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Smiling Children of the Soviet Socialist Republics.

**Representations of Children of the Soviet Socialist Republics
in the Propaganda Photographs Published in the Magazine
*SSSR na Stroike***

Silja Pitkänen

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Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS)

Bielefeld University, Germany

Web: [www.uni-bielefeld.de/\(en\)/bghs/](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/(en)/bghs/)

Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology (BGHS)

Universitätsstr. 25

33615 Bielefeld

Tel.: +49 (0)521 106-6526

www.uni-bielefeld.de/bghs

E-Mail: bghs@uni-bielefeld.de



Working Paper

Smiling Children of the Soviet Socialist Republics. Representations of Children of the Soviet Socialist Republics in the Propaganda Photographs Published in the Magazine SSSR na Stroike

Silja Pitkänen

This article analyses representations of children in the photographs published in the Soviet propaganda magazine SSSR na Stroike (USSR in Construction), concentrating on the volumes devoted to different Soviet Socialist Republics. The changes in the Soviet Union's nationality policies during the 1930s are clearly visible in the images. The article begins with classification of the child-related photographs. Next, images are analysed using representation theory, developed by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, and the theory of orientalism, presented by literature theorist Edward Said. It is also considered how the representations of children were used as a part of the Soviet nation-building process.

Keywords:

children, nation-building, orientalism, othering, photography, propaganda, representations, Soviet Union, Soviet Socialist Republics

Words:

11496 Words



Smiling Children of the Soviet Socialist Republics

Representations of Children of the Soviet Socialist Republics in the Propaganda Photographs Published in the Magazine *SSSR na Stroike*

Introduction

In this article¹ I analyse how children of the Soviet Socialist Republics were represented in the photographs of the Soviet propaganda² magazine *SSSR na Stroike* (*USSR in Construction*) during 1930s and the underlying purposes of these representations.

USSR in Construction was an illustrated magazine that served as a Soviet showcase towards the West. Its purpose was to gain support for the country. I concentrate on the volumes issued before the Second World War depicting different Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) and other autonomous regions of the Soviet Union – their peoples and traditions, as well as their agriculture and industry.

The 1930s is an interesting period to analyse as many changes in Soviet aesthetics took place then. According to sociologist Victoria E. Bonnell (1994, 363),

The Central Committee resolution on political art, issued on 11 March 1931, left no doubt about the aim of visual propaganda. It was to serve as ‘a powerful tool in the reconstruction of the individual, his ideology, his way of life, his economic activity’ and a means of ‘entering the consciousness and hearts of millions [of people].’ The

¹ This article is part of my PhD dissertation, a work in progress, in which I analyse and compare child-related Soviet and German propaganda photographs from the 1930s from the viewpoint of nation-building and state-building. The paper was first presented and discussed at the Third International Conference of the Association for Political History, at Bielefeld University, in June 2015. I wish to thank the Bielefeld University Graduate School in History and Sociology for the Conference and for publishing the paper in the Working Paper Series. I wish to thank also Dr. Ivan Sablin for reading and commenting on the manuscript.

² In the study, I use a broad concept of propaganda along the lines of historian David Welch (2013, 2) who provides the following definition: ‘propaganda is the dissemination of ideas intended to convince people to think and act in a particular way and for a particular persuasive purpose.’ Moreover, John M. MacKenzie (1984, 3), a British historian of imperialism, defines propaganda in the following way: ‘Propaganda can be defined as the transmission of ideas and values from one person, or groups of persons, to another, with the specific intention of influencing the recipients’ attitudes in such a way that the interests of its authors will be enhanced.’ MacKenzie (ibid.) also reminds us that the study of censorship should always be a part of the consideration of propaganda, and underlines the significance of mass media in propaganda. All of these are important viewpoints in my study. As for the role of modern mass media in propaganda, see also Hobsbawm 1990.



pronouncement accentuated the ambitious task of political art in the Stalin era: to change people's structure of thinking at its deepest level.

The aims of propaganda were indeed ambitious – to change the entire world-view of the people. This kind of deliberate propaganda in visual arts was launched in earnest in 1931.

In the 1930s the Soviet Union was under the leadership of Iosif Stalin. A specialist in Russian and Soviet nationality politics, Ronald Grigor Suny (1997, 37), notes that '[...] Stalin transformed nationality policy from a series of concessions to non-Russians into a powerful weapon of imperial state-building.' This was already taking place during the researched period. The objectives of state-building and also nation-building are visualised, e.g., in the photographs published in the propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction*, especially in the images portraying children of the national minorities of different SSRs.

By nation-building I mean the deliberate and purposeful construction of national identity,³ and I understand 'nation' as an intentionally created entity, as anthropologist Benedict Anderson sees it.⁴ Moreover, Anderson (2006, 113–114) distinguishes 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.' 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.

By state-building, in the context of the Soviet Union and the researched period, I refer to the construction of an organised political community which is led by the government. The concepts of nation-building and state-building overlap and are intertwined, however.

³ However, as historians Terry Martin and Ronald Grigor Suny (2001, 9) remind us, many analysts have been puzzled by the Soviet leadership's failure to try to build a national identity at the all-Union Soviet level. Nationality was instead confined to the sub-state level. Unlike, for example, in Britain, India, or America, 'Soviet' was never considered an ethnic or a national identity, Martin and Suny note.

⁴ Suny and Martin (2001, 7) analyse that nations were previously interpreted to be ancient and natural entities, but in the past decades nations and nationalities have been seen to be 'created (or invented) in a complex social and political process in which intellectuals and activists play a formative role, as well as broader socioeconomic forces'. In this article I follow the views of Anderson, as well as Suny and Martin, when it comes to nation-building.



Furthermore, in various discourses, the Soviet Union has been called an empire, and it has been debated if it was imperialistic and colonialist.⁵ Anderson (2006, 86) ponders the relationship between nationalism and imperialism in Russia before the revolution. He remarks that “‘Russification’ of the heterogeneous population of the Tsar’s subjects [...] represented a violent, conscious welding of two opposing political orders, one ancient, one quite new’. Thus, in the Tsar’s Russia, imperialism and nationalism coexisted and were intertwined. These elements may also have been intertwined in Soviet propaganda photography.

Edward Said’s theory of orientalism – closely connected to imperialism and colonialism – has given rise to very interesting discussions concerning the history of Russia and the Soviet Union.⁶ In this article, I found it useful to apply the theory to analyse the photographs of children of the Soviet SSRs. In the imagery of the Soviet Union of the 1930s, children of the SSRs were often depicted as ‘others’, and seen as oriental, exotic beings. These depictions have roots in pre-Soviet times. As Suny (2001, 44) analyses, in Tsarist Russia, ‘[d]ifference from and fear of the “other”, particularly the Islamic other, was emphasized in portrayals of Turks and Tatars and in popular captivity tales’. Moreover, as Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Suny (1994, ix) remind us, it is fruitful to think along parallel lines with respect to Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union.

The visual propaganda of the Soviet Union indeed stemmed from the Tsarist past. At the same time, however, it created new meanings. Bonnell (1994, 342) writes:

Soon after seizing power, party leaders turned to the problem of disseminating their message to the population at large. With encouragement and leadership from Lenin and his commissar of education Anatoly Lunacharsky, party members came to understand that the creation of compelling visual symbols – ‘invented traditions’ as E. J. Hobsbawm has called them – was a key aspect of the campaign to capture public enthusiasm, inculcate novel ideas, and implant loyalty in a semiliterate population accustomed to the elaborate pageants and visual imagery of the old regime and the Russian Orthodox Church.

⁵ See, for example, Suny and Martin 2001, 5; Suny 2001, 23–24.

⁶ See, for example, David-Fox, Michael et al. (eds.) 2006.



Bonnell mentions two more key elements important to my perspective on the propaganda photographs: the concept of invented traditions and the visual imagery of the Russian old regime. I examine photographs through lenses of invented traditions, but also in relation to continuums from earlier decades and even centuries.

The nationality policies of the Soviet Union have been a subject of vast scientific debates in recent decades, and many articles, anthologies and monographs have been devoted to them.⁷ Moreover, the opening of the Soviet archives after the collapse of the USSR has made materials and viewpoints available that were previously inaccessible, and many new studies have been published on Soviet nationality policies (Suny and Martin 2001, vii).

