

# Modelling the Socialist Kindergarten in the Early Soviet Picture Book

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## Abstract

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks aimed to create a modern socialist society which would be populated by a 'new Soviet man', who would take control of his own destiny and build a communist future. The first generation of Soviet children were perfect modelling material for this new type of citizen and the kindergarten was marked out as one of the institutions which would foster revolutionary transformation. Picture books for young children which featured the kindergarten acted as a guidebook for the rational, socialist education which was envisaged by progressive educators. Story book kindergartens were exemplary institutions where children engaged in a collective daily routine. Stories taught the reader how play was training for work and that pre-schoolers were capable of learning to work for the good of the group. They modelled political activism with children taking part in communist festivals and spending time with Pioneers. Authors and illustrators also realized that children were still children and embedded even the most political picture books with humour, brightly coloured pictures and easy-to-grasp imagery.

After the 1917 October Revolution, Russian society and culture underwent a period of fundamental change, driven by the socialist ideology of the Bolshevik government. Utopian visions suggested that this complete break with the past could create a new type of being who would master his own consciousness. This would lead to the creation of a rational, progressive civilization. The first generation of children to be born after the revolution provided perfect modelling material from which to create this *new Soviet man* and the kindergarten was marked as one of the new state institutions which would help to achieve this transformation. This article will explore how picture books for young children published from the mid-1920s to early 1930s, modelled the perfect kindergarten and so encouraged young readers and their families to adhere to a modern style of upbringing with an allegiance to socialist politics.

## I

The Bolsheviks aimed to create a modern socialist society which would be classless, atheistic and collective. Everything was to be subject to

## 2 MODELLING THE SOCIALIST KINDERGARTEN

rational planning, including mankind. This scientific utopianism emerged from a cultural trend pre-dating the revolution. Members of the pre-revolutionary Bolshevik party used literature and philosophy as well as direct political discourse to imagine the ideal socialist state. In his 1908 novel *Red Star*, Aleksandr Bogdanov took the popular science fiction genre as a vehicle for modelling his futuristic vision of a collective society. In the Martian colony on which the tale is centred, citizens subordinate every aspect of their social and emotional lives for the good of the community.<sup>1</sup> After the revolution, Leon Trotsky theorized upon how to further idealize the new type of being and all that he could achieve. In the 1924 essay *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky explained that man would master his own feelings and consciousness to 'extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman'.<sup>2</sup>

If these visions were to have any impact upon Soviet society then they needed to be transformed into practical action. The Bolshevik party leaders were intellectuals who had spent many years in exile, with covertly published newspapers as the main method for disseminating their ideas. When they took power in 1917 it was therefore inevitable that they would turn to the printed word as a key part of their strategy to propagate socialism to all corners of the land. During the early twentieth century illiteracy was still widespread in Russia, particularly amongst the large rural population and so in December 1919, a decree was launched compelling all illiterates between eight and fifty years old to study, which would enable them to 'participate consciously in the political life of the country'.<sup>3</sup> Lenin himself frequently emphasized the link between literacy and political consciousness and his declarations on the topic were often cited during the 1920s. A 1929 poster promoting the 'week of the children's book', to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the state publishing house Gosizdat (Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo), was embellished with a quote from Lenin. The image on the left-hand side of the poster showed two children choosing books from a packed shelf, while the image on the right showed another three children standing in determined stance, each with a book in hand. The text, printed inside

<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Red Star: The First Bolshevik Utopia*, trans. Charles Rougle (Bloomington, IN, 1984). Richard Stites traces the rich cultural origins of Russian and early Soviet science fiction. He characterizes it as a utopian, futurological mode of thinking with some connections to Marxism but also as a product of the early twentieth-century fascination with immortality, space travel and aviation. See Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 167–89.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution: Chapter 8 Revolutionary and Socialist Art*, trans. Rose Strunsky, < [https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit\\_revo/ch08.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch08.htm) > [accessed 6 May 2015].

<sup>3</sup> Sovnarkom decree on illiteracy, 26 Dec. 1919. Excerpts from the decree are quoted and analysed in Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of mass Mobilization 1917–1929* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 75–7.



Figure 1 ‘Without books there is no knowledge, without knowledge there is no communism’ (1929). Poster Collection 18, Kislak Centre for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

a prominent red banner reads: ‘Without books there is no knowledge. Without knowledge there is no communism’ (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

This poster thus demonstrated that the production and promotion of ideologically correct children’s books fitted in perfectly with both the campaign for literacy and the plan to mould ‘new man’ from the first Soviet generation. Politically minded literary critics had alerted their readers to this issue as early as February 1918, when an article appeared in Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* entitled ‘The Forgotten Weapon’. The author, children’s writer L. Kormchii, argued that books ‘crystallize in children’s souls, creating subsoil that nourishes and gives root to future convictions and beliefs’ and went on to assert that, ‘we must seize these weapons from enemy hands’.<sup>5</sup> By the late 1920s and early 1930s, when discussion around children’s books had developed into an important area of pedagogy, texts directly advocated the use of children’s literature to create socialist citizens. A 1931 catalogue for children’s books from

<sup>4</sup> ‘Bez knigi net znaniia, bez znaniia net kommunizma’ (Moscow, 1929). For a similarly worded statement see V. I. Lenin, ‘Report to the Second All-Russia Congress of Political Education Departments’, 17 Oct. 1921. In this report, illiterates are described as ‘outside of politics’ and Lenin states that without the alphabet there would be only, ‘rumours, fairy tales, prejudices but not politics’. Quoted in Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> L. Kormchii, ‘Zabytoe oruzhenie (O detskoi knige)’, *Pravda* (17 Feb. 1918). Excerpt translated and reproduced in Jacqueline Olich, *Competing Ideologies and Children’s Literature in Russia, 1918–1935* (Saarbrücken, 2009), p. 40.

Gosizdat, *100 knig tvoemu rebenku* (100 Books for Your Child), included a guide for mothers on how to choose the correct books to bring home. One of the demands listed for the children's book was that it should help to raise children who were collectivist, internationalist, brave, honest and strong – in short, who had 'the features of the new socialist person'.<sup>6</sup>

Such pedagogical theorizing could only begin to define the new Soviet children's literature and it took the vision of innovative authors and illustrators to create a bold, modern picture book with which the Soviet child could engage. With the advent of the new socialist life, the old conception of childhood was outdated and therefore so was the old-fashioned, pre-revolutionary picture book. In the early years of the twentieth century, the majority of picture books and children's periodicals for pre-school aged children were commercially orientated publications which conveyed childhood as a distinct and idealized world.<sup>7</sup> The rosy-cheeked children depicted in the softly rendered illustrations were to be entertained by fluffy puppy dogs and enjoy sledging adventures in the snow. Mother was the guiding moral force and correct behaviour was rewarded by treats. *Katin tsvetok* (*Katya's Flower*), a 1912 short story by Sof'ia Lavrent'eva, perfectly exemplified this attitude. The story is set in a pretty garden and features an obedient little girl who learns that she may only have tea and cake once she has watered the flowers that she has planted.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time however, modernist writers and artists were beginning to develop new ideas with text and image which indicated their belief that art for children ought to be taken more seriously than as a superficial commercial product. In the light of this, members of the Symbolist group of writers led by Poliksena Solov'eva published the children's journal *Tropinka* (*The Path*, 1906–12). The Symbolists were fascinated by the inner world of the child and used the magazine to explore nature, religious themes and folk-tales with a childlike, mystical perspective as indicated by the atmospheric woodland scene used for the cover of each issue.<sup>9</sup> Leading artists such as Ivan Bilibin had been employed to provide illustrations for *Tropinka* but also achieved success in their own right. Inspired in part by folk art, Bilibin's illustrations for folk-tales and elaborate page layouts demonstrated a rich flair for colour and decorative use of line which would influence the design of illustrated books and set a new standard in what could be achieved on the printed page.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *100 knig tvoemu rebenku* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1931), pp. 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> For analysis of this view of childhood in early twentieth-century Russia see Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1991* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2007), pp. 43–7.

<sup>8</sup> *Katin tsvetok*, in Sofia Lavrenteva, *Malym detkam* (Moscow, 1912), pp. 10–14.

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of *Tropinka* see Ben Hellman, *Fairy Tales and True Stories: The History of Russian Literature for Children and Young People (1574–2010)* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 228, 230–5, 270–2; Elena Sokol, *Russian Poetry for Children* (Knoxville, TN, 1984), pp. 51–3.

<sup>10</sup> On Bilibin see Kelly, *Children's World*, p. 40; Hellman, *Fairy Tales and True Stories*, pp. 169–71. For a more detailed account, see Sergei Golynets, *Ivan Bilibin*, trans. Glenys Ann Kozlov (London, 1981).

