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Kids, Guns and Gas Masks. Military Technology as Part of the Photographs Taken at the Schools of the Leningrad Province in the 1930s

Silja Pitkänen

An Image of Childhood in Stalin's Russia

On the wall of the reading room of the Central State Archive of Documentary Films, Photographs, and Sound Recordings of St. Petersburg (*Tsentrāl'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv kinofotofonodokumentov Sankt-Peterburga*¹; TsGAKFFD SPb), there is a print of a photograph taken by the well-known photographer Victor Bulla. The photo depicts dozens of children wearing gas masks. The caption reads: “Group of participants of the pioneer campaign in gas masks. 1935, Leningrad province². Pho-

¹ In transliterations, I follow the Library of Congress Romanization Table, Russia 20012; <https://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/russian.pdf>, last visited on 27 August 2018, except for names, such as Kuybyshev, in which I use the customary transliteration practices.

² I have translated *raion* (raion) to district, *uchastok* to area and *oblast'* (oblast) to province; see, for example, Bernstein 2017, xi.



Image 1. Victor Bulla: Group of participants of the pioneer campaign in gas masks. 1935, Leningrad province. TsGAKFFD SPb, image number Gr 43561.

tographer V. Bulla.” The same image is on display in the Sergei Kirov Museum in St. Petersburg as part of an exhibition on Soviet childhood. In this exhibition the photo is placed in the context of the school reforms of the early Soviet Union. This photograph, and similar photos, have also been used as cover images of books.³

It seems that this photograph has become widely associated with childhood in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and one wonders why this has been the case. The answer is quite obvious: the image is striking, as it combines two very different themes, childhood, which is usually perceived as innocent⁴, and gas masks, which have connotations of

³ See Bernstein 2017; Neumaier 2004.

⁴ According to art historian Anne Higonnet, childhood has been seen as innocent since the 17th century, and pictures have represented children accordingly. Higonnet 1998, 8. See also Vänskä 2012, especially pages 79–109. However, there has been also differing representations; see, for example, Robson 2003; Vänskä 2012, especially pages 161.

violence, threat of serious injury and death, and also refer to international military conflict and defence against “enemies”.

Gas attacks of the First World War had been traumatic for many countries, including Russia, and in the 1930s there was a threat of a new war and the Soviet Union reacted to the tightening international atmosphere. Consequently, children were taught to wear gas masks, for example. Victor Bulla’s photograph was taken sometime between 1935 and 1937, depending on the source⁵. Thus, it can also be seen as an icon of pre-war Stalin’s Soviet Union, where, as Sheila Fitzpatrick states, “the fear of war was ever-present”.⁶ The militarisation of the Soviet Youth in the 1930s⁷ is exemplified by this photograph.

In the Western tradition, it is not very common for art to present children and childhood in connection with direct violence and war. Moreover, the gas masks make the children look somewhat bizarre, like small robots. Bulla’s photograph reminds one of the dystopic imaginings of early 20th century science fiction popular in early Soviet Russia.⁸

Children in receipt of military training, even if defensive in nature, is a striking subject – especially because, as I argue elsewhere⁹, the child-

⁵ This image can also be found on Wikimedia Commons, which dates it to 1937.

⁶ Fitzpatrick 1999, 71. The sentence as a whole: “The fear of war was ever-present in the Soviet Union throughout 1930s; it was the shadow that dimmed the prospect of the radiant future.” In the contexts of building the Soviet nation and the New Soviet Person, the prospect of war “dimming the radiant future” is interesting.

⁷ See Bernstein 2007, 2.

⁸ See Stites 1989, 172.

⁹ This self-contained article stems from my ongoing PhD research, in which I analyse why and how children were depicted and represented in the propaganda photographs published in the Soviet magazine *USSR in Construction* and in the National Socialist women’s magazine *N. S. Frauen-Warte*. The focus of the analysis is in nation-building – how feelings of “nationness” were increased via propaganda images of children. The archival images analysed in this chapter are separate to those analysed in my PhD dissertation. Furthermore, my approaches in this chapter are more on the microhistorical level, with nation-building as an important background idea. The Soviet Union did not consider itself as a nation in the Western sense, yet nation-building process can be seen taking place in the early Soviet Union. See, for example, Martin and Sunny (eds.) 2001; Smith 2013; Slezkine 1994.

related propaganda imagery of the 1930s Soviet Union was mostly quite different in both its content and aesthetic, creating visions of happy childhoods and bright futures¹⁰.

Historian Seth Bernstein has studied the first Soviet generations in relation to militarisation and defence. According to him, these generations were deemed as crucial and a lot of attention was paid to them because they were to maintain socialism and, if needed, defend it. Moreover, the new generations were to be “New Soviet Persons” and their life and future in the first socialist country was to be beautiful and bright.¹¹

In this chapter, I analyse four photographs taken in the schools of the Leningrad province and housed at the aforementioned TsGAKFFD SPb. The chosen images represent the themes prevalent in the archival collection connected to military education in schools. I concentrate on photographs of children attending lessons on “antiaircraft defence and defence against chemical attacks”, as well as photos of children studying a gas mask and learning how to shoot. I approach the photos from a microhistorical perspective and, after that, apply the representation theory to the results of my preliminary analysis.