The scholarly analyses of the concepts of nation and state, as well as nation-building, state-building and empire-building, are extensive. In this article I use these entities as working concepts without going deeply into their analytical details.

Images of children are usually very powerful in their emotiveness. Thus, they serve as a good indicator of a nation's propaganda. Also, images of children have been and are still used often in nation-building processes – they are frequently exploited in creating ideas of a glorious future and also in drawing menacing visions. Margaret Peacock (2014, 3; cf. 1; 19; 21) analyses how after the Second World War images of idealised and threatened children were utilised in building domestic and international consensus in the Cold War. She notes that '[h]ungry, dirty, and orphaned — no other image, except perhaps that of the raped woman, could generate the revulsion and rage required to compel a population to support its government's decision to go to battle in the face of certain horror.' In this article I analyse images of idealised rather than threatened children. The images I scrutinise were used to build the Soviet nation and also to create new Soviet identities, which, however, changed over time, as I will explain.

This analysis of the means of Soviet propaganda in the 1930s also sheds light on the situation in the contemporary world where tensions between 'East' and 'West' are again on the rise.

⁷ See, for example, Smith, Jeremy 2013.



The propaganda aesthetics can be regarded as a continuum from the First World War and beyond until today.⁸

USSR in Construction and the Researched Volumes

USSR in Construction was established on the initiative of the author Maxim Gorky – a leading figure in literary socialist realism – and it was published monthly from 1930 to 1941. It was originally issued in Russian, English, German and French, and in 1938 a Spanish edition was added. The magazine's propaganda essays were plentifully illustrated, and it employed leading Soviet visual artists and authors. (Margolin 1997, 166–167.)

As a propaganda magazine, *USSR in Construction* promoted the policies of the Soviet leadership. It maintained high quality and was thus a very important and expensive undertaking for the State Publishing House of Graphic Arts.

The magazine had both domestic and international aims. Art historian Victor Margolin (1997, 166) summarises that *USSR in Construction* 'was intended primarily for foreign audiences, but it was also distributed within the Soviet Union where it performed a related function of encouraging enthusiasm and support for the state policies and practices'. In other words, the magazine was a propaganda tool directed to international readers as well as to Soviet citizens.

Most of the issues of *USSR in Construction* were 'devoted' to a particular theme, for example a specific industrial or agricultural project or a particular Soviet Republic. In this article, I concentrate on the images published in the issues of *USSR in Construction* housed at the Library of the Labour Movement in Helsinki Finland,⁹ as well as on issues that are available in digital form on the webpages of the University of Saskatchewan. Coincidentally, many magazines housed in the Library of the Labour Movement, as well as several issues available on the Internet, are devoted to a certain SSR. Therefore, I chose the images of the children of the SSRs to serve as a glimpse into

⁸ See, for example, Jowett and O'Donnell 2015, 274.

⁹ The collection includes magazines published in English, German and French.



my wider research data. The magazines analysed in this article were published between 1931 and 1938.

Researching representations of diverse ethnic groups and their relation to the ethnicity or ‘race’ that has been determined as the ruling one sheds light on the nation-building process. The ideal nation of the future was communicated, among other things, through the photographs of children, as these images reflect the ideal citizens and nation of the future.

The children of the SSRs were represented in specific ways. Depicting folk customs and traditions was central to socialist realism, as Pekka Pesonen (1998), an expert in Russian literature, notes.¹⁰ This is quite apparent in *USSR in Construction* – peoples and nations of the Soviet Union, as well as their traditions, were very common themes in the magazine. This also applies to the images of children.

Regardless of the particular theme of an issue, the narrative of *USSR in Construction* usually followed a certain pattern. First, it showed the wretched pre-revolution conditions. Then it illustrated how brilliantly things had improved and how bright the future would be. My preliminary hypothesis is that the preceding conditions of poverty were especially highlighted when it came to SSRs and other autonomous regions – as were the improvements after the regions became members of the Soviet Union. The improvements represented included, for example, housing, education and healthcare, and children were often central characters in the visual presentations of these reforms. Children were also – perhaps a bit surprisingly – depicted in connection with innovations and improvements in such fields as agriculture and industry.

Research Methods

I concentrate on photographic portraits of children. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a portrait is ‘a painting, drawing, or photograph of a person that usually only includes the person’s

¹⁰ The idea of the central position of the populace, as well as the objective of depicting national characters, originally came from the Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinsky (Pesonen 1998, 170–171).



head and shoulders’.¹¹ However, I also analyse images that can be loosely defined as portraits, but which feature wider backgrounds. In analysing child-related propaganda imagery, I understand ‘child’ as a person who in all probability is under twelve years old.

My main method is two-fold. First, I divide the child-related images into different categories utilising quantitative visual content analysis. It enables researchers to handle a large number of images and gather quantitative information. The content analysis helps by reducing the visual material to codes and drawing out their patterns and symbolic elements. These patterns and elements refer to wider cultural contexts, which might be challenging to grasp from a large amount of material employing compositional interpretation, for example. (Rose 2012, 81–85.)¹² I will not code the images in this article, but use coding as a background idea in interpreting the visual elements in the photographs.

The next stage of the research is the study of representations: I analyse how children were represented in the propaganda photographs published in *USSR in Construction*, i.e., what kinds of meanings were articulated through images and why. In defining representation, I will follow cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997, 1). He 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.

I analyse the representations of visual language, which produces meanings similarly to spoken language. This will shed new light on certain representational strategies that were part of Soviet nation-building.

Peacock (2014, 8) summarises that her research on child-related images from the Cold War era ‘is about the relationship between images and the functions they perform in society.’ She also

¹¹ www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/portrait, accessed on 7 May 2015.

¹² See also Bock, Isermann and Knieper 2011, 265; Seppä 2012, 23, 212–214; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2006, 95; Eskola and Suoranta 2014, 156.



describes that her research ‘borrows its methodology from poststructural semiotics and the study of how [...] images can define, calcify, undermine, and traverse people’s understandings of the world around them.’ In this article, I have a very similar approach, although I research images from the 1930s, which are a bit older.

In addition, photographer and art theorist Allan Sekula (1999, 181), in his essay on interpreting a collection of industrial images, notes that ‘we [...] need to grasp the way in which photography constructs an imaginary world and passes it off as reality’. My hypothesis is that propaganda photography has a powerful role in nation-building. It can be utilised in forming and maintaining a nation as well as an empire. In the end, both of these are imagined communities, and also imaginary worlds as defined by Sekula. At the same time, they have actual borders that, to borrow from Anderson’s (2006, 7) definition of nationalism, millions of people are willing to die for.

Victoria E. Bonnell (1997, 79–82) describes how in the 1930s, at the latest, as the collectivisation of Soviet agriculture began, the new symbolic language of the Soviet Union began to emerge, with images of workers and peasants – especially with images of female peasants. According to Bonnell (1997, 9), ‘Collectivization, one might say, is presented visually in the female idiom.’ What about the children of the Soviet Union? How were they used in propaganda imagery to construct meanings and, in the end, a nation and an empire? I aim to answer these questions in the following sections.

The Soviet Narrative of the Republics and Regions

It is worthwhile to sketch the outlines of Soviet national policy starting from the early 1920s in order to understand its essential turning points. According to Martin (2001, 73–74; 81), the cornerstones of Soviet nationality policy were defined in two meetings in 1923: at the Twelfth Party Congress in April and at the Central Committee Conference on Nationalities Policy in June. It was



decided that national territories, national languages, national elites and national cultures would be supported in the Soviet Union. Moreover, national decision-making was highlighted, national elites were trained into positions of leadership and native cadres were to make Soviet power appear domestic. Martin maintains that this was done so that Russia would not look imperialistic.

The new nationality policy, however, did not take all the ethnic minorities into account. Moreover, as Suny (2001, 15) notes, '[...] since ethnicity was an inherently fluid identity and lines between groups were often blurred, officials and ethnographers had to make sometimes arbitrary decisions about who belonged where.' It could be claimed that these arbitrary decisions regarding ethnic classifications led to the creation of invented communities that featured invented traditions.¹³ This was especially the case with the minorities whose 'national kitsch'¹⁴ was celebrated.

