

Soviet Street Children and the Second World War

Welfare and Social Control under Stalin

Olga Kucherenko



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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
List of Illustrations	viii
Terms and Transliteration	ix
Abbreviations and Archive References	x
Introduction	1
Part One Bezottsovshchina	11
1 Rolling Stones	13
2 The Crime Wave	25
3 The Great Migration	37
4 Efforts to Help	51
5 Coda	59
Part Two Step-Motherland	63
6 Empty Promises	65
7 Forced Displacement	75
8 Making Labourers into Criminals	97
9 Law and Order Soviet Style	109
10 Coda	117
Part Three In Beria's Care	123
11 State House	125
12 Maloletka	135
13 Challenges to Authority	143
14 Educating through Labour	153
15 Coda	167

Conclusion	173
Glossary	177
Appendix	183
Notes	187
Select Bibliography	235
Index	240

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List of Illustrations

1	Registration at the Kiev DPR, 1944.	14
2	Children collecting weapons.	34
3	Evacuation of children from Leningrad, June–July 1941.	40
4	Child refugees.	42
5	Cadets of Nakhimov Naval College in Leningrad.	56
6	Cadets of a Suvorov college.	57
7	Polish orphans awaiting evacuation together with the Anders' Army.	80
8	Makeshift dwellings of Lithuanian exiles.	86
9	A child deportee marking wood in 1955.	93
10	Model students of FZO no.7, Leningrad, 1945.	101
11	A model DPR in Kiev.	127
12	A stark contrast between two different juvenile reformatories.	137
13	A lesson at a model DPR in Kiev.	156
14	A workshop at a model DPR in Kiev.	159

Terms and Transliteration

Throughout the text I use a modified Library of Congress transliteration system. The Russian endings *ий* and *ый* appear as *ii* and *yi*, and most diacritics are omitted, except the Russian 'soft' (') and 'hard' (") signs. Personal names and toponyms appear in their non-Anglicized Russian form, except when such names are commonly used in their familiar English version, for instance Krupskaya and Gorky. Toponyms, such as Kiev and Kharkov, as well as those that have since been changed, such as Stalingrad (Volgograd) and Gorky (Nizhnii Novgorod), are mentioned as they were known at the time. All translations are mine, except where indicated otherwise.

To simplify matters, I use the word 'police' instead of the Soviet term 'militsiia'. To minimize repetition, the official designation for the Soviet government agency concerned with ensuring administrative legality, the Procuracy, and its employees, procurators, appear interchangeably with the names that are more familiar to Western readers, Prosecutor's Office and prosecutors.

Abbreviations and Archive References

AChMP	Archive of the Black Sea Port Authority (Odessa, Ukraine).
DAOO	State Archive of Odessa Oblast' (Odessa, Ukraine).
GARF	State Archive of the Russian Federation (Moscow, Russia).
GARF (Hoover)	Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford: Archives of the Soviet Communist Party and Soviet State, Microfilm Collection (Stanford, CA, USA).
LGGRTC	The Museum of Genocide Victims (Vilnius, Lithuania).
Memorial	Archive of the International Historical, Educational, Human Rights and Charitable Society 'Memorial' (Moscow, Russia).
MUZR	Museum of Young Defenders of the Motherland (Kursk, Russia).
RGANI	Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (Moscow, Russia).
RGASPI	Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (Moscow, Russia).
RGASPI M	f.k.a. TsKhDMO Centre for the Preservation of the Documents of Youth Organizations (Moscow, Russia).
TsDKFFA	Central State Archive of Film, Photo and Phono Documentation (Kiev, Ukraine).
TsGAIPD SPb	Central State Archive of Historical and Political Documentation of St Petersburg (St Petersburg, Russia).
TsGAKFFD SPb	Central State Archive of Film, Photo and Phono Documentation of St Petersburg (St Petersburg, Russia).
TsGAMLI	Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Arts (Kiev, Ukraine).
KP	Komsomol'skaia Pravda
NSh	Nachal'naia Shkola
PP	Pionerskaia Pravda
Slu	Sovetskaia Iustitsiia
SP	Sovetskaia Pedagogika
SZ	Sotsialisticheskaia Zakonnost'
SZd	Sovetskoe Zdravookhranenie

In the endnotes, names of archives are abbreviated, and the traditional f. for fond or collection number, op. for opis' or inventory number, d. for delo or file number, and l. for list or folio number are substituted with forward slashes (e.g. GARF 1/1/1/1).