Despite these efforts, there was a group of writers who during the 1910s felt that still more should be done to modernize literature for young children. They were united in the belief that children's authors should see the world from the immediate perspective of a child rather than employing a vision of childhood projected by grown-ups. Aleksandr Fyodorov-Davydov led the way as a popular writer of books which employed simple language and content that young readers could relate to, with stories often involving animals or toys that come to life within a fairy-tale structure.<sup>11</sup> He also edited periodicals for children including *Svetliachok* (*Little glow-worm*, 1902–18), which embodied a spirit of childhood joy and positive moral values such as truthfulness and love.<sup>12</sup> The satirist turned poet Sasha Chernyi became equally renowned for his humorous verse which placed imaginative games at the centre of a world in which children could feel at home.<sup>13</sup>

One figure was to overshadow both men in their quest to transform writing for young children. Kornei Chukovskii, a young literary critic, began publishing articles on children's literature in 1907, criticizing the journals available as dull and insensitive to the needs of children. According to Chukovskii, even the more adventurous periodicals such as *Svetliachok* and *Tropinka* were not completely attuned to the perspective of the young child.<sup>14</sup> To address this issue, Chukovskii began to investigate language as used by small children themselves, even asking his readers to write to him with "all the childish words and expressions" used by their own children.<sup>15</sup> In the years preceding the First World War, Chukovskii had made occasional attempts at writing stories or poems for children's magazines but it was not until 1916 that he would create a piece which would cement his reputation as a children's writer.<sup>16</sup> *Vania i krokodil* (*Vanya and the Crocodile*) was first printed during 1917 in a children's supplement edited by Chukovskii with cartoon style illustrations by Re-Mi (Nikolai Remizov).<sup>17</sup> *Krokodil* announced a great departure from existing children's poetry in both form and content. Written in concise, fast-moving rhyme, the story featured a cigar-smoking crocodile who walks through Petrograd eating policemen and all who get in his way, only to meet little Vanya, who in escaping from his nursemaid defeats the beast using a wooden sword.<sup>18</sup>

Chukovskii's Vanya was much more spirited than Lavrent'eva's passive Katya but still fell short of standards for the new Soviet child, who was

<sup>11</sup> Hellman, *Fairy Tales and True Stories*, pp. 224–6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241; For an analysis of Chernyi's poetry, see Sokol, *Russian Poetry for Children*, pp. 53–9.

<sup>14</sup> Lydia Chukovskaia, *To the Memory of Childhood*, trans. Eliza Kellogg Klose (Evanston, IL, 1988), pp. 96, 107; Sokol, *Russian Poetry for Children*, pp. 4–5, 51–3.

<sup>15</sup> Kornei Chukovskii, 'O Detskom iazyke', *Rech*, 14 Dec. 1909. Quoted in Sokol, *Russian Poetry for Children*, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> For details of Chukovskii's early children's poetry, see Sokol, *Russian Poetry for Children*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Hellman, *Fairy Tales and True Stories*, p. 291.

expected to be a young citizen, fully participating in society and taking on his or her own specific duties. Through the new post-revolutionary picture book, children were to learn about socially useful work and the modern world around them. Juvenile characters, where present, were rewarded not with confectionery but with the knowledge that they were growing as young socialists. Pre-revolutionary authors such as Chukovskii continued to produce whimsical tales which were vastly popular but by the mid-1920s, common picture book themes also included factories, steam engines and the latest technology, as well as socialist political topics in simplified form. Proletarian critics expressed a preference for these contemporary topics and were quick to pounce on children's literature that was not meeting expectations. A 1926 article by N. Potapov attacked the 'unhealthy fantasy' of bourgeois children's literature, with its fairy tales about witches and dragons. He proposed that children no longer needed this distraction from mundane reality and should instead be presented with interesting material from daily life as: 'Only a knowledge of contemporary life as it really is and participation in collective labour will help to train future warriors and builders of a socialist state.'<sup>19</sup>

Potapov's manifesto found its visual counterpart in a poster illustrated by Constructivist artists Galina and Ol'ga Chichagova. The two sisters designed a number of influential picture books in the mid-1920s and applied their ultra-modern, dynamic illustrative style to the propaganda piece.<sup>20</sup> On one side of the poster is a collage of fairy-tale characters, including the witch Baba Yaga, placed next to the exclamation, 'Down with the mysticism and fantasy of children's books!!' The opposite side of the poster, delineated by a sharp red line, is headed by the slogan, 'Give us the new children's book!!' The topics suitable for this new type of book are listed as work, battle, technology and nature, with illustrations in a bold stencilled style. The figure of Lenin and the workers, soldiers and children pictured, all have a dynamic stance, either looking forward into the distance or urgently engaged in an important task (Figure 2).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> N. Potapov, 'Is Fantasy Needed in Children's Literature?', *Soviet Studies in Literature: A Journal of Translations* (1987–88), pp. 49–52. Originally published as 'Nuzhna li fantastika v detskoj knizhke?', *Vozhatyi*, 1 (1926), pp. 31–9.

<sup>20</sup> The best-known works by the Chichagov sisters were those created in partnership with author Nikolai Smirnov during the mid-1920s. They always addressed contemporary themes and included *Puteshestvie Charli (Charlie's Journey)*, *Detiam o gazete (For Children about the Newspaper)* and *Otkuda posuda (Where Does Crockery Come From?)*. For a full list of titles and bibliographical details see Ivan Startsev, *Detskaia literatura bibliografiia 1918–1931* (Moscow, 1933), p. 213. Smirnov and the Chichagov sisters described themselves within the Constructivist group as the 'productional cell for children's books'. See The First Working Group of Constructivists, 'Statement from the Catalogue of the "First Discussional Exhibition of Associations of Active Revolutionary Art", 1924', in John E. Bowlit (ed.), *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934* (London, 1991), pp. 241–3.

<sup>21</sup> A. Gelina, Galina Chichagova and Ol'ga Chichagova, 'Obrazy staroi knizhki-skazki. Mistiku i fantasiku iz detskoj knigi doli!! Daesh' novuiu detskuiu knigu!! Trud, bor'ba, tekhnika, priroda – novyi detskii byt. Novaia kniga nomozhet vospitat' novuiu smenu' ('The characters of old story books. Down with the mysticism and fantasy of children's books!! Give us the new children's book!!





Figure 2 ‘Give us the new children’s book!!’ Poster designed by Galina and Ol’ga Chichagova (1925). Princeton University Library. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Such avant-garde approaches were typical of the visual style that became predominant in picture books by the mid-1920s. As well as the all-pervasive influence of Constructivist typography and design, other modernist artists had a great influence on book illustration. One of the most important was Vladimir Lebedev, who had cemented his artistic reputation while working on propaganda window posters for ROSTA (The Russian Telegraph Agency) during the Civil War. He brought this experience of direct communication to book illustration, utilizing simple shapes and bright colours to convey his message with great immediacy.<sup>22</sup> A significant contribution was also made by Vladimir Konashevich, who was the leading exponent of a style which was figurative rather than avant-garde, yet colourful and contemporary. His illustrations contained concrete details and the occasional decorative flourish, but confined themselves to the most necessary images, placed against a simple white background.<sup>23</sup> The shelves in the children’s section of any Soviet book shop during the 1920s thus enjoyed their own revolution, with an abundance of colourful, modern design overthrowing the sentimental and decadent graphics of the children’s books that had come before.

Work, battle, technology, nature – the new everyday life of children. The new book fosters new transformation) (Rostov, 1925).

<sup>22</sup> On Lebedev’s visual style during the 1920s see Evgeny Steiner, *Stories for Little Comrades: Revolutionary Artists and the Making of Early Soviet Children’s Books*, trans. Jane Ann Miller (Seattle, WA and London, 1999), pp. 21, 42–3, 53–5.

<sup>23</sup> For discussion on the development of Konashevich’s illustrative style, see Albert Lemmens and Serge Stommels, *Russian Artists and the Children’s Book 1890–1992* (Nijmegen, 2009), pp. 321–3.

## II

In the July 1928 issue of *Murzilka*, a magazine for young children, a letter was published by four-year-old Vova Tiurin from Nizhnii Tagil, in which he described everything he liked about attending his kindergarten. Vova told the readers about the new coat pegs, cots and chairs that were being delivered but most of all he was excited about the delicious lunch served, consisting of soup, kasha and kissel.<sup>24</sup> Little Vova would not have been aware that his enjoyable days at the kindergarten were part of a great scheme to raise a generation of socialist children. For the Bolsheviks, the protection of children was vital to assure the communist future.<sup>25</sup> The rights of young citizens were secured in family law and labour legislation. In both domestic and international propaganda, the fair treatment of children by the state became part of the legitimizing myth of Soviet socialism, with the assertion that children experienced better conditions there than in any other country.<sup>26</sup> A well-designed, ideologically correct education system was part of the state's plan to provide for its youngest members and this was to begin at pre-school level.