On the Archival Sources

As I mapped material for my PhD research, I visited the TsGAKFFD SPb archive and browsed collections of photographs depicting schools of the Leningrad province from the 1920s to the 1950s. I soon noticed that many documentary photographs taken at schools had visible “political” motifs. They featured, for example, images of Lenin and Stalin, political posters, and other symbols, as well as gas masks and guns. I began to

¹⁰ Jeffrey Brooks has analysed “the economy of the gift”. He maintains that as recipients of “gifts”, Soviet citizens were permanently in debt. “The performers’ expressions of appreciation confirmed their indebtedness and the shortfall of their efforts, as in the slogan, ‘Thank You, Comrade Stalin, for a Happy Childhood’.” Brooks 2001, 84.

¹¹ Bernstein 20017, 2–3.

pay special attention to these themes, and finally, to militaristic imagery in particular. The Leningrad schools are quite extensively photographed and documented, and there is substantial visual material on this theme in the archives. For this reason, I have chosen four sample photographs, representative of the overall collection, for closer analysis.

One important aspect to consider when analysing the archival photographs is that it may not always be possible to fulfil all the requirements of source criticism. For instance, it would be too time-consuming (or even impossible) to find out the identities of all the children photographed or who took the photographs as the information attached to the images is often insufficient. The photographers, for example, are often referred to only by initials, or, at best, by their surnames. Moreover, publishing records of these photographs do not exist.¹² The photos may have been printed in such media as the daily tabloid of the Central Committee of the Komsomol, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*¹³, or at least taken for publishing purposes. However, when researching the images *as such*, it may not be necessary to have the publishing details of the images.

Even if some concrete details of the photographs are lacking, can the photographs themselves still offer valuable information about the era in which they were created? Can they tell us something interesting or important about wider social and historical issues? In other words, can they be deployed as sources for historical knowledge, or is their only value in their use as illustrations in publications dealing with Soviet schools?

In my view, these historical photographs can be significant sources in aiding our understanding of the ethos of the era. They can reveal issues that other sources – such as administrative or political records, novels, or diaries – may not cover. One aspect of photographs as sources is that in them fact and fiction overlap – they are taken in “real” circumstances, yet they often include elements of fantasy.¹⁴

¹² However, it is possible that there is non-written information and knowledge on these issues that is challenging for a foreign researcher to reach.

¹³ I wish to thank Seth Bernstein for this notice.

¹⁴ For the relationship between a photograph and “reality”, see, for example, Michaels 2007.

From Microhistory to Representation

In her article on photographs as sources for microhistorical research, cultural historian Mervi Autti maintains, in the spirit of Carlo Ginzburg, that

The small can open the way into vast scenes. Especially in the interpretation of photographs, dialogue between micro- and macro history demands contextualization in terms of the epoch, and clarifying the point of view which is deployed.¹⁵

Thus, relatively minor details in photographs can, after contextualisation, reveal something more general about the reality behind the photo.

To begin with, I will examine microhistorical details such as the locations where the photos were taken and the expressions, postures and clothing of the students. As my argument here is related to military technology in photographs, I will concentrate especially on these details. As stated by Autti, such details in historical photographs – intentional or unintentional – can also tell us about the macrohistorical ethos of the era.

It would be possible, in addition to studying the aforementioned details, to research such concrete facts as what types of guns and gas masks were used and how military training in schools was organised overall. However, there are other kinds of sources and research literature available on these subjects. My research interests lie rather in the issue of *how* the students were photographed with gas masks and guns, and, secondly, *why* such images were taken so extensively in this period.

After the microhistorical analysis, I will analyse the *meaning* of the photos. I shift the focus to historical representation and consider the underlying ideas behind these photographs. Ultimately, I address how

¹⁵ Autti 2011, 211.

such images served to construct the ideal of Soviet childhood and youth, and by extension of the Soviet Union.¹⁶

In her article on photographs as sources, Autti also notes that “To perform or being performed speaks of ideals, values, goals and aims of the era”.¹⁷ This idea bears similarities to cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s theory of representation. Hall states:

In language, we use signs and symbols [– –] to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the ‘media’ through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced.¹⁸

I analyse the representations of visual language, which produces meanings similarly as spoken language. Aptly, Hall mentions that he uses “language in a very broad and inclusive way”, including in this definition images “[– –] whether produced by hand, mechanical, electronic, digital or some other means, when they are used to express meaning.” For Hall, languages (in the sense of systems of words, sounds, gestures, images, etc.) work through representation and are systems of representation; they *signify* and *symbolise* – they construct meaning and transmit it.¹⁹

