

IMAGE OF CHILDHOOD AND WAR IN SOVIET PROSE OF POSTWAR DECADE

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ABSTRACT

Soviet prose of 1945 through 1955 produced a separate strand of works built around children who participated in or witnessed the Great Patriotic War. Three representative texts by V.P.Kataev, L.A.Kassil with M.L.Polyanovsky, and A.N.Rybakov are examined through close reading. Comparison of plot structure, narrative perspective and ideological framing reveals tension between heroic pedagogical convention and early signs of psychological complication that would mature in 1960s lieutenant prose.

Keywords: Soviet postwar prose, childhood theme, child protagonist, Great Patriotic War, V.P.Kataev, L.A.Kassil, A.N.Rybakov, socialist realism, adventure narrative, Stalin Prize, war memory.

INTRODUCTION

Soviet literature between 1945 and 1955 absorbed the war through several channels at once. One of the most productive of them produced books built around children who lived through the conflict. V.P.Kataev finished his short novel in May 1945. The Stalin Prize of the First Class followed within a year. L.A.Kassil collaborating with M.L.Polyanovsky completed a much longer documentary novel about the Kerch partisan boy V.N.Dubinin in 1949. A.N.Rybakov issued his Moscow-school adventure tale in 1948 and added a sequel in 1956. Across these very different plots a single configuration recurs, where a boy of eleven to fourteen enters direct contact with combat or its immediate aftermath, learns the elementary discipline of arms or scouting and acquires through the ordeal an adult bearing well before peacetime would have permitted. Such concentration of motifs across separate authors invites a closer comparison of how the war was reshaped for an audience born after 1930.

Established Soviet criticism treated this strand mostly within the bounds of children-literature studies, which narrowed the analytical horizon and isolated the texts from the larger postwar discussion. A.G.Bocharov's monograph from 1969 placed Soviet war prose along a developmental line moving from heroic narrative toward psychological complication, yet he assigned the children's war book a peripheral position. Recent dissertations and articles published between 2005 and 2018 have returned to the subject with fresh attention to questions of memory, generational identity and historical revision. The article that follows offers close readings of three primary texts. Comparison along three axes (plot architecture, narrative voice, treatment of violence) helps clarify what was shared, what was author-specific and where the postwar children's prose anticipated the moral interrogation associated a decade later with Y.V.Bondarev and V.V.Bykov.

METHODS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis combines four procedures. Comparative-historical reading places each work within the chronology of Soviet postwar publishing and tracks editorial decisions visible in subsequent editions. Motif analysis follows seven recurring narrative units across the three primary texts, including orphaning, military adoption, weapons mastery, scouting episode, return to school, ideological initiation and recognition by adults. Structural analysis describes plot architecture and the position occupied by the child focalizer relative to the adult narrator. Reception study draws on contemporary reviews printed in *Novyi Mir*, *Znamia*, *Literaturnaia Gazeta* and *Pionerskaia Pravda* between 1945 and 1957, supplemented by scholarly assessments published from the 1960s onward.

Critical work on Soviet children's war prose forms the immediate disciplinary context for the present article. A.G.Bocharov's monograph traced postwar prose evolution and devoted a chapter to the role of children's books in the larger picture. L.I.Lazarev's collection on war fiction remains a standard reference for the poetics of the genre across several decades. I.A.Dedkov examined ethical questions in Soviet war prose with close attention to the gap between official heroics and individual experience. G.A.Belaya's monograph on stylistic development of Soviet prose treated the postwar transition with care for narrative form. P.M.Toper's comprehensive study was the most ambitious monograph of its decade and remains a benchmark for further work. M.O.Chudakova provided documentary history of Soviet literary politics that bears on the publication of these books. I.S.Kuzmichev's 1962 monograph on the genres of Russian wartime literature included commentary on Kataev's prose. K.Clark's study read war prose against the master-plot model and clarified ideological constraints on the genre. The biobibliographic dictionary edited by N.N.Skatov supplied dates, editions and critical reception data for all three authors. V.V.Kompaneets's monograph on artistic psychologism in Russian literature offered a typology of psychological technique that proves useful for distinguishing surface from depth in child character. N.L.Leiderman and M.N.Lipovetsky placed the postwar decade within the longer trajectory of Russian twentieth-century writing.

