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Comrade Pavlik: the Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero (book review)

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Catriona Kelly. *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero*.
Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero by Catriona Kelly
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mid-1920s when the party generally shifted responsibility for social propaganda to higher organs. As workers' club directors and trade union officials assumed responsibility for the agitation trials from local activists, verdicts that focused on individual guilt superseded collective social responsibility for problems, and punishment for wrongdoing displaced social enlightenment as a prime objective. Crimes of commission (mistreatment of machines) and omission (failure to join "voluntary" Soviet social organizations such as the Society of the Friends of the Air Force) both brought forth denunciation under the guise of criticism and self-criticism, which replaced the dialogues characteristic of the earlier agitation trials. As distinctions between reality and theatricality thus became even more blurred in the second half of the 1920s, the Communist Youth League staged trials of private behavior that signaled the state's increasing intrusion into the spheres of family, morality, and personal life. And by the time the party began conducting real show trials of engineers and technical specialists in 1928, emphasis had permanently shifted to identifying scapegoats rather than debating values. As Wood demonstrates convincingly, the mock trials of 1930–1933 had become so dominated by schematic characters and stories that they lacked dramatic interest, even as they laid the foundation for the Manichean Stalinist show trials of 1936–1938.

This book stands on a substantial body of sources. Researching a genre that valued spontaneity and sometimes proceeded without a script presents special problems to the researcher, which makes Wood's vast array of sources all the more impressive. Moreover, she enhances the volume of the evidence with the keen insight she shows in analyzing the large number of plays that illustrate her story. Drawing on anthropology and sociology, Wood weaves a sophisticated interplay between the perspectives of the organizers and audience/participants that no short review can reproduce adequately. The result is a fascinating account of the rapid road from socialist utopia to Soviet distopia that deserves a wide audience.

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CATRIONA KELLY. *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero*. London: Granta Books, 2005. Pp. xxxii, 352. £17.99.

Pavlik Morozov was arguably the most famous child in Soviet history. Catriona Kelly's account of his life, death, and legend begins with a description of Soviet ten-year-olds gathered around a bonfire at a Young Pioneer camp, listening to the story for the first time: "Long ago, before you were born . . . back in the early 1930s, there was a little boy, not much older than you" (p. xxii) whose father was working against the collectivization of the Soviet countryside. When good little Pioneer Pavlik found out, he reported his father to the police. In retaliation, his relatives brutally murdered him and his younger brother.

The rest of Catriona Kelly's wide-ranging and engaging book aims to destabilize and deconstruct every aspect of this campfire story. Kelly seeks to uncover Morozov's "real life" and to trace the creation, transmission, reception, mutation, and eventual eclipse of the Pavlik legend. The result is a book that is part murder mystery and part scholarly analysis of Soviet propaganda in the making that may hold as much appeal for real crime buffs as for historians of the Soviet Union and of childhood more generally.

Kelly's examination of the rise and fall of the Pavlik legend proves a useful lens through which to view Soviet conceptions of children and childhood. From the first years of Bolshevik power, Soviet propaganda pictured children as active fighters for revolution. During the campaign to remake the countryside, the Pioneer press featured stories of children clashing with neighbors and even parents who were reluctant to join the collective farms. She emphasizes that such propaganda had the capacity to inspire the young, and "children who denounced were not just a figment of propagandists' imagination" (p. 41).

Still, whether Pavlik was a dedicated Pioneer denouncer, as the legend claimed, remains unclear. Granted unprecedented access to the once secret Morozov case file in the Central Archive of the Federal Security Service (formerly the KGB), Kelly provides a detailed—perhaps too detailed for some tastes—account of the murder investigation. Ultimately neither the case file, other archival sources, nor interviews with surviving villagers yield definitive answers to questions regarding Pavlik's life and death. An exhaustive review of the available evidence leaves the central event of denunciation "not proven" (p. 239).

The case file does, however, shed considerable light on how investigators and journalists began the process of turning Pavlik into a national cult figure. The local police initially viewed the two boys found murdered in the woods in September 1932 as victims of a village quarrel. Within a few days, however, the arrival of the district political police (OGPU) turned the investigation in a more ideological direction. Investigators now described Pavlik as a prominent pro-Soviet activist and sought evidence of a murderous conspiracy of wealthy peasants. Some two months later, when the central press picked up the story of the grisly murders, Pavlik's denunciation of his father gained new prominence, and the local boy activist began to be transformed into a "Soviet saint" (p. 109). The process culminated a year after the murders, when the novelist Maxim Gorky decided to promote the story.