According to Hall, there are two ways to study representation: the first is the *semiotic approach*, which concentrates on how language produces meaning, and the second is the *discursive approach*, which is con-

¹⁶ In the 1930s Soviet Union, things were often to be *imagined* in their splendid future state. Sheila Fitzpatrick summarises the mentality, “the socialist-realist view of the world”, as she calls it: “In the socialist-realist view of the world, a dry, half-dug ditch signified a future canal full of loaded barges, a ruined church was a potential kolkhoz clubhouse, and the inscription of a project in the Five-Year Plan was a magical act of creation that might almost obviate the need for more concrete exertions.” Fitzpatrick 1992, 217. In photographs, it was, to some extent, possible to show things not as they currently were but as they would be in the future.

¹⁷ Autti 2011, 229.

¹⁸ Hall 1997, 1.

¹⁹ Hall 1997, 18.

cerned with the effects and consequences of representation. The semiotic approach analyses the material itself, while the discursive approach examines how the information produced by representation, is connected with power, and how it constructs identities at particular times and in particular places.²⁰ In this chapter, following a microhistorical analysis, I will apply a semiotic approach to the photographs in question. Finally, I will briefly apply the discursive approach and consider the (intended) consequences of these representations in the context of propaganda and nation-building.

Art historian Anne Higonnet has analysed the connection between images of children and the future – in other words, the process of forming and valuing the collective future on a national level.²¹ This, at least to some extent, could also be described as nation-building²². The process of nation-building seems to be an important mechanism behind the production of extensive amounts of school-related photographs involving military imagery.

Propaganda, Nation-building, Myth

The photographs analysed can be interpreted as propaganda images to some extent. Historian David Welch, who specialises in the subject of propaganda, states that in the 20th century the development of mass

²⁰ Hall 1997, 6.

²¹ Higonnet 1998, 14.

²² By nation-building I mean the deliberate and purposeful construction of national identity, and I understand “nation” as an intentionally created entity, as anthropologist Benedict Anderson sees it. Moreover, Anderson argues that “[–] often in the ‘nation-building’ policies of the new states one sees both a genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm and the systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth.” Anderson 2006, 113–114. Thus, for Anderson, nation-building of new states, such as the Soviet Union of the 1930s, is a combination of general enthusiasm and promulgating the nationalist ideology. According to Anderson, the mass media and the educational process have an essential role in nation-building.

media enabled the spreading of propaganda to larger audiences. Furthermore, Welch argues that propaganda had a prominent role during the First World War “as an organized weapon of modern warfare” and was “a significant weapon” in the Second World War.²³ This chapter concerns photographs in the interwar period. As Bernstein maintains, “the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany appeared to make war in Europe inevitable” while Soviet officials fought supposed domestic enemies.²⁴ The 1930s in the Soviet Union was an especially “turbulent period of mass violence”.²⁵ It could be claimed that the propaganda war started during that decade, and art and mass media played an important role in it. Photography – both as a form of art and a mass medium – was consequently a vital propaganda medium of the era.

In addition to being a period of mass violence, the 1930s was also “a time when people believed in a brighter future”, as stated by Bernstein.²⁶ Historian James J. Sheehan maintains that violence was important for both fascism and communism as a means of acquiring power, but also “as a transformative instrument, essential to forging a new social and political order.”²⁷ It was the idea of forging a new order that made people believe in a better future during the insecure and violent times, and militaristic visual propaganda took advantage of this belief – especially when featuring children.

The archival photographs depicting Soviet schools can, to some extent, be read in the context of the rising and colliding of Stalinism and Nazism. They can be interpreted as propaganda images intended for propagating feelings of security for citizens by indicating the Soviet Union’s capability for defence – even small children were taught to protect themselves, and, on the other hand, defence was so easy that even children were able to handle it; it was really a child’s play. Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, researchers specialising in propaganda, note

²³ Welch 2013, 2; 15; 20. On the relationship between mass media and propaganda, see also Jowett & O’Donnell 2006, 79; 84.

²⁴ Bernstein 2017, 5.

²⁵ Bernstein 2017, 2. See also Fitzpatrick 1999, 71; Bernstein 2017, 2.

²⁶ Bernstein 2017, 2.

²⁷ Sheehan 2008, 99.

that war propaganda usually begins well before war itself.²⁸ Thus, the guns and gas masks in these images can be seen as preliminary preparations for a possible war.

Furthermore, Jowett and O'Donnell maintain that our understanding of images is constructed via associations with images we have seen before.²⁹ Anne Higonnet, as mentioned, explains how childhood and children have been represented as innocent since the 17th century.³⁰ Subsequent images of children are easily associated to angelic pictures of innocent children. In images where children are represented with war technology, the gas masks and guns do not necessarily challenge the innocence of the children – it might also be that the presence of children, deemed as innocent, transfers the meaning of military paraphernalia into sacred objects of defending the first socialist country and motherland (*rodina*).

