

Children Heroes

Have there been child *heroes* in Southeast Europe in the last two centuries? Have there been heroes such young Gavroshe from Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables", who became symbols of uprisings, national and social revolutions and liberation wars? We shall find such a child on a canvas by Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) entitled "Liberty Leading the People" (1830-31). He is charging from the barricades, armed with two pistols.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the Balkans and Southeast Europe abounded in uprisings against foreign rule, independence wars, national and social revolutions and rebellions and local regional wars. Two world wars were also waged there, costing the lives of millions. And, like it or not, children took part in them, usually as victims but sometimes as combatants.

What is surprising is that there are few traces of "child heroism" in the 19th century, and it seems that the role of victim, most

frequently anonymous victim, was reserved for children (and women) in the dramatic events of those times, at least as far as historic memory and tradition is concerned. War and the role of *hero*, it would seem, were matters for adults, reserved virtually exclusively for men.

Therefore, the historic tradition of the Southeast European nations in the 19th century has few examples and few testimonies of children elevated to the symbolic role of *hero*, which does not mean that there were not many more in reality. In the Hungarian revolution of 1848-1849 there appeared (anonymous) drummer boys, who beat out the rhythm for the battle ranks of the revolutionary army and strode out ahead of them. They were continuing the cruel tradition of 18th century European armies, and particularly from the age of the Napoleonic wars, that numbered small drummer boys in their ranks. The legendary standard-bearers and gunner boys also

The cartoon strip "Never Slaves"

in which the main characters were Mirko and Slavko, boy heroes and combatants in a Partizan unit, was published for over 20 years. It had a large following and was very popular in Yugoslavia in the sixties and seventies.



belong to the similar tradition of revolutionary events.

The twentieth century brought new and even more terrible wars to the Balkans, wars that did not spare the civilian population. The Balkan wars led to an increase in both the suffering and the exodus of the civilian population (that of the Muslim population after the First Balkan War and, later, that of the Christian population of different nationalities towards their "mother countries").

Children mounted their own kind of resistance in occupied Serbia from 1915 to 1918 by sabotaging the imposed system of foreign language, writing and schooling. They also helped the insurrectionists that fought the Bulgarian and Austrian occupation troops in eastern and southern Serbia. Cases were recorded of boys being taken as prisoners of war together with their soldier fathers and of their being held as such until the end of the war or, indeed, all trace having been lost of them. Nonetheless, the picture of the child *hero* did not come to light in the First World War in Serbia.

In Romania, the case of Marie Zaharia (Mariuca), a nine-year-old girl who perished in 1917 helping Romanian soldiers in the fight against the Germans, is well known. She was buried in the mausoleum in Marasesti together with the fallen combatants. As the only such example, she has remained carved into collective memory and was mentioned in textbooks in the second half of the century.

Literature, however, has created the characters of *child* heroes more for political or propaganda effect than for the cause of literature.

Totalitarian movements introduced the large-scale misuse of children, their organized indoctrination, politicization and militarization. Children were regarded

as future loyal party and army members. In the Second World War, children, as victims and also as real or imaginary heroes, became idealized and mythologized to an incomparably greater extent. From real characters they were quickly transformed into "models for future generations", "ideals" or "role models for the future".

This phenomenon was particularly widespread in the region of Yugoslavia in the Second World War. The Partizan commu-

Child – "Anti-hero"

Father and Son

*Old Amidža was once walking along the road
Like a grey-haired mandarin;
Hopping, jumping, running behind him
Born of heroic blood, his youngest son..*

*A fair was underway. And at the fair
Sabers, pistols, an Arabian steed,
Tunisian caps, silver and gold,
Silk from Venice, Geneva clocks.*

*- Eh, what shall your father buy for you? -
He asked the child, seeking his heart's desire
- A saber, shining, sharp and bright
Or a valiant Arab steed?*

*Or do you want garments of silk?
May you be clad all in silk!
Tell me, my son, tell me,
Let me buy you buttons of gold.*

*The child scratched his head,
As if he knew not what to choose;
- Oh, father, father, buy me, father,
Buy me some roasted lamb...*

*Now the father scratched his head,
Looking long at his small son:
- I dreamt of sabers sharp and lances long,
And my son dreams of roasted lamb!*



Djura Jakšić (1832-1878), Serbian poet and painter, representative of Romanticism. He is known for his lyrical and patriotic poetry. His poem "Father and Son" is an ironical portrayal of the "generation gap" between the heroic, insurrectionist generation of fathers and their non-heroic descendents.



