, and did not cry.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Olga Adamova-Sliozberg, *Put’* (Moscow: Vozvrashchenie, 1993), 11-13.

<sup>4</sup> Valeriia Mikhailovna Gerlin, Interview, Moscow, April 2005.



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For children who were babies when their fathers were arrested, their mothers or other relatives who took them in could avoid the subject altogether or tell the children lies to protect them against problems with their peers or teachers. Ivan Timofeevich Zhuchkov was born shortly after his father was arrested in the city of Arkhangel'sk in 1937.

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In 1937, even before I was born, my father was arrested and then shot. Neither did I see my father, nor did he see me... Well, and after he was arrested, as soon as I appeared in the world, my mother and all her relatives, that is her mother, father, and brother were ordered to leave Arkhangel'sk within twenty-four hours. They settled us in a very remote location, in Russian it is called a hole, and that, strictly speaking, is where I grew up.

...Somehow they avoided the question of my father completely. The question of my father generally was never raised in any way. I did not know this...It did not seem strange to me. Well, now I am already a grown man and I understand that my grandfather, my grandpa, very discreetly, almost imperceptibly fulfilled the function of a father.<sup>5</sup>

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Natalia Semenovna Kruk's mother also maintained almost complete silence about her father, although she did keep a few photographs of him.<sup>6</sup> Natalia Semenovna was born in December 1936; her father, a candidate-member of the Communist Party who directed a project in the defense industry, was arrested in Leningrad in September 1937. Natalia Semenovna's parents were from the western region of Ukraine; her mother was from a noble family, who were preparing to emigrate when the matriarch died of typhus during the Civil War (1918-1921). After her death, everyone scattered, with Natalia Semenovna's mother landing in Petrograd/Leningrad, where she met her husband, who had completed a technical high school.

After the father's arrest, Natalia Semenovna and her mother were permitted to remain in

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<sup>5</sup> Ivan Timofeevich Zhuchkov, Interview, Vologda, July 2005.

their very large room in a communal apartment in one of the royal palaces in the heart of the city. Perhaps her mother's work as a medic protected them. As little Natalia Semenovna grew up, her mother gave her an unchanging version of her father's death, "Papa died in the war with Finland." And she stubbornly refused ever to discuss him. "Fear, fear, simply fear," was Natalia's understanding of what motivated her mother's silence.

Fear motivated the henchmen, as well. Despite the fact that they were engaging in an orgy of political executions, they did not feel strong enough to withstand the potential fury of the populace if they were to discover how many citizens were being shot at the base of the skull and tossed into mass graves within days or months of their arrests. So the state came up with a fiction of its own. Relatives desperately inquired at offices of the security police (during these years – the NKVD) about the husbands and fathers who were taken away in the night. Instead of informing the relatives that the arrested person had been executed, the state informed them that he or she had received the sentence of "Ten years exile without the right of correspondence."

This forestalled desperate fury among those left behind. And to ensure that the fiction endured, the NKVD often sent agents to visit the families in the disguise of prisoners who described themselves as recently incarcerated with the relative in question. They turned up to tell the survivors that their beloved had sent a message that he was still alive. Such a person visited Galina Vasilievna Dudareva and her sister and grandparents, years after her father's arrest as a high-ranking Communist Party boss in Rostov. "They did this so that people would sit peacefully, so that they wouldn't be writing, making demands, so that they would wait quietly."<sup>7</sup> These fictions, whether conveyed by close relatives or by agents of the security police, protected the children from the knowledge of their parents' violent death and inoculated the children

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<sup>6</sup> Natalia Semenovna Kruk, Interview, St. Petersburg, February 2007.

against hatred of the regime that had carried out the execution.

The children also inhabited an artificial cocoon of familial reticence about the regime and its leaders. Adults surrounding the children did not indulge in criticism in their presence. Their goal was to protect the already-stigmatized children from further alienation from their milieu. They supported the children's desire to be active in the Young Pioneers from age ten and to try to enter the Komsomol (Communist Youth Movement) at age fourteen or fifteen. Inna Aronovna Gaister, whose father and mother had been arrested in 1937, maintained full faith in the Communist system and in Joseph Stalin. She joined the Komsomol as an eighth grader in Moscow. She recalls:

After all, I was correct in my thinking, I was very ideological. Indeed we believed all the slogans. I sincerely believed. That's what good propaganda is. I also believed there were "enemies of the people." I believed in the arrests, too. And as for the fact that they arrested Papa and Mama, that was a mistake. When you cut down trees – wood chips fly! And as for the fact that there were so many woodchips all around me, I did not think about it.<sup>8</sup>

Valeriia Gerlin retained similar convictions, even as, like Gaister, she lost both parents to arrest. She described herself as "absolutely Soviet."