Mythology, too, often has a role in both propaganda and nation-building. Jowett and O'Donnell define the relationship of propaganda and myth in the following way:

A myth is a story in which meaning is embodied in recurrent symbols and events, but it is also an idea to which people already subscribe; therefore, it is a predisposition to act. It can be used by a propagandist as a mythical representation of an audience's experiences, feelings, and thoughts.³¹

The images of children can be associated with mythical and religious images. In the context of the everyday visual environment of the early Soviet Union, they might be associated to the pre-Revolution Christian images of the Holy Family and the Infant Jesus who bears the promise

²⁸ Jowett & O'Donnell 2015, 232.

²⁹ Jowett & O'Donnell 2015, 9.

³⁰ Higonnet 1998, 8.

³¹ Jowett & O'Donnell 2015, 316.

of salvation.³² In the photographs analysed in this chapter, the Jesus-like saviours are the first socialist generations. They are builders of the new world, equipped with gas masks and rifles. The new world, in order to be further built, had to be protected, too.³³

Kids with Gas masks and Guns

The second photograph of this chapter – the first one analysed – is part of a series of eight images taken at the school of factory and plant apprenticeship (*Shkola fabrično-zavodckogo ycheničestva*)³⁴ of Leningrad province’s Finland area. On the archival cards of six out of the eight images in this series, it is written that students are attending classes on

³² Philip M. Taylor maintains that as the masses of the early Soviet Union were mostly illiterate, they were, nevertheless, “historically and culturally receptive to icons”. Taylor 1995, 199. “The poster, like the icon, could present symbols in a simple and easily identifiable way, even to barely literate peasants.” Taylor 1995, 200. See also Bonnell 1999. My premise is that icons had an impact on all types of Soviet propaganda art – on posters as well as to photographs, for example.

³³ See, for example, the propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction*, which features similar themes in its various volumes. For example, volume 1 from 1934, *The Bobriki Chemical Combinat*, features on its back cover a serial of four photographs depicting young citizens doing sports, with the title “We are ready for labour and defence”. In one of the four images, youngsters are walking in gas masks. Furthermore, volume 9 from 1936, *The Chuvash Soviet Republic*, features several photographs of young people wearing gas masks and operating military technology. One of the captions of the photo essay declares: “Andri of the modern Chuvash fable did not secure happiness in order to lose it again. We are all learning to defend our country”. The defence, obviously, was targeted towards enemies outside the borders of the Soviet Union. Other volumes of the magazine feature people with guns and give predictions of war, such as volume 1 from 1937, *Red Navy*, which declares in a caption: “War clouds lower over the land of socialism” and “the clouds of war have gathered over the land of socialism.”

³⁴ Schools of factory and plant apprenticeship trained qualified industrial workers and technicians in the Soviet Union in the 1920s–1930s.



Image 2. Factory and plant apprenticeship students from the Leningrad province's Finland area attending practical classes. 1933. TsGAKFFD SPb, image number Vr 35031.

PVHO, anti-aircraft defence and defence against chemical attacks.³⁵ The cards in this collection were written in 1991 and thus the information is not very exact.

Image number two, shown above, dates from 1933, and on the archival card it is written that “The school’s students are attending practical classes.”³⁶ The practical classes are most likely first aid classes, and possibly related to anti-aircraft defence and defence against chemical

³⁵ *Glossary of Soviet Military Terminology English–Russian, Russian–English* 1955, 770.

³⁶ I wish to thank MA Ksenia Venediktova for indispensable help at the archives and with translations. Furthermore, I wish to thank the staff of TsGAKFFD SPb for their friendliness, helpful advices and continuous support. Special thanks to MA Alexandra Generalova, who was an employee at the archives by the time I visited there for the first time. Any possible mistakes in reading and interpreting the data are mine.

attacks, as all the students are wearing gas masks. Furthermore, some of the students have sleeve badges and bags, which may also be related to first aid.

In the photograph, two students lie on the ground in the foreground of the picture. Both of the students playing the part of a victim are helped by other students. On the right side of the victims, two students are bearing stretchers and two are lifting a victim to the stretchers. Behind this group there are two students standing. In the background of the photo, there is a group of students carrying a victim on stretchers. On the right side of them, there are two other groups of students. In both groups, two students have lifted up a victim and are supporting the victim from both sides – the victim is sitting on their arms. It seems that nearly all of the students taking part to the rehearsal are women, as they seem to be wearing skirts. On the left side of the image, there are two figures, looking away from the other students. One is also wearing a skirt and a white armband, and, as she seems older than the other figures on the image, she might be a teacher or educator.