Heroes of the reconstruction

nist units fighting occupying troops and collaborators also numbered children, mostly boys, who had a special place in them as trusted couriers or, on account of their small size and ability to pass unnoticed,

Taken from a Yugoslav primer

On the Highway

There are pioneers on the highway too. They have their shovels too. There's Spase. He's loading and Spira's doing the carrying. Paja's filling in holes and Puniša's leveling. Petar was the one who filled in the most holes and did the most leveling this morning.

The work's over. The Pioneers are carrying their shovels and singing: "We are Tito's pioneers."

were trained and used to blow up fortified positions by means of hand grenades ("bomber boys").

Their adult fellow combatants treated them with great deference as such boys were performing deeds that often led to loss of life. Indeed, those boys competed amongst themselves as to who would perform the largest number of suicidal missions and who would show the greatest defiance in the face of death. That was why they became *heroes* during their lifetimes, and death in combat brought them the halo of martyrdom, having given their lives for freedom and a "new life". They were awarded the title of "national hero" posthumously, and tales of their feats were to be found in textbooks and novels for young people, poems and songs. Many schools, children's homes, theatres... throughout the former Yugoslavia

were named after them.

This virtually mythical image of the valiant little „bomber boy“ or courier was part of the official ideological cult of the Yugoslav Partizans’ anti-fascist struggle. It was popularized in different ways, and the many films made about the Partizans after the war almost always contained the character of a boy hero, at least in the form of a cameo role. They were the main *heroes* in strip cartoons targeting children and young people.

The central and best known figure in this cult of the boy hero was Boško Buha, who had fled in the face of Croatian fascist (Ustasha) terror and reached Serbia with his father as a refugee in 1941, whereupon he joined the Partizans. When he died at the age of seventeen in 1943, he had already won great fame as a fearless ”bomber boy“.

As part of the propaganda machinery, stories about child *heroes* that fought together with Partizans were also used in a similar way in Bulgaria (Mitko Palauzov from Gabrovo, Kalitko the Shepherd, Vassil and Sava Kokareshkov from Belitza).

During the uprising against Soviet troops in Hungary in 1956, young boys threw Molotov cocktails at Soviet tanks in suicidal attacks on the streets of Budapest.

In the period from 1945 to 1990, it was not advisable, and indeed not possible, to pose the question of the moral justification of such wartime misuse of children and the sacrifice of their lives, regardless of the objectives.

M.R.

Question

- 8.1. Which children have been considered heroes in the history of your country? How did they become heroes? Are there any anti-heroes?
- 8.2. Which values or political ideas are symbolized by the examples of the child *heroes* in the book and those you know from your countries?

The Legendary Bomber Boy

After wandering for days, Boško Buha reached liberated territory. He finally found himself among the Partizans of the Second Proletarian Brigade. He told them of everything that had happened to him and how he had lost his father. They received him as one of their own and tried to be like parents to him.

At the beginning they did not immediately give the boy any weapons. They did not let him go into action, either. The boy objected, saying that ”he was just as good a fighter as the others“, but to no avail...

But Boško went into action for the first time in secret. The commander was not to know.

Finally the members of the brigade gave in. They gave the boy a gun. But he preferred grenades. He trusted grenades the most. He carried them in clusters around his body like ripe grapes...



Boško Buha

The Second Proletarian Brigade was eternally on the move. It was constantly fighting Germans, Ustasha and Chetniks.

An Ustasha machine gun was firing mercilessly from a bunker. It had already cut men down. No one could get near it; no one could blow it up; no one could silence it.

Finally, little Boško Buha approached the bunker. Silently. Cautiously. Taking care no one should notice him. He removed the safety device and threw the bomb. One, two... a mighty explosion... Tremendous. The young boy jumped into the smoke-filled bunker after the bomb.

The other combatants held their breath. No one managed to say a word, to warn him... it was all over in a matter of seconds.