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Even in childhood, when I was five or six years old, I wrote plays about the Civil War, then I would put on these plays, I was both the director and the chief heroine in these plays. And we fought against the Whites, and so, Soviet power necessarily was victorious. Well, all as it should have been...I was a Young Pioneer.<sup>9</sup> They admitted us to the Pioneers when we were ten years old, which means that was in 1939. (There were no problems) with the Pioneers. And there were also no problems when it came time for me to join the Komsomol. They

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<sup>7</sup> Galina Vasiliievna Dudareva, Interview, St. Petersburg, February 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Shikheeva-Gaister, *Deti vragov naroda*, 56. Gaister's comment about woodchips is a repetition of a popular Stalinist slogan about the costs of revolutionary progress.

<sup>9</sup> Children typically became Pioneers in the third grade. This was the first stage in their path to Communist Party membership as adults. Activities focused on political and social instruction. Membership in the Pioneers was virtually universal; as teenagers, the best and most politically correct students were invited to join the Communist Youth Movement, the KOMSOMOL. The access to full membership in the Communist Party was much narrower; no more than 10% of the Soviet population was admitted to full membership in the Communist Party.

heard me out and admitted me. Well, I was very happy, and I wanted so much to be in the Pioneers. Then I really wanted to join the Komsomol. I put in my application the very day I turned fourteen. So that's how it all was.

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Valeriia Gerlin's best friend was Zaiara Veselaya. Zaiara's father was a prominent novelist and devotee of the Soviet regime. He was arrested during the Great Terror of 1937-1938. Zaiara's half-sister and half-brother, children of her father's then-wife, wound up in an orphanage for "children of enemies of the people." Her mother, who was divorced from her father, escaped arrest until after the war. A nurse, she was arrested for anti-Soviet propaganda after a neighbor in her communal apartment heard her recommend that a patient try to find some American penicillin because it was the most effective antibiotic.<sup>10</sup>

Against the backdrop of these family losses, Zaiara and her sister, Gaiara, remained utterly loyal to the Soviet regime and to Stalin, himself. Valeriia Gerlin explained that she never discussed her parents' arrests with her beloved Zaiara, "one of the most Soviet people on the planet." Valeriia feared the Veselaya sisters would turn away from her if talk of her parents suggested to them any dissatisfaction on her part with the regime they adored. After the war, as a young adult, Valeriia began to have doubts beyond just her parents' fate about the justice of the Soviet regime. These she never intimated to Zaiara. Such caution between friends who grew from children into women together was typical of the silence that pervaded relationships among children of enemies of the people.

When adults responsible for the children harbored doubts, they kept them to themselves. Irina Dubrovina lost her father to arrest in 1937 because he had been a Socialist Revolutionary for ten months in 1917-1918. She, her mother and older sister were able to stay together, not the

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<sup>10</sup> Zaiara Artemnovna Veselaya, Interview, Moscow, November 2007.

least because they heeded their mother's urgent instructions.

Mama said, 'Do not tell anyone anything about this. Because if you say even one word about this, then they will arrest me and take me away. You will be left on your own. Therefore no one must know anything.' Many years later, Mama told me, 'Half of the fathers of your classmates were arrested.' And we continued to go to school, no one said anything to anyone....No, not one word. Our parents had forbidden us to talk about it, because there had been cases when they arrested the father, and then the mother. So we were afraid. Children disappeared, and one of the first to disappear was the daughter of the tractor factory's director. She disappeared and that was it. No one said where she had gone, why she was not in school, not a word.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, as of August 1937, Soviet law required the arrest of "wives of enemies of the people" and placement of their children in Soviet orphanages, unless a relative would take them in. Dubrovina's mother's fear was thus well-founded.

Young Irina maintained her faith in the Soviet system and Stalin right up the eve of his death. One of the most painful experiences of her childhood was being denied admission to the KOMSOMOL during World War II when she and her mother were living as refugees in the far reaches of the Ufa region. Unlike many such children, Irina was reunited with her "enemy" father after the war after his release from the camps. Her father wisely decided to call his family to live at his last place of residence in the GULAG, at the forced labor mining complex at Vorkuta, where his ex-prisoner status would be less remarkable than in other locations.

From there, Irina lied about her father's status on her university application to gain admission to Leningrad State University. Once there, she eagerly joined the KOMSOMOL and rose to be its chief officer in her senior year. This desire to be part of the Communist enterprise was stronger than her own experiences of loss or observations of life among former inmates just outside the forced labor camps at Vorkuta.

