

BETWEEN MORAL INSTRUCTION AND IMAGINATIVE FREEDOM IN RUSSIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the historical development of Russian children's literature from its didactic origins to the plural literary field of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The study focuses on several interrelated problems. It reconstructs the role of criticism, school reading, publishing institutions, and state educational policy in shaping books for children. It also traces the changing image of the child in literary texts and shows how the balance between instruction and artistic freedom changed across major periods. The analysis is based on historical and comparative reading of canonical works, critical statements by Russian and Soviet theorists, and modern scholarship on literary history. Special attention is given to the nineteenth century discussions associated with V.G.Belinsky and N.A.Dobrolyubov, to L.N.Tolstoy's work for young readers, to the experimental rise of the 1920s, to the ideological consolidation of the 1930s, to the post Stalin renewal of the 1950s and 1960ы, and to the market and value shifts after 1991.

Keywords. Russian children's literature, literary history, childhood studies, Soviet culture, Tolstoy, Marshak, Chukovsky, literary pedagogy, publishing institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Russian children's literature became an object of sustained critical attention earlier than is sometimes assumed. In the major historical survey by M.Balina and L.Rudova [2], the first systematic interest in this field is traced to the 1820s and 1830s, when publishers, educators, and critics began to isolate books for young readers as a distinct literary category. From the beginning, this writing was linked with debate about aesthetic value, ethical purpose, readership, and mediation between author, school, family, and book market. The earliest critical formulas were openly pedagogical, yet they were not aesthetically indifferent. Belinsky's position remained especially influential because it joined instruction with seriousness about literary quality. One later summary preserves his concise dictum that "Children's books are written for education" [6]. In Balina's discussion of 19th century

criticism, another formulation attributed to Belinsky states that education “it decides the future of a human being” [1]. Such statements are important because they show that Russian thought about literature for the young did not begin from amusement alone. It began from the conviction that reading shapes character, language, taste, and civic feeling. At the same time, this tradition did not remain static. By the late 19th century and especially in the Soviet period, the field became a site of intense struggle over who could define the child, what kind of speech was appropriate for childhood, and how literature should balance play with instruction.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research material includes historical studies of Russian and Soviet children’s literature, critical writings on childhood reading, and a set of representative literary works that mark key stages of development. Among the principal scholarly sources are M.Balina’s study of the early Soviet period, B.Hellman’s history of Russian children’s books, L.Rudova’s analysis of the post Soviet situation, and B.Hellman’s study of Tolstoy’s reworking of “The Three Bears.” These works make it possible to connect literary change with publishing practice, educational debate, and wider social history.

Methodologically, the article combines historical literary analysis, comparative reading, institutional analysis, and close interpretation of selected texts. The study does not treat books for children as a minor appendix to adult literature. Instead, it reads them as a central literary field with its own canon, critical vocabulary, publishing networks, and recurring aesthetic tensions. The analytical focus falls on genre choice, image of the child, relation between play and instruction, and the degree of state or school control at different moments.

RESULTS

A major finding of the study is the periodization of Russian children’s literature. Its development can be described through several distinct stages, each characterized by its own institutions, favored genres, and prevailing concept of the child reader. Prior to the Soviet period, the field was shaped by primers, readers, moral narratives, fables, and adapted folklore. During the 19th century, critical reflection became more substantial, and authors such as L.N.Tolstoy introduced a higher level of literary ambition into educational prose. In the Soviet era, children’s literature grew rapidly, although this growth was consistently accompanied by ideological control. After 1991, the literary market became more diverse, but the collapse of earlier institutional structures also generated new forms of instability.

Table 1. Periodization of Russian Children's Literature

Period	Main institutional setting	Dominant forms	Representative names	Leading function
18th and early 19th centuries	Primer tradition, school reading, translated moral literature	ABC books, readers, fables, instructive tales	N.I.Novikov, early compilers and translators	Moral and linguistic formation
Mid and late 19th century	Pedagogical criticism, family reading, school publication	Readers, realistic prose, adapted folklore	V.G.Belinsky, N.A.Dobrolyubov, L.N.Tolstoy, D.N.Mamin-Sibiryak	Education joined with artistic credibility
1920s	Narkompros, new journals, Raduga, Gosizdat	Picture book, poetic experiment, adventure, science and travel writing	S.Y.Marshak, K.I.Chukovsky, V.V.Bianki, B.S.Zhitkov	Experiment together with political socialization
1930s to late 1940s	Union of Soviet Writers, Detskaya literatura, school canon	Heroic poem, school story, production literature, war prose	A.P.Gaidar, A.L.Barto, S.V.Mikhalkov	Collective discipline and state loyalty
1950s to 1960s	Relative liberalization, wider genre range	Humorous prose, school novella, poetry, science fiction	N.N.Nosov, V.Y.Dragunsky, A.G.Aleksin, B.V.Zakhoder	Return of everyday psychology and play
After 1991	Commercial publishing market, reduced subsidy system	Fantasy, detective fiction, comics, religious literature, translations	E.N.Uspensky and reissued classics beside new popular authors	Pluralization of forms under market pressure