Gunfire was heard from the bunker.

With fear in their hearts, the Partizans continued to watch the bunker into which

the little bomber boy had disappeared... They feared for the life of their little friend...

A little later, the boy appeared with a big pistol in his hands. He had taken it from a dead Ustasha. He waved to the Partizans behind him, urging them forward.

- There's no one here any more, he said. We can pass freely.

While his fellow fighters passed, the boy looked at the Ustasha bunker that he had just taken with his grenades.

By day, when the brigade was resting in a village after an action or exhausting march, Boško would seek out the village children and play with them. And the children would gather around him, staring at his uniform, at the bombs in his belt and his gun. They envied him.

- What are you looking at me like that for? - Boško would often ask his little friends. - You can be like me.

- How? - One boy asked him once.

- Easily. Come with me and join the Partizans.

- And will the comrades give me everything that they've given you?

- Yes, they gave me everything...

And the boys often went off with Boško. The mothers and fathers would have great trouble bringing them home.

The First Anti-Fascist Congress of the Youth of Yugoslavia was being held in Bihać. Delegates had arrived from all over the country. Comrade Tito was also there. He was following the work of the Congress.

Boško Buha, the leader of the bomber boy section of the Second Proletarian Brigade, took the floor. He was so small that he could barely be seen over the rostrum...

A whisper went around the hall: "Boško Buha". Loud applause broke out.

He then told them how the bomber boys of the Second Proletarian Brigade were fighting against the Ustasha, how they were eliminating their bunkers. He told them that the bomber boys had once climbed on to the roof of a house and thrown grenades down the chimney on to the Ustasha inside.

Indescribable delight reigned in the hall. Another lengthy applause rang out. The little bomber boy descended from the dais. Comrade Tito stood up to congratulate the

battle-tested fighter. He removed his watch and gave it to the boy. Boško was embarrassed.

- Thank-you, Comrade Tito - he barely muttered, overcome with joy.

Aleksa Mikić

Small Stories about Great Children

Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1957

Fateless

During the four years at school I did not hear a single word about this place. (...) The disadvantage was that I had to learn here on my own that we were in a "concentration camp", a Konzentrationslager. Even these places weren't all the same, I was informed. This concentration camp, for example, was a Vernichtungslager, that is, an "annihilation camp." An Arbeitslager, "labor camp", was an entirely different place: there life was easy; the circumstances and the food, they said, were not comparable, which is natural,

Recommendation

- Compare the child heroes from the book with examples from your own country. Are there any similarities and differences in the values as represented by the child *heroes*?
- Take your pupils to visit memorials in your town – analyze the value systems they represent. Have those systems changed over the passage of time?

because, after all, that camp's purpose was different. We were supposed to go to such a place, provided nothing happened to prevent us; this, several people admitted, could conceivably happen. At any rate, we were warned that it was not advisable to report in sick, since the camp hospital was at the foot of one of the chimneys, called by the abbreviated name „Number 2.“ We ran the greatest danger with water, unboiled water, that is, like the water I had drunk on the way from the station to the baths but after all I couldn't have known this. Admittedly there had been a sign. I can't

LAJOS PÓSA

The Young Cannoneer

*Upon the vast battle field
flowers of blood are springing
and in every soldier's heart
stars of fire are twinkling.*

*Heaven and earth are both shaken
by cannons' roar and swords' rattle
the ground is getting covered by
the bloodflowers of wild battle.*

*A young child of a cannoneer
is taking aim so ardent
- the missile's like a firebolt
and hits the foe's lines hardest.*

*The enemy is firing back
with fierce shells like lightning,
and the ardent young soldier
is on the ground now dying.*

*The captain's kind and merciful
to wipe the blood from his face,
while the boy is dying there
in his captain's embrace.*

*'Have I hit them, tell me, sir -'
he can hardly whisper,
'Ten Germans fell in the dust
when your shelling hit there.'*

*'Please, sir, let my mother know
shall my life here end,
that I've been a good son to her
and my fatherland.*

*He is dying with these words,
with a smile on his face.
The captain's crying, holding him
still tight in his embrace.*

*(in Hazafias versek. Signer és Wolfner é.n.,
Hungary p. 18.)*



deny that, but still, I thought, the soldier should have said something to me. But wait, I said to myself. I should look at the fundamental purpose of the camp, shouldn't I? Still, fortunately, I felt fine, and I didn't hear any complaints from the other boys either.