The uncle with whom Irina Dubrovina lived in Leningrad never said anything direct

against the system that had imprisoned his brother. But he subtly opened the first crack in Irina's confidence in Stalin. The following recollection illustrates the private vignettes which oral history adds to the record of life in a censored society. It also testifies to the effectiveness of early instruction in the necessity of silence. Each evening, Irina's uncle settled into his chair to read *Pravda*. Irina noticed that he did so with a red pencil, and was always marking items in the newspaper. After several weeks, she asked him what he was noting.

He answered, 'I'm counting the number of times the words Stalin, Stalinist, or they write something about Stalin and so forth appear in each issue of *Pravda*.' I was surprised, 'So, how many?' 'In one issue, I counted 200 times.' And that was all he ever said to me about politics. But that made me reflect, of course. I began to think about the fact that Stalin was taking too much power. When he came home from work at night, my uncle sometimes said, 'So and So was arrested.' But for me that wasn't so terrible, because I did not know these people. But I always remembered what that had meant for my father. And that was the reality for me that taught me to remain silent, so that I would not harm anyone, including myself. *Silence was salvation*. That's what I knew.

### **Reintegrating into the Nation during World War II**

*So for me, in my life, there are two most important points: the repressions and the war. Indisputably, war that is something that can't be imagined. Utterly.*

Inna Shikheeva-Gaister, Interview, Moscow, April 2005

It has long been a truism that victory against the Germans in World War II has served ever since 1945 as the most heartfelt and tenacious justification for the Soviet system and Stalin's leadership among Russians. Oral history interviews with children of "enemies of the people" offer further evidence that this was and still is the case. The Soviet Union lost 27 million citizens to death during the war; of those, less than a third were military deaths. The Nazis' rapid advance across the Soviet western borderlands in 1941, constant dislocation as

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<sup>11</sup> Irina Andreevna Dubrovina, Interview, Kotlas, July 2005.

citizens fled before advancing battle lines, severe hunger and epidemics throughout the war on the home front, and Stalin's orders that citizens in such cities as Stalingrad not flee before the German advance contributed to the massive civilian death toll.<sup>12</sup>

Children of enemies of the people had opportunities to obscure their fathers' fates in the chaos of constant displacement and military mobilization. Galina Vasilievna Dudareva had barely escaped being seized by German troops in the first months of the war. She, her mother, and older sister, Svetlana, were living directly on the path to Moscow from the west in the town of Yel'na in the Smolensk region, the traditional route for armies invading from the west. Yel'na became the location of the first defeat by the Red Army of the German salient, but it was beyond the Soviet forces to expand that brief victory.<sup>13</sup>

When German bombs began to fall on Yel'na in September, her mother joined forces with two other mothers to take their children to a village 25 km distant until the bombing ceased. She was unable to convince her elderly mother and father to accompany them. "Grandmother and Grandfather refused. Well, first of all, 'We're already old people, and then, it won't last long, it's temporary, we'll survive here.' So they stayed behind."<sup>14</sup>

When the girls were settled in the village, but the Germans were drawing closer and closer to Yel'na, Galina's mother decided to return to force her parents to evacuate. But, as she approached the city, she encountered Red Army soldiers. "They were retreating. They were running like crazy people....When they saw my mother headed in the direction of the city, they shouted, 'Auntie, where are you headed? The Germans are in Yel'na!' and they did not permit

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<sup>12</sup> The best English-language studies are Richard Overy, *Russia's War. A History of the Soviet War Effort: 1941-1945* (New York: Penguin, 1997); and John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London and New York: Longman, 1991). The best literary treatment of the war is Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Overy, *Russia's War*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> Galina Vasilievna Dudareva, Interview, St. Petersburg, February 2007.

her to pass.” Galina and her mother and sister later learned that Germans moved into their building, which soon burned to the ground, forcing the grandparents to move in with their friends, the Muratovs. “Well, they were already over sixty years old. There was absolutely, absolutely nothing for them to eat. So, well, they died.” They were buried in a bomb crater in the yard of the Muratovs’ building.

By the time the grandparents were dead, the Dudareva women were resettled in Riazan. Within days of their escape from Yel’na, the mothers recognized that they had to get out of the region and began walking toward the railroad with the children. “Everywhere there were explosions. All around us explosions and fires.” Some Red Army soldiers picked them up in their truck, and delivered them to a train headed toward Moscow.

They got off in Riazan and appealed to an uncle for help. He found a school nearby in need of a teacher. There was no question about the fact that Galina’s mother was a wife of an enemy of the people. “Nobody asked who she was. We were evacuees. That was all that was needed.”

