# Street Children in Early Soviet Odesa

*Matthew D. Pauly*[1]

This is an origins story of the Odesa Comintern Children's Town No. 1. It came to be known in the early Soviet Union for its experimentalism and broad ambition to link the fate of the individual to shared socio-political goals. Origin stories tell us how particular institutions and communities evolved. But they also suggest something about the multi-dimensional character of these communities. As anthropologist Fred Gearing argued in a classic 1958 article: "In a word, a human community does not have a single social structure; it has several. Put otherwise, the social structure of a society is the sum of the several structural poses it assumes around the year."[2] This idea forces us to fight against the grain of established institutional histories of the Soviet Union in which the development of a particular community or establishment is determined by an authority acting from above and the endpoint is presented as preordained.

The Comintern Children's Town was informed by the numerous roles it inhabited, many of which underscored its collectivist orientation: sanctuary, corrective centre, hospital, school, research institution, and political tutor. It was also informed by the various contexts in which it operated: on the edge of empire, in a port city, during the transition from revolution and civil war, and at a time of a tragic famine. Space does not permit a full explication of all these roles, but this children's town was representative of an attachment to the ideal of "the rational institution as a utopia of human transformation and a crucible for new social forms."[3] This was a certainty that predated Soviet Ukraine and had its roots in urban anxieties.

In the late nineteenth century, Russian psychologists developed an epidemiological model to explain the "appearance" and spread of "mental epidemics," coded in ethical terms. These scientists often glossed over the mechanism of transmission, accepting "moral contagion" as fact, and preferring to investigate questions of susceptibility and resistance. After the revolution, scholars continued to reference this idea of a "moral contagion," but no longer

because of "irreducible irrationality of human beings."[4] Rather, it was a corrupting environment that produced the evils of the city, among them juvenile delinquency and hooliganism to which homeless children (*bezprytul'ni*) were particularly prone. Even those previously labelled as "savage" could be redeemed if the correct setting and process was provided.[5] As Maria Cristina Galmarini-Kabala reminds us, many pre-revolutionary experts "opposed the degenerative theory of child development and instead campaigned to address children with psychological disorders through a curative paradigm."[6] This was an approach that the Soviet institutions such as the Comintern Children's Town in Odesa aspired to realize.

## Genesis

Stories of children who populated Odesa's poorer neighbourhoods and infiltrated its opulent centre to beg, con, and pickpocket fascinated late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century society in the city and beyond. Delinquent, neglected, and abandoned children represented the city's failures; their existence exposed its corruption and contradictions. The overall count of children cared for in the great variety of municipal shelters at the turn of the century is difficult to discern, but their numbers increased substantially because of the disorder and death introduced by war, revolution, and famine between 1914–1923. Children who came to Odesa seeking solace and sustenance contributed to a daunting 1923 tally of 22,000 dependents in the province's children's homes, slightly less than the republic's highest concentration in the Ekaterinoslav (Dnipro) province.[7] The problem of children's homelessness was one with a long history that demanded a bold solution.

The 1922 head of the Odesa Provincial Department of Education, Vladimir Potemkin, has left the most complete history of the creation of the Comintern Children's Town, the primary institution meant to refashion "savage" youth. Potemkin credits an early representative of Soviet power in Odesa (and future commissar of education), Oleksandr Shumsky, with laying the groundwork for a large children's settlement. Shumsky imagined it would be housed on the grounds of a former cadet academy and an adjacent dacha complex, renamed Samopomoshch (Russ., Self-Reliance).[8] In June 1920, the Odesa provincial government, in which Shumsky held a prominent voice, sanctioned the founding of a children's town (*mistechko*), and tasked an interagency body – the Coun-

cil for the Defense of Children – with logistics. After some study, the council endorsed Shumsky's proposed site.[9]

The town then represented the culmination of a long-held desire to "scientifically" disentangle the problem of children in need of care. However, Potemkin's description also invoked a new form of collectivism. For him, the town embodied "the idea of a harmonious combination of small children's communes."[10] Under the umbrella of a single administrative centre, children housed in a network of children's homes (*dytbudynky*) would work in concert with each other and appointed adults to manage the town's resources and design an educational curriculum. As Andy Willimott has noted, Soviet schools and orphanages often adopted the title "commune," a term that came to be associated with "more than just group association, it also implied an environment, system, or lifestyle devoted to instilling collective values."[11] Few in the public objected to this aspiration for shelters. However, it was also a label embraced by university students and workers who sought to establish communal living arrangements in dormitories, factories, and apartments. The founders of the Comintern Children's Town tended to see their charges like the adult communards of Willimott's study saw themselves, "as the advocates of a rational, modern collectivism – the bearers of a proletarian cohesion designed to advance the modern socialist state."[12] While children might not have spontaneously embraced such a role, the town's education was supposed to ensure this political outcome. In fact, the process was erratic. A shortage economy forced regular adjustments and wilful children regularly sought to preserve individual autonomy.