Introduction

In a 2011 interview, Sergei Volkov, the author of the popular and deeply disturbing Russian novel *Children of the Emptiness*, compared the abysmal situation with child homelessness in modern Russia and the Soviet Union. Careful not to idealize the latter, the writer nevertheless lamented the ‘unmatched social security’ offered by the Soviet state to disenfranchised children. To substantiate his claim, Volkov invoked some of the best examples of Soviet propaganda film: *A Road to Life* (1931), *Flags on Towers* (1958) and *The Republic of SHKID* (1966).¹ All three celebrated the events of the 1920s – when the country was swamped with waves of abandoned and destitute youthful victims of war and famine – and the efforts undertaken by the state to eliminate child homelessness (*besprizornost'*). Volkov did not, however, mention another tumultuous decade in Soviet history that had also witnessed more than a million children being swallowed up by the street. And this ignorance has less to do with the writer's forgetfulness than with the Soviet state's deliberate policy of excision.

To be sure, the 1940s were associated in Soviet collective consciousness with a savage war, grand strategic operations, unparalleled suffering and even child displacement, but a carefully constructed metanarrative of the Second World War failed to mention the extent and some of the reasons of this social ill. The regime worked hard to represent itself as the bastion of social fairness and the champion of all children during this period. In the words of one prominent Soviet jurist echoed by many others: ‘from the beginning of the war [the state] carried out a planned and well thought-out programme to prevent neglect, homelessness and delinquency’, thereby ‘sharply reducing the scale and acuteness of this frightening calamity, caused by the war’.² Consequently, not only was the regime hailed for the arduous task of keeping the number of destitute and deviant children under control, but the responsibility for producing them was firmly planted on the shoulders of the German fascist invaders, who maliciously wrecked the happy childhoods of so many little citizens of the Soviet Union. To sustain the fighting spirit and to boost the regime's legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects, the story of exceptional state care in wartime was disseminated far and wide. Even the Soviet Union's allies received assurances that ‘despite all our war-time difficulties, the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet government have not for a moment forgotten the children’.³

Whether the allies fell for the carefully constructed myth is a matter of debate, but some indeed assumed that the Soviet Union was spared a rise in juvenile delinquency, and claimed that despite its shortcomings ‘the Soviet child-care programme [was] the most comprehensive of any country in the world’.⁴ Considering how readily people from different walks of life within the country believed in their state's energetic actions

to keep children off the streets, even if their everyday experience contradicted such convictions, the propaganda campaign worked on the domestic audience. In their letters to the authorities written shortly after the war's end, ordinary citizens insisted that all homeless children and war orphans had been quickly absorbed by state welfare institutions or adopted.⁵ Similarly, juvenile delinquents, in the view of two Ukrainian cinematographers, had not been allowed to remain 'on the bottom', where a capitalist system would have surely left them, but had been picked up and re-educated in labour colonies to return to the bosom of a socialist society as 'proper citizens' (*polnotsennyye grazhdane*) and 'active participants in the building of our magnificent future'. So confident were the directors in the state's ability to find keys to the 'broken souls of these little people, to restore their innocence and to instil in them high moral qualities and love towards labour' that they proposed to make a film about it in 1946.⁶ Seven years later their colleague from the literary community simply stated through her protagonist that 'during the unprecedentedly difficult years of the Great Patriotic War in our USSR there were absolutely no neglected children. That is the miracle that Soviet power enacted!'⁷

A similar line was repeated incessantly in specialized literature on social welfare during the Second World War. Elevating ideals into fact, the author of one treatise, published in 1969 at the height of Soviet war myth-making, boasted that while in the occupied countries of Europe children endured great hardship, in the Soviet Union 'there was no mass homelessness'; 'from the very first days of the war local authorities with the help of public organizations accounted for all children left without parental supervision'; 'all children's institutions were evacuated to safety in an exceptionally short period of time' and 'received provisions from a centralized distribution system' on top of what they gathered from their 'vast' subsistence plots; children's commissions responsible for dealing with homeless (*besprizornnye*) and unsupervised (*beznadzornnye*) youngsters worked tirelessly to place 'all apprehended vagrants in children's homes immediately', while every large town and train station boasted a receiving centre supervised by the education authorities, and from 1943 by the police. All this, the author triumphantly concluded, served as an 'eloquent confirmation that in our socialist country state care for a person has always been and is a priority'.⁸ Social welfare in wartime thus continued to serve as a legitimizing factor in the regime's marketing campaign designed to prove the superiority of socialism over capitalism.