As for the girls, they felt no stigma at all. “No one had fathers. They had all perished. In our entire class, there were only two children with fathers...I didn’t feel different from the others... First of all, I knew that many, many people had suffered. Very many parents were repressed. Second, because of the war, very many were without their fathers.” For the duration of the war, Galina and Svetlana went to school, their mother taught, and they blended in to wartime society in a routine defined by the Soviet educational system.

While the Dudareva women accepted a passive reintegration into the system, other children actively made sacrifices to prove their membership in Soviet society and devotion to their country. Some were quick to volunteer for service at the front. When the Germans invaded



the Soviet Union in 1941, the three children of the Old Bolshevik Valerii Obolenskii-Osinskii were wards of the state. Both father and mother had been arrested in the Great Terror; the children were sent to an orphanage. The oldest son, Valeriian, had succeeded in gaining admission to Leningrad State University, where he was completing his first year when the invasion began in June. He tried to enlist. As a son of an enemy of the people, he was denied entry into the regular ranks. Instead, he was conscripted into the people's militia in Leningrad. First he dug trenches outside the city, and then he was sent in the waves of suicidal units to stall the Germans' advance at the front. His sister received her last letter from him in October 1941. The notification she later received at the orphanage in response to a letter she had sent read simply, "Not listed in the lists of the dead, those who died from injuries, and missing in action."<sup>15</sup>

Vera Borisovna Orlovskaiia's older brother died in much the same way. The Orlovskii children were orphans by 1941; their father had been a successful gold trader in the Urals before the revolution. He was arrested as an enemy of the people in 1937 and died in prison. His wife died within the next year of tuberculosis, leaving the children as dependents with a bitter, distant relative.<sup>16</sup> The older son graduated from high school in 1941. All the boys in his class went directly to the front. As he left Tomsk, Private Orlovskii swore to Vera and their younger brother, "I will NEVER fight for Stalin. I will fight for my Motherland, but not for Stalin." He died in the first months of the war, along with every other boy in his class, save one.

Nina Kosterina also sought redemption and reintegration through military service. Nina Kosterina's father had fallen in the purge of military personnel in 1937-1938 who had been active in the partisan movement during the Civil War. Kosterina was already a member the

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<sup>15</sup> Svetlana Obolenskaia, "Iz vospominaniia," unpublished manuscript, Moscow: Vozvrashchenie archive, p. 105.

Komsomol and defended her right to stay in the organization. When war broke out in the summer after her first year in university, she took matters into her own hands. She rushed to reclaim her membership in Communist society as well as her legacy and bond to her father, the Civil War Bolshevik partisan. On November 13, 1941, she recorded her decision, “On November 16<sup>th</sup> I am joining a partisan detachment. And so my life is entering upon the path my father traveled.”<sup>17</sup>

Her search for redemption through partisan warfare was not unique among children of enemies of the people. The most famous girl heroine of the war, Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, was also a daughter and granddaughter of enemies of the people who had been executed in the 1930s. Her treatment at the hands of the Germans who captured her became iconic, the images of the defiling of her body among the most familiar and motivating in the war. “Her frozen body, with the left breast cut off, was found still dangling when Soviet troops arrived.”<sup>18</sup> By 1943, Zoya’s fate had been memorialized in poetry, theater, and film. She entered the war as a partisan with her mother’s encouragement.

Nina Kosterina’s mother, on the other hand, was unable to influence her daughter as she rushed off to war. She received Nina’s letter after the fact. She received only one other letter dated December 8:

I have not written to you for a long time, but, really, it was impossible. I have just returned from a mission, and am resting now. Soon I shall go again. I would like you to see how they outfitted us! Warm underwear, felt boots, woolen vests, mittens....You write very little to me. I returned from my mission and ran to see if there were any letters. Nothing. It makes me sad. ...Do not worry, mama darling, thus far everything is well. Kiss Verochka and Lelya for me. I kiss all your stern little wrinkles.

Nina

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<sup>16</sup> Vera Borisovna Orlovskaya, Interview, Akademgorodok, July 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Kosterina, *The Diary of Nina Kosterina*, 188-9.

<sup>18</sup> Overy, *Russia's War*, 123.

In late January 1942, Nina's mother heard from the front again. The message read as follows:

To Kosterina, Anna Mikhailovna

Notice No. 54

Your daughter, Nina Alexeyevna Kosterina, native of Moscow, died in December 1941, in the fight for our Socialist Homeland. Faithful to her military oath, she showed heroism and courage in the performance of her duty.