An important finding concerns the 19th-century foundations of the field. Dobrolyubov insisted that children's literature should become "a textbook of life" [1]. This formulation is significant because it connects literary reading with practical moral formation rather than with mechanical school memorization alone. In a similar vein, Tolstoy's educational prose for children sought simplicity without reduction or banality. As Hellman observes, in "The Three Bears" and in the reading books associated with it, Tolstoy's ideal was "brevity and simplicity" [5]. Tolstoy's place in the history of Russian children's literature is decisive. Hellman shows that "The Three Bears" entered *Novaya azbuka* in 1875 and that Tolstoy reworked foreign material with artistic independence, privileging compositional economy and linguistic clarity over overt moralizing. This choice had long consequences. It demonstrated that writing for children could remain educational while also becoming a test of literary mastery. The same

principle can be seen in other school texts associated with Tolstoy, where short form, lexical precision, and recognisable action support memory and interpretation. In practical terms, 19th century Russian children's literature moved along two lines at once. One line privileged moral instruction, school usefulness, and social formation. The other developed literary credibility, realistic detail, and child level perception. These lines did not exclude one another, yet their balance varied from author to author. Tolstoy, Mamin-Sibiryak, and later authors for family reading often worked productively within this tension. Examples such as "Три медведя," "Филипок," and "Алёнушкины сказки" show how concise form, vivid action, and ethical implication could coexist without rhetorical heaviness.

The early Soviet period marked a decisive turning point in the history of Russian children's literature, as the field grew with remarkable speed both institutionally and artistically. A widely cited formula associated with N.K.Krupskaya and preserved in later scholarship describes books as "one of the mightiest weapons in socialist education of the new generation" [7]. Even when transmitted through a later academic source, this statement clearly conveys the new Soviet understanding of the importance of children's reading. Literature for the young was no longer viewed only as part of family upbringing or school instruction. It became an instrument of state policy, directly connected with mass education, ideological formation, and the creation of new social values.

Yet the 1920s were not only a period of pressure. They were also a moment of formal innovation. Hellman notes that Raduga's first books in 1923 opened "Golden Age of Soviet Russian children's literature" [3]. In the same decade, critics recorded a severe shortage of publication because only thirty three books for children appeared in 1921, yet precisely this difficult setting produced a concentrated burst of new writing, illustration, and editorial work. Gorky's journal activity, Marshak's organizing talent, Chukovsky's poetic energy, and the participation of avant garde writers made the period especially dynamic. Gorky's program for children's reading did not simply repeat crude indoctrination. In his early editorial statement, he wrote of fostering "active participation in life" [1]. This phrase reveals a key Soviet aspiration, namely the formation of an active social subject. Even so, early Soviet children's literature still contained genuine heterogeneity. Chukovsky's verse tales, Marshak's city poems, Bianki's natural history prose, and Zhitkov's travel and technical writing gave young readers different models of curiosity, movement, and language play. Works such as "Мойдодыр," "Тараканище," "Почта," and "Лесная газета" reveal that literary pleasure remained inseparable from educational value.

The same decade also sharpened conflict over fairy tale, fantasy, and imagination. Balina shows that party aligned critics attacked folklore and fairy tale for allegedly strengthening non Soviet values, while Krupskaya's educational authority increased the reach of such campaigns. As a result, one of the oldest and most flexible forms of children's writing became suspect precisely when it was proving artistically fruitful. This conflict is central to the history of Russian children's literature because it shows that the child reader was repeatedly imagined either as open to imaginative freedom or as vulnerable to politically undesirable symbols.

Table 2. Institutional and Aesthetic Tensions in Early Soviet Children's Literature

Field of pressure	Mechanism	Expected result	Literary response	Illustrative examples
School and pedagogy	Control of reading lists and libraries	Useful and ideologically safe reading	Didactic prose and regulated selection	Readers, moral stories, school prose
Party cultural policy	Publishing supervision and criticism	Formation of loyal young citizens	Heroic and collective plots	Production themes, civic verse
Writers and editors	Experiment in language and form	New child-centered literary idiom	Humour, rhythmic play, absurd elements	Chukovsky, Marshak, OBERIU-related children's writing
Readers themselves	Letters, magazines, circulation feedback	Adjustment to actual interests of children	Wider range of genres and topics	Gorky's campaign and the seven thousand letters

The 1930s and the post-war years formed another important stage in the development of Russian children's literature. During this period, the field became more centralized and more visibly subordinated to the aims of socialist realism. Hellman notes that Gorky called Marshak "the founder of Soviet children's literature" [4]. This formulation is revealing because it links literary authority with institution building. Marshak was significant not only as a writer, but also as an editor, organizer, and promoter of younger talent. The field increasingly gravitated toward themes of heroic conduct, industrial labour, military readiness, and exemplarity. This centralization did not eliminate literary quality, but it narrowed the accepted range of subjects. A.Gaidar's prose about duty and collective action, A.Barto's ideologically adaptable verse, and S.Mikhalkov's civic didacticism represent one dominant line. War deepened the prominence of sacrifice and patriotic service. At the same time, writing about ordinary childhood did not disappear completely. Even under pressure, authors looked for ways to preserve humour, rhythm, recognisable speech, and domestic scale.