The Soviet kindergarten had its roots in the mid-nineteenth century, when progressive educators imported the concept from Europe with the aim of making childhood and family life more rational and modern.<sup>27</sup> In a move away from the traditional upbringing by nannies and governesses, wealthy parents began to consider the benefits of a collective education.<sup>28</sup> At the other end of the social spectrum, a small number of charitable societies and employers were beginning to provide help for working mothers, notably including the Tregorkha textile works in Moscow which had its own childcare centre.<sup>29</sup> In terms of educational methodology, the influence of western European theorists was keenly felt, with the ideas of Friedrich Froebel gaining great popularity from the 1860s and the work of Maria Montessori proving popular during the 1910s.<sup>30</sup> In the immediate pre-revolutionary period, child-centred 'free upbringing' was the pedagogical current dominating the Russian kindergarten. Children were to develop practical and intellectual skills willingly, through games and creative work but they were also to become socialized to life amongst other children, leading to the creation of a harmonious community.<sup>31</sup>

However, the kindergarten did not become a mass movement and even by the 1910s only a very small proportion of the pre-school

<sup>24</sup> *Murzilka*, 7 (1928), p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Lisa Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (New York and London, 2001), pp. 43–4.

<sup>26</sup> Kelly, *Children's World*, pp. 61–4.

<sup>27</sup> For a history of the kindergarten in pre-Soviet Russia and the various pedagogical currents which were popular during this period see Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, pp. 8–32; Kelly, *Children's World*, pp. 36–7, 367–71.

<sup>28</sup> Kelly, *Children's World*, pp. 367–8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36–7.

<sup>31</sup> Kelly, *Children's World*, pp. 36–7, 370–31; Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, pp. 19–24.



aged population was served. In Moscow, the area with the highest level of provision, the figure stood at just 2 per cent during 1917.<sup>32</sup> As Kirschenbaum explains, the lack of a tsarist network of public kindergartens left very little foundation for early Soviet educators to build on.<sup>33</sup> While this created a huge organizational challenge, it also meant that there was a blank slate for the construction of a Soviet kindergarten with unique ideological and practical significance. Immediately after the Revolution, the most radical pedagogues advocated the idea that the bourgeois nuclear family would be disintegrated, with children handed over to the state and raised in a fully communal environment. This would allow full political socialization from an early age and would emancipate women, who were seen as equals of men in Marxist ideology and enable them to participate fully in labour and political society.<sup>34</sup> Such ideas never fully gained hold, but childcare institutions embraced elements of this theory in an effort to mould the *new man*.

The kindergarten was intended to free women for work, but it also put children at the centre of a complex set of pedagogical and social goals, tied up with the realities and evolving political philosophy of the Bolshevik state. As early as October 1917, Narkompros (the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment) established a Pre-School Education Section.<sup>35</sup> In the immediate post-revolutionary period, the great hardship that many families suffered as a result of the First World War and the Civil War led to the kindergarten being seen as an institution which could improve the health and welfare of children. The 1919 handbook of pre-school education published by Narkompros emphasized that kindergartens should make sure to provide hot meals for children, who might otherwise go hungry. They were also advised to provide a full rather than half-day service, so that children with two working parents would be properly supervised instead of left to run through the streets or factory corridors.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, reports from delegates at the 1920 pre-school conference suggested that teachers hoped that once children began to attend the kindergarten, parents would look beyond its practical role and embrace the wider educational mission which was envisaged.<sup>37</sup>

By the mid-1920s, with the initial crisis caused by the revolution over, educators and the state began to elaborate upon how the kindergarten could be used to help construct the new society. Pre-school education was to form part of the move towards the *novyi byt* or new daily life, a way to create a modern, socialist society by transforming daily life rather than relying on direct politics. Children would be liberated from the pernicious influence of the family, which inhibited the correct social

<sup>32</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Robert W. Clawson, 'Political socialization of children in the USSR', *Political Science Quarterly*, 88/4 (1973), pp. 686–7; Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p. 51.

<sup>35</sup> Kelly, *Children's World*, p. 397.

<sup>36</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, pp. 35–6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 36–7.

development of children. On the one hand this could mean relief from poverty and neglect or, on the other, being removed from the irrational love of parents prone to spoiling their children.<sup>38</sup> The kindergarten would be a centre for rational upbringing by providing a clean environment with simple furnishings where children were taught good hygiene and 'cultured behaviour', which incorporated a love for reading, appreciation of nature and the development of good manners.<sup>39</sup> It was hoped that these patterns of behaviour would spread to the home and convince parents that modern ways were worthwhile, leading Kelly to describe children during this period as 'instruments of indoctrination'.<sup>40</sup>

Despite this soft approach, the Soviet establishment was still acutely aware of the direct link between politics and education. Vera Fediaevsky, an early Soviet nursery expert, expected children to be 'active workers in the socialistic reconstruction of society'. Consequently, the Communist Party would provide them with an education which aimed to bring up 'a generation capable of definitely establishing communism'.<sup>41</sup> During visits to the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, American educationalist Thomas Woody observed this policy in action, visiting model nursery schools and kindergartens, including those at Stanislav Shatskii's Colony of the Cheerful Life.<sup>42</sup> Woody wrote that: 'Children in these institutions, like those in communes, children's houses and children's villages, have the best possible chance of becoming whole-hearted supporters of the new ideology.'<sup>43</sup>

On a practical level, pre-school aged children might have attended several types of institution. All designated for children aged three to seven, they included the *detskii sad*, which translates literally as 'children's garden', from the imported German term. Alternatively, they might be sent to an *ochag* or hearth. In her study of the early Soviet kindergarten, Kirschenbaum identifies this as a full-day institution for pre-school

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 44–9.

<sup>39</sup> Kelly, *Children's World*, pp. 397–8.

<sup>40</sup> Catriona Kelly, 'Shaping the "future race": regulating the daily life of children in early Soviet Russia', in Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (eds), *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Bloomington, IN, 2006), pp. 256–81, at p. 257.

<sup>41</sup> Vera Fediaevsky, *Nursery School and Parent Education in Soviet Russia* (London, 1936), p. 82.

<sup>42</sup> Shatskii was a leading progressive pedagogue before the revolution, who later aligned his aims with those of the Bolsheviks. His network of progressive schools in Kaluga province, including the Colony of the Cheerful Life, is analysed by William Partlett in 'Breaching cultural worlds with the village school: educational visions, local initiative, and rural experience at S.T. Shatskii's Kaluga school system, 1919–1932', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 82/4 (2004), pp. 847–85. Partlett highlights how extra-curricular and outreach work, such as hygiene campaigns, were used in an attempt to transform and modernize communities along Bolshevik-approved lines.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Woody, *New Minds: New Men? The Emergence of the Soviet Citizen* (New York, 1932), p. 367. As a visiting foreign specialist, Woody would have been shown only the best institutions. His book is, however, thoroughly methodical and his conclusions are based on what he sees rather than his own ideological judgements. Within the vast literature on foreigners visiting the Soviet Union, Shelia Fitzpatrick offers an insightful analysis of the cultural and political dynamics of such visits. See Shelia Fitzpatrick, 'Foreigners observed: Moscow visitors in the 1930s under the gaze of their Soviet guides', *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 35/1–2 (2008), pp. 215–34.

children, which may have included an educational component.<sup>44</sup> Having visited an *ochag*, Woody stated that it varied ‘but little from the kindergarten in appearance’.<sup>45</sup> There were also less formal arrangements such as the *detskii ploshchad* (children’s playground), which has been defined by Kelly as a ‘temporary creche’.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Fediaevsky identified organizations set up by groups of parents on their own initiative, perhaps through a house commune or workers’ barracks. These included groups started for ‘walks’ or excursions, which evolved into rudimentary creches with basic equipment.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the assumed ideological importance of pre-school education, limited state funds meant that only a tiny proportion of children were able to attend a kindergarten. In her analysis of early Soviet sources, Kirschenbaum reveals that during 1926–7, only 0.6 per cent of pre-school aged children held a place at a *detskii sad* or *ochag*, with the figure rising to 1.61 per cent during 1930–1.<sup>48</sup> The very low level of provision during the mid-1920s was due to budget cuts imposed after the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP). With state funds severely restricted, private kindergartens were permitted to operate and even state institutions began to charge for tuition from 1924 onwards, an extra cost that would have proved very difficult for most families.<sup>49</sup> The small increase in attendance during the early 1930s was due to policies implemented during the First Five Year Plan (1928–32). During this period there was a drive to increase the number of pre-school institutions, including those organized by communities themselves, so that the female labour force could be harnessed.<sup>50</sup> Urban children benefited from this growth much more than rural children. The attendance figure for 1931 showed that while 7.83 per cent of urban pre-schoolers attended a *detskii sad* or *ochag*, this proportion was just 0.32 per cent in rural areas.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to the overall lack of provision, existing facilities were of inconsistent quality. Elena Bonner, born in 1923 to communist parents, attended several kindergartens in Moscow and Leningrad during the late 1920s. She recalled her experiences of two particular kindergartens, one of which was clean, airy and well equipped with neatly dressed children. The other was dark, cramped, had sticky table cloths and a lavatory which was so filthy that Bonner was left with a ‘lifelong dislike of public bathrooms and the habit of “holding”’.<sup>52</sup> It is therefore of great significance that when the kindergarten appeared in picture books, it was always depicted as a model institution full of happy,

<sup>44</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p.27.