Although the cornerstones of Soviet nationality policy were laid in the 1920s, some important changes took place during the next decade. As described by Martin (2001, 81), the promotion of national identities intensified in 1932, as the Soviet discourse of the nation shifted from the presumption that nations were modern constructions to emphasising 'the deep historic roots of all Soviet nations'. From then on, as Martin maintains, the nations and ethnic minorities were primordialised – portrayed as ancient and with enduring characteristics – and 'national kitsch' was highlighted at the same time. Moreover, Russian became the dominant language of the government and the party. In addition, Stalin declared in 1934 that Russians and other nationalities were equal, but, as Martin (*ibid.*) notes, '[...] by 1936 they [Russians] had already been raised to the rank of "first among equals" in the Soviet family of nations'.

¹³ See Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.), 1983.

¹⁴ According to Jeremy Smith (2013, 97–98; 117–118), an ideological shift leading to a more Russian-orientated culture and a new conceptualisation of nationality took place in the early 1930s. At the same time as Russian culture was emphasised, peoples of the Soviet nations were portrayed as **primordial** – that is ancient and with enduring characteristics – and '**national kitsch**' was accentuated. Martin (2001, 73–74) formulates the phenomena by noting that after the Twelfth Party Congress in April 1923, and especially after the special Central Committee Conference on Nationalities Policy in June 1923, Soviet policy promoted national identities of non-Russian peoples. Martin maintains that this was done '[...] through the formation of national territories staffed by national elites using their own national languages but also through the aggressive promotion of symbolic markers of national identity: national folklore, museums, dress, food, costumes, opera, poets, progressive historical events, and classic literary works.' – It is noteworthy that these can also be labelled as 'national kitsch'.



Inventing and representing a nation or a state is, however, not enough to create them in reality. The nations themselves have an important role in the process. Suny (2001, 27) notes (referring to political scientist Michael Hecter) that the reactions of population are central in state-building:

If the core has been successful in integrating the population of its expanding territory into accepting the legitimacy of the central authority, then nation(-state)-building has occurred, but if the population rejects or resists that authority, than [*sic*] the center has succeeded only in creating an empire.

Therefore, an empire is a result of nation-building and/or state-building gone awry. This was partly the case in the Soviet Union. Thus, in summary, the past and the role of the (partly artificial) Soviet nationalities and ethnicities were highlighted during the 1920s, and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) became imperialistic, in the following decade.

Representations of the Soviet Nations through ‘Othering’

As mentioned, *USSR in Construction* had international as well as domestic political goals. The depiction of different ethnic and national groups of the Soviet Union was central in the magazine. Representing the Soviet Union as homogeneous and harmonious was crucial from the viewpoint of foreign policy, as Victor Margolin (1997, 167) describes:

Stalin was extremely competitive and sought to project an image of the Soviet Union as a workers’ paradise that was far superior to the decadent capitalist countries of the West. The principal characteristics of this paradise, as they were embodied in Soviet propaganda abroad during the 1930s, were heroic achievements in all spheres of life, generous rights and entitlements for Soviet citizens, and a shared vision of the future among the diverse ethnic and national groups that had been incorporated into the Soviet Union since the Revolution. In the creation of this image, *USSR in Construction* played a central role.



However, it can be claimed that in the Soviet Union reality was often very different from the representations.¹⁵ The diverse ethnic and national groups did not have a ‘shared vision of the future’, nor was the Soviet Union homogeneous or harmonious. On the contrary, as historian Michael G. Smith (1998, 2) describes, the internal differences were vast: ‘The Bolshevik ideal of a unitary Soviet proletarian state was imperilled by the variety of peoples over whom they ruled and did not understand.’

The distance between the Central Committee and the different peoples led to ‘othering’. Michael G. Smith (1998, 2) states: ‘When the victorious party looked out upon the rural and non-Russian countryside, it saw not identity but difference, not itself but the “other”’.

For Hall, the concepts of ‘other’, ‘otherness’ and ‘othering’ are important, and he employs them to analyse how difference is represented. Hall concentrates on representations of black Africans. However, I find his concept of ‘other’ and analyses on ‘otherness’ useful for the most part, and apply them in analysing representations of people of the Soviet nations and ethnic minorities.

A certain ambivalence and inconsistency is visible in the images of *USSR in Construction* featuring non-Russian children. This is due to changes in the nationality policy of the Soviet Union. Lenin and Stalin had different attitudes to the non-Russian peoples and areas, and reflections of both attitudes can be seen in the propaganda images. Lenin, according to Suny (1997, 29–30), ‘promoted the concept of national self-determination, even to the point of separation from Russia’, whereas

Stalin favoured a much more centralised arrangement, with the formally independent states reduced to autonomies within the RSFSR [...] As his own power increased, Stalin consistently shifted the emphasis in Lenin’s nationality policy until it became an ideology for a new, disguised form of empire in which the centre and Russia

¹⁵ For example, manoeuvres connected to socialising livestock farming in Kazakhstan led to a great famine that lasted from 1931 to 1933. Moreover, they destroyed the traditional way of life connected to farming. See Smith, Jeremy 2013, 106.



emerged superordinate and the non-Russian peripheries fell into a stage of tutelage.

Thus, it can be claimed that at the beginning of the 1930s peoples of the Soviet nations were also ‘othered’ more than before. For Hall (1997, 245), ‘othering’ and ‘stereotyping’ are generated, for example, through the technique of naturalisation: the culture of the ‘other’ is reduced to nature. At the same time, difference is naturalised and thus the power relations are seen as permanent and fixed.

In addition to being ‘othered’, the children of the republics and regions were depicted as exotic. The previously mentioned theory of orientalism is relevant for this reason. Said (1994, 1) analyses Western representations of the ‘Orient’. For him, the Orient is mostly a European invention and ‘a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.’¹⁶ In the case of *USSR in Construction*, the gaze is directed from the RSFSR towards the other Soviet republics and regions, and in many instances they are seen as exotic ‘others’.

Historian Francine Hirsch (2003, 689) describes how also the exhibitions at the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum included ‘othering’:

Although the department’s stated purpose was to provide ‘a complete picture of everyday life in the USSR’, its actual effect was otherwise. Visitors might marvel at the panorama of peoples with whom they shared Soviet citizenship, but they often left with the impression that the wax figures in animal hides were strange ‘others’ from distant lands. Children became acquainted with the Chukchi warrior, but exhibits did not suggest what relevance he or the Siberian shaman had to their lives. Moreover, people from Leningrad and its environs were hard-pressed to see themselves even in representations of the Russians or Finns.

Evidently, representing the nations and ethnicities of the Soviet Union was a great challenge, and considerable attention was paid to it, especially in the 1930s. The magazine *USSR in Construction*

¹⁶ Michael G. Smith (1998, 10) also notes that in creating knowledge about the peoples of the Russian east, Russian linguists practised ‘colonial ethnography’ or ‘orientalism’.



preferred a mostly primordialising attitude often bringing ‘national kitsch’ to the fore and highlighting ‘otherness’ and oriental exoticism. However, at the same time all the nations were represented as part of the great Soviet family with a common vision. ‘Othering’ and unifying, that is depicting people as one entity, were both present in the issues of *USSR in Construction* depicting the Soviet Socialist Republics.

Smiling Children of the Soviet Nations

Objectives of nation-building were promulgated via propaganda, for example through images of children. Children were portrayed in many different contexts, depending on the aims of the imagery.

Following the basic principles of quantitative content analysis, I have categorised the child-related portraits published in the aforementioned issues of the magazine *USSR in Construction*. The five largest categories are education (8 images), childcare (7 images), friendship (6 images), healthcare (4 images) and local foodstuffs (3 images). Apart from the photographs in these categories, I analyse two images of children featuring traditional costumes and a traditional musical instrument, as I believe that these images are especially revealing regarding the attitudes towards the SSRs and other autonomous areas. I pay special attention to images in which the typical characters of the category are clearly visible. I proceed with one category at a time, starting with education.