## Multiple Structural Poses

The Samopomoshch settlement was a sort of unfinished city garden, established in 1912 for Odesa's aspirational class. The dachas were reportedly well maintained and equipped with all "the comforts, allowed by their owners, representatives of the middle bourgeoisie" (Potemkin identifies captains of shipping, former government bureaucrats, and university professors).[13] However, two obstacles confronted the organizers of the children's town: a proportion of the dachas were still occupied and there was no sewage system for the settlement. The board worried about the spread of disease and rot because of overflowing cesspools and fungal contamination. The board's proposal imagined a town of up to 2,000 people, but no more. Some members of the Council for

the Defense of Children pressed for the transfer of some 10,000 children to the site, but the board resisted. It did not want to create large-scale barracks but sought to reproduce a sort of semblance of domestic "dacha" life. Here perhaps a bucolic vision of communal peace was prioritized over a utilitarian impulse, if only to suggest an improvement over the tsarist past.

A significant pressure was the coming end of the summer; children in makeshift "colonies" on the outskirts of Odesa were threatened with exposure to the cold. Furthermore, according to Potemkin, the city regularly welcomed new arrivals, "children who fell to the earth in their great suffering." Even though health authorities opposed using the Samopomoshch dachas, provincial education and housing officials argued that "whatever shortcomings the settlement would have, the life in it would be incomparably more hygienic and happier than in the slums in which children of poverty must huddle."[14] Housing authorities sanctioned the immediate release of 30 Samopomoshch dachas to the children's town and the eviction of their residents.

Yet another complication was the presence of many Red Army troops on the grounds of the cadet academy in addition to prisoners of war being held in an internment camp. They were here for multiple reasons perhaps, but Odesa's place on the border of the former empire certainly dictated their stationing too. The Soviet government viewed with hostility the occupation of Bessarabia by Romania a short distance away and some Bolsheviks harboured illusions of resurrecting a still-born Soviet republic that had been founded on the territory in 1919.[15] Furthermore, a large number of new troops were expected to arrive, perhaps before their dispatch to the Crimea to oust the remaining forces of White General Pyotr Wrangel in the fall of 1920.[16] In short, the children's town was being created in the midst of the waning days of the civil war. Furthermore, its site was an instrument of revolutionary justice. The creation of the children's town was then an expression of the triumph of rationality, an assumption that became an article of faith for the Soviet educational establishment. But this victory was far from consolidated. It is not surprising then that nothing went according to plan, despite the dictates of local Soviet authorities.

## Teetering Forward

The head of the Odesa Provincial Department of Education at the time (and the future Ukrainian deputy commissar of education), Ian Riappo, issued preliminary orders for the transfer of children from Odesa's summer colonies to

the imagined town, effectively sanctioning the final creation of the town at this site, regardless of the intervening circumstances. It is not clear what happened to the Red Army troops stationed on the territory, but on September 26, 1920, the internment camp was dissolved and four days later the children's town occupied the cadet academy's headquarters. Multiple children's institutions were placed in the buildings of the academy in a way that reflected the nature of Odesa and evolving Soviet nationalities policy. For example, the former apartment of the director of the academy was granted to a Belarusian school-commune and a Russian kindergarten. A Ukrainian school-commune, Polish school-commune, several other generic schools, and a Ukrainian kindergarten were placed in the former officers' outbuildings. Jewish and Lithuanian school-communes and three children's boarding houses were first assigned buildings in the settlement of Samopomoshch.[17] The previous occupants did not go quietly. The evictees looted the dachas, pulling out windows and doors, and the administrators of the former internment camp took almost all equipment, including workshop tools and even a theatrical stage from the cadet academy.[18] The children's institutions arrived to find nearly empty shelves.