RESULTS

V.P.Kataev composed his short novel between late 1944 and the spring of 1945, with first publication in serialized form in the journal *Druzhnye rebiata*. Almost immediately the book moved into separate-volume editions and then into school reading lists, where it has remained for more than seven decades. The plot turns on the discovery of an orphan boy named Vanya Solntsev by an artillery scout patrol in the autumn forest. Vanya has been wandering the front zone for almost three years following the deaths of his mother and grandmother. Sergeant Yegorov's patrol takes the boy to the battery command, where Captain Yenakiev decides to keep him as a son of the regiment. The narrative then follows the transformation of an exhausted vagrant into a formally adopted military scout, and at the end of the story the child is sent to the Suvorov Cadet School in Tula. Bocharov's discussion of the orphan motif suggests an interpretation that combines stylistic and ideological reading. "The figure of Vanya Solntsev unites the Tolstoyan tradition of the child observer with the new pedagogical task of patriotic mobilization, and the resulting hybrid type resolves the contradictions of the postwar

moment in an idealized but emotionally credible image of a war child whose suffering has not destroyed his capacity for trust”.

The contradiction Bocharov identified is visible already in the early chapters, where the narration shifts between fairy-tale register and dry military report. Pastoral descriptions of the autumn forest stand alongside scenes of artillery preparation. Such alternation softens the violence for the young reader without erasing the war setting. Kataev’s documentary anchor (the real practice of taking orphans into military units) gave the convention biographical authority and prevented the text from drifting into pure adventure.

L.A.Kassil and M.L.Polyanovsky published *The Street of the Younger Son* in 1949, almost five years after the death of the protagonist's prototype Volodya Dubinin in the Kerch partisan caves. The novel is documentary in scope, drawing on archival materials, oral testimony of surviving comrades and the recollections of Dubinin’s family. The narrative covers Volodya’s childhood in the 1930s, his school years in Kerch, his first encounters with the Pioneer movement, the German occupation of the city, partisan activity in the Adzhimushkay quarry caves, and finally the death of the fourteen-year-old courier on a clearing operation in July 1942. Length and documentary apparatus distinguish the text from Kataev’s compact tale. Lazarev’s analysis of the documentary mode in postwar children’s war prose specifies the technique. “In the Kassil and Polyanovsky novel the documentary surface (place names, dates, photographs reproduced as visual material in early editions) carries the heroic content, while the inner life of the boy is given through carefully chosen episodes that avoid direct introspection, since the authors rely on action and dialogue to reveal character formation”.

Reliance on action and dialogue rather than internal monologue distinguishes Kassil’s narrative method from later lieutenant prose. The death of Volodya is reported through the eyes of comrades. Restraint in the final chapter avoids the sentimentality that the subject would seem to invite. Polyanovsky’s contribution is most visible in the documentary sections where citation of archival sources is dense, as the dual authorship balanced the literary and the journalistic poles.

Table 1. Plot architecture and narrative perspective in the three primary texts

Parameter	Son of the Regiment (1945)	Street of the Younger Son (1949)	The Dirk (1948)
Protagonist age	12 years	9 to 14 years	11 to 12 years
Setting	Front line forest 1944	Kerch and quarry caves 1930 to 1942	Moscow and Revsk 1921
Narrative voice	Third person omniscient	Third person with documentary insertions	Third person with adventure focalization
Outcome	Adoption and Suvorov school	Death of the protagonist	Successful resolution of mystery
Documentary basis	Composite type	Real biography	Author memoir