<sup>45</sup> Woody, *New Minds: New Men?*, p. 366.

<sup>46</sup> Kelly, *Children’s World*, p. 401.

<sup>47</sup> Fediaevsky, *Nursery School and Parent Education in Soviet Russia*, pp. 66–7.

<sup>48</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p. 91.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95–7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134–40.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>52</sup> Elena Bonner, *Mothers and Daughters*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (New York, 1993), pp. 60–1.

well-cared-for children. For children and parents who did not have access to a kindergarten or whose experiences were less than exemplary, the picture book could demonstrate the rationale and methods of the best institutions.

### III

Rational methods of upbringing were fundamental to the kindergarten if it was to succeed in its mission to promote the *novyi byt*. Key aspects of this campaign were modelled in picture books, which always showed a clean classroom environment with suitable furniture and neat equipment, regular meals served sitting at the table and facilities for washing which were properly used by the children, while everything happened according to a strict daily routine as part of the collective.

One of the most exemplary kindergarten texts is *Detskii sad* (*The Kindergarten*) by M. Prigara which was published in 1930.<sup>53</sup> The front cover illustration shows a child in a fur coat ringing the doorbell. He or she crosses the threshold and we are taken into the world of the kindergarten, with a cheerful poem which explains each part of the day. The children remove their outdoor clothes and hang them on hooks before they say good morning to the teacher, Aunt Nadya. Once indoors, they wash their hands and brush their teeth at special small sinks. Next, they make animals with clay and construct wooden models in the workshop until it is time to sit down together for breakfast in a spotless dining room, with dustpan and brush hanging on the wall, ready to clean up with afterwards. The meal is followed by songs round the piano, feeding the animals in the living corner and games outdoors.

Prigara tells a story about everyday life to which young children would have related but the book is also full of clues about the ideological environment in which it was created, demonstrating a direct link between children's literature and the agendas of pedagogues and propagandists. In her study of early Soviet hygiene propaganda, Tricia Starks explains how the Department for the Protection of Motherhood and Infancy was established in 1918 with the aim of providing a full range of services for mother and baby, including nurseries, maternity homes, and consultations for nursing children and pregnant women. As it became apparent during the 1920s that the state budget could not allow for all these things, the consultation centre and propaganda took the lead in training mothers until the state could live up to its promises.<sup>54</sup>

Information literature about the kindergarten followed the same principle. The 1919 Narkompros pre-school handbook contained guidance for equipping the kindergarten, based upon the scientific importance of a clean and safe environment. This included a specified

<sup>53</sup> M. Prigara, *Detskii sad*, ill. Pleskovska (Kiev, 1930).

<sup>54</sup> Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene and the Revolutionary State* (Madison WI, 2008), pp. 139–40.

number of wash basins and towel hooks, hygienically designed furniture and toys, plus the commitment to involving health care workers to make sure standards were being met.<sup>55</sup> By the late 1920s and early 1930s, when demand still far outstripped actual pre-school provision and standards of care frequently failed to meet expectations, literature issued by government agencies demonstrated how things ought to be. A poster published by Narkompros during this period featured the headline: 'The kindergarten strengthens children's health and accustoms them to collective life and work.'<sup>56</sup> Six boxes with captions show children going about their daily activities in a neat, orderly setting. In some of the images, they work in the garden or play with building blocks and toy trucks. Two images are dedicated to the communal meal, with one of the captions explaining the importance of clean, orderly and correct feeding. The image given dominant place at the top right corner shows a doctor and a nurse in clean white overalls, tending to a queue of curious children (Figure 3).

The vision of the kindergarten that we see in Prigara's story is directly related to such materials. As well as featuring activities that clearly enforce the rational, healthy agenda – tooth brushing, disciplined meal times, constructive play – the visual motifs in the book inherently demonstrate its allegiance to modern upbringing. In common with the poster, the illustrations show rosy-cheeked children in brightly coloured clothes, posters and charts on the wall and perfectly child-sized furniture. From observing photographs of model kindergartens in early Soviet periodicals, Kelly has described the propaganda kindergarten as 'a purpose-built structure with clean lines in the high modernist style associated with Russian constructivism'.<sup>57</sup> The minimal, Constructivist style of Pleskovskaia's illustration serves to emphasize the point, with the use of a sterile white background and domestic objects constructed from simple shapes (Figure 4). In both the Narkompros poster and the *Detskii sad* illustrations, the little white wooden chair, neatly made with concise right angles, becomes an instantly recognizable symbol of modern, progressive childcare.

Although forming only one aspect of the health-promoting regime, the attention paid to personal cleanliness must be given further consideration. Encouraging young children to wash is a staple theme in pre-school literature even today and this was no different in the early Soviet Union. In 1923, Chukovskii's *Moidodyr* (*Wash-until-holes-appear*) was published.<sup>58</sup> The humorous poem features a boy who refuses to wash, until one day he is chased by a talking washstand with an army of household objects and forced to relent. The book was a huge success, reaching sixteen editions

<sup>55</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> 'Detskii sad ukrepliaet zdorov'e detei i priuchaet ikh k sovместnoi zhizni i trudu' (Moscow, c. 1930).

<sup>57</sup> Kelly, *Children's World*, p. 405.

<sup>58</sup> Kornei Chukovskii, *Moidodyr: Kinomatograf dlia detei*, ill. Iurii Annenkov (Petrograd and Moscow, 1923).





**Figure 3** ‘The kindergarten strengthens children’s health and accustoms them to collective life and work’ (C.1930). Poster Collection 18, Kislak Centre for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

by 1930.<sup>59</sup> While ultra-modernist kindergarten picture books addressed this same theme, their tone was entirely different. They took on an air of serious instruction, as for young builders of communism learning about hygiene from an anthropomorphic washstand was not appropriate.

As well as the core ideological belief that healthy children would become healthy members of the future communist society, pure practical circumstances dictated the need for this basic education. In late tsarist Russia, infant mortality had been of great concern to social reformers, who identified traditional child-rearing practices as the most immediate hazard to the survival of infants. In one village in Perm province between 1902 and 1913, 55 per cent of babies under the age of one died.<sup>60</sup> After the

<sup>59</sup> Startsev, *Detskaia literatura bibliographiia 1918–1931*, p. 252.

<sup>60</sup> David L. Ransel, *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2000), p. 41. Ransel’s study offers fascinating insight into how rural





Figure 4 Pleskovskaia, illustrations for *The Kindergarten* by M. Prigara (1930). Soviet Children's Picture Books from the Twenties and Thirties, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

revolution, disturbances caused by the First World War and Civil War meant that the living conditions of most families were highly inadequate. Many children were being raised in cramped, unhygienic conditions and infectious disease was rife. In the light of these circumstances, it therefore made sense that kindergarten teachers would do their best to prevent their charges from becoming unwell. In Woody's accounts of his visits to model institutions, he repeatedly comments on the presence of soap, basins, tooth brushes and towels. In one kindergarten, he notices a slogan on the wall which reads: 'Cleanliness is the way to health.'<sup>61</sup> Quoting from a document on pre-school training from 1930, Woody explains that three-to-four-year olds were expected to be able to use the toilet properly without help, wash before bed and on rising, and clean their teeth with a brush. Crucially, they should wash their hands before eating, after using the toilet and after activities such as playing with animals. Woody considered that given the crowded living conditions of Russian working families, standards of personal hygiene in pre-schools were generally 'far higher than could have been obtained in their individual homes'.<sup>62</sup>

women in Soviet Russia managed their reproductive choices and child-rearing practices through a complex relationship between tradition, modernity and the state.

<sup>61</sup> Woody, *New Minds: New Men?*, p. 51.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 414–16.



Figure 5 Margarita Genke, illustrations for *Everything Topsy-Turvy* by Nina Sakonskaia (1929). Princeton University Library. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

The seriousness of this mission did not mean that humour was disallowed in texts on the subject. *Vse kuvyrkom* (*Everything Topsy-turvy*) by Nina Sakonskaia features a boy who is late getting ready for kindergarten and gets in a terrible muddle trying to find his grooming equipment.<sup>63</sup> He dries himself with a scarf instead of a towel, brushes his hair with a dirty black boot brush instead of a hair brush and tries to clean his teeth with salt instead of tooth powder. The humour relies on the boy's silly behaviour and he is affectionately called a 'chudak', best translated here as 'oddball' or 'eccentric'. Even though the poem is fun, the ultimate purpose of the book is to inform. When the boy mistakenly smears his cheeks with cheese from the cupboard, we are given a very definite description and illustration of what he should have used instead – a round, pink cake of soap, recognizable by the letters 'ТЕЗЕ' imprinted on its surface (Figure 5). Significantly, the book was published by the State Medical Publisher and a note on the back cover states that the book is approved by the Commission for Pre-school Books of the Narkompros Pedagogical Studio.