All the attempts of the organizers of the town to prevent these shortcomings, their many requests, petitions, and protests, were in vain. Remarkably, there was no legitimate authority to stop what occurred. The children's town was an attempt to order the disorder of children – corrupted, abandoned, impoverished, and sick – within the boundaries of a single collective space. Yet, it was born in an environment of chaos. The Soviet revolutionary system of justice was supposed to enable its creation, but it was toothless. Provincial authorities had promised to supply the town at the same level as a military field hospital, but assumingly the true military needed these resources more.[19] A so-called surplus commission was tasked with redistributing goods taken from Odesa's mercantile bourgeoisie, but it apparently did not do so effectively or, perhaps equally likely, had hoarded the confiscated goods. The children's town remained poorly supplied – a shortcoming blamed on the poverty of post-civil war Odesa, the looting of state-owned warehouses, and the distance of the town from the city centre (which made the delivery of clothes, bedding, food, fuel, and equipment difficult).[20]

The remaining residents of the Samopomoshch dacha settlement resisted their final eviction, using a technicality of Soviet law to delay their removal. They insisted that the authorities were obligated to ensure their transport to new housing. Several were former shipping officers who appeared to know how to work the bureaucracy. According to Potemkin, these former bour-

geoisie turned out to be "magnificent experts in all the compulsory powers of Soviet institutions, from the revolutionary tribunal to the extraordinary commissions."[21] Lastly, at the beginning of 1921, central authorities threatened to throw out the children from the cadet academy to house newly created military-technical courses for the Red Army infantry. Fortunately for the town, this plan was never realized.[22] But the chief challenge was hunger, a problem that increased with the regular addition of new children from the famine-stricken Donbas to the already crowded facility.

## Overlapping Competencies

Establishments like the Comintern Children's Town existed to rescue and reform in accordance with the collectivist educational principles shared by conventional primary schools. It was not an institution that received children whom Soviet authorities judged to be most criminal. In October 1922, the Russian People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) issued a new statute that effectively set policy for its Ukrainian counterpart. Its chief objective was to differentiate between institutions responsible for the internment, punishment, or rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents. According to an amendment to the new criminal code approved by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee in June of that year, children as young as fourteen and fifteen could be sentenced by the criminal courts.[23] Others were sent to different types of reformatories, including "correctional houses" and colonies maintained by the Soviet security police, whose new purpose after the promulgation of the statute was to "rehabilitate and reintegrate young offenders."[24] However, they continued to do so imperfectly because their basic orientation remained coercive and punitive.[25] Children judged to be more capable of reform were assigned to children's homes of the kind that made up the Comintern Children's Town.

In Odesa, a juvenile affairs commission overseen by the city government's education department maintained an aptly named "collector" to offer short-term shelter for those apprehended by the police and to sort out who went where. A major problem was what to do with children over the age of 13, whom the children's homes were not obliged to accept. But even young children sent from the collector were viewed with "distrust and caution" by administrators of children's homes, a sentiment that was reciprocated by city authorities. According to a July 1924 Odesa Municipal Education Department report: "Natu-

rally, [these] former pupils of the collector, children with a perverted narcissism, leave the children's homes as a result of this relationship [their unwelcome reception] and take to the street."[26] There was perhaps no more damning condemnation of excessive individualism than this charge. Assignment to a children's home by the collector was not unusual and these children were expected to merge into the general population of those not initially detained for criminal behaviour. Mykhailo Kokhansky, the director of the Comintern Children's Town from 1923–1930, justified resistance to the town's collectivist aims on the latent perversion of some, noting in October 1924 that "breakouts [from the town] occur as an exception among the recently arrived children, morally corrupted children with criminal intentions."[27]

Children from the collector were then present in the children's town and Kokhansky judged them to possess a "criminality" of a different order. Their desire to escape suggested their tendency towards recidivism. But Kokhansky stopped short of saying this. He rather implied that their presence threatened to undo the work of educators in the town as a whole; they were the "exception" that undermined the standard. All children in the town represented a potential "moral contagion" because of their vulnerability to the temptations of the street. Juvenile delinquents of all sorts, and the simply homeless, needed the order that the town provided. Their participation in the town's instruction, it was believed, would provide some immunity, a mechanism to right their lives and safeguard larger Odesa. But importantly the town's administrators folded this impulse into other concerns.

Throughout the early 1920s, the legacy of famine was still felt. Pavlo Ivasevych, a teacher in the town's Ukrainian Home No. 14 (a school-commune and variant of a *dytbudynok*), gives some indication of how this was the case in a 1923 article. He makes clear that the teachers in the town were struggling to adjust to the new environment, to ensure the correct application of educational norms. Like primary schools elsewhere in the republic, schools in the town were to instruct children in the value and practice of group labor and thereby ready them for their generation's common task: the building of socialism. The town's schools enjoyed the advantage of a relatively closed environment, in which teachers might impart these lessons without the interference and distraction of parents whom Soviet educators suspected of retaining outdated, self-centred interests.[28] But the pupils' educational pursuit was not trouble-free. What, Ivasevych asks, was the "correct path" to undertake amidst the lingering destruction of "material and pedagogical conditions" in Odesa? He writes: "Imagine the following picture: a hundred hungry, broken, apathetic

children who hover near the kitchen, whose conversation is limited to the question of what is for lunch, breakfast, or dinner, or if it is possible to eat weeds?" For Ivasevych, "It was clear to the children that 'no one will set us free,' not God, not the tsar, not a hero, but only their own labor."[29]