So persuasive was the one-sided self-congratulatory story presented by Soviet historiography that many of today's social workers and historians repeat it without much critical assessment, despite the revisionist trend in late and post-Soviet historical literature. Once again faced with a rapidly growing number of 'socially orphaned' and homeless children, the Russian specialists look to the Soviet past to find examples where marginalized youth were dealt with successfully. Instead of making a complex analysis of the wartime crime and vagrancy prevention programme, they tend to examine state legislation exclusively, which extended sympathy and a helping hand to all youngsters, be they conscripted child workers, displaced children, juvenile delinquents or war orphans.⁹ The difficulties in implementing state programmes are acknowledged but mostly blamed on wartime exigencies. Very few studies mention, and even then only fleetingly, other factors

that played a role in marginalizing youngsters, generating a great number of orphans, vagrants and delinquents during this period.¹⁰

This book challenges the idealized assertions made by Soviet opinion-makers and historians, consolidated in the aforementioned 1969 essay and frequently repeated in more recent studies. It exposes a huge discrepancy between what the legislator envisioned and how it translated into reality. Given the enormity of the upheaval faced by the Soviet state and the strain it found itself under, its child protection programme was extensive but not as successful and effective as Soviet and modern accounts make it out to be. Though on paper the government was committed to the resocialization of street children, this was in practice a low priority for the state, which was busy fighting a war and maintaining order on the home front. Its interventionist policies were more about exercising control over the population than protecting children from wartime hardships. The state was less concerned with the prevention of child vagrancy and deviance than with combating their negative consequences. Crucially, the Stalinist state created conditions that exacerbated the situation. As such, it was to a degree responsible for marginalizing youngsters through the poor administration of criminal justice, consistently punitive legislation, deportations and ineffective management of resources.

Assuming, for the purposes of this discussion, that 'the state' is a hierarchical network of individuals with administrative and policy-making duties, as opposed to an abstract structure, the responsibility for generating homeless juveniles and deviants lay with central government and its local representatives. While many choices were forced upon them by the emergency of war, certain actions reflected political objectives that unnecessarily subjected a great number of people and their children to abuse. The gross violation of their rights was avoidable. Many home front children suffered great hardship during this period for reasons that only indirectly had anything to do with the emergency situation. It is true that the rapid rise in juvenile delinquency and vagrancy was inevitable in wartime, as the experience of other belligerents shows, but the presence of so many street children in the Soviet Union was an indictment of the way the state understood its priorities, where political and ideological considerations weighed more heavily than humanitarian concerns. The book, therefore, shows how state policies transformed an existing problem into a nationwide crisis, how the Stalinist method of rule extended hardship to children on the home front and prevented the government from responding effectively to the emergency.

The Soviet state's role in 'constructing asocial identity' and its contradictory policies, which aimed at preserving social stability but simultaneously marginalized a great many people, have attracted the attention of a number of historians both in Russia and the West.¹¹ Some of them concentrated their analysis on the youngest members of society, although their focus was predominantly on the children of those whom the regime considered its enemies.¹² Homeless and delinquent children and their relationship with the state became the subject matter of several important studies, but their focus is either on pre-war or post-war years.¹³ More general works on Stalinist policing practices and the legal system, although providing an invaluable detailed account of debates underpinning juvenile legislation, also stop short of wartime.¹⁴

Scholars generally left the period of hostilities unexplored, and when they did turn their attention to it, their objective was either to give a broad analysis of children's wartime experiences or to write the latter into a general history of Russian/Soviet childhood.¹⁵ Although it does not reflect in great detail on the plight of street children and the state's role in the reinforcement of their ranks, Julie deGraffenried's seminal study is of particular importance because it pinpoints the crucial shift of priorities in governmental policy towards children, which other scholars tend to overlook. As the state needed everyone to contribute to the war effort, its attitudes and expectations towards children changed from protectionist to openly exploitative. Children were now expected to sacrifice their innocence, even well-being, for the 'happy childhood' they would return to once victory had been secured.