Education

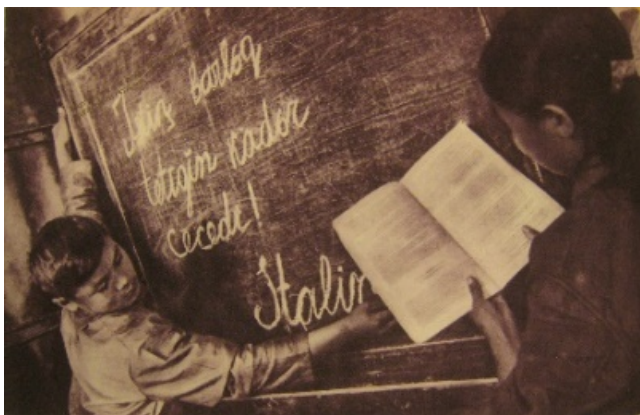
Many educational reforms were implemented in the early Soviet Union.¹⁷ One of the major objectives was to eliminate illiteracy. Compulsory education was established, and new schools were founded around the country.

¹⁷ See Smith, Michael G. 1998, 105.

Education was one of the major themes in *USSR in Construction*, also in relation to autonomous regions. In this category, I concentrate on two images published in issue 1935/11, ‘devoted to the 15th anniversary of Kazakstan [sic]’.¹⁸ In image 1, the themes of education, language studies and the legitimisation of the Soviet rule are intertwined. The text the boy writes on the board – in Kazakh – is explained in the caption: ‘WRITTEN ON THE BOARD IS “CADRES DECIDE EVERYTHING! (STALIN)”’. As Michael G. Smith (1998, 3) states, Soviet rule was legitimised ‘through the definition, promotion, and management of native cadres and their formal attributes of language and custom’. In image 1 and its caption, new schools, improvements in education, as well as the importance of education are underlined, as is the position of cadres. The power relations are represented symbolically: instructions are dictated from above by the teacher. Moreover, the teacher’s face is not shown – the power is faceless and thus impersonal. The student’s expression is serious – learning is not something to play with. This is the most obvious message of the image.

Russian and Soviet historian Joshua Sanborn (2001, 100) notes that images of the family were used for political purposes even before the Revolution: ‘The familial imagery of the old regime prior to the turn of the twentieth century had been fully patriarchal, and political power was legitimated in this way.’ Sanborn (ibid, 105) continues that in the 1930s the fraternal rhetoric of the early Soviet Union “retreated” under Stalin’s paternalistic pressure’. In image 1, the teacher is a woman, but she is a representor of local cadres whose authority is underlined in the text the boy writes on the blackboard. And Stalin – the main patriarch – is mentioned as the highest authority.

¹⁸ In issues of *USSR in Construction* the spelling of several nouns and names is different from contemporary spelling.



1.
1935/11 IS DEVOTED TO THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF KAZAKSTAN, 40.

Captions:

1. WRITTEN ON THE BOARD IS ‘CADRES DECIDE EVERYTHING! (STALIN)’

2. BEFORE THE **OCTOBER REVOLUTION**:
ONE NEWSPAPER
NOT A SINGLE THEATRE
THREE MIDDLE SCHOOLS
TWO PERCENT OF LITERATE KAZAKS.

ON THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF SOVIET KAZAKSTAN: 116 NEWSPAPERS IN THE KAZAK LANGUAGE, OVER 7 000 ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS AND 580 MIDDLE SCHOOLS, WITH 754 000 PUPILS; 20 COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, 85 TECHNICALS WITH 29 000 STUDENTS, 22 THEATRES, 834 CINEMA HOUSES.



2.
1935/11 IS DEVOTED TO THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF KAZAKSTAN, 42.

Caption:

THUS HAS A TSARIST COLONY BEEN TRANSFORMED BY THE BOLSHEVIKS INTO A FREE SOCIALIST LAND.

WHEREVER THEY MOVED LIFE ITSELF CHANGED.

BEHOLD, WATER HAS BEGUN TO FLOW IN THE WATERLESS STEPPE [...]

BEHOLD, HEALTHY, HAPPY CHILDREN GO TO SCHOOL. THESE CHILDREN HAVE A FUTURE BEFORE THEM WHICH WE CANNOT SEE THROUGH THE BLINDING LIGHT OF THE FIVE-YEAR PLANS, A FUTURE OF WHICH WE CANNOT EVEN DREAM.

THE NAME OF THE ORGANIZER OF THESE VICTORIES IS THE COMMUNIST PARTY. REMEMBER IT.

THE POET MAIMBET HAS EXPRESSED THE SENSE OF THE VERY GREAT LOVE [...] IN THE FOLLOWING LINES:

‘THIS SONG I SING TO YOU, STALIN,
[...]
OUR DEAR TEACHER AND FRIEND,
[...]

Coincidentally, in the poem written by a Kazak writer and quoted in the caption of image 2, Stalin is referred as a teacher: ‘THIS SONG I SING TO YOU, STALIN, [...] OUR DEAR TEACHER AND FRIEND, [...]’. The lines represent Stalin as the moral and intellectual authority¹⁹ whose power is distributed through cadres and finally teachers. The three children depicted in image 2 are also serious. They are concentrating on reading.

Images 1 and 2 are both concerned with education, that is, writing and reading, respectively. Children are shown as an example to other children and also to adults. This issue of the magazine was published in 1935, when Russian culture and language already was ‘the first among equals’ in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the language written on the board is Kazak – understandably, as the volume is devoted to Kazakhstan. However, ‘Stalin’ is written in the Latin alphabet – this is possibly because the magazine was distributed, in addition to the Soviet Union, in England, France and Germany; all of the readers of the magazine were able to read the most important word. Furthermore, the switch from the Latin alphabets to Cyrillic letters in non-Russian schools took place mostly between the years 1939 and 1941.²⁰

According to historian Peter A. Blitstein (2001, 253–255; 258), universal knowledge of the Russian language was seen as an important basis for creating a culturally uniform Soviet population. Thus, Russian language and literature were established as distinct subjects as early as the school year 1934–1935 and were made obligatory subjects in all Soviet schools in March 1938. Non-Russian schools were Russified through these procedures. In addition, the Russian language was crucial in educating non-Russian cadres.

However, as Blitstein (2001, 267) states, the Stalin regime’s signals in language policy were controversial, and this ‘reveals that a coherent understanding of the nature of the Soviet multinational state itself remained lacking in these years’. Thus, some inconsistency can be seen in

¹⁹ Jeffrey Brooks (2000, 64) describes how Stalin was often represented in the press as ‘nations’ schoolmaster’ and ‘father’.

²⁰ See Blitstein 2001, 260.

the propaganda images as well, especially those that depict reforms in education. Messages of a united and centralised Soviet Union are entangled.

The improvements in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic are highlighted in the captions. As Stalin's name is written with bigger letters, his name is undoubtedly meant to be associated with the listed improvements.

Birth, Mothers with Babies and Childcare

Birth, motherhood and childcare were common topics in *USSR in Construction*. They are highly emotional and symbolic themes regarding the propaganda utilised in the process of nation-building.

Babies were often depicted in big groups, or in beds placed in a row, usually with a nurse taking care of them. In the family law of the year 1918 it was envisioned that women would be emancipated when they could work, and society would organise childcare.²¹ However, Alexandra Kollontai, a central figure in the women's emancipation movement in Soviet Russia, also underlined the bliss of motherhood, as long as society took care of the household chores. Kollontai maintained that the New Soviet Woman should be able to dedicate herself to motherhood, work and politics. The ideal was to dismantle the structures of the traditional nuclear family and replace them with the national family.²²

The photographs of young children as a group showed how childcare was organised by society so that women could go to work. They can also be seen to symbolise a multitudinous and strong nation. The propaganda seems to proclaim: in the Soviet Union, the nuclear family no longer exists, but the entire nation is one strong family where all the members cooperate in order to make the family unbreakable. The person taking care of all of the children of the nation(s) was Stalin.²³

²¹ See Rotkirch 2014, 198. Women worked as nurses, taking care of children.

²² See Rotkirch 2014, 198.

²³ Jeffrey Brooks (2000, xv) describes how in the Soviet newspapers Stalin was often represented as a father-figure, even as a Grandfather Frost: 'On December 30, 1936, the official trade union newspaper, *Labour*, carried a front-page picture of Stalin as Grandfather Frost, the Russian Santa Claus. Bright-faced smiling children circled a "New Year's tree" decorated with schools, busses, planes and other such "gifts". The tree, first permitted in 1935, marked New

Researchers Helena Goscilo and Yana Hashamova (2010, 8) ponder the role of Stalin as father. They note that

Stalinism, in fact, evidenced the triumph of trope (Stalin as father) over lived reality (the biological father). The Stalinist concept of the country as the Big Family united through a single, communal worldview conspired to make a highly publicized national hero of the fifteen-year-old Pavlik Morozov, the schoolboy who in 1931 demonstrated his ostensive devotion to ‘the common good’ by denouncing his father to the secret police for falsifying documents.