Washing was given further importance by the fact that it was embedded in a fixed daily routine, an important guiding principle of the socialist kindergarten. The daily routine of a well-run kindergarten would have been similar to the schedule demonstrated in books such as Prigara's *Detskii sad*. The day would have begun with washing and breakfast,

<sup>63</sup> Nina Sakonskaia, *Vse kuvyrkom*, ill. Margarita Genke (Moscow, 1929).

followed by work in the garden and organized activities. Late morning would be taken up with games devised by the children, a walk or sunbathing. Then the children would have washed before lunch, eaten and then taken a nap. The afternoon might be taken up with walks, excursions, games or creative work before an afternoon snack of tea and bread.<sup>64</sup> Fediaevsky saw daily routine as the best way to shape correct habits in young children and meet their physical needs stating that: 'The rigid adherence to their daily routine of desirable habits means the healthy body with the physical strength to play one's part in a communistic society.'<sup>65</sup>

As well as regulating children's physical life, Kelly suggests that a further purpose of the fixed routine was to develop a rational sense of time in the young. Schedules to regulate workers' time, such as the ideas developed by Gastev, were advocated during this period both for their modernizing effect and the hope that they would create a disciplined, more efficient workforce.<sup>66</sup> While pre-school children were not expected to be meeting production quotas quite yet, this awareness of time still found its way into kindergarten picture books. In Ol'ga Gur'ian's *Progulka* (*The Walk*), a group of small children go out for a walk in the snow, building snowmen, throwing snowballs and sledging.<sup>67</sup> The joyful tone of the poem emphasizes the fact that the children are having fun and the text is not overtly didactic, except for the clock which features prominently on the first page of the book, letting us know that this activity fits firmly into the routine. The opening lines of the poem read: 'Twelve! | Twelve! | Time to get dressed to go for a walk!' (Figure 6).<sup>68</sup>

The fact that Gur'ian's walk group all set out together and Prigara's diligent pupils work in harmony is no coincidence and demonstrates the final fundamental part of the drive for rational upbringing. Activities at the kindergarten were to have no individual differentiation, as even the smallest socialists were to strive towards collectivism. Induction into the collective spirit is gently demonstrated by Dubianskaia in her short story *Mnogo rebiat* (*Many Children*).<sup>69</sup> Little Maia is left at the *ochag* for the day and bursts into tears when her mother leaves. She doesn't want to draw until another little girl shares a drawing of some Red Army men. Then Maia won't join the other children to wash her hands because she doesn't want to stop drawing. When it is naptime, she sits on the floor stubbornly and says she wants to play, until all the other children fall asleep and the room becomes very quiet (Figure 7). She can't help but join in when Auntie Ania plays the piano and all the children pretend to be bears and finally Maia's mother arrives to collect her. Maia decides that she doesn't want to go home and so hides one of her galoshes and ends up being the

<sup>64</sup> This example schedule was compiled by Kirschenbaum based on kindergarten plans from the mid-1920s. See Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, pp. 109–10.

<sup>65</sup> Fediaevsky, *Nursery School and Parent Education in Soviet Russia*, p. 85.

<sup>66</sup> Kelly, 'Shaping the "future race"', pp. 261–2.

<sup>67</sup> Ol'ga Gur'ian, *Progulka*, ill. V. Golitsyn (Moscow, 1926).

<sup>68</sup> 'Dvenadtsat'! | Dvenadtsat'! | Pora odevat'sia, itti guliat'! Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> M. Dubianskaia, *Mnogo rebiat*, ill. Vera Ermolaeva (Leningrad, 1930).



Figure 6 V. Golitsyn, illustration for *The Walk* by Ol'ga Gur'ian (1926). Soviet Children's Picture Books from the Twenties and Thirties, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Figure 7 Vera Ermolaeva, illustrations for *Many Children* by M. Dubianskaia (1930). Soviet Children's Picture Books from the Twenties and Thirties, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

last to leave. Immersion into the collective is seen in Dubianskaia's tale as a pre-school rite of passage but educators planned that this stage in a child's life would lead to much greater things. Fediaevsky outlined how important it was that children be introduced to collective living and learn to do simple tasks for the good of the group. This was for no lesser reason than that: 'By accustoming children to play and work co-operatively we lay the foundation for the first habits of collective work.'<sup>70</sup>

#### IV

In 1924, the State Academic Council (Gosudarstvennyi Uchenyi Sovet or GUS) introduced a pre-school curriculum designed to 'train children to construct and participate in the socialist future'.<sup>71</sup> Traditional pre-school activities such as drawing and building with blocks would still be allowed but interpreted within a new socialist framework. Pre-school work was to connect with contemporary life and develop a materialist world-view with collective habits.<sup>72</sup> In unison with the 'complex method' which was introduced into the primary school curriculum at the same time, activities were to be divided into the three categories of nature, labour and society.<sup>73</sup> Nature activities might have included work in the garden or organizing a nature corner. Labour projects could have been helping to prepare vegetables or making decorations for the kindergarten. Society tasks might have encompassed visiting a local factory or meeting with a Pioneer troop.<sup>74</sup> At the third pre-school congress in 1924, delegates discussed the new curriculum and concluded that even though the term 'play' was no longer in use, play was still an important part of the kindergarten. Teachers adjusted to the new use of terminology by declaring that it was not possible to distinguish between play and labour.<sup>75</sup>

Kindergarten picture books displayed activities which, to the uninitiated reader, would have looked like children taking part in ordinary games but would have been labelled as children's 'work' under the new curriculum. *Detskii sad* (*The Kindergarten*) by M. Mikhaelis shows images from pre-school life in small, concertina format with no text.<sup>76</sup> In the brightly coloured figurative illustrations, the kindergarten pupils are seen taking part in the usual activities including eating together, watering the plants in the living corner and working in the garden. In one of the images, a group of children in smocks bustles around a table

<sup>70</sup> Fediaevsky, *Nursery School and Parent Education in Soviet Russia*, p. 101.

<sup>71</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p. 105.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107–8.

<sup>73</sup> On the introduction of the complex method in primary schools and the subsequent failure of teachers to follow it, see Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education on Soviet Russia, 1917–1931* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991), pp. 32–6, 39–40; Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, pp. 107–8.

<sup>74</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, pp. 107–8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 122–3.

<sup>76</sup> M. Mikhaelis (ill.), *Detskii sad* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930).





Figure 8 M. Mikhaelis, illustration from *The Kindergarten* (1930). Soviet Children's Picture Books from the Twenties and Thirties, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Figure 9 M. Mikhaelis, illustration from *The Kindergarten* (1930). Soviet Children's Picture Books from the Twenties and Thirties, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

which is covered with a model village. One little girl is cutting out shapes from coloured paper and the other three children seem to be adding the finishing touches to the models. (Figure 8) In another image, a group of children build a structure from large blocks while two of their class-mates gaze at a spinning top and another loads a wooden trolley with toys (Figure 9). Without captions to disambiguate the meaning of these activities, they would appear to be the sort of things that might happen in a normal play session.

Iakov Meksin offers a similarly ambiguous picture in his book *V Detskom sadu* (*At the Kindergarten*), a collection of short sketches 'edited' by the author but composed by a group of pre-schoolers from Tver.<sup>77</sup> In one of the episodes, 'Na mashine' (By Engine), a group of children build a

<sup>77</sup> Iakov Meksin (ed.), *V detskom sadu*, ill. Nina Ushakova (Moscow and Leningrad, 1926).



train from large building blocks and stools, so they can go on an excursion to the countryside. To initiate this activity, Kolia calls to the other children 'Vasia, Lenia, let's play!'<sup>78</sup> The use of the word 'play' might be justified here by the fact the story is being told from the children's perspective, but the accompanying illustration lends itself to the idea that the game is fun rather than work, as two of the little girls filling the role of passengers are holding dolls.

In the classroom, the blurring of the line between work and play might have been accepted due to the strong pre-revolutionary influence of Montessori, whose work was infused with the notion that play is the work of the child. Elizaveta Shabad echoed this sentiment in a pamphlet for parents on how to choose suitable toys, stating that: 'Any healthy child loves to play. Moreover, play is the main occupation for a pre-school child and his first work.'<sup>79</sup> However, for heavily politicized Soviet pedagogues who were theorizing on how to build a new society, the concept bore much deeper ideological implications. In a 1928 article, Nadezhda Krupskaja commented upon the loose boundary between work and play, explaining how children's games were a path to collective life and therefore socialism. Echoing Montessori, she argued that what seems like play to us is work for children but also noted that sometimes children like to make or do things together. As a ten- or eleven-year-old, she and two friends built a model zoo for some younger children. She recounted how the grown-ups saw their task as play, but the work drew the girls into a close friendship. Krupskaja argued that supporting such acts of children's initiative would produce the habit of collective work and the 'organization of all life on a collective basis'. Organizations for children's labour such as kindergartens and children's clubs were to be a 'broad step on the route to socialist construction' and a 'good medicine against hooliganism'.<sup>80</sup>

Demonstrating the power of the kindergarten to implement such direct social organization, some kindergarten books showed activities which were to channel children into work for the collective and which could not readily be categorized as play. The concept of 'self-government' was embedded in the curriculum and Kirschenbaum argues that while kindergarten teachers were aware that their pupils were too young to run their own institutions, self-government was a way to teach children discipline and order. Children would take turns at helping in the dining room and there were commissions for sanitation, housekeeping or caring for the plants and animals in the living corner.<sup>81</sup> Woody encountered this agenda on a visit to a village kindergarten, where he observed that the system of self-government in education began at pre-school level.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>79</sup> Elizaveta Shabad, *Igrushka v doshkol'nom vozraste* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1930), p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Nadezhda Krupskaja, 'O kollektivnom trude detei', *O nashikh Detiakh*, 2–3 (1928), p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p. 129.