Colonel Kuprianov  
Chief of Army Personnel

With no date or location to place her daughter's death, Nina's mother knew only that her oldest daughter had died a Soviet hero.<sup>19</sup>

Fourteen-year-old Valentin Tikhonovich Muravskii got the opportunity to redeem himself at the front willy-nilly. His father, a non-Party radar engineer, had been arrested in Leningrad in 1937. His mother, he, and his sister, Dina, were sent into exile in Central Asia, but then returned unexpectedly by the state to Leningrad in late spring 1941. There, they were trapped in the blockade that encircled the city by late September.

After nearly dying of dystrophy, Valentin was evacuated with his mother and sister to the north Caucasus region in spring 1942. There, he was captured in August by the German troops on the way to Stalingrad. For the next two-and-a-half years, he was a slave laborer for the German war effort in German-occupied Romania, Hungary, and Austria.

When the Red Army captured Vienna, Valentin, by then seventeen years old, was

working with a fellow slave laborer at Vienna's central hospital, the Allgemeines Krankenhaus. When the Red Army entered the city, chaos and block-by-block street battles created cover for the boys' escape. After surveying the scene from the attic of the hospital, they decided to make a run for it. They ran up to a Soviet tank and explained who they were.

They thus became two of hundreds of former slave laborers and prisoners of war liberated by advancing Soviet troops who joined, if they were physically capable, on the march to Berlin.<sup>20</sup> The soldiers asked if they knew the streets of Vienna; they assured them they did, and were invited to hop aboard to serve as guides. In the span of thirty minutes, Valentin Tikhonovich metamorphosed from slave laborer to Soviet warrior. He remained with the unit he joined until May 8, 1945, having received a uniform, a rank, weapons, and an indelible new identity. "I am a participant in the war. I liberated Vienna." Still only seventeen years old, Valentin Tikhonovich thus experienced dramatic, sacrificial, heroic reintegration into Soviet society during the war. He had no doubt that he had contributed to the defeat of the Germans.

Lydia Dubrovina and Vera Orlovskaiia contributed at home. At the same time that Irina Dubrovina and her mother were living on a starvation diet, and Irina was enduring constant reminders in school of her enemy status during wartime, Lydia was literally giving her life's blood to the Soviet cause. With her mother's permission, she had stayed in Ufa during their flight from Stalingrad, to continue her medical studies. She went to school during the day and worked in a hospital for the war wounded at night. "In addition, she gave blood for the

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<sup>19</sup> Kosterina, *The Diary of Nina Kosterina*, 194.

<sup>20</sup> Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War. Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Picador, Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 386; Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in German. A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), see chapter on "The Problem of Rape" Muravskii described his profound disappointment in the behavior of marauding Red Army soldiers as they exacted revenge on the German population. Again, these scenes became part of this young man's kaleidoscope of dreadful images of human depredation during his adolescence. Valentin Tikhonovich Muravskii, Interview. St. Petersburg, June 2008.

wounded; for this they also gave her a special ration and some money.” The wounded repaid her also. Lydia was clearly starving; the wounded soldiers in her care saved their suppers or leftovers when their appetites failed them -- to give to her when she arrived for night duty.

Thousands of miles still further east in Tomsk, Vera Borisovna Orlovskaja was living a life parallel to Lydia Dubrovina's. During her last two years of high school, Vera Borisovna worked in a weapons factory, handing her pay over to the relative who had taken her and her two brothers in. When she graduated in the middle of the war, she chose medical training and was able to move into a dormitory. She continued to work the night shift at the weapons factory, receiving rations at the institute and factory. On top of this round of school and work on alternating days and nights, she regularly donated blood. In the context of a war that she was willing to view as a defense of the Russian Motherland, Vera Borisovna was able to join in by getting an education, building weapons, and donating her blood. She was able to consider herself a patriot and someone who contributed to the defeat of the Germans.

The extraordinary circumstances of World War II thus inexorably drew children of enemies of the people into shared suffering and opportunities for shared sacrifice with their fellow citizens. Not only did these circumstances temporarily relieve their stigma. They also bound the child survivors to the nation, the Motherland, they had helped save. While some, as did Vera Orlovskaja, withheld loyalty to Stalin, the majority of child survivors of Soviet repression interviewed for this project continued to identify deeply with the Soviet war effort, and thereby to explain their sense of membership in a system that had so harmed them and their families.

## **“Study Well.” Gratitude for a Soviet Education**

The second indisputable triumph of the Soviet system was its system of public education. Within the first decade of Soviet rule, literacy rates rose to 80% in cities and 58% for the entire Soviet Union. Eventually, the Soviet Union would declare that it had achieved universal literacy among its citizens. Thus, the Soviet educational enterprise was one of its most positive legacies. Child survivors of political repression not only acknowledge that Soviet achievement; they are also deeply grateful for what it gave them. Most of my interview subjects also devoted their professional lives to Soviet education or science.