Following this general line of thought, the current volume also considers the war years as a separate and consequential episode in the history of Soviet child policies. This was a period when the romanticized concept of childhood, on which the Soviet state partially based its legitimacy, was dramatically redefined, stressing the punitive disciplinary model. Although outwardly the regime was still operating in the 'happy childhood' mode, inwardly it continued in earnest the disciplinarian trend that had started in the mid-1930s – following the more liberal approach of the 1920s – and which would be abandoned again after Stalin's physical and ideological demise. In this respect, the war years were indeed an interruption in the *longue durée* of the 'sentimentalization' of childhood in the Soviet Union, which would leave deep scars.¹⁶ As Soviet society marched into the maelstrom of the Second World War, it witnessed the nearly complete erasure of boundaries between social welfare and repressive policies. In more than one way, the widely touted welfare state became a 'warfare' one, whose great social promises were more rhetorical than real, rarely receiving sufficient funding or making it to the top of the state's priority list.¹⁷

All children were affected, but those who did not fit the accepted model of behaviour were at the centre of the new punitive approach. The tremendous social and economic chaos of this period produced mass displacement and rapidly rising rates of juvenile criminality. While some youngsters were indeed maladjusted, the overwhelming majority were victims of circumstance, who crossed the boundary of legality in order to survive. As such, they became a numerous and important, if distinct, group within the broader cohort of Soviet youngsters. A social anomaly, they were certainly not representative of the entire child population, but, as the most prolific student of marginalized groups in the post-war Soviet Union, Elena Zubkova, notes, 'nothing can be so revealing about the "norm" as a deviation from it'.¹⁸

Looking at street children – in the broadest definition of the term, which encompasses homeless, unsupervised (or neglected) and delinquent youth not all of whom were easily distinguished – offers an opportunity to examine the relationship between the state and its youngest subjects, as well as between theory and practice of the wartime prevention programme. The state and its spokespersons claimed to have taken the well-being of all children seriously, giving them the love and protection of a family that many permanently or temporarily lost. When the parents could no longer perform their child-rearing functions, the state offered its services as a surrogate parent, thereby laying a particularly robust foundation of the post-war myth of

exceptional state care. There is thus an opportunity to test the state's declarations by examining its attitudes towards the most vulnerable group of children. Looking beyond policy to its implementation, this study evaluates the effectiveness of the legislation as well as the success of programmes of removing children from the streets and resocializing them in state care institutions; it also investigates the impact of the war years on juvenile justice and reveals many continuities with the 1930s procedures and standards. In the final analysis, not only did the Soviet state fail to live up to the image of an 'extended family' that it had taken upon itself, but it also enacted some of the most abusive policies concerning minors in its history. In the sphere of child welfare the Stalinist state resembled a 'limping Behemoth' (to use Mark Edele's metaphor), much less capable of nurturing than coercion and persecution.¹⁹

That said, it would be hasty to claim that repression was an end in itself. In her insightful analysis of the state's treatment of street children in the immediate post-war years, Juliane Fürst argues that compulsion and exclusion of such children was a state policy throughout the war years and especially after its end. The image-sensitive regime viewed street children as a particularly ugly stain on its record. Initially treated with sympathy, such youngsters were progressively elbowed out from the socialist project, having been, in Fürst's words, 'branded and forgotten' so as not to spoil a more heroic and sanitized picture of Soviet childhood in wartime. They were given to the repressive organs and locked up from view in receiver-distribution centres (DPRs) and reformatories, where their numbers grew markedly by the war's end.²⁰

Custodial sanctions indeed prevailed in judicial practice during this period, even when there was a possibility to return a misbehaving child to his or her family, which might lead to the conclusion that the Stalinist state attempted to solve juvenile homelessness and delinquency through social exclusion. This argument is generally correct but needs a more nuanced substantiation. The current study reveals that although the regime did turn to repression and exclusion to combat deviance, it did so by force of habit as an expedient solution. The nature of these measures can be understood in the context of Soviet totalitarianism, where the desire for comprehensive control clashed with the inability to exert it, thus provoking drastic measures. The weaker the state felt its grip on society, the harsher were the punishments and the heavier was its dependence on repressive organs. The state's inability to care for the growing numbers of street children ultimately led to the toughening of law and the strengthening of coercive methods.

