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Between School and Barracks: Militarization and Ideological Socialization of Children in Soviet Lithuania

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Abstract

Between 1944 and 1990, Soviet rule in Lithuania brought not only the destruction of statehood but also profound economic, social, and cultural transformations. Seeking to stabilize the regime, Soviet authorities attempted to reshape society itself. While politically unreliable or potentially resistant adults were controlled through repression, deportations, and other coercive measures, particular attention was directed toward children and youth as the future of the Soviet system.

Within the state-controlled educational and extracurricular environment, the Soviet regime employed instruments of soft power aimed at shaping ideologically indoctrinated, politically loyal, and militarized citizens. A key role in this process was played by the Young Octobrists and Pioneer organizations. Although formally voluntary, participation was strongly encouraged and often reinforced by social pressure. Operating in schools, summer camps, and community institutions, these organizations combined ideological instruction with physical training, paramilitary activities, and politically framed civic engagement, promoting obedience, collectivist values, and loyalty to the Soviet state.

Program content incorporated elements of Marxist–Leninist ideology, the glorification of the Red Army, and narratives emphasizing external threats. Activities such as marches, shooting competitions, civil defense exercises, uniforms, badges, and ceremonial rituals reinforced hierarchical discipline and normalized militarized behavior. Children were also targeted through literature, periodicals, and animated media that heroized the Soviet army, presented soldiers as guarantors of peace, and portrayed the Soviet Union as surrounded by hostile forces.

Drawing on archival sources, educational manuals, and media materials, this paper analyses how early militarization functioned as a mechanism of ideological socialization and soft coercion, integrating children into Soviet structures and contributing to the consolidation of Soviet authority in Lithuania.

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