Just as Pavlik was reaching the pinnacle of fame in the mid-1930s, however, the legend came into conflict with changing conceptions of childhood. By 1936, Soviet propaganda and law (notably the banning of abortion) sought to endorse and enforce "traditional family values" (p. 148). Kelly surveys updated Stalinist versions of the Pavlik legend that turned the boy into a model pupil and downplayed the "junior vigilante" (p. 155) theme. After Joseph Stalin's death, his successors

made what Kelly judges to be an unsuccessful attempt to rehabilitate the Pavlik cult in tandem with a rehabilitation of the “ideal of the self-assertive child” (p. 198), whose self-assertion was in the service of Soviet values.

While focusing on shifts in official conceptions of childhood, the book also attempts to discern what children made of the legend. Drawing on oral histories and memoirs, Kelly argues that young people in the 1930s often responded to Pavlik’s self-sacrifice, rather than his act of denunciation. She finds that by the 1940s, Pavlik was less popular—among both the producers of the Pioneer press and the children who consumed it—than wartime martyrs and the fictional Timur, a lovable youthful adventurer. In the late Soviet period, distaste for Pavlik the denouncer seems to have grown, even as war heroes remained on their pedestals. By the post-Soviet period, Pavlik had become a “fallen hero” (p. 218), a symbol of the worst excesses of the Soviet state and, Kelly argues, a cause of post-Soviet society’s deep suspicion of whistle blowing. While not all readers will agree that “the Pavlik legend is central to the understanding of Soviet history” (p. 15), Kelly’s book provides a nuanced account of how Soviet practices, from police investigations to campfires, turned a real life and death into myth.

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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTHERN AFRICA

DONALD BLOXHAM. *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005. Pp. xiv, 329. \$35.00.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire tried to stave off military defeat and dissolution as it was beleaguered by the Great Powers and harried by its own minorities. In dealing with the European empires, various sultans tried to strengthen the state, modernize the military, and balance one power against the other in the great game of international politics. In dealing with minorities, the sultans vacillated between reform on the one hand and repression on the other. Nor did the Ottomans shrink from widespread massacre as a method of intimidating or even eliminating minorities that called for or seemed to demand self-termination.

In 1894–1896, under the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II, tens of thousands of Armenians were massacred, following a period when some political parties had agitated for Armenian independence and had called on the Great Powers for aid in their efforts. In 1908, the Young Turks staged a political revolution. They were led by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), whose original purpose was to reform the empire in order to preserve it. But after the disastrous Balkan wars of 1912, the Young Turks and the CUP were themselves further radicalized as they abandoned earlier pluralist notions

and became converts to a hard-edged integral Turkish nationalism. Whereas even under Abdülhamid II, Armenians and other minorities had legitimate albeit inferior roles to play in the empire, increasingly under the nationalists no Christian minority had a secure place in the new Turkey. The Armenians especially aroused the CUP’s suspicions: they could make claims to be the original settlers of Anatolia—the heartland of Turkey—and their population centers in the east were located on the border with Russia, Turkey’s traditional enemy.

Even before World War I, the Armenians were viewed as a possible fifth column, an internal threat linked to an external enemy. Once the war started, what seemed to be theoretical became perceived by the CUP as a real danger. It is in this context that Armenians in the army were grouped into labor battalions, which were later massacred. At the same time Armenian communal leaders were forced on the pain of death to surrender weapons, even if they had none to give up. (Some communities actually purchased weapons so that they could be seen as complying with government orders!) Then in 1915, as the war turned against the Turks in the east, the CUP orchestrated the deportation of the Armenians, supposedly to protect the eastern provinces from Russian invasion and Armenian collusion. It soon became apparent that the deportations were not a means for moving a possibly unreliable population from the front; instead they became the principal method for destroying the Armenian community. More than a million Armenians perished as the deportee caravans were set upon by organized killers and tribesmen. What mass murder left undone, mass starvation and disease finished off. Some scholars estimate that about ninety percent of the deportees perished en route to the Syrian desert. This destruction has come to be known as the Armenian Genocide by most scholars of the events. To this day, however, the Turkish government denies that the deportations were genocidal and claims that the Armenians perished in the course of a civil war that they themselves had provoked.

Donald Bloxham has recast and reinterpreted these events, and in doing so he has made an important and original contribution to the historiography of the Armenian genocide and to the analysis of its denial by the Turkish authorities. Bloxham disagrees with a standard explanation that posits a prewar conspiracy among CUP leaders who took the opportunity of war with the Entente, especially Russia, to commit genocide against the Armenians. Neither does he subscribe to the “provocation thesis.” Instead, Bloxham tries to demonstrate how, during World War I, integral Turkish nationalists like Mehmed Talât Paşa, Enver Paşa, and others magnified the Armenian threat, which led to a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby Turkish repressions evoked Armenian resistance in some cases like Musa Dagh and Van. Turkish nationalists then reinterpreted Armenian self-defense as aggression and treachery. Bloxham calls this a process of “cumulative policy radicalization,” a term which he borrows from the historiography of the Ho-