The year 1943 witnessed the climax of governmental activity regarding misbehaving children. By this time the regime had gained more confidence in the positive outcome of its struggle with Germany and needed to reassess control over society with a view to post-war reconstruction. It finally acknowledged the growing problem of child homelessness and lawlessness on the home front, turning to more repressive means of dealing with youthful indiscipline and indolence. The network of DPRs and juvenile reformatories expanded and a greater number of youngsters found themselves under the authority of the social control agencies. Nevertheless, as Rosaria Franco rightly states, 'penal institutions were only one of the options of care' for street children and 'even at the height of the totalitarian state, never became

the prevailing one'.²¹ Efforts were also made to return children to the classroom, to reassert the influence of the youth league in order to organize and control their after-school pursuits,²² and to increase the number of children's residential institutions with the addition of new trade schools and junior cadet colleges. Together with children's homes (*detdoma*), the new educational establishments, as part of the state-wide anti-homelessness campaign, would have to accommodate the ever growing number of children whose parents had perished at the front or succumbed to the effects of a bad harvest, disease and general exhaustion from prolonged starvation coupled with hard work, all of which made themselves manifest by 1943.²³ Over the next two years, the liberation of new territories, as well as state actions against people whom it perceived as being disloyal, also produced new claimants to the welfare funds. Thus, the increase in the population of DPRs and juvenile reformatories in the last two years of the war, to which Fürst refers, was indeed the result of more repressive methods employed by the state desperately trying to avert chaos. Yet it can also be attributed to better operational work on the part of the law enforcement agencies, as well as the inability of the overtaxed residential welfare system to absorb all the street children quickly enough.²⁴ The idea of reintegrating these youngsters into mainstream society through education and labour training was never abandoned, although it rarely materialized, because the conditions and the rough treatment in these alternative institutions of socialization were rarely conducive to successful rehabilitation. Rather, in its dealings with street children the state used a combination of correctional and rehabilitative models, viewing such youngsters both as a public nuisance, who moreover threatened the regime's reputation, and as damaged victims in need of help.

This does not mean that the state's relationship with street children was a benevolent and nurturing one, although some of its representatives persistently advocated just this kind of approach. The central government did not seem to have any qualms about the potential for creating new waifs and orphans when it enacted its repressive campaigns against entire national groups or those accused of treason, even though it knew very well how this would affect the children involved, having had vast previous experience with such operations. Furthermore, while the leadership might not have considered the offspring of persons accused of collaboration with the enemy as being criminal themselves, it neither showed much concern for their well-being, contrary to what Catriona Kelly suggests,²⁵ when it interned them together with their relatives in prisons or sent them off to exile in remote regions of the country, where the utter lack of provision increased their chances of turning to life on the streets or illegal activities in order to survive.

Conversely, there is a danger in over-emphasizing the government's more sinister motives when concentrating exclusively on state repression, as several students of the Soviet penal system do. Although they convincingly argue that the war years became the apogee of repression against children, evidence does not bear out their assertions that the state deliberately targeted children and their mothers in order to enlarge its rapidly haemorrhaging involuntary labour force or that the state's relationship with street children and delinquents was based solely on 'arbitrariness, illegality and brutality', or that the general camp system was governed not by the logic of production

or re-education but by the logic of torture. The risk here is to confuse the traditional disrespect for human life, economic hardships, constantly breaking down supply system and unscrupulous, sometimes openly sadistic, individuals in powerful positions with the calculated actions of higher authorities.²⁶ With its decrees and instruction letters central government tried to correct the wrongs, advocating a more humane approach towards disadvantaged youths, including those in custody, but it was generally unable to enforce its own orders successfully. Much depended on the people who came into direct contact with street children. So the centre tolerated abuse, and in certain cases implicitly encouraged it through indolence and myopic policies, but this was most certainly not its objective. The fact that hardship was extended to a great many children was more an act of oversight than commission, and there were examples when the state did try to deliver on its promises and alleviate privation.