There are no leaves on trees, yet there is no snow either, indicating that the photo was most likely taken either in autumn or spring. The students seem to be practising at an empty lot and the buildings on the right side of the photograph appear unfinished. This might be explained by the fact that during the first decades of the Soviet Union, many new cities, towns and neighbourhoods were built and urban areas grew and expanded rapidly.³⁷

It is noteworthy that by 1933 practical, militaristic classes were part of teaching at the School of Factory and Plant Apprenticeship of Leningrad province's Finland area. It is, of course, possible that the students are practising first aid for work-related accidents, but the scene of the rehearsal is more reminiscent of a battlefield than a factory interior. According to Bernstein, in the mid-1930s civil defence became one of the forms of youth activism, and "The main location of youth activism began to shift from workplace to schools, fitness programs, and civil defense as the league [Komsomol] attempted to mold adolescents."³⁸ Furthermore,

³⁷ See Stites 1989, 244.

³⁸ Bernstein 2017, 41.

he mentions the civil defence organisation, a society established in 1927 as the Union of Societies for Aid to Defence and Aviation-Chemical Development of the USSR (OSOAVIAKhIM), and maintains that:

An amalgamation of several 1920s-era voluntary defense organizations, Osoaviakhim inherited a wide range of functions related to civil defense: preconscription training for young men, civilian firearms training, air and chemical defense. It also was responsible for the production and distribution of defense products (e.g., gas masks) and pest extermination.”³⁹

All the photographs analysed in this chapter are to be read in this context, especially the images including Komsomol-aged students.

Image three is part of the same series as the previous image. On the archival card of the photo it is written “The school’s students are attending practical classes of anti-aircraft defence and defence against chemical attacks”. In the photo, about 20 students are in a row in front of a two-storey school building. The sign on the wall of the building with the school’s name is partly visible, but the text is obscured by the students. Some of the students are on the roof of the vestibule, sweeping it. One person, with his back towards the photographer, holds a hose and is spraying a tree. In the foreground of the picture, there are two barrels labelled with the word *pesok*, sand – most likely used for saturating chemicals in case of an accident or an attack. The season seems to be the same as in the previous image. The composition of the image is somewhat similar to Victor Bulla’s photograph, especially in terms of the students standing on the left side of the image. This suggests that even though Bulla’s photograph is quite well-known, many similar

³⁹ Bernstein 2017, 49. Bernstein also notes that a broader expansion of defence education was taking place among the youth, and the Red Army attempted to increase its role in the general curriculum and increasingly sought out schools and higher education as partners in military training. Bernstein mentions that the school system already included compulsory defence education for older students, and that Narkompros sent roughly half of students in grades eight through ten (about 400,000) to some form of military training. The programme included military skills such as marching, shooting, and grenade throwing. Bernstein 2017, 53–55.



Image 3. Students of the school of factory and plant apprenticeship of Leningrad province's Finland area attending classes in anti-aircraft defence and defence against chemical attacks. 1933. TsGAKFFD SPb, image number Vr 35032.

photos on the same subject exist and Bulla's photo is not unique in terms of its subject.

All the students seem to be boys, as they are wearing trousers and caps. Perhaps first aid was considered a female responsibility, whereas defence against chemical attacks was considered an assignment for boys and men. Richard Stites describes how gender roles were redefined in the mid-1930s, and, according to him, "The Stalinist image of woman was patriarchal: the ideal woman was a matronly mother of many children, and not the thin and tough barricade fighter of the revolutionary poster".⁴⁰ Stites' statement supports the idea of female students as occupying a "matronly" role taking care of the wounded. Moreover,

⁴⁰ Stites 1989, 234.

female students seem to be wearing skirts or dresses – markedly feminine clothing – even when simulating violence and catastrophes.

It is noteworthy that all the photographs analysed in this chapter were taken in the Leningrad province. When preparing for defence, Leningrad was crucial, as it was a very important city in the western part of the Soviet Union. The perceived threat was supposed to come from the west, and thus the schools of the Leningrad province were the most likely to be actively engaged in practising defence.

Military education had also another side. In addition to defence, students were taught how to shoot and attack. Image four is part of a series of 18 images taken at the Model school No 1 in the Leningrad province's Kirovskiy district. The images in the series were taken between the 1920s and the 1950s, with most of them dating from the 1930s. The archive card of the image – most likely completed in the 1930s deducing from the handwriting, the outlook of the card and the detailed information – includes the description: “Members of the Komsomol – students



Image 4. Students of the Model school No 1 of the Leningrad province's Kirovskiy district – members of the Komsomol and the school's first Voroshilov sharpshooters. 1936. TsGAKFFD SPb, image number Ar 31860.

of the Model school no 1 of the Kirovskiy district (under patronage of the ‘Red Triangle’ plant). The school’s first Voroshilov sharpshooters. In the photo, in the upper row: Obratsov, Kalashnikov, Semenov, Krautner and Garezin. In the lower row: Limnenkov, Rakov, Aleksandrova, Nikolaeva.” The image was taken on 20 March 1936.