The children turned to gardening to sustain their kitchen, naming newly planted vegetable beds after Marx as well as the heroes of the new Soviet state and their children's town. They reportedly took responsibility for the town and thus for their own survival, "every 'child-leader' knows how the whole town, and a single small plant are the shared property of the children's [school-] commune and the result of attention and labor, carefully divided between the children."[30] And they meticulously recorded the growth of every plant. One of the beds of the garden curiously bore the name "little journal," reportedly because of the children's love of this compendium of their labors in the soil. According Ivasevych, the journal was the children's alone: "It is the guide for public criticism, the tribune of social interests of the child, and his simple history."[31] Ivasevych credited authorship of the journal to the rather precociously named "children's scientific collective."

One entry from the journal stridently decried the individualism of class enemies and simultaneously used this understanding to offer a language lesson on the importance of a collective purpose:

> Dear Little Journal! You ask how to say "exploiter" in Ukrainian? This word is foreign, but it is translated into Ukrainian as "*halapas*" [hanger-on] . . . For example, in my plant bed there are tall weeds that are no use to anyone but are in fact the opposite – they do harm and make themselves at home, when I water them and not the carrots. Those children who do not do any useful work for our building-commune but live off the work of others are counted as *halapasy*. Goodbye.[32]

Another entry in the children's journal, a poem entitled, *New Path* (*Novyi shliakh*), similarly condemned the oppression of the past, but ended with a celebration of the revolution's achievement for all, especially children:

> And spilled blood for nothing
> Harnessed the people firmly to the yoke
> And still drove with the whip, as if cattle
> The bourgeoisie celebrated bloody banquets
> And beat and punished the people for the truth
> And the poor people suffered quietly

And only furtively damned the torturers

But all the curses did not help –
The unsatisfied bourgeoisie continued to rule
And lies would live a long a time and prosper
And the bourgeois authority made merry despite them
And the workers did not want to live in this way
And they created their proletarian regime
And the path of poverty, which overflowed with tears
All was covered with red flowers. And ardent tears will no long return
And red roses smiled at all.[33]

Taken together these entries outlined a form of political education achieved through gardening or labor. Children were instructed to identify the social parasite or weed and focus on an earned future, a time welcomed by red roses – a symbol that invoked the title of the Young Pioneers' periodical, *Chervoni kvity* (Red Flowers). Building socialism was a reciprocal task. The journal "spoke back" to the children in entries made by the teacher, complaining it had not been taken on an excursion to the city, scolding the children humorously for being left outside overnight, or urging children to act upon their talk. It also included jokes that made light of the children's dirty clothes and hunger. The journal was accordingly an expression of a new kind of children's activism. It was this sort of engagement that reportedly allowed children to comprehend their labor, to understand their stake in overcoming such a "cheerless factor" as hunger. The teacher's role was "reduced to an imperceptible helmsman, whose task is not to sink or ground it [the commune metaphorically imagined as a ship]."[34]

## The Promise of Collectivism

The children's collective then determined the fulfilment of duty. Archival information is not nearly as illustrative as Ivasevych's tale, but files recount a continued problem in the Comintern Children's Town with food supply, overcrowding, and truancy.[35] What is true is that the multiple poses that the town occupied from its founding come together in this snapshot of Ukrainian Home No. 14. Here were children, sheltered in the sanctuary of a bourgeois dacha, taking classes in military buildings vacated by tsarist cadets and the Red Army, osten-

sibly improving their physical health and moral fortitude through their labor outdoors and their knowledge through their study, writing, and contributions to a revolutionary institution. And, lest we get too serious, when opportunity presented itself, the children also enjoyed a frolic on the neighbouring Arkady beach. The point is that the children's town by the sea, by the border, and by the threatening and alluring city of Odesa performed all these roles for the children under its protection. The simultaneity of its multiple, overlapping competencies only increased its significance to the young Soviet state, its charges, and to the promise of collectivism.