At least in propaganda, loyalty to the biological family was secondary to loyalty to the party.

Some images feature huge crowds of children in kindergartens and on playgrounds. Masses of young people can be interpreted as a symbol of continuity and a bright future. In the issue of *USSR in Construction* devoted to the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, pages 40–41 feature images of two roughly four-year-old children, and the caption is ‘Die Zukunft gehört uns’ [‘The future belongs to us’]. The photographs of small, yet strong and cheerful children can be read as allegories of the young Soviet state and its attitude towards the future.

Year’s Day as surrogate Christmas; the picture signified Stalin’s accession as the country’s benefactor.’ Notably, the image is a drawing, not a photograph. My hypothesis is that, generally, Stalin is seldom present with ‘his children’ in photographs. In addition, as mentioned, Brooks (2006, 64) also describes how Stalin often was represented in the press as the ‘nations’ schoolmaster’ and as ‘father’: ‘While editors and journalists surpassed one another in paying homage, Stalin presented himself as the nation’s schoolmaster and later “father,” both evoking the founder’s authority and obscuring it.’ Furthermore, Brooks (2000, 69) states: ‘Soviet political theatre acquired a mythic dimension in the mid-to late 1930s, when Stalin cast himself as a father of the nation.’



3.

1936/2 IST SOWJET-ARMENIEN GEWIDMET [‘Soviet Armenia’²⁴], 40–41.

Headline: DIE ZUKUNFT GEHÖRT UNS [‘The future belongs to us.’]

Caption: EINE NEUE, GLÜCKLICHE GENERATION DES ARMENISCHEN VOLKES WÄCHST AUF, DIE KEINEN NATIONALEN ZWIST UND KEINE UNTERDRÜCKUNG KENNT.

[‘A new and happy generation of the Armenian people is growing up, knowing nothing of national divisions and oppression.’]

In image 4, where a mother is holding her baby, one can also see a new Soviet Man in a nascent form. The child²⁵ is represented as bright and complete: the face is shown in its entirety in the image, whereas the mother’s head is covered and, moreover, shadow darkens and hides half of her expressionless face. The message is clear: the old generation is fading, moving aside, and a new generation is growing in the full light of socialism.

Breaking the ties to the past was possible in rhetoric, but in practice it was more challenging. As Richard Stites (1989, 109–111), an expert on Soviet history, shows, Christian festivals and family rituals, for example, were replaced with ‘revolutionary counter-celebrations’ in the early Soviet Union. Although they were different on the surface, they shared the same foundation. In a similar vein, the roots of socialist realism lay in the realist arts of the previous century. Religious elements were utilised whether knowingly or not. Notably, the language of the caption of image 2 carries references to Biblical language. Also, the influence of religious art is clearly visible in image 4.

²⁴ The English texts in quotes are taken from the English translations of the volumes. The translations are not always precise equivalents but deliver the meaning.

²⁵ When in doubt whether a child is a girl or a boy, I write ‘the child’.



4.

1931/10 IST DEM TADSHIKISTAN [*sic*], DER SIEBENTEN DER SOWJETREPUBLIKEN GEWIDMET [‘1931/10 is devoted to Tadjikistan [*sic*] – the seventh Soviet republic’], 27.

Headline:

DER WEG DER TADSHIKISCHEN SOZIALISTISCHEN SOWJETREPUBLIK VON GESTERN INS HEUTE [‘Tajikistan’s transition from yesterday to to-morrow.’].

Caption:

Die gen. Mo-Bibi. Als sie der Kollektivwirtschaft beitrug, fogte sie Ihrem Gesuch hinzu: ‘Man soll mich aber nicht zwingen den Ring aus der Nase zu nehmen.’ [‘Comrade Mo-Bibi. When joining a collective farm she added to her application: “but they should not force me to take the ring out of my nose”.’]

The Tajik woman and her child are portrayed with orthodox Christian conventions. The image is strikingly similar to the Elusa-type orthodox icon. Elusa, or the Virgin of Tenderness, is an icon in which the Virgin Mary shows affection by holding the baby Jesus close to her face.²⁶ Connections to Christian art were most likely used deliberately in this representation of the Tajik woman as they evoked positive associations to the holy family. On the other hand, when thinking in terms of primordialising, it is possible that the people of the Soviet nations were represented as ancient, as were Christian beliefs.

As for ‘otherness’, it is often pointed out how black women were/are experienced as twofold ‘others’ by (ruling) white men: they are women and they are black. They are seen as exotic, and perhaps also as fertile and sexually fascinating.²⁷ The dark Tajik woman in the image, wearing traditional dress and a nose ring, holding the dark-skinned, sturdily built and healthy child, can similarly be read as a twofold ‘other’ and exotic being. In analysing ‘othering’, Hall (1997, 225;

²⁶ See, for example, Loginova et al. (eds.) 1988, 56–57.

²⁷ See, for example, Kaartinen 2004, 106.



249; 263–266) emphasises racial and ethnic difference. He maintains that ‘stereotyping’, i.e., ‘reducing to few essentials’, is one of the central techniques of ‘othering’. As Pesonen (1998, 170–172) mentions, people were often represented as types, that is, as stereotypes, in socialist realism. The Tajik woman is shown as a primordial type, reduced to the essentials of an exotic mother, and the child is depicted as an exotic, healthy and ‘natural’ child.

The representation of the Tajik woman is quite far from the representations of emancipated and modern New Soviet Women. Moreover, the caption mentions that the woman does not want to remove her nose ring when joining a collective farm. Thus, she is represented as clinging to ‘national kitsch’. In the image, ‘othering’ and ‘primordialising’ are intertwined and thus the strengthening of the Soviet central power is present. The woman and the child, primordial ‘others’, are also depicted as dependants. Stalin, the father of nations, takes care of all his children, even the ones living in the most distant locations. It is implied that the woman is working on the collective farm almost as a favour to Stalin. However, she retains the nose ring which connects her to her traditional/national roots.²⁸

When it comes to traditions and traditional habits, one more viewpoint is crucial: Douglas Northrop (2001, 191–193) notes that Muslim women, veiled and secluded, played a central part in Bolshevik approaches to Central Asia in the 1920s, as they were seen as potential allies in the revolutionary cause. The modernising mission, for its part, legitimised Soviet power, and, therefore, Central Asian peoples were represented as primordial. Furthermore, as Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald G. Suny (1994, 17) note, the women’s section of the Bolshevik Party, Zhenotdel, launched a campaign to emancipate Central Asian women in the 1920s. Primordialising and emancipation were intertwined in the attitudes towards Muslim women then, and traces of these attitudes can still be seen in the propaganda imagery of the 1930s.

²⁸ Jeffrey Brooks (2000, xv) describes how Soviet citizens ‘[...] are immeasurably beholden to the leader, the Party, and the state.’ He goes on: ‘Lenin and Stalin advanced this formulation of economic and social relations in which citizens received ordinary goods and services as gifts from a generous and solicitous leadership.’ Brooks notes that in Lenin’s time, citizens owed their well-being to ‘the revolution’, ‘Soviet power’, ‘the Party’, and sometimes to ‘the working people’ – Brooks quotes the contemporary press. However, according to him, ‘[I]ater, Stalin became the center of public obligation and loyalty.’ – In this context, the idea of Stalin taking care of ‘his children’ and the ‘children’ working for Stalin as a favour in return seems justified.



As Northrop (2001, 191–193) argues, female dress and seclusion were used as national markers in Central Asia. He maintains that this imagery, again, had long roots: ‘The image of an exotic, often veiled, woman had long symbolized Central Asia – indeed, the entire “East” – in Russian (and European) eyes.’ The fact that the Tajik woman in image 4 wants to keep her nose ring – and her veil – suggests that there is still work to be done in modernising these nations. Thus, the national kitsch of the propaganda images is both a sign of backwardness and a symbol of strong national identity. It is clear that there were great inconsistencies in Soviet nationality policy, especially when it comes to ‘othering’.