In this image, a boy is loading a rifle, and a group of eight other students – apparently consisting of six boys and three girls – are watching him while holding their own guns. In the background are two targets. The students seem to be smartly dressed: at least of the two boys in the background (the first and second from the left) wear suits and ties, and the others also wear quite formal clothes. Furthermore, the students appear to be excited and enthusiastic. Perhaps they have dressed up for the photo, and perhaps they are exaggerating their excitement for the important photo session? However, they have a good reason to be excited – they are the first Voroshilov sharpshooters⁴¹ of the Model school no 1 of the Kirovskiy district! In the back row, on the right of the image, one girl seems to be leaning towards the boy. Despite the formal dress, the overall atmosphere of the photo is rather relaxed. This might be because practising shooting was introduced for the Komsomol youth in the contexts of sports and leisure, not in the context of war and death. In addition, this photo is a bit unusual because the family names of the students are mentioned on the archival card.

Shooting can, of course, be considered as a sport, but in the context of this photo it most likely had explicit militaristic aims, as the inclusion of the name of the People’s Commissar for Defence, Voroshilov, indicates. As the archival card of the image indicates, shooting was also connected to the free time activities of the students, in other words, to the Komsomol movement. Historian Catriona Kelly notes that great changes took place in the early 1930s in the Pioneer movement, and “To begin with, the [Pioneer] groups were now firmly located in the educational world”.⁴² Most likely, this also took place with Komsomol activities. Furthermore, it is notable that it is mentioned on the card that the

⁴¹ Voroshilov sharpshooters was an honorary title for marksmanship, introduced in 1932 and named after People’s Commissar for Defence, Kliment Voroshilov.

⁴² Kelly 2007, 549.

students are members of Komsomol – they are Komsomols, the school’s first Voroshilov shooters, and students of the Model school No 1 of the Leningrad province’s Kirovskiy district. Thus, they are elite students in many ways and it is thus understandable that they are photographed and mentioned by name on the record of the image, with some of their achievements listed.

As mentioned previously, the students are also very well dressed. Sheila Fitzpatrick notes that school uniforms returned during the second half of 1930s, and this was a very popular move. However, this “was not a matter of social status, since all pupils went to the same state schools and the only differentiation fostered by the uniforms was between boys and girls.”⁴³ However, Catriona Kelly states that “Between 1918 and 1943 there was no centrally imposed, compulsory school uniform, though some ambitious city schools dictated the wearing of one on a local basis”.⁴⁴ Most likely, the Model school No 1 of the Kirovskiy district was an “ambitious city school”. It is also possible, as mentioned previously, that the students have dressed up for the photograph. It is also notable that the girl on the right on the image, who is leaning towards the boy, does not seem to be dressed in a very feminine way, or at least she is not dressed similarly as the other girls in the image, but wearing a plaid shirt, whereas the other girls are wearing plain, collared shirts with slipovers on top. Perhaps the ambitious elite school allowed some freedoms from the differentiation between boys and girls – at least in the context of shooting lessons that can be defined as quite masculine sports. In the context of practising defence, as presented on above, skirts or dresses seemed to be a common attire for girls.

In addition to school uniforms, there were other changes in the Soviet school of the 1930s. Richard Stites states: “The school, embattled during the cultural revolution, was reinvested with familiar components: examinations, uniforms, rigid scheduling, homework, the power of the teacher in the classroom, and pedagogical discipline”.⁴⁵ It is in accordance with this that defence skills and shooting were also taught.

⁴³ Fitzpatrick 1999, 107.

⁴⁴ Kelly 2007, 508.

⁴⁵ Stites 1989, 246.

Moreover, 1936, when the image was taken, was the year the great purges began and the everyday life in the Soviet Union became more and more violent. This also had an impact on everyday life in schools – defence and shooting were actively practised.

The fifth image is part of a collection of 14 photographs taken at 18th School of the Leningrad province's Kuybyshevskiy district. The collection includes posed photographs taken in various locations such as the school cafeteria, as well as photos taken during classes. In the collection, there are three photographs all taken at the same location – most likely a classroom. All three photos feature an adult, most likely a teacher, who is holding a gas mask. The gas mask is very centrally placed in the photograph – it is held by a teacher and is placed on a table. Students have gathered around the table and the teacher. The arrangement of the



Image 5. A group of students of the School no 18 of the Kuybyshevskiy district, Leningrad, studying a gas mask. 1938. TsGAKFFD SPb, image number Gr 52549.

photograph follows the conventions of school photographs. In the collection, there are also three photographs featuring students with rifles.

The archive card of image five, written in 1960, reads: “1938, Leningrad. School no 18 of the Kuybyshevskiy district. A group of school-children studying a gas mask.” It is notable that this photo was taken in 1938, when the international political atmosphere was already growing quite tense.