He watched the ‘domestic economy committee’ set the table and ‘gladly accepted their invitation to have a bowl of soup’.<sup>82</sup>

Picture books often showed children laying the table or helping to serve a meal. *Nash zavtrak (Our Breakfast)* by Varvara Mirovich gives us an idyllic view of such an activity in a poem about a group of children having breakfast together.<sup>83</sup> The children carry the chairs to the table and we find out that that it is Mania and Zina’s turn to be on duty, as their names and identifying pictures are on the wall – a sledge and pussycat respectively. Mania and Zina take care of the bread basket while Aunt Masha sprinkles sugar on the kissel and kasha (Figure 10). The clean, modern illustrations reinforce the idea of a cultured environment by showing delicate china and neat children in patterned smocks. After the meal has finished, Marat takes his turn at clearing up duty and puts the crumbs out of the window for the sparrows, whom he tells off for not sharing, saying: ‘Look at the children, | we eat and drink together, | not fighting, not screaming, | we live together cheerfully.’<sup>84</sup>

Captive living creatures provided further focus for children’s sense of duty in picture books about the living corner. The major benefit of children caring for animals was that they would, according to Fediaevsky, ‘gain a sense of responsibility for other lives than their own’.<sup>85</sup> In another book by Mirovich, *Zhivoi ugolok (The Living Corner)*, a group of kindergarten children learn about the wild things they find, helped by patient explanations from teacher Aunt Olia.<sup>86</sup> Each short episode is written in the first person, from a child’s viewpoint, and reveals mysteries about a different creature. The children learn that a pupa was not glued to a branch by someone but stuck itself there and so they leave it alone until it unfolds into a blue butterfly. The group must teach one of their friends that taking the goldfish out of the water will make it unwell and they watch some tadpoles grow into frogs. Other residents include a lizard, a family of hedgehogs and a finch escaping the winter frost. Matter-of-fact illustrations by Georgii Echeistov make sure that the explanations in the text are supplemented visually for any reader who might not be familiar with the creatures described (Figure 11).

During the First Five Year Plan period, kindergarten books showed collective work with a specific political character. These activities far exceeded the loose definition of ‘work’ in the GUS curriculum by closely modelling adult work practices and the political dialogue current at this time. In Lina Neiman’s *Udarnaia brigada (The Shock Brigade)*, the children have nothing left in their living corner but a lizard, a hedgehog and a crow who has become boring.<sup>87</sup> The children had agreed at the start

<sup>82</sup> Woody, *New Minds: New Men?*, p. 51.

<sup>83</sup> Varvara Mirovich, *Nash zavtrak*, ill. unknown (Moscow and Leningrad, 1926).

<sup>84</sup> ‘Posmotrite na rebiat, | vmeste my edim i p’em, | ne deremsia, ne orem, | družno veselo zhivem.’ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>85</sup> Fediaevsky, *Nursery School and Parent Education in Soviet Russia*, p. 92.

<sup>86</sup> Varvara Mirovich, *Zhivoi ugolok*, ill. Georgii Echeistov (Moscow, 1928).

<sup>87</sup> Lina Neiman, *Udarnaia brigade*, ill. M. Granavtsev (Moscow, 1931).



Figure 10 Unknown artist, illustration for *Our Breakfast* by Varvara Mirovich (1926). Soviet Russian Children's Picture Book Collection, Kislak Centre for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

of the year that they would get ten creatures and they quarrel about why nobody has brought any, until Katya jumps up on a stool and declares that they are 'udarniki' (shock-workers) and will accomplish the task. The next day, Taras brings a cockroach in a matchbox. Then a yellow canary in a cage arrives, followed by a puppy and a tank of goldfish. With two

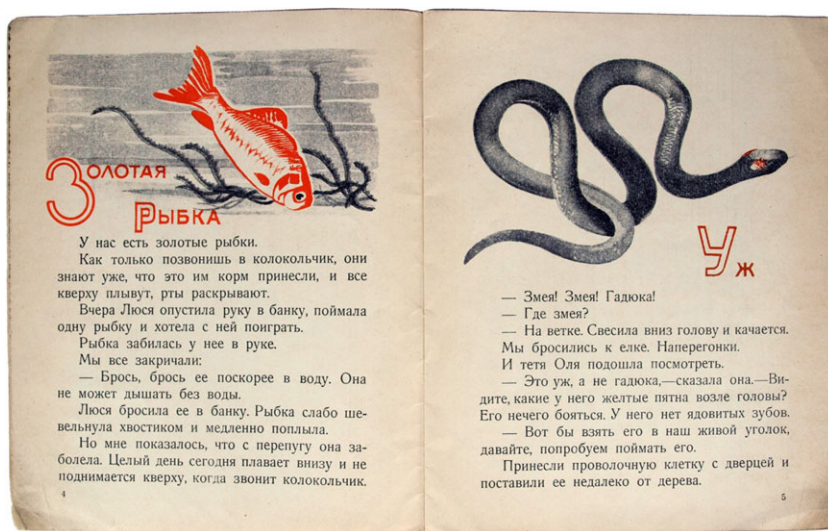


Figure 11 Georgii Echeistov, illustration for *The Living Corner* by Varvara Mirovich (1928). LS Collection, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

days to go until the deadline, Iuzik brings a real rabbit but the day after that one of the goldfish dies (a failure) (Figure 12). On the final day, the lead shock-workers save the day by going to the zoo and obtaining a pair of ginger guinea pigs from a Pioneer who works there. The book ends with the triumphant statement that: 'The plan is fulfilled.'<sup>88</sup> In contrast to Mirovich's benevolent living corner, Neiman's animals become a focus for militant political agitation, undertaken as part of a fundamentally pre-school task.

Pre-schoolers were also encouraged to expand their horizons beyond the kindergarten and learn directly about the world of adult work and socialist construction. This was to give them a respect for and desire to participate in labour, whether through watching the cook prepare vegetables or observing the postman and the carpenter.<sup>89</sup> In *Detskii sad v berezovoi roshche* (*The Kindergarten in the Birch Grove*), Elena Ulrikh portrays a rural kindergarten attended by children from a sovkhoz (state farm) and a kolkhoz (collective farm).<sup>90</sup> As well as taking part in the usual kindergarten tasks of feeding the bunnies and watering the garden, the children learn about agriculture by watching adults working on the farm. With the story told from the pupils' perspective, we see how they visit the farm and watch the harvest being threshed, look at the silo where the cattle

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>89</sup> Fediaevsky, *Nursery School and Parent Education in Soviet Russia*, pp. 97–9.

<sup>90</sup> Elena Ul'rikh, *Detskii sad v berezovoi roshche*, ill. Vera Lantsetti (Moscow, 1931).





Figure 12 M. Granavstev, illustrations for *The Shock Brigade* by Lina Neiman (1931). Princeton University Library. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

feed is kept and then ride home on a cart loaded with sacks of grain.<sup>91</sup> They emulate the work of the adults in their play and so develop work habits and knowledge that they will one day use as productive members of the community. A group of little boys pretend that the ladders on their climbing frame are the silo tower and they haul baskets of grass up to the top, in imitation of filling the feed store.<sup>92</sup> In another game that prioritizes team work, the children construct a chute from a plank of wood. Some of the children send objects rolling down to a little house at the bottom, where other members of the gang pick them up (Figure 13).<sup>93</sup> The text is intended to be read as a factual report, employing black-and-white photomontage illustration concurrent with the style used in propaganda albums during this period. The children in the illustrations are well-kept, wholesome and seem to be enjoying themselves, but the earnest overall tone of the piece brings home its message: even these very young children are taken seriously as members of society and so are expected to engage fully with grown-up themes.

