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

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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assumed responsibility for the agitation trials from local activists, verdicts that focused on individual guilt superseded collective social responsibility for problems, and punishment for wrongdoing displaced social enlightenment as a prime objective.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.

William B. Husband
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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. xiii) 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

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made what Kelly judges to be an unsuccessful attempt to rehabilitate the Pavlik cult in tandem with a reha-
bilitiation 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 chil-
dren 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, Pav-
lik 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 pro-
vides 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: Im-
perialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Otto-

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Em-
pire 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 em-
pires, various sultans tried to strengthen the state, mod-
nernize the military, and balance one power against the
other in the great game of international politics. In
dealing with minorities, the sultans vacillated between
liberal reform on the one hand and repression on the other.

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 Abdulhamid II, Ar-
menians and other minorities had legitimate albeit in-
ferior 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 Turk-
key—and their population centers in the east were lo-
cated 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 com-
munal leaders were forced on the pain of death to sur-
rrender weapons, even if they had none to give up.
(Some communities actually purchased weapons so that
they could be seen as complying with government or-
ders!) 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 mil-
lion Armenians perished as the deportee caravans were
set upon by organized killers and tribesmen. What mass
murder left undone, mass starvation and disease fin-
ished off. Some scholars estimate that about ninety per-
cent 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 Ar-
menians 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 Ar-
menian 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 “prov-
ocation thesis.” Instead, Bloxham tries to demonstrate
how, during World War I, integral Turkish nationalists
like Mehmed Talat Pasha, Enver Pasha, and others mag-
nified the Armenian threat, which led to a self-fulfilling
prophecy whereby Turkish repressions evoked Arme-
nian 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-

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