The students gathered around the teacher appear to be approximately six to nine years old – the image features students younger than those in the previous photographs. The majority of the students look serious, reflecting the important occasion of being photographed, but some of the students have playful expressions. The majority of the students seem to be boys. One of the students on the right side of the teacher is staring either at the gas mask or the teacher. The teacher, too, has serious expression, and she does not look straight to the camera but down to her left side. Behind the students there is a world atlas on the wall with the visible letters SSSR (USSR). The wall also features a poster explaining how to use a gas mask, a portrait of Stalin, and a poster showing rifles and tanks.

All the students are dressed in different ways and they do not wear uniforms. The clothes of the students seem thick and warm, and at least one boy, the last one on the left side of the photograph, is wearing traditional Russian felt boots. This indicates that the season is winter. One detail worth paying closer attention to is the dress of a student sitting in the front row, third from the right. The boy is wearing a sailor suit, which had been fashionable children’s attire since the latter half of the 19th century.⁴⁶ The children of Emperor Nicholas II were often seen and photographed wearing sailor suits.⁴⁷ Furthermore, several students seem to be wearing Pioneer scarfs.

In addition to the ostensible theme of the photograph itself – students with a gas mask – the themes of the posters on the wall behind the

⁴⁶ See Vänskä 2012, 200–201.

⁴⁷ Photographs of the children of Emperor Nicholas II were exhibited at the State Museum and Exhibition Center ROSPHOTO in St. Petersburg, in the exhibition *Emperor Nicholas II. On the 150th Anniversary of Birth*. The exhibition was on display from 6 July 2018 to 9 September 2018.

students are interesting. In the 1930s, the Soviet Union expanded⁴⁸, and the state indeed looks very big on the atlas. Maps often tend to be drawn from the perspective of the culture that produces them, and the USSR looks central and wide on the atlas on the wall. Moreover, the other posters also feature militaristic themes and, overall, the atmosphere of the photograph is rather militaristic. Even though the children do not wear gas masks, as in the other photographs analysed in this chapter, the theme of defence is strongly present. Depicting fairly young children with a gas mask gives a slightly unsettling aspect to the photograph, while also implying that the children are the future of the USSR and worth defending and fighting for. In addition to educating children, the task of school is also to protect them. Furthermore, photographing the children in front of the atlas with the USSR in the central position parallels the Soviet Union with its schools with classrooms full of literally New Soviet Persons. The new citizens were taught to defend themselves and their fellow citizens, and women especially were taught to take care of those wounded in attacks or in battles, as in the second image. The portrait of Stalin is, both literally and figuratively, in the middle of everything. He is the father of the nation and, at the same time, the protector of all its children.⁴⁹

Representations of Children with Military Technology

So far, I have employed semiotic approach to the images, focusing on microhistorical details and drawing preliminary conclusions based on these. I will now take a discursive approach in which I analyse why these images were taken and for what purposes they were used. The answers to these questions are to be found by examining the historical and political contexts of these photos, drawing on representation theory and the theory of nation-building.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Martin & Suny 2011.

⁴⁹ I have briefly discussed Stalin's role as a father of the nation in my article on photographs of children in the Soviet Socialist Republics (Pitkänen, 2017).

Researchers Yvon van der Pijl and Francio Guadeloupe have analysed belonging and nationness in the Dutch Caribbean, and state that “imagining the nation in the classroom” took place there.⁵⁰ The same process can be detected in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Van der Pijl and Guadeloupe consider schools as “privileged institutions for the transmission of formative beliefs and principles” and, furthermore, they maintain that schools are “ideal ethnographic sites for studying the paradoxical relation between dominant, hegemonic, essentializing ideologies of belonging [– –]”.⁵¹ The Soviet photographs combining schools and military technology also convey the “ideologies of belonging”. The collective co-operation of students is highlighted, suggesting that the students are building the ideal Soviet state as one big group dedicated to defend the young socialist motherland. Moreover, in the photographs the children have specific roles. For example, in the first aid photo children are performing various first aid tasks simultaneously. This indicates that the cooperation is effective, even machine-like, as if the children were practising to be parts of the Soviet (war) machine.

Furthermore, as Benedict Anderson, in his classic *Imagined Communities* (1983) notes, “[– –] the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship”. He continues: “Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.”⁵² The ideology of protecting the nation, and if needed, dying for the nation, is introduced to the students of the schools of Leningrad province in the form of lessons in defence and shooting. Thus, in these images the children are connected to mythical stories of comradeship and of defending the sacred motherland. At the same time, images of children are associated with holy images from the Christian past. This association, it could be claimed, sanctifies their represented mission of defence.

Sociologist Siniša Malešević has analysed how the idea of nation was visualised in 19th and 21st-century Serbia and Croatia, showing that

⁵⁰ van der Pijl & Guadeloupe 2015.

⁵¹ van der Pijl & Guadeloupe 2015, 91.

⁵² Anderson 2006, 7.