Most of the subjects I interviewed inherited a deep respect for education from their parents. Two children illustrate what the Bolshevik regime had given their parents. Antonina Nosovich and Rudolf Iakson joined the Red Army to defend the Bolshevik revolution in 1918. After the war, both received a free medical education at Moscow State University. Rudolf rose rapidly in the Soviet medical hierarchy. In 1937 he was director of the Leningrad branch of the famous Nobel Laureate Ivan Pavlov’s Institute of Experimental Medicine, while his wife was a professor of obstetrics and gynecology. Their daughter, Maya, was born in December 1928.

Inna Gaister was born on August 30, 1925, to Rakhil Kaplan and her husband, Aron Gaister. They had met as Communist Party activists in Gomel, where Aron edited the local Party newspaper. The Kaplan family as a whole was exceptionally blessed by the Bolsheviks. At the turn of the century, the matriarch, Gita Kaplan, lived with her hapless, trumpet-playing husband in the tiny settlement of Zel’va, outside Warsaw. There she gave birth to seven children, whom she sometimes fed with the flour dust her husband was permitted to scrape off the walls of the mill where he worked. Their oldest daughter, Rakhil, joined the Communist Party in 1918 and urged the oldest of her younger brothers to join her in Moscow. Over the 1920s, all but one of

her siblings would move to the young Soviet Union, leaving their parents and youngest sister behind in Zel'va. Receiving free higher education, they all rose through the ranks of Soviet society, and for several, membership in the Communist Party during the 1920s.

By 1920, Rakhil Kaplan and Aron Gaister had moved to Moscow, so that her father could study history at the Institute of Red Professors. Her mother was on the Central Committee of the Union of Seamstresses. Inna's father rose fast and high in the party-state, first teaching at the Institute of Red Professors, and then moving into government work. Their status in the city was such that her father could arrange for the most famous obstetrician in the city to come to their dormitory quarters to deliver Inna, their first surviving child.

By 1928, he was working at GOSPLAN, the central planning commission, and his family had begun to enjoy the privileges of his model political biography. They had an apartment of two large rooms, little Inna attended a nursery school in the most prestigious neighborhood of the city, she had a peasant nanny to care for her, and she spent her summer months at special summer camps outside the city. As 1930 approached, even grander prospects appeared: her father learned he would receive an apartment in the modernist apartment building being built on the embankment of the Moscow River, Government House, practically in the Kremlin's shadow, the largest apartment building in the world.<sup>21</sup>

The centrality of education to family experiences appeared even at the moment of arrests. By late summer, 1937, the Iakson-Nosovich family had lost their apartment, Rudol'f Iakson had lost his job and been expelled from the Communist Party. Antonina urged him to flee, but he refused to believe arrest was imminent. It came in early fall, when Maya should have been at school. Instead, she was home in bed with scarlet fever. Her father was sitting beside her bed

with a globe, trying to amuse her, when NKVD officers entered the apartment. They took him away, giving him time to say to her only, “Study well.”

Inna Gaister’s arrest came on the day she defended her senior thesis in physics at Moscow State University in 1949. She was one of many children of enemies of the people who, after losing their fathers to arrest and execution and being separated from their arrested and exiled mothers for eight years, were themselves arrested as “socially dangerous elements” that year. Many of their mothers were also arrested for a second time in 1949. At the last moment, just before physics students were to begin their presentations to the panel of professors, Inna was informed that her presentation had been moved up to be the first one.

As soon as she was done, she was summoned to the chair’s office, where a security police officer awaited her. He escorted her in her new high heels and dress bought for the defense directly from the university to the Lubyanka, the first stop in a journey to exile in a village in Kazakhstan. The completion of her thesis defense proved crucial; it enabled her to receive a teaching job in exile, and thus to support her mother and sister, who joined her.

Valeriia Gerlin was one of several subjects who described her application to university as a quest. As a gold medalist in high school after the war who “at one time even believed that I was the smartest person on earth,” she “could not even imagine that it was possible to study anywhere but Moscow University.”<sup>22</sup> She took into account the riskiness of various fields, rejecting biology, for example, because of the rising tide against genetics. She applied to the History Department, which, for a gold medalist simply meant submitting her documents, having a pro forma interview, and waiting for official notification of her automatic admission. Instead,

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<sup>21</sup> Inna Shikheeva-Gaister, *Deti vragov naroda. Semeinaia khronika vremen kul'ta lichnosti* (Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage Publishers, 2003), 7-9.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Valeriia Mikhailovna Gerlin, Moscow, April 2005.



she received a rejection letter stating that there were no places left in history.