Friendship and Happiness

Family as a theme is also present in the depictions of friendship among children. Soviet propaganda often represented children as one happy family, a family of nations. This supported Soviet nationality policy.

Images 5 and 6, published in *USSR in Construction* issue 1938/5–6, which was devoted to the Soviet Far East, were printed on the same spread but feature very different-looking children. Perhaps the underlying message was that, in addition to ‘others’, there were also Russians in the Far East. Also, the images indicate that Soviet children, despite their differences, are similar in every corner of the empire, as they behave in the same manner regardless of their physical differences.



5.



6.

1938 5–6 IST DEM FERNÖSTLICHEN GAU GEWIDMET [‘The Far-Eastern territory’], 52–53.

Captions:

5 – NIWCHISCHE PIONIERE AUS DER SACHALINER KOLLEKTIVWIRTSCHAFT ‘TSCHIR UNWD’ [‘Nivkhi young pioneers of the Chir-unvd collective farm on Sakhalin island.’]

6 – ALTERSGENOSSEN DER STADT KOMSOMOLSK, SECHSJÄHRIGE KINDER, DIE ZUSAMMEN MIT IHRER STADT WACHSEN UND SICH ENTWICKELN. [‘Children of Komsomolsk, six years old, who were born at the same time as their city and are growing up with it.’]

In images 5 and 6, as well as in image 7, the children are smiling and look exceedingly happy. They are represented as a group, even a family. As media researcher Jonas Larsen (2005, 424) shows, social relationships are constructed in photographs. He analyses how family members and their performances of ‘faminess’ make holiday experiences and places visited extraordinary and full of ‘enjoyable life’. The same can be maintained of depictions of children’s friendships in *USSR in Construction* – the regions represented seem to be extraordinary and full of ‘enjoyable life’.



7.

1935/5 THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AZERBAIJAN OIL INDUSTRY, 38–39.

[Headline of the page]: THE NEW GENERATION



Larsen (2005, 425) also notes that family photographs are never simply records of ‘real’ family life, but are coloured with desires, fantasies, and ideals of family life and, thus, they are photographs of ‘imaginary families.’ The citizens of the Soviet Union were depicted in a similar vein as one big, imaginary family, and the children of the family were numerous and enjoying life. Stalin was the father of his great Soviet family. He is not visible in these images, but it could be said that the spirit of Stalin is hovering over.

However, children of the ‘imaginary Soviet family’ were shown also among their own national families. Notably, Martin and Suny (2013, 13) maintain that after the Second World War the Soviet Union was represented as a ‘Friendship of the Peoples’ in which the Russians, however, had the central and unifying role. It seems that this tendency was already prevalent on the pages of *USSR in Construction* in the 1930s, especially in the photographs featuring children. Unifying was the main principle, but ‘othering’ also had a role in the great performance of nation-building.

Moreover, Martin (2001, 81) argues that

In the 1920s, the voluntary invisibility of the Russian nationality was meant to unify the multiethnic state (by disarming non-Russian distrust of their former oppressor); in the 1930s, the visibility and centrality of the Russians would serve the same function. This new principle of Soviet unity was represented by the metaphor of the Friendship of the Peoples, a friendship that was said to have been forged by the Russians and to have existed already for many centuries. The Friendship was propagandized as a kind of supranational imagined community for the multiethnic Soviet people.

In images 5 and 6 the children are among their ‘ethnic families’, and the families do not mix. As Martin (2001, 77) mentions, Soviet nationality policies did not accept assimilation, and Stalin especially denounced it. In the representations in *USSR in Construction*, the nation was formed of different, separate families. According to Martin (2001, 81), there was an important paradigm shift in Soviet nationality policies in the 1930s: Russian nationality and Russian national culture were rehabilitated. Martin notes also that by 1936 Russia ‘had already been raised to the rank of “first

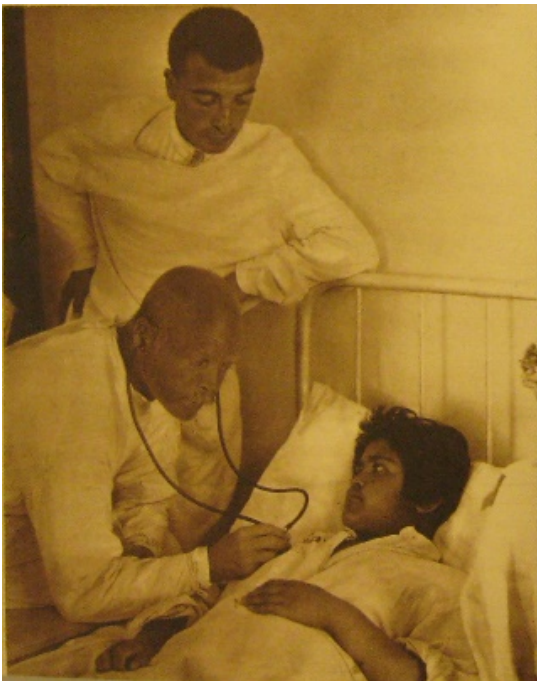
among equals” in the Soviet family of nations’. The Soviet nationality policies had many stages, and the propaganda images published in *USSR in Construction* reflect the changes in the policies.

Suny (2001, 47) notes that the family metaphors were used even before Soviet times; he quotes the ideological formulation by Nicholas I, titled *Official Nationality*, in which Russia was portrayed as ‘a single family in which the ruler is the father and the subjects the children’. Also Sanborn (2001, 96) summarises that ‘[t]he use of familial affinities as the prototype for national affinities was common throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century’, and that this kind of imagery was ‘intended to inspire feelings of loyalty, closeness, and, above all, unity’. It could be claimed that Stalin continued the tsarist tradition of being ‘a father’. Moreover, he was not Russian, but a representor of the Caucasian peoples, and thus a great father to the vast multicultural state, the grand Soviet family of nations.

The ambiguity of Soviet nationality policies is visible again in the representations of friendships among children. On one hand, the entire Soviet Union was depicted as one big family, but on the other, the family members were supposed to be different, sometimes even ‘others’.

Healthcare, Hygiene and Nutrition

Technical development was one of the most important undertakings in the early Soviet Union. As Stites (1989, 48) notes, Lenin ‘became almost fixated’ on the prospect of the rapid electrification of the Soviet Union, and electrification became a symbol of progress. Other kinds of progress took place as well, for example in the field of healthcare, as image 8 shows.



8.

1931/10 IST DEM TADSHIKISTAN, DER SIEBENTEN DER SOWJETREPUBLIKEN GEWIDMET [‘is devoted to Tadjikistan – the seventh Soviet republic’], 26.

Headline:

DER WEG DER TADSHIKISCHEN SOZIALISTISCHEN SOWJETREPUBLIK VON GESTERN INS HEUTE [‘Tajikistan’s transition from yesterday to to-morrow.’]

[Caption blurred]

In the image, the young Tajik boy is sick, and professional-looking doctors are examining and taking care of him. The photograph suggests that the great Soviet family looks after its children even in the most distant locations of the Union. Children were seen as the future, and unhygienic and unhealthy conditions were a threat to the future of the Soviet Union. The presence of the Soviet Union in SSRs was legitimised as the Union modernised the primordial, unhealthy conditions.

As mentioned, the Soviet Union was officially oriented towards the future. New generations were born and they were supposed to be unaware of the bourgeois past. The imagery of cleanliness and high standards of hygiene were also symbols of the new beginning without the stains of the past. The children were literally New Soviet Men and Women, and they were represented as pure and innocent.²⁹

²⁹ Anne Higonnet (1998) analyses the history of representing children as innocent.



9.
1935/5 THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AZERBAIJAN OIL INDUSTRY, 38.
[Headline:] THE NEW GENERATION

High-quality nutrition was regarded as an essential part of good health. In image 9 the child is eating in a canteen, possibly at a kindergarten. In addition to nutritional food and the rational organisation of daily meals, communality is emphasised – the child is eating in the company of other children. In the same vein, the child is also represented as executing the new family models of the Soviet Union: it is not the mother who is doing the chores and feeding the children, but the society and its great father, Stalin.