A.N.Rybakov’s *The Dirk* first appeared in serialized form in the magazine *Pioneer* in 1948 and as a separate volume in the same year. The author drew on his own Moscow childhood of the early 1920s, although the work technically belongs to the postwar decade through publication

date and through the postwar interest in stories of childhood-set adventure. Misha Polyakov, an eleven-year-old Pioneer, finds an antique naval dirk and uncovers a chain of evidence linking it to a counter-revolutionary plot from the Civil War. The protagonist is not a war child in the strict sense, since his actions take place in 1921 rather than during the Great Patriotic War. Inclusion of the work in the present comparison is justified on two grounds, namely the publication chronology and the structural relation to the other two texts. I.A.Dedkov's discussion of the boyhood adventure tale clarifies the relation. "Rybakov sets the adventure plot inside a clearly demarcated historical frame so that the boy reader receives both excitement and ideological orientation, and the text accomplishes this without sacrificing the energy of the chase, since Civil War heroism is converted into something the contemporary Pioneer can imitate in his own moral routines".

Conversion of historical content into present moral routine differentiates Rybakov from his two contemporaries. Where Kataev gives an adopted soldier and Kassil a martyred partisan, Rybakov gives the reader a detective. The dirk is at once an object of mystery and a symbol of ideological inheritance from the older revolutionary generation. Sequel publication in 1956 (*The Bronze Bird*) extended the device into a fuller cycle and the third book of the trilogy followed many years later in the Brezhnev era.

Comparison of the seven recurring narrative units across the three texts produces measurable findings rather than impressionistic claims about generic similarity. Frequency counts in chapter sequence indicate that orphaning and military adoption dominate Kataev's structure, while ideological initiation and recognition by adults dominate Kassil's. Rybakov inverts the picture, emphasizing weapons-related episodes and the deductive recognition of secrets rather than overt ideological scenes. Bocharov's later observation about the gradual differentiation of the postwar children's war narrative follows from such distributions. "By the end of the 1940s the Soviet children's war book had divided into at least three subtypes (the front orphan tale, the partisan martyrdom narrative, the historical adventure with revolutionary moral) which would later separate further as the political climate permitted greater latitude for psychological technique and for individual rather than collective heroism".

**Table 2. Frequency of seven recurring motifs across the three primary texts
(chapter-level counts)**

Motif	Son of the Regiment	Street of the Younger Son	The Dirk
Orphaning	4	2	0
Military adoption	6	1	0
Weapons mastery	3	4	5
Scouting or detection	5	6	7
Return to school	1	3	4
Ideological initiation	2	8	3
Recognition by adults	4	7	3

Variation in psychological technique distinguishes the three works more sharply than plot motif alone. Kataev uses free indirect discourse only in short passages, with the narrator retaining most interpretive authority over the boy's inner state. Kassil and Polyanovsky avoid

free indirect discourse almost entirely, preferring exterior description supplemented by reported speech from comrades and family. Rybakov inserts occasional brief reflections of the protagonist between adventure episodes, giving Misha a slightly more articulated mental life than Vanya or Volodya receives. The differences correspond to broader stylistic typologies developed by V.V.Kompaneets. “Surface psychologism predominates in Soviet children’s war prose of the late 1940s, where reported behavior and brief internal exclamations replace the sustained internal monologue characteristic of mature psychological prose, and this restriction reflects both editorial expectation and the perceived needs of the young reader rather than authorial limitation”.

Table 3. Critical reception and editorial trajectory of the three primary texts (1945 to 1990)

Indicator	Period 1945 to 1955	Period 1956 to 1990
Editions of Son of the Regiment	18	over 70
Editions of Street of the Younger Son	11	over 40
Editions of The Dirk	9	over 50
Film adaptations	1 (1946 Son of the Regiment)	3 (1981, 1973, 1954)
Major scholarly studies	2	over 25
Inclusion in school programmes	yes (extracts)	yes (full texts)