She tried to get in through an interview and oral examination, on which she received a perfect score. Yet, again, they informed her that there was no slot for her.

I took the same documents in my teeth and decided that maybe this was the hand of Providence indicating that I should have applied to the Philosophy Department, which I had been afraid to apply to because it was so prestigious. I had been afraid to apply there...So, I'll matriculate there. I brought my documents to the Philosophy Department. The Admissions Commission was taking a break, on the top floor...I sat on the steps. A fellow sat next to me and started asking me what I was waiting for and why. He said, "Why didn't they admit you?" I said, "Because of my parents." At home, they had convinced me that I should not lie in any way about the situation. Because it was a real humiliation to lie. I wrote that my parents had been repressed. He asked to see my documents, and said, "No, it's not only because of that." And he pointed to my nationality.<sup>23</sup> And that was such a blow. Such a blow. The first. A terrible blow. I did not go to the Philosophy Department. I took my documents and went home. And from the university I walked along the embankment [along the Moscow River] on Usachevka to Luzhniki, seriously considering what I should do. In general, what was I to do? Either drown myself in the Moscow River or throw my documents into it.

Instead, when she came to the end of the embankment, she turned around and went directly to a teachers' institute to submit her papers. They admitted her.

Teachers hold a sacred place in the reminiscences of child survivors. They recount special efforts teachers and school directors made to ensure they received a rigorous education and the rewards their exceptional achievements deserved. One such episode involved Ella Zakgeim, whose father and mother had both been arrested in 1937.<sup>24</sup> She earned her gold medal in high school only through the intervention of her school's director.

She saw that I was playing in volleyball in the school yard, and she (she lived at school, she had no place to live after the war) yelled at me, "Ella, come here!" in a very threatening voice, we were very afraid of her. She was strict. "Wash your hands," she told me and gave me a towel and soap. I could not understand what

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<sup>23</sup> Citizens of the Soviet Union had to state their nationality when they received their internal passports at age sixteen. Gerlin's parents were both Jewish, so her passport listed her nationality as Jewish.

<sup>24</sup> Ella Iudelevna Zakgeim, Interview, Moscow, April 2005.

was going on. I washed my hands and came back in. She said, “Sit down, and I’ll tell you what the problem is. In order for you to gain admission to any institute with your biography, you must have a gold medal. You deserve it, I know, but in your essays there are three errors. I want you to correct them in your own hand.” The essays, you see, were read by the city department of public education, in the city, at the highest level. In general, I had left out three commas. No, that’s not quite right. I had left out two commas and the third error was even funnier. She made me correct this in my own hand...two commas were missing in my essay on Tolstoy, and there was a quote from Chekhov, from “Uncle Vanya.”

The problem turned out to be that Ella had used a capital “B” for the word “god” in Russian, *Bog*, in the quote from Chekhov. She had taken the quote from a 1920 Soviet edition of his works. Her director, Anna L’vovna, insisted that it was no longer permitted to capitalize the word “god” and that it was not capitalized in the latest Soviet publications. Only when Anna L’vovna showed Ella the quotation from the most recent Soviet edition with a lower case “b” did she change her essay. “Thus, thanks to Anna L’vovna, I received my gold medal after all, which in 1949 gave me the right to enter any institution of higher education without taking entrance exams.”

Other children named the teachers who had taken them under their wing, or had offered special tutoring to enable them to stand for university exams in remote locations where they were stigmatized children of enemies of the people. Such were the cases of Maya Nosovich-Iakson and Irina Dubrovina, each of whom earned a degree in the sciences. Teachers’ interventions could be prosaic, but important. When American humanitarian assistance reached World War II Moscow, for example, Zaiara Veselaia’s class received two outfits of girls’ clothing. The teacher reserved one for Zaiara before allowing the class to decide who would receive the second; that cream suit was her only suitable outfit for years.

Galina Dudareva attributes her sister’s and her survival in part to a teacher in Yel’na, to which they returned after the Red Army recaptured it during the war. In her interview, Dudareva

breaks down into tears as she remembers their starvation, and the periodic arrival of the teacher in the evenings with a parcel of food. Andrei Vorob'ev, who eventually rose to be Minister of Health during the post-Soviet presidency of Boris Yeltsin, also identifies a teacher in post-war, hungry Moscow as his samaritan; she arranged for him to tutor other students in math in order to earn enough cash to buy food.<sup>25</sup> For Inna Gaister, a teacher's similar effort in summer 1941 provided her tutees and enough money to buy a train ticket to go to the GULAG to visit her mother in a forced labor camp for one day.