## V

The grown-up concerns placed upon young shoulders were not limited to developing good work habits or adapting to a collective way of

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., pp. 6–7.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

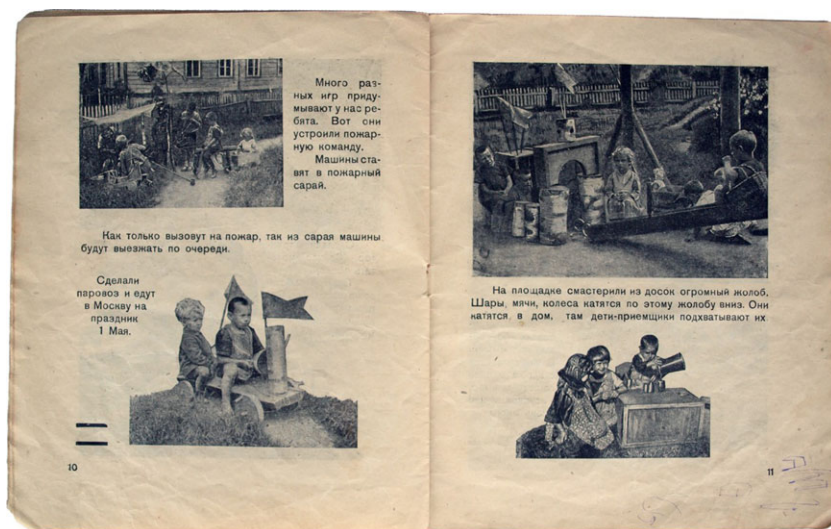


Figure 13 Vera Lantsetti, illustrations for *The Kindergarten in the Birch Grove* by Elena Ul'rikh (1931). LS Collection, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

living. Picture books also addressed direct political themes, with specially adapted motifs designed to make these subjects easy to digest and enjoyable. In outlining the purposes of social education, Fediaevsky explained that it should involve 'preparation for understanding and participating in political education'.<sup>94</sup> To achieve this, pre-schoolers were to celebrate revolutionary festivals and to be 'acquainted with the achievements of their great leaders of the working class'. They were also to have contact with Young Pioneers, so that they would learn to work diligently and develop a 'desire for good organization'.<sup>95</sup> These themes were all to be found in stories about the kindergarten.

Revolutionary holidays on 1 May and 7 November were intended to replace the key religious festivals of Easter and Christmas and were supposed to make a deep impression on children.<sup>96</sup> The GUS curriculum suggested that May Day should take precedence over October and be something that pupils eagerly awaited.<sup>97</sup> Guidelines from one author advised that the holiday would 'raise in the children consciousness of the international solidarity of the working class'. It was recommended that in the months before May Day, children learn about different jobs and by

<sup>94</sup> Fediaevsky, *Nursery School and Parent Education in Soviet Russia*, p. 101.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p. 125.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 127.





Figure 14 Anna Borovskaia, illustrations for *The Holiday* by Ol'ga Gur'ian (1927). Soviet Children's Picture Books from the Twenties and Thirties, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

using art projects and dressing up, would envisage themselves as future workers.<sup>98</sup>

Revolutionary festivals were depicted in sections of picture books or in whole books devoted to their celebration. They often pictured the spectacle of a May Day parade as viewed by small children and sometimes showed how May Day activities were approached in the kindergarten. *Prazdnik (The Holiday)* by Ol'ga Gur'ian does both these things.<sup>99</sup> In the first part of the poem, the kindergarten children bundle into the back of a truck with red paper flags and they are taken to see the big parade on the square (Figure 14). The children cheer as the workers file past them holding red banners, followed by the Komsomol (Communist Youth League) and then the Pioneers in their red scarves. Most excitingly of all, 'steel birds', or aeroplanes, 'rustle and dance' over the squares of the red capital.<sup>100</sup> In the second part of the poem, the children spend the week busily decorating the classroom for their own festival and they use their games to emulate adult workers. With large building blocks, they play at being a construction brigade, just like those they see putting up new

<sup>98</sup> These ideas were from a 1924 article by Mariia Markovich, cited in Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, pp. 127–8.

<sup>99</sup> Ol'ga Gur'ian, *Prazdnik*, ill. Anna Borovskaia (Moscow, 1927).

<sup>100</sup> 'Nad ploshchadiami | krasnoi stolitsy | shumiat i plishut | stal'nye ptitsy – | aeroplany!' Ibid., p. 8.

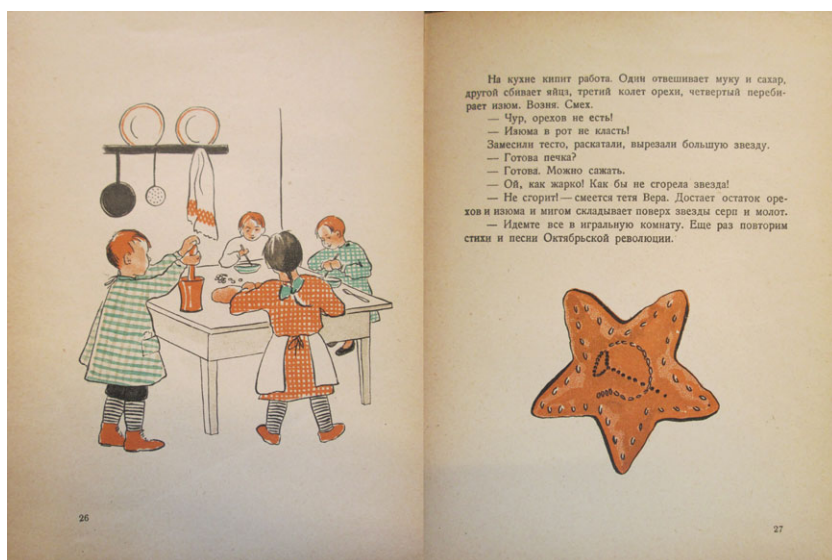


Figure 15 Nina Ushakova, illustration for *At the Kindergarten* by Iakov Meksin (1926). Soviet Russian Children's Picture Book Collection, Kislak Centre for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

buildings around town. Auntie Anna plays the piano while they pretend to be aeroplanes in the Red Air Fleet. To finish the celebration, they take a homemade megaphone and give a radio broadcast, announcing all that they have achieved.

The celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution was also acknowledged by picture book authors. One of the episodes in Meksin's *V detskom sadu* is entitled *Krasnyi Oktiabr'* (*Red October*).<sup>101</sup> As with other stories in the book, the subject is treated very gently and with deference to the young age of the expected reader. The children bake star shaped biscuits decorated with nuts and raisins in the shape of a hammer and sickle (Figure 15). They sing songs about the October Revolution and the older children go to see the pioneers to invite them to visit the kindergarten. Most importantly, Auntie Vera explains that while planning the celebration they must think 'how best to remember comrade Lenin'.<sup>102</sup> After Lenin's death in 1924, all schools were ordered to make sure that children had some knowledge of the life and work of Lenin, which for kindergarten teachers could mean building a 'Lenin corner' or putting on a 'Lenin morning'.<sup>103</sup> In Meksin's story, the children make a collage

<sup>101</sup> Meksin, *V detskom sadu*, pp. 24–7.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>103</sup> Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*, p. 124. On the history of the Lenin corner see Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1983), pp. 126–7, 222–4

with a picture of Lenin in the centre and surround him with images of children holding red stars in their hands. One of the kindergarten children exclaims: 'Look, the children have come to congratulate Lenin on the holiday.' Then they cut out pictures of workers and peasants and hang these underneath Lenin's portrait in the Lenin corner. We are informed that Lenin, 'greatly loved workers and peasants and taught them to free themselves from the factory owners and landlords'.<sup>104</sup>

Spending time with the Pioneers was not just for October. The Pioneer was an aspirational figure for the kindergarten pupil, who was far too young to join the organization but could look forward to the day when they would. Established in 1922 as the junior branch of the Komsomol, the Pioneer organization involved around one fifth of children aged ten to fourteen by 1925. Incorporating elements of the Scout movement, its primary purpose was to educate young people in the values of socialist society and encourage active participation in politics. On joining, children took an oath to be true to the precepts of Lenin and the Communist Party. On leaving, they were eligible to apply for admission to the Komsomol, which would eventually lead the selected few into full Party membership.<sup>105</sup> In 1924, the movement was extended to even younger children, with the creation of the Octobrist organization for those aged seven to ten, which was to be run under the supervision of the Pioneers.<sup>106</sup>

For the young children in Gur'ian's poem *Pionery prishli!* (*The Pioneers Came!*), a visit from the Pioneers is a matter of great excitement.<sup>107</sup> A 1929 Gosizdat catalogue for pre-school books described the tale as: 'A depiction of one of the most festive moments in the life of the kindergarten.'<sup>108</sup> The first part of the poem declares that nobody can sleep, as they are dreaming of a drum and a trumpet. The Pioneers are coming to the kindergarten and the children rush to get their breakfast and catch the tram on time. Upon arrival, in true collective spirit, the kindergarten children hold a meeting and all agree that they will welcome the Pioneers with a bright red banner bearing the slogan: 'We will always be friends.'<sup>109</sup> Finally the Pioneers arrive, marching in a straight line with the drum beating rhythmically and their leader wearing a shaggy fur coat (Figure 16). Imitating the organized brigade, the little children march in their own line, trying to be serious and avoid yawning. Speeches are exchanged and the kindergarten children declare that: 'Now we are seven years old, | but when we are eight, | we will ask you to take us

<sup>104</sup> Meksin, *V detskom sadu*, p. 24.