Children and youth could be "savaged" as well as "savage." The long imperial and Soviet anxiety about the moral contagion that the urban street represented was meant to be resolved by the very range of responsibilities that the Odesa Comintern Children's Town No. 1 embraced. If the initial motivation was containing the threat of juvenile delinquency and vagrancy, activities such as those advocated by Ivasevych recognized that the broader environment inscribed lasting injury on young constitutions. Educators, like Ivasevych, who believed that children could not be morally "defective," would come to be labelled "florists" from the slogan "Children Are the Flowers of Life."[36] In a very real sense, children in the town functioned as their own florists, cultivating themselves as much as vegetal blossoms. Wildness could be tamed, and individual desires subordinated. Within the bustle of activity, the larger "scientific" tension between a children's intrinsic deficits and their victimhood by external, corrupting forces seemed trivial, if not reconciled. And although isolation, correction, and salvation were inherently bound up in the enterprise of the town, they could not be reduced to a singular punitive focus.

## Notes

1 "Street Children in Early Soviet Odesa" will appear as "The Savagery of Youth: Odesan Street Children, Public Anxiety, and Collectivist Remedies." In *Proceedings of "The Soviet 'I' and Soviet 'We' Between Ideology and Reality" International Conference, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy,* (forthcoming). It is reprinted with the permission of the editors.
2 Gearing, "The Structural Poses of 18th Century Cherokee Villages," p. 1149.
3 Kelly, *Children's World*, p. 157.
4 Beer, *Renovating Russia*, pp. 191–201.
5 Ibid., pp. 105–106.

6 Galmarini-Kabala, *The Right to Be Helped*, 86–87; Andy Byford, *Science of the Child in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia*, pp. 156–157; Caroli, *L'Enfance abondonnée et délinquante dans la Russie Soviétique (1917–1937)*, pp. 35, 38, 188–202.
7 Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, 283 fn. 229.
8 Potemkin, *Pervyi detskii gorodok imeni Kominterna*, p. 7.
9 For more on the founding of the town, see: Pauly, "Curative Mythmaking," pp. 145–183; Kuz'mych, "Dytiache mistechko im. Kominterna v dokumentakh ta materialakh DAOO ta biblioteky ONIuA," pp. 198–202; Petryshyna and Iurii, "Do istorii stvorennia pershoho derzhavnoho pozakovoho dytiachoho mistechka v Odesi," pp. 191–197.
10 Potemkin, *Pervyi detskii gorodok imeni Kominterna*, p. 9.
11 Willimott, *Living the Revolution*, p. 45.
12 Ibid., pp. 18, 137.
13 Potemkin, *Pervyi detskii gorodok imeni Kominterna*, p. 9.
14 Ibid., pp. 13–14.
15 King, *The Moldovans*, p. 56.
16 For more on this military campaign, see: Deriabin, *Oktiabr 1920-go*.
17 Potemkin, *Pervyi detskii gorodok imeni Kominterna*, p. 15.
18 Ibid., p. 16.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., pp. 17–18. In hungry Odesa, this was not a surprising occurrence. Thefts from warehouses maintained by the American Relief Administration occurred regularly in the former Russian Empire, sometimes with the explicit sanction of Soviet authorities. Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand*, pp. 135–140, pp. 191–201.
21 Potemkin, *Pervyi detskii gorodok imeni Kominterna*, pp. 27–28.
22 Ibid., p. 24.
23 Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, pp. 121–122.
24 Caroli, *L'Enfance abondonnée et délinquante dans la Russie Soviétique (1917–1937)*, p. 297.
25 Ball provides a full description of the great variety of corrective institutions. Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, pp. 92–93, 96–97, 137, 157, 244. See also: Slavko, *Detskaia besprizornost' v Rossii v pervoe desiatiletie sovetskoi vlasti*, pp. 106–107.
26 *Derzhavnyi arkhiv Odes'koï oblasti (DAOO)*, f. R-1234, op. 1, spr. 8, spr. 82.
27 *DAOO*, f. R-1234, op. 1, spr. 8, ark. 128.

28 On labor instruction generally in Soviet Ukraine and Russia, see: Pauly, *Breaking the Tongue*; Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse*. On the corrupting influence of the family, see: Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades*.
29 Ivasevych, "Z zhyttia Ukraïns'koho domu ch. 14 1-ho dyt. horodka Kominterna v Odesi," pp. 28–29.
30 Ibid., p. 29.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., p. 30.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., pp. 29–30.
35 See, for example: DAOO, f. R-1234, op. 1, spr. 8, ark. 126–127; R-112, op. 1, spr. 488, ark. 30; DAOO, f. R-134, op. 1, spr. 1006, ark. 92–93, 95–96; DAOO, f. R-150, op. 1, spr. 326, ark. 182.
36 Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened*, p. 129.

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