Perhaps because of their recognition of the potential impact of teachers, and certainly because they deeply valued learning and formal education, many of the child survivors became teachers themselves. Some, such as Andrei Vorobev and Aleksandr Zakgeim, continued to teach well into their seventies. Others continue to hold their former students' respect and affection, as I had opportunities to observe in Kotlas (Irina Dubrovina), Moscow (Valeriia Gerlin), and Smolensk (Maya Nosovich-Iakson). Most were systematically denied teaching honors and awards, even years after their parents had been fully rehabilitated during the tenure of Nikita Khrushchev as General Secretary.

Such reminders of their parents' histories and their own stigmatized childhoods worked effectively to keep most survivors in check. Only Valeriia Gerlin spoke out openly against the Soviet regime; she was fired as a result, but subsequently reinstated. Irina Dubrovina reflects openly about the challenges of teaching young persons in Kotlas for thirty years without revealing her adult doubts about the Soviet system. Only in retirement, and then only because of Mikhail Gorbachev's official policy of transparency/glasnost', did she risk public engagement with public debates about the Soviet regime. She continues to serve as the director of the local

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<sup>25</sup> Andrei Ivanovich Vorob'ev, Interview, Moscow, May 2005.

chapter of the non-governmental organization, Memorial, which was established in the late 1980s to research and commemorate the victims of Soviet political repression. She is most proud of her work in local schools, where she teams up with teachers to incorporate study of the terror and experiences of children of enemies of the people into their curriculum. But for the decades she was on the Soviet payroll, she was a prudently silent teacher on any subject beyond her specialization, chemistry.

### **Conclusion**

In his pathbreaking study of how Stalinist society functioned in the steel town of Magnitogorsk, Stephen Kotkin used the apt phrase to describe Soviet citizens as ironically being “Europe’s most quiescent working class.”<sup>26</sup> His larger argument was that Stalinism offered much to many Soviet citizens, whose own aspirations converged with the rapidly modernizing and industrializing regime. Child survivors’ oral history interviews add alternative explanations for why quiescence so characterized the post-war citizenry. State and family conspired to keep children in the dark about the extent of the state’s violence against their parents. Family silences and fictions enabled children of enemies of the people to live within Soviet society without the burden of hating their political masters. This adult strategy opened the way for the children’s socialization as loyal citizens and aspiring young Communists well into their late teenage years.

By then, official values settled in, often surviving the shocks of family and official revelations over the last thirty-five years of Soviet power, from Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 through Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost’, which accelerated revelations beginning in 1987. Sharing the experience of their fellow citizens in

World War II reintegrated many of the children of enemies of the people into the Soviet family. No matter their future disenchantments with Stalin and the Soviet system, few would renounce their bond to the Soviet people and government during those crucial four years in the lives of the nation, which coincided for most of the children with their teenage and young adult years. Finally, the children's experiences inside Soviet classrooms, first as vulnerable children who gained teachers' solicitude and knowledge there, then as teachers themselves, bound them to the most unalloyed success of Soviet rule, education.

These sources of quiescence do not ensure nostalgia or positive valuation of the Soviet system today. On the contrary, most child survivors of Soviet political repression have emerged as fierce, if usually private, critics of authoritarianism, both of the late Soviet period and of Vladimir Putin's post-Soviet Russia. One indication of the metamorphosis of their quiescence as Soviet citizens into deep skeptics toward the Soviet and post-Soviet states is the departure of so many of *their* children from Russia. They began to leave in the early 1990s. Now they live in Germany, Australia, Israel, and the United States. When I asked Valeriia Gerlin if the experience of having lost her parents as a seven-year-old had led her, as a mother, to fear that she would lose her only daughter. Her response was, "I have already lost her."

Why do the grandchildren of the enemies of the people leave? Inna Gaister explained her daughter's motivation with a phrase that other survivors use, as well, "genetic fear." As Orlando Figes explains in his recent voluminous study of victims of Stalinist repression, "the ruinous legacies of the Stalinist regime continued to be felt by the descendants of Stalin's victims many decades after the dictator's death. It was not only a question of lost relationships, damaged lives

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 198.

and families, but of traumas passed from one generation to the next.”<sup>27</sup> Without the binding experience of World War II, and *with* the full knowledge of what the Soviet regime did to their grandparents, grandchildren lack two of the factors that contributed to their parents’ ability to live out their lives under the regime that had victimized them.

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<sup>27</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers. Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 645.