These efforts are the focus of Part One, which considers both the advantages and disadvantages of the state programmes to remove children from the streets and resocialize them in state care institutions. It investigates the genesis of child homelessness and delinquency on the Soviet home front, the way the war affected family dynamics, the means with which children coped with hardships, as well as how law enforcement and welfare agencies responded to the crisis of mass displacement.²⁷ Although homelessness and delinquency were not synonymous in the eyes of the Soviet authorities, the latter definitely saw greater risks of children falling into misbehaviour and committing crime when they found themselves permanently or temporarily on the streets. So the two problems were addressed simultaneously, betraying the consistency of perceptions over time and geographic space, be it in the deep rear or areas close to the front.²⁸ Unable to meet the current burden of welfare and carry out effective social work among children, many of whom quickly found employment for their idle hands, driving up crime rates throughout the country, the government turned to volunteers for support. The war period saw increasing community participation in child protection programmes, as well as crime control, and the expansion of the movement into all social strata, something that would become a truly massive drive in later years.

With its gaze turned to the front line, the leadership delegated the responsibility for dealing with disadvantaged children to the local authorities and made it clear that the latter should not expect the centre's assistance, whether organizational or material. Hidebound in corruption and idleness, local bureaucrats often refused to prioritize disadvantaged youngsters, while their superiors engaged in bitter jurisdictional warfare, blaming one another for failures. In fact, it seems that in many cases it was compassion and a desire to help, not resources, that were in short supply.

Yet mismanagement of funds and bureaucratic indifference were just two among many causes of state-induced child displacement and victimization. The government's narrow-minded policies of repression, resettlement and deportation of entire ethnic groups also played a significant role in driving children to a wretched life on the streets. Judging by the available information, the leadership did not seek the complete extermination of these ethnic groups,²⁹ but the state's discriminatory neglect and lack of basic organization resulted in the abuse and physical destruction of many people, leaving their children parentless, destitute and ultimately more likely

to commit crimes. Joining them in their plight were many youthful workers who were conscripted into the labour force under threat of criminal prosecution but were left with little provision or protection far away from their homes and social support networks. The contribution of underage workers and apprentices to the criminal statistics was significant, and neither state nor general public took to them kindly.

Though many of the committed offences would have been considered criminal by any society of the time, disproportionately severe punishments and wide deployment of discretionary justice made the Soviet case peculiar. The state clamped down on the slightest signs of deviant behaviour in the juvenile population, broadening the list of punishable offences, encouraging extrajudicial punishment and routinizing custodial sentences. There was also a very high incidence of wrongful convictions. Miscarriages of justice could naturally be blamed on the underfunded and underqualified law enforcement agencies that proved largely inadequate for the task of maintaining public order in wartime. Nevertheless, a strong prosecutorial bias also indicates that these were not merely individual 'mistakes' and 'abuses', but a systemic trend, a certain method of rule, wherein the political expedience of maintaining public order took precedence over legality. Those professionals who advocated a more humane treatment and believed in rehabilitation outside custodial settings did not meet an understanding audience in the government. Instead, unwilling to attribute the shortcomings to its own actions and policies, the leadership insisted on solving the problems that arose with the excessive use of repression, which had engendered those problems in the first place.

Therefore, while Part One explores the role played by the state welfare system in curbing child displacement and crime, Part Two concentrates on state actions as their accelerator, pushing a great number of youngsters to the margins of society. Evidence presented here reflects more negatively on the Soviet state's track record during the war, and supports the argument advanced by Aleksandr Yakovlev and Ann Livschiz about the 'duality' of Soviet childhood,³⁰ whereby some children were allowed to retain their innocence, while others were rudely thrust into the world of adults on account of their belonging to a 'suspect nationality', committing a transgression or becoming part of the 'indentured' workforce.