The child in image 9 is also represented as ‘other’. As darker-skinned and brown-eyed, the child is somewhat ‘exotic’, and, above all, seems to be eating with hands. Yet, the child is also ‘modern’, as eating in the canteen indicates. The ‘other’ and the New Soviet Man are both present at the same time.

Nutrition was one of the key themes in the representations of children when the Soviet Union was in the process of nation-building. Images connected to food propagated good health and also showed how fertile the Soviet Union was, and how well it had organised the production and distribution of staples. Moreover, such images assured viewers that the nation had triumphed in organising the daily chores, for example cooking – an objective written also into the above mentioned family law.

Children with Fruits, Fishes and Other Local Foodstuffs

Before healthy food arrived on children's plates and palates, it needed to be produced. Some of the portraits and close-ups of children feature agricultural products as well as domestic animals and even fish of the different regions. These photographs were used to propagate the affiliation of the SSRs and other autonomous regions to the Soviet Union, as the collectivisation of agriculture of the SSRs presented challenges for the Soviet leadership.³⁰ The images featuring foodstuffs also aimed to present the products of the Soviet Union to international audiences. The purpose was to propagate the advanced and modern agriculture. The propaganda is to be read against the context of famines that killed millions: the Russian famine in 1921–1922, the famine in Kazakhstan in 1931–1933³¹ and the Ukrainian Holodomor in 1932–1933. Many images of the abundance of Soviet foodstuffs employed children to obliterate these catastrophes and to assure the readers that there was enough food for everybody, especially the children, in the Soviet Union.



1936/4–5 DIESE NUMMER IST DEM 15-JÄHRIGEN
JUBILÄUM SOWJETGRUSIENS GEWIDMET
[‘dedicated to the 15th anniversary of Soviet Georgia’],
35.

[No headline or caption]

10.

³⁰ See Smith, Jeremy 2013, 104.

³¹ See, for example, Smith, Jeremy 2013, 106.



11.
1936/10 CONSACRÉ À LA RÉGION AUTONOME DE KABARDA-BALKARIE [‘Kabardino-Balkarian autonomous region’], 37.

Text on the page:

LA VIE CULTIVÉE S’AMPLIFIE ET S’ENRICHIE GRACE AUX ARONDANTES MOISSONS, VISITEZ DONC LE KOLKHOZ [...] [text blurred] [‘And the unprecedented harvests are bringing the country a prosperous and cultured life, visit the collective farm of...’]



12.
1937/3 DEN VÖLKERN DES ORDSHONIKIDSEGAUS (NORKAUKASUS) GEWIDMET [‘The peoples of the Orjonikidze territory (Northern Caucasus)’], 9.

Caption:

‘ES LEBT SICH BESSER GENOSSEN, ES LEBT SICH FRÖHLICHER’ HAT DER GELIEBTESTE MENSCH UNSERES LANDES, DER GENOSSE STALIN, GESAGT.

[‘“Life has improved, Comrades. Life has become more joyous.” Has the most beloved man in our country, Comrade Stalin, said.’]³²

³² I was not able to find this image among the ones I scanned while visiting the library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to read the magazine *USSR in Construction* in English in summer 2015. I will check the situation on my next visit to archives.

Image 10 shows a contented and well-nourished, even somewhat chubby boy with pears, his rotund belly in the middle of the image. Image 11 presents two boys with a large pumpkin, and in image 12 a boy is sitting on the back of a big sturgeon. There are two probable reasons for depicting children with these products: first of all, children indicate the scale – the size of the products – and, secondly, combining children with vegetables and fishes suggests that there is plenty of food for children, and thus the future is secured. There is no room for want or famine in these representations.

Combining food and power has long traditions in Russia and the Soviet Union. In an article on food in Catherinian St. Petersburg, George E. Munro (1997, 33) notes: ‘To be able to eat delicacies out of season, to place on the table an array of dishes far more extensive and in much greater quantity than could possibly be consumed at one sitting was a symbol not only of hospitality and generosity but also of power.’ Thus, to present the abundant foodstuffs of the Soviet Union was also to communicate and to propagate the power of the USSR at home and abroad.

Food can also be regarded in connection to religious contexts. Musya Glants (1997, 216–217) pays attention to the position of food in pre-revolutionary paintings: ‘Food has been depicted in Russian painting since the time of Old Russia. One finds food metaphors already in icon paintings, for example, in the variations of the Trinity theme.’³³

To summarise, food has had a mythical and sacred position in visual culture at least since early Christian art. The position of foodstuffs is in many ways similar in the propaganda photographs of the Soviet Union. Food conveys connotations of power, especially imperialistic power. Glants (1997, 219) also notes that in the Stalin era, ‘food was widely used to glorify the beauty of Soviet life and the happiness of the people.’ Furthermore, she remarks that ‘[a]s with everything else, it had become a stylistic device for propaganda’. Food was used in propaganda to visualise the happy Soviet life, as if to illustrate Stalin’s views about Soviet life that he famously

³³ Glants also reminds us that ‘[b]read, wine, salt, and all the fruits of the earth have a powerful symbolic significance in the culture of [all] nations.’ (Glants 1997, 214). Thus, the position of fruits and vegetables is universal – and they are powerful symbols.

formulated in his speech at the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites in 1935: 'Life has improved, comrades. Life has become more joyous'.

The representations of smiling children with foodstuffs and local products also underline the role of the Soviet Union as a great family of nations. The images indicate that the children of the family always had healthy food to eat. Moreover, the boy depicted with the fish is naked, which highlights the 'naturalness' of the peoples of the autonomous regions. On the other hand, the boy – even if naked – is riding on the back of the fish, and this, as well as the sailing ships in the background, symbolises the Soviet Union's triumph over nature, a central theme in the propaganda of the early Soviet Union. Moreover, the boy in image 11 is wearing a traditional hat – again national kitsch is celebrated.

It is noteworthy that the photographs present foodstuffs, not meals. Glants (1997, 225) remarks that ethnic dishes were often depicted in paintings in order to express Russian national awareness. She analyses the relationship between food and nationality: 'In addition to simple food, all sorts of utensils were involved, as in Vladimir Stozharov's *Bread, Salt and Bratina* (1964). The bread and salt, the homespun fabric of the embroidered towel, the smooth surface of the *bratina* (loving cup) and the old wooden walls were a metaphorical assertion of national character, of the warmth and simplicity of the Russian people and their cultural values.' National awareness and cultural values were articulated similarly in the propaganda photography. The foods connected to the Soviet ethnic minorities do not, however, signify long cultural traditions like the bread and salt of Russia, and they do not feature any utensils. Instead, they accentuate the primordial naturalness of the regions and the people. The fresh and raw produce depicted in the photographs symbolise the undeveloped areas of the empire.

Depicting foodstuffs is strongly connected to the relationship between the Soviet leadership and the autonomous regions. Historian and geographer James R. Ryan (1997, 24) describes how the early British commercial photographer John Thomson (1837–1921) travelled, for example, in China and Cyprus, and his travels 'were represented as a project to produce a



photographic inventory of overseas resources'. Ryan notes that Thomson took photographs of Chinese fruits, and interprets that they were symbols of the exotic lands being offered to Britain.³⁴ The same phenomena can be seen in *USSR in Construction* where images featured, apart from fruit, also vegetables and 'fruits of the sea'. This is especially striking in image 11, where the young boys, again exotic 'others', are shown from above, as if a big brother or father was looking down to them and the boys are handing a gigantic pumpkin to the invisible father almost as an offering of their gratitude.³⁵ Via the pumpkin they are symbolically offering also their primordially fertile country as a gift to Stalin.

One additional, perhaps a bit Freudian, perspective on the images concerns the regions they depict. According to Suny (2001, 46), at the beginning of the nineteenth century, 'The Russian colonial encounter with the Caucasus coincided with an intense phase of the intelligentsia's discussion of Russia's place between Europe and Asia'. At that time, it was commonly accepted that 'Russian "civilization", usually taken to be inferior to that of the West, was at least superior to the "savagery" of the Caucasian mountaineers or Central Asian nomads'. As analysed by Hall, many forms of racism were present in the discussions about the peoples of the Caucasus, as well as in the literature of the era. Suny (2001, 46) summarises the atmosphere: 'The eroticism that companioned imperialism was contained in the Russian fear of the physical prowess of the Caucasians that extended from the battlefield to the bedroom.' Possibly the idea of Caucasian people as powerful and virile is also underlying the depictions of the fruitfulness of those regions. Moreover, as mentioned, Stalin was a representor of the superior Caucasian peoples.