(...)

I was quite hungry, but as it happened, one piece of bread was to be our whole supper, and I had eaten that already in the morning. We then found our barracks. The „block“ was



Prototype of child hero, Second World War

entirely bare on the inside; it was a room without any furniture and even without lights, with concrete floors where the night's rest had to be arranged the same way as it was in the horse stables at the barracks. I leaned my back against the legs of a boy behind me and supported the back of the boy in front of me with my knees. Since I was tired after all these new experiences and impressions, I quickly fell asleep.

Imre Kertész, Fateless, Hungary

Dear Children! Little Hungarians!

I'm searching for words wishing to rip their old robes off, because I speak to You!

Wash yourselves, clarify yourselves ye Hungarian words in the splendour of mag-

nificent October! Our language, purify yourself from filth and squalor, sound with the ring of dulcimers, sound with the ring of zithers, echo the words of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers!

Sound, ye refreshed, purified Hungarian words about those who stood on guard together with their valiant fathers! You, valiant sons, valiant children whose heroic deeds are marvelled by the world. Our Little Davids, your names gleam together with those of old-time heroes, warriors of our great Prince Rákóczi! Only their feats can be compared to yours! Valiant sons of the 1848 revolution, heroes of the battle of Piski, Bem's, Damjanich's redcaps smile down at you!

Little heroes fighting side by side with their fathers. East and west, north and south speaks about you. Miraculous legends spread, new sagas are born about your feats!

The heroic epic of our century has been written in your blood!

We do not know your names yet, little Botonds. Yet we pledge vow to keep your memory alive forever and ever!

As long as Hungarians live on this Earth, we shall relate your feats! We promise to record all the heroic deeds of the glorious days and write a chronicle worthy of you.

To fulfil our vow, our magazine, your fathers and grandfathers read and liked, now starts again. These heroic days have opened the door for MY MAGAZINE, too. We, editors promise that we never ever desert you, Hungarian children! Sweet fairytales and heroic sagas about Hungarian heroes of old and new will resound in these columns! Poems will be born, together with the springs, streams and rivers of Hungarian tales, legends. You'll drink of these refreshing springs, feel how you're rejuvenated and become true Hungarian patriots!

We beg you to help us. Please, record everything you've got to know about the glorious days!

Little Hungarians! Let us join our hands, we take care of you, we never let you down, nobody will ever tear us apart!

István Komjáthy

*My Magazine, Children's literary weekly,
Hungary, 31 October 1956.*

used to be pioneers and got fed up with all the lies at the troop meeting, now jumped at rumbling, squeaking tanks with petrol bottles in hand.

We have uprooted the trees of lies and the monsters of slavery were blown up into nothing...

"What will become of our children?" parents kept worrying about your future. And see the miracle: you have fought the battle, guarded the shop-windows (so that the purity of our sacred revolution is not stained!) you have carried bread to the sick, carried the wounded to hospital. The battle of grownups is your battle, too. There was no need of pretentious, hypocritical troop-meetings – you knew your duty at once, you knew where to go and what to do.

We owe a debt of respect and gratitude for those who shed their blood and gave their life for us!

Our battle is not over yet!

You must learn the lesson of our revolution for life!

When weekdays are back, you must go back to learn, to play. Learn and work hard. Learn a lot, learn the truth, learn with the true Hungarian spirit!

If you do, then sweet storytelling might start again one day...Once upon a time...

Uncle Miklós, Hungary

Once upon a Time...

Once upon a time, there was a...

Children, it is so difficult to tell a fairy tale now. It is so difficult to tell tales about dwarfs or giants. I wish I could tell a tale about Big John, not just John but Johnny, Louis, Alex and Steve! Big Johns are among you and your brave friends! How could a boy of ten or fourteen uproot trees or tame bears...?

I wish I could tell you about this, but it is so difficult to tell a tale about what's happened here in the beautiful capital city of our country under your very eyes. Louis, Alex, Steve and Johnny had rattling machine-guns in their hands. They who