Chronologically, this part begins at the start of the Second World War, twenty-two months before the Soviet Union's clash with Nazi Germany and her allies. Although the Soviet state was not yet at war (but already throwing its weight about along its western borders), it was actively preparing for the inevitable collision, setting up draconian labour regulations, as well as arresting and deporting potential enemies from among its own ethnic minorities and newly acquired populations.³¹

Moving away from the discussion about the legislation and repressive policies that adversely affected home front children, Part Three concentrates on the experiences of those youngsters who found themselves in the clutches of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), either for committing crimes, including political ones, or because they were deemed vagrant. Juveniles became a comparatively small but easily recognizable part of the Gulag inmate population. Nevertheless, they are hardly ever mentioned in the scholarly literature on the Soviet penal system, and when historians afford them a short remark, there is a strong tendency to lump them together and

represent them either as hapless victims of political purges or beastly good-for-nothing brutes. Such a simplistic approach distorts the social face of this segment of the Gulag population. Similarly unhelpful is the classification of all NKVD institutions for juveniles as 'children's camps', which frequently appears in historical works. There existed two types of reformatories for minors within the wartime Gulag – labour colonies (TKs) and labour educational colonies (TVKs) – where the overwhelming majority of youngsters were interned. Despite the generally abject living conditions therein, it would be misleading to equate juvenile correctional institutions with the loaded term 'camp', not only because of the milder regime compared to that of adult camps, but also because officials viewed juvenile colonies as places of childhood, where youngsters were to be socialized, educated and trained to become productive members of society. Whether the colonies succeeded in this task is a different matter, but when it came to thousands of juveniles who wound up in labour camps for adults, little attempt was made to educate them. Much depended on the administration of a given camp, but, normally, increased rations and lower production norms were the only entitlements that youngsters could expect.

Part Three, therefore, enhances our perception of the juvenile contingent as it follows their trek across the wartime penal system from the day of their apprehension to release. The focus here is on the youngsters' everyday existence in correctional institutions, the state's attempts to resocialize them and the brutalizing conditions of internment that gave rise to a robust juvenile delinquent subculture which governed the youngsters' lives and determined their relationship with the authorities, fellow inmates and wider society. Interwoven throughout are the overarching themes of the state's role in the marginalization of children and the disparity between the theory and practice of its childhood policies. Focusing on juvenile reformatories, the discussion also breaches a wider debate on the economic rationale of the Gulag, and the relationship between the requirements of the penitentiary machine and increased repression in wartime.

In addition, all three parts evaluate the power dynamics between central and local authorities. There is evidence of disorder, incompetence, conflicting interests, unresponsiveness and insubordination at all levels of the bureaucratic structure, which at once illustrates the inconsistency of state policies in the sphere of child welfare and betrays the dysfunctional nature of Stalinist governance.³² Judging by the available archival material, the centre, local governing bodies and welfare agencies often advanced very different opinions about the nature of deficiencies and failures in child protection programme. It was the task of state inspectors to uncover problem areas and alert their superiors, which explains a strong bias towards the negative evaluation of local developments, although positive assessments were also fairly common. Provincial bureaucrats often had a different take on their efforts, employed various techniques to conceal shortcomings or made the best out of the bad situation by asking for more resources. At the same time, although the centre blamed their regional colleagues for inadequacies, the true champions of children's rights often came from the ranks of local officials. To balance the often-prejudiced representation, this book takes advantage of a number of regional studies to reveal the local perspective.

Therefore, focusing on the war years proves a fruitful exercise, allowing one to delve into this hitherto little explored subject, as well as offering greater insight into the interaction of Soviet society with the state in times of emergency. Moreover, considering the Soviet propensity to boast about achievements in the sphere of child welfare, drawing comparisons with their American and European contemporaries, this study places the Soviet experience within the broader geographic context.

The study makes use of a number of published works that present a rich and nuanced picture of social change exacted by the war, but the results of historical research in the former Soviet archives, both national and regional, form the book's core. Most of the documents are 'state-produced', generated by the government, police, the Procuracy, as well as the youth league and education departments. To present a more objective picture of the events, an array of secondary material, such as memoirs, contemporary periodicals and published testimonials seek points of convergence between official records and witness accounts. Although the sources in this study do not come directly from children themselves, being either the processed memories of adults expressed through memoirs or interviews, or professional assessments and bureaucratic reports detailing the children's contacts with the system, the documents still give voice to their subjects, vividly conveying their childhood experiences and everyday struggles.