³⁴ Also Edward Said (1994, 9–10) maintains that in the expansion of the Western powers, profit – spices, sugar, gold etc. – was an important motive.

³⁵ Brooks (2000, 84) analyses the 'economy of the gift': 'It was as difficult to recompense the country and Stalin for "gifts" of goods and services as it was to meet the production quotas of the era. Recipients of gifts, that is, normal wage-earning citizens, were thus 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".' – The happy children in the images all seem to say/think: 'Thank You, Comrade Stalin, for a Happy Childhood'.



Children with 'Traditional' or 'National' Costumes, Musical Instruments etc.

I have placed images of children with 'traditional' or 'national' costumes or artefacts in the last category analysed in this article. This category includes two close-ups/portraits of children, both published in issue 1935/3–4 of *USSR in Construction*, which was dedicated to the Soviet Far East. In image 13 a girl is dressed in a folk costume and in image 14 the two boys are depicted with a balalaika, and the boy on the right side of the image is wearing a navy uniform. All three children are smiling.



13.
1935/3–4 CONSACRÉ À L'EXTRÊME ORIENT SOVIÉTIQUE ['the Far Eastern region'], 53.
[No headline or caption]



14.

1935/3–4 CONSACRÉ À L'EXTRÊME ORIENT SOVIÉTIQUE ['the Far Eastern region'], 49.

caption:

Jeunes pionniers coréens. ['Korean pioneers.']

Text on the spread:

En 1933, 23 000 enfants ont fréquenté les jardins d'enfants de la région de Extrême-Orient. En 1934, on en comptait déjà 28 000. Le nombre des petits qui fréquentent les jardins d'enfants provisoires est passé de 37 500 à 60 000.

['In the kindergartens of the Far Eastern Region, 23 000 children were looked after in 1933. The number rose to 28 000 in 1934. The number of children served by the play centres rose from 37 500 to 60 000.']

This pair of images highlights the ambivalence in Russification and 'othering': the girl is presented wearing a traditional costume, whereas the Korean boys are depicted with distinctive Russian symbols – a balalaika and a navy uniform – and in the caption they are connected to the essential Soviet youth movement, the pioneers.

In the previous images (10, 11 and 12) the colonial aspects were reflected in the grocery production. The theme of travelling³⁶ was also often present in *USSR in Construction*. Travelling and photography share common, colonialist ground, as historian Leila Koivunen (2006, 52) analyses. She maintains that travelling and picture-making have always coexisted. Many remote regions of the Soviet Union were explored with a camera and then exhibited in *USSR in Construction*. The power relations of the state – embodied by travelling photographers – and the regions and peoples exhibited³⁷ were not neutral, on the contrary: Michael G. Smith (1998, 2) maintains that 'centre' and 'periphery' were common terms of discourse during the first years of the Soviet government, and representatives of the republics were often positioned against those of the 'centre'. Images 13 and 14 indicate that the representations of the peoples of the 'periphery' were changing in the mid-1930s, but they were still always in relation to the centre, either as similar to it or as different from it. Again, we are facing the ambiguity of Soviet nationality policy in the representations of the children of different nations.

The Soviet Far East (Дальний Восток, literally 'far East'), as the name indicates, was very far from the 'centre'. In fact, it was geographically on the other side of the Soviet Union from

³⁶ Or former expeditions as, for example, in issue 10/1934 DIE 'TSCHELJUSKIN'-ЕРОПӨЕ, Semion Chelyuskin being an 18th-century polar explorer. He explored, for example, the Kamchatka peninsula (part of the Soviet Far East).

³⁷ On visibility and power in exhibiting human subjects at the great spectacles of the colonial period, see Lidchi 1997, 195.

Leningrad, for example, and the cultural distance was great as well. Michael G. Smith (1998, 2–3) remarks that after the western provinces of the empire (for example, Finland) gained their independence, the Russian federation concentrated on the Asian parts, the Soviet East, and the Bolsheviks saw giving the ‘backward’ nationalities of the East class-consciousness and nationhood as their duty. Moreover, as Martin and Suny (2001, 10) maintain, the Bolsheviks thought that the measures connected to the ‘cultural revolution’ (rapid industrialisation, collectivisation of agriculture etc.) were very relevant in the ‘culturally backward eastern’ regions, as the Bolsheviks called them. Thus, the East was seen as backward and in need of quick modernising procedures.

As nationhood and class consciousness were delivered to the nationalities of the East, they were primordialised. One of the strategies of ‘othering’ is representing the ‘other’ as light-minded and happy, as well as child-like, as historian Marjo Kaartinen (2004, 46; 48; 93) analyses, in the spirit of Hall. Smiling children with traditional dresses and artefacts, as in image 13, may underline how undeveloped the peoples of the periphery were. Primordialising the peoples of the East and representing them as happy children justified the patronising attitude of the ‘centre’ towards the ‘periphery’.³⁸

On the other hand, the Korean boys are depicted with objects regarded as traditionally ‘Russian’: a balalaika and a sailor suit. These symbols indicate that ‘development’ was already occurring in the Far East. Francine Hirsch (2003, 689) notes how in the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum traditional culture was taken as a main focus in 1923, and objects such as hand-woven rugs, musical instruments, painted masks and animal skins were displayed. In the 1930s the situation was different. Depicting the Korean boys with traditional Russian objects perfectly culminates the shift from emphasising the ‘national’ cultures and artefacts to underlining the position of Russian culture as ‘first among equals’ – the Korean boys were primordialised with traditional Russian objects!

³⁸ The interpretations of the relationship between ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ have changed over the decades. For example, Martin and Suny (2001, 6) find that a paradigm shift took place in the 1970s: the narrative of cynical manipulation, repression and the erasure of nationality through Russification and modernisation was replaced with a story of a dialectical relationship between nation-making and nation-destroying.

Conclusion: Educated, Healthy and Happy Children of the SSRs

In the *USSR in Construction* issues studied, which presented autonomous regions of the Soviet Union, children were represented in connection to education, childcare, healthcare, modernisation, nutrition and friendship, for example. Furthermore, children were featured in images presenting traditions of the autonomous regions.

All the images show the children as healthy and happy, often surrounded by friends. The happy children were an allegory of the Soviet Union as a big and united family of nations – a family which was presented in propaganda as even more important than the biological family. However, the power relations were clearly visible in the images, as the children were primordialised and ‘othered’, but also Russified. In the researched era the nationality politics of the Soviet Union varied and were in some cases ambiguous and even contradictory. This can be seen in the images as well, as there were no uniform practises in representing the SSRs. To continue Soviet historian Yuri Slezkine’s (1994) metaphor of the USSR as a communal apartment: at first, there were no rules on how to live in the *kommunalka* – the rules were created along the way.

Moreover, in connection to the educational triumphs of the Soviet Union, children were depicted as active and serious students. The children depicted in the issues of *USSR in Construction* dedicated to the SSRs and other autonomous regions can be seen as representatives of the peoples of Soviet nations – they are ruled from the central regions of the Soviet Union, and they are obedient subjects of Soviet rule.

Especially remarkable are images in which children were depicted with fruits and other foodstuffs – the children were represented as offering the abundant foodstuffs as a gift for being taken into the great family of nations. Stalin himself was represented as the all-knowing and all-powerful father of the family of nations. However, the father did not always know how to regard his great family with children so different from each other.



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1935/5 THE 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AZERBAIJAN OIL INDUSTRY

1935/9 CONSACRÉ AU 15-ÈME ANNIVERSAIRE DE LA REPUBLIQUE SOVIÉTIQUE DE
CARÉLIE

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1936/3 IST DEN KOLLEKTIVWIRTSCHAFTEN DES KIEWER GEBIETS DER
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1936/4–5 DIESE NUMMER IST DEM 15-JÄHRIGEN JUBILÄUM SOWJETGRUSIENS
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About the Author

Silja Pitkänen (MA) is Doctoral Researcher at the Department of History and Ethnology at University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

Contact

Silja Pitkänen
University of Jyväskylä
Department of History and Ethnology
Historica, H123
PL 35
FI-40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto
FINLAND

E-Mail: spitkan@student.jyu.fi