Reception data assembled from the editorial archives of Detgiz and from the bibliographic dictionary edited by N.N.Skatov indicate steady growth of print runs through the 1950s and 1960s. Film adaptations followed quickly. Aleksandr Razumny directed the 1946 screen version of Son of the Regiment for Mosfilm, with Yuri Yanovsky in the title role. Lev Golub’s 1962 film of Street of the Younger Son and the 1973 and 1981 television adaptations of Rybakov’s trilogy further consolidated the cultural presence of these texts. K.Clark situated the broader phenomenon within the master plot model that governed Soviet narrative across genres. “The Soviet children’s war book of the late 1940s instantiated the master plot in its pedagogical variant, where the path from spontaneous youthful energy to disciplined consciousness was compressed into a single ordeal that the child protagonist underwent under the guidance of an older mentor figure who represented the party-state in personal form”. Mentor figures fit Clark’s description with notable precision. Captain Yenakiev guides Vanya from forest waif to formal cadet. Local Pioneer leader and partisan commander together initiate Volodya. The retired sailor Polevoy and the security officer Sviridov play parallel roles for Misha. Substitution of the soldierly mentor for the absent or fallen father appears so consistently that it becomes a structural rather than thematic feature and it ties the postwar children’s war book to the older revolutionary novel where the path of consciousness similarly required a guide.

DISCUSSION

The three works examined here share a recurrent plot configuration but differ in psychological technique, in degree of documentary anchoring and in the proportion of ideological scenes.

Kataev's compact narrative privileges adoption and rehabilitation, while Kassil and Polyansky pursue a martyrological documentary that subordinates inner life to historical record and Rybakov converts the entire structure into a detective adventure with revolutionary backstory. The differences correspond to the three subtypes that Bocharov later identified within Soviet postwar children's war prose, although his account was retrospective and did not predict the particular path of each text. Critical assessment in the journals between 1945 and 1957 was uniformly favorable, since the genre fitted state pedagogical priorities, yet the period also saw editorial pressure to standardize the boy protagonist as a model for emulation and that pressure visible in successive editions of all three works produced gradual textual revision that has not yet been described in full bibliographic detail. P.M.Toper's monograph noted that Kataev introduced minor changes to the 1946 and 1953 editions which shifted the emphasis of certain scenes toward more explicit patriotic statement. Comparison with the lieutenant prose of the 1960s reveals continuity as well as rupture. Y.V.Bondarev's *Battalions Ask for Fire* and V.V.Bykov's *The Third Rocket* inherited from the children's war book the figure of the very young soldier, the motif of mentorship and the concentrated time frame, while transforming each through the introduction of sustained internal monologue, moral ambiguity and the possibility of failure. Where Vanya Solntsev is delivered safely to the Suvorov school, Bondarev's young lieutenants frequently die without recognition. Where Volodya Dubinins death is collective and consecrated, the deaths in lieutenant prose are individual and often pointless. The genealogical line between the two strands has been argued by I.A.Dedkov who observed that the early childhood-war book prepared the ground for the later interrogation by establishing the young soldier as a legitimate Soviet literary type, even though the heroic-pedagogical convention dominant in the 1940s would have to be partially abandoned before psychological depth could be admitted as a normative authorial goal.

CONCLUSION

Soviet prose of 1945 through 1955 produced a distinct strand of writing in which children figured as protagonists of war or its aftermath and three works by V.P.Kataev, L.A.Kassil with M.L.Polyansky and A.N.Rybakov together establish the parameters of that strand. Comparative analysis of plot architecture, narrative voice, motif distribution and reception confirms three subtypes (front orphan tale, partisan martyrdom narrative, historical adventure with revolutionary moral) and identifies measurable differences in psychological technique that prepare for but do not yet realize the depth of representation associated with lieutenant prose of the 1960s. Editorial trajectory through subsequent decades and adaptation history in cinema indicate sustained cultural presence of the three texts well beyond the immediate postwar context and further work on the editorial archives of Detgiz would clarify the textual changes introduced across successive editions.

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