As such, the book combines the 'top-down' political and legal approach with grassroots social history, exploring the impact of war on children's lives, their behaviour and legal status, as well as their experiences within the penal system. My understanding of the term 'child' is guided by Soviet legislation, which considered any person under the age of eighteen to be a 'child' or a 'minor'; a similar definition is adopted in current international law. For the purposes of the present discussion, I limit the age group to adolescents aged ten to sixteen, since they constituted the core of the homeless cohort of youngsters and the inmate population of juvenile correctional institutions. Theirs was not an enviable lot. First marginalized by the system that had loudly proclaimed its devotion to *every* child but fell short of its promises, they were later pushed to the margins of an academic debate. It is time to afford them more than just a fleeting mention.

Part One

Bezottsovshchina

Rolling Stones

War, with its attendant massive population shifts, destruction of infrastructure, loss of life and widespread chaos, caused an alarming rise in child neglect, vagrancy and delinquency. From mid-1941 to late 1945 the officially recorded number of homeless and neglected children passed the million mark; however, these figures are not comprehensive and are thus deceptive (see Table A.1). Before 1943 there existed no central coordination or integrated collection of statistical data, and even afterwards in many places the registration of street children was unsystematic and incomplete. Officials usually recorded only those youngsters who had been processed through receiver-distribution centres (DPRs). Many more had been apprehended by the police, Komsomol activists or concerned citizens and returned to their relatives or directly placed in a job or a state boarding institution, bypassing the DPRs. For instance, in the course of the last two years of the war, the police of Smolensk oblast independently arranged placement for the entire contingent of their 1,726 charges.¹ Moreover, not all children managed to obtain a referral to the receivers, owing to the shortage of places therein, and had to be turned back to the streets, as was the case in Tashkent, where the number of homeless and neglected youngsters was so overwhelming that 4,750 of them, collected from the streets during the course of January and February 1944, had to be let go, many without registration or assistance.² While some children managed to move through the system several times, changing their surnames and biographies, orphans often remained unaccounted for, especially in the recently liberated regions. Moreover, instructed to detain only those below fourteen years of age, the police normally left older adolescents on the streets, thereby overlooking 'the most persistent cadres of vagabonds'.³

Officials also resorted to conscious falsification of statistical data, when they strove either to create an illusion of a favourable situation, thus underreporting, or to show off their efforts in clearing cities of juvenile delinquents. Several times a month, district police officers would enlist the help of house attendants and members of the public to carry out major sweeps of places known to attract large numbers of children. The problem with such campaign-style operations was that all too often totally innocent youngsters found themselves caught up in such clearing operations. Observers complained that up to 95 per cent of children were mistakenly apprehended and recorded as neglected while attending cinemas, zoos and marketplaces, or travelling to the countryside to visit relatives, to procure food or

to go on vacation.⁴ If delivered to a receiver, such teenagers were eventually released and normally did not make the DPR statistics.

Another contributory factor to the desultory record-keeping was the relatively limited network of DPRs, which meant that the majority of waifs and neglected youngsters ended up in so-called children's rooms (*detskie komnaty militsii*), organized under the aegis of police precincts and vested with the responsibility of controlling juvenile delinquency, as well as serving as temporary shelters for street children. The registration process was just as flawed in these places, however. The sheer number of youngsters collected in a single day, in addition to those who arrived of their own accord, and the incompetence of the responsible police officers inevitably led to a careless registration process. Regardless of the nature and extent of the violation, the children would be put on record, even when there was no reasonable cause to do so.⁵ This not only wasted the officer's time, while the rest of the detainees waited for hours to be registered, but could potentially do great damage to some children, should they find themselves standing trial for a first-time offence, when the number of previous apprehensions (*privody*) could affect the court's ruling. No wonder, then, that some youngsters attempted to cover their tracks by burning registers, thereby interfering with already skewed statistics.⁶

While interned, the youngsters were usually forced to hang around in exceptionally hazardous environments, sometimes for up to a week instead of the prescribed six hours.⁷ Approximately half of all the children's rooms throughout the country were deemed satisfactory for work and temporary accommodation. Many did not have appropriate quarters, being located in cowsheds, storehouses, former shower-rooms, with leaky plumbing, and even in private flats. Almost everywhere,



Figure 1 Registration at the Kiev DPR, 1944 (courtesy TsDKFFA).