A further important finding emerges in the period after Stalin's death. As Balina's survey demonstrates, the cultural atmosphere became less rigid, while genre diversity expanded markedly during the 1950s and 1960s. Poetry experienced a clear renewal in the works of Zakhoder, Berestov, Tokmakova, and Sapgir. Prose likewise broadened through the growth of school novellas, humorous short fiction, adventure narratives, and science fiction. In this context, the child was represented not only as a future citizen, but also as an individual experiencing embarrassment, curiosity, fear, friendship, and comic misunderstanding.

This change can be observed in concrete examples. Nosov's prose about school life, especially "Витя Малеев в школе и дома," turns away from monumental heroism and studies everyday effort, mistake, and self correction. Dragunsky's "Денискины рассказы," including "Он живой и светится," build value not through political slogan but through perception, comic timing, and emotional accuracy. Zakhoder's playful rewriting of foreign material and Uspensky's later prose about unconventional community, as in "Крокодил Гена и его друзья," continue the same line. In all these texts, literature for children regains trust in the ordinary.

Table 3. Landmark Works and Images of the Child in Russian Children's Literature

Author and work	Approximate period	Dominant literary feature	Image of the child	Historical significance
L.N.Tolstoy. Три медведя and reading books	late 19th century	Lexical economy and structural clarity	Attentive learner and observer	Raised artistic demands for educational prose
K.I.Chukovsky. Мойдодыр	1920s	Rhythm, absurd play, memorable sound pattern	Energetic participant in comic correction	United amusement with behavioural instruction
S.Y.Marshak. Почта	1920s	Urban movement and poetic sequencing	Curious reader of the modern world	Made contemporary social life readable for children
A.P.Gaidar. Тимур и его команда	1940s	Collective ethics and action	Organizer and helper	Canonical model of civic childhood
N.N.Nosov. Витя Малеев в школе и дома	1950s	Everyday realism and humour	Fallible but developing school child	Returned ordinary childhood to a central place
V.Y.Dragunsky. Денискины рассказы	1960s	Short comic prose and psychological precision	Speaking and feeling subject	Strengthened the value of personal experience
E.N.Uspensky. Крокодил Гена и его друзья	1960s-1980s	Playful social fantasy	Open to friendship beyond norm	Expanded acceptable models of community

The post 1991 period constitutes another major finding of the study. As Rudova's analysis indicates, the collapse of Soviet institutional structures produced both new freedom and significant imbalance. The children's book market increasingly turned toward mass genres, including detective fiction, fantasy, horror, comics, fairy tales, and various forms of playful writing. Reprints of earlier authors also became widespread, while religious literature for children returned for the first time since the Bolshevik era. At the same time, the disappearance of former subsidy and editorial mechanisms weakened earlier standards of selection and professional guidance.



DISCUSSION

The discussion confirms that the development of Russian children's literature cannot be reduced to a movement from simplicity to complexity or from moralism to freedom. More accurately, the field repeatedly negotiated a stable contradiction. Society expected books to educate, but literature retained strength only when it trusted imagination, rhythm, humour, and concrete child experience. Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, Tolstoy, Gorky, Marshak, and post Stalin prose writers all occupied different points within this contradiction. For this reason, the image of the child changed not in a straight line, but in successive redefinitions. The child appears first as a learner of moral order, then as a school reader shaped by pedagogical expectations, then as a Soviet builder of the future, then as a psychologically credible subject of everyday life, and finally as a market reader navigating abundance. These images did not fully replace one another. They accumulated and often coexisted. Even contemporary commercial literature continues to borrow from older models of instruction, adventure, and collective ethics.

Institutional history also matters greatly. The flourishing of the 1920s depended on publishers, journals, editors, and public debate. The rigidity of the 1930s followed from tighter control of the same channels. The opening after Stalin's death coincided with greater tolerance for generic variety. After 1991, the erosion of earlier institutions increased choice but reduced coordinated cultural support. In other words, literary development in this field was inseparable from school policy, publishing structure, and the social prestige of children's reading.

CONCLUSION

The historical development of Russian children's literature reveals a durable and productive tension between educational purpose and artistic freedom. In the nineteenth century, criticism established the seriousness of writing for children and connected it with moral and aesthetic formation. Tolstoy then demonstrated that simplicity for young readers could be artistically exacting. The 1920s brought an exceptional concentration of experiment, editorial energy, and new poetic forms, even while ideological pressure increased. The 1930s and post war years institutionalized the field and secured its cultural prestige, but often narrowed its acceptable themes. The post Stalin decades restored humour, daily life, and psychological nuance, while the post Soviet period widened the market and the range of available forms, though at the cost of stability and common standards. Russian children's literature reached its highest achievements when it treated the child as an active reader capable of emotional, moral, and imaginative work.

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