<sup>105</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (London, 2007), pp. 25–6; Kelly, *Children's World*, p. 62; Jim Riordan, 'The role of youth organisations in communist upbringing in the Soviet school', in George Avis (ed.), *The Making of the Soviet Citizen* (London, 1987), pp. 136–60, at pp. 136–9.

<sup>106</sup> Riordan, 'The role of youth organisations in communist upbringing in the Soviet school', p. 138.

<sup>107</sup> Ol'ga Gur'ian, *Pionery prishli!*, ill. Mariia Shervinskaia (Moscow, 1929)

<sup>108</sup> *Katalog knig dlia doshkol'nikov* (Moscow, 1929).

<sup>109</sup> 'Budem vseгда druž'iami!' Ibid., p. 4.



Figure 16 Mariia Shervinskaiia, illustrations for *The Pioneers Came!* by Ol'ga Gur'ian (1929). Soviet Russian Children's Picture Book Collection, Kislak Centre for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

as Octobrists!<sup>110</sup> The serious formalities over, both sets of children play games together. The Pioneers teach the little ones how to play at being tea cups and lead them in a ball game about the weather. When it is time for the Pioneers to go home, the children bid them goodbye. One of the little boys in the final illustration waves a symbolic red scarf as the troop disappears around the corner.

## VI

Despite the definite educational tone and overtly socialist message of most picture books about the kindergarten, the stories still reflected the fact that the books were about small children and had to appeal to readers of a very young age. Authors achieved this by writing believable characters that had all the normal traits of pre-school aged children. When they were not urgently engaged in tasks of socialist construction, the storybook boys and girls were funny, mischievous and fiercely loyal to their friends.

In Neiman's *Udarnaia brigada*, a transparently political text, the character of Taras offers a comic diversion at several points in the plot. He is the first to deliver a creature, so when he arrives with a small box in his

<sup>110</sup> 'Seichas nam sem' let, a stanet vosem', my b oktiabriata vsiat' nas poprosim!' Ibid., p. 8.

pocket and taps it mysteriously, all the children crowd round in suspense to see what is inside. He tells them to be quiet or the thing will run away. When they ask where he caught it he sighs deeply and says: 'In the kitchen, that's where.' Eventually Katya snatches the box, opens it furtively and the children are enormously disappointed to find nothing but a whiskered black cockroach.<sup>111</sup> Later on in the story, when one of the goldfish dies and it looks as though the plan will not be fulfilled, Taras breaks the tension by timidly asking the children if they would like more cockroaches, assuring them that 'we have lots in the kitchen'.<sup>112</sup> His suggestion is duly ignored by the leaders of the shock-brigade.

While Taras might have been exaggerating his accomplishments, he did not cause trouble. Other storybook children were aware that their actions were not very well judged yet carried on regardless. In *Uzhi i khrabraia Zheka* (*The Adders and Brave Zheka*), Pravdina writes about a little girl called Zheka who goes into the woods and catches a pair of snakes.<sup>113</sup> She calls them Filka and Timoshka and decides that she will take them to kindergarten the next day, so that the children can learn to care for them. When she arrives home the creatures are hidden so that nobody will find them, particularly her mother, who is scared of snakes. Zheka does not put them in a box or a tin but under a pile of newspapers and then wishes them goodnight (Figure 17). In the morning, she awakes to a commotion with the women of the house screaming and Filka slithering his way down the hallway. She catches the snake and everybody says how brave she is. However, Zheka fails to tell them that there was another snake which can't be found – only Filka makes it to the kindergarten.

In a story by Meksin, it was not a reptile but a little girl who did not turn up for lessons. In *Kak Alla Khvorala* (*How Alla Became Ill*), we read about a group of children who miss their friend Alla when she does not turn up at the kindergarten for several days in a row.<sup>114</sup> They want her to come back so that she can finish her part of the model town that they are making and they miss her laughter when they play games. The children compose a letter for Alla, which they dictate to Auntie Inna, so that they can find out what the matter is. Fedia is asked to deliver the letter, as he is Alla's neighbour and he bravely fights his way past a big scary dog to do so. When he returns the next day with the reply, the group find out that Alla has caught malaria but she is beginning to feel better and is not contagious, so will be back soon. The children celebrate by replying to her letter, sending gifts that they have made and a poem declaring that they are not afraid of mosquitoes, so will crush all the nasty insects. The children are a firm collective, following the correct routine and procedures of the socialist pre-school, but their relationships remain close and affectionate.

<sup>111</sup> Neiman, *Udarnaia brigade*, p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> A. Pravdina, *Uzhi i khrabraia zheka*, ill. Rubleva (Moscow, 1931).

<sup>114</sup> Iakov Meksin, *Kak Alla khvorala*, ill. Vladimir Konashevich (Moscow and Leningrad, 1926).





Figure 17 Rubleva, illustrations for *The Adders and Brave Zheka* by A. Pravdina (1931). Soviet Children's Picture Books from the Twenties and Thirties, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

They are still scared of things but will do anything to overcome their fears and help a friend (Figure 18).

## VII

The Bolsheviks aimed to create a modern socialist society which would be populated by a *new man*, who would take control of his own destiny and build a communist future. The first generation of Soviet children, with no experience of life during pre-revolutionary times, was perfect modelling material for this new type of citizen. Literacy and the contemporary picture book were considered essential to creating an active political culture, with which the whole of society would engage, starting with the youngest members. In practical terms, the kindergarten was marked out as one of the institutions which would foster revolutionary transformation by freeing women for work and raising children in a rational, collective manner. The perfect kindergarten would be well funded by the state, clean and suitably equipped. The ideal pupil would be healthy, cheerful, cooperative and keen to engage in educational activities and politics. Such children would leave the kindergarten prepared to take their part in Soviet society and work hard to bring about the envisaged communist utopia.



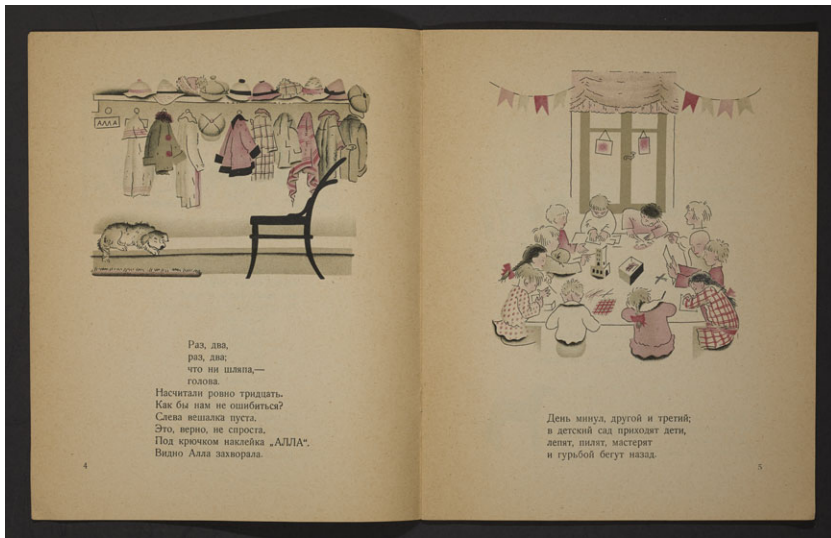


Figure 18 Vladimir Konashevich, illustrations for *How Alla Became Ill* by Iakov Maksin (1926). Princeton University Library. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

When it became apparent that the state was not able to provide good-quality pre-school education for all children, the picture book became a guidebook for the upbringing that was envisaged by socialist educators. Picture book kindergartens were bright, modern institutions with stylish modern furniture and neat children, trained to use perfectly scaled washrooms. The benevolent, well-educated teachers escorted their neatly dressed model charges through a daily routine of learning and living together. Stories taught young readers and their families how ordinary play was really training for work and that pre-schoolers were also capable of learning to work for the good of the group, either by sharing the domestic chores or by looking after their many pets. The most ambitious picture books modelled direct political activism. Children imitated the shock-brigades of adult workers, took part in communist festivals, venerated the memory of Lenin and longed to become older so that they could join the Pioneers. Authors and illustrators also realized that children were still children and embedded even the most political picture books with humour, brightly coloured pictures and easy-to-grasp imagery.

Early Soviet children's picture books featuring the kindergarten had a transparent political identity. They demonstrated a commitment by the state to the erosion of traditional family life in favour of a modern, collective approach to child-rearing. The idealized young characters in the stories also modelled the methods through which the very smallest citizens were to be vehicles for huge social change, in a state which aimed to control

its population and build a specific type of socialism. However, despite their inherent ideological purpose, picture books about the kindergarten also showed the great depth of concern that existed for the education and well-being of young children in the early Soviet Union. During a period when the country was undergoing unprecedented social uncertainty and enormous material hardship, the scope of this ambition can only be admired.