Serbia and Croatia were represented in the 19th century through battle-field glory, and in the 21st century through sports glory and through the success of students in international competitions.⁵³ In my research data, the nation, the Soviet Union, is represented mainly through children ready to defend – and possibly even to fight for – their country. In the photographs, the students are glorified for their readiness to defend the motherland. Moreover, the students are placed before the atlas as if they were “forming” the map of the USSR – the new generations are perceived and represented as the future of the Soviet Union. One could even go as far as claiming that – at least on the level of propagandistic images – a militarised nation was being built.

Building a Nation – Conclusions

The photographs analysed in this chapter can, with some limitations, tell us about the realities of the schools and student life in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. Details of the dress of the students can be discerned in these photographs. It might also be the case, of course, that children wore their best clothes for the occasion of being photographed. If this is the case, the photos indicate what were considered to be “best clothes”, and, at the same time, indicate prevailing practices of dress, and even financial realities of families. Furthermore, the photos reveal that taking photographs was an important occasion. These archival photographs can, to a certain extent be used as a source of historical knowledge even in the absence of further background information.

Moreover, the photos can reflect wider historical phenomena. As historian Caroline Brothers argues: “The evidence of greatest historical interest lies less in what the photograph literally depicts than in the way it relates to and makes visible the culture of which it is a part.”⁵⁴ These images, for example, tell a story of a nation that is ready to defend itself

⁵³ Malešević 2017.

⁵⁴ Brothers 1997, 22.

and preparing for a war. Therefore, it is possible to see the photographs as propaganda images.

In the context of analysing photographs, Mervi Autti mentions that, historically, the early photographs were faithful to the conventions of portrait-painting, and therefore also people of the lower classes looked like the bourgeoisie.⁵⁵ In these photographs of children in militaristic settings certain conventions of portraiture are likewise present: for example in image five the children are arranged in groups, as if they were meant to be photographed formally for a group portrait. At the same time, the images are quite evidently breaking the conventions by combining kids, guns and gas masks. Because of the rather peculiar contents of the photographs, there are certain tensions in the images – they break the conventions of representing children and childhood⁵⁶ and break the conventions of portraits.

The most interesting issue indicated by this research data is the connection between school and nation-building. When children are taught to protect the nation at school – a public institution compulsory for all – the nation is, at the same time, powerfully defined and built. This is perhaps especially the case considering that this process is being photographed and represented to other people. The photographs analysed in this chapter indicate this, and, furthermore, they can reveal what kinds of mechanisms of visual representations are used in the nation-building processes. In the images analysed, the link between the proper conduct of schoolchildren and the future of the nation is emphasised. Moreover, as argued by Seth Bernstein, “When the war arrived, there was no shift from building socialism to defending it”.⁵⁷ In the images analysed in this chapter, the virtues of defending socialism are visible throughout the 1930s.

⁵⁵ Autti 2011, 216.

⁵⁶ Higonnet 1998, 8.

⁵⁷ Bernstein 2017, 2.

Afterword

At Kubinka, in Moscow province, there is a military theme park called Patriot Park. *The Guardian* newspaper dubs it as “military Disneyland”, as it is mainly targeted at children and families. There has been a tank museum in Kubinka since the 1970s, and the military theme park was officially opened in the same area in 2015. According to *The Guardian*, President Vladimir Putin announced that the park will be an important element in the Russian “system of military-patriotic work with young people”. Moreover, as *The Guardian* summarises, “The emphasis at Patriot Park is on the glory of war, and the government believes the theme park should help instil a new sense of patriotism in Russia’s youth”.⁵⁸

Patriot Park is not the only element in the current Russian “system of military-patriotic work with young people”. The youth army of Russia, Yunarmiya, has more than 140,000 young members, according to the online newspaper *The Independent Barents Observer*. In Yunarmiya, children can “Learn how to throw a hand grenade, shoot with automatic rifle or use a bayonet”.⁵⁹ Furthermore, activities such as the Vympel club for children and the My History park support the aims and ideals of patriotic education.⁶⁰

The leading Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* parallels Yunarmiya with the Soviet Pioneer movement. The same article also mentions that Yunarmiya gathers together various school clubs and associations that relate to military subjects, such as first aid groups, history clubs and sports associations for martial arts. It is worth mentioning that in these clubs about half of the members are girls, and that there are also girls in Yunarmiya.⁶¹ Schools, children’s free time, and military/patriotic themes intertwined in the 1930s, and, similarly, intertwine in today’s Russia. Militaristic hobbies involve boys as well as girls. Photographs as striking as those taken in the 1930s are published across various media platforms presenting the militaristic hobbies of Russian youth.

⁵⁸ *The Guardian* 16 June 2015.

⁵⁹ *The Independent Barents Observer* 10 August 2017.

⁶⁰ For Vympel, see, for example, the webpage of Finnish Broadcasting Company, YLE, on 4 January 2018. For My History theme park, see, for example, *Helsingin Sanomat* 20 January 2018.

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