



Soviet Children's Flags

Anne M. Platoff

Children and Flags

Many vexillologists can trace their interest in flags to their childhood. They might have begun collecting flags as children, or learned how to identify a variety of flags at that time. However, most did not understand the full symbolism of flags and their usage at the time when they first became interested in flags. That level of interest came later as they matured and the level of understanding became more complex. Clearly, though, something about flags appeals to children—perhaps their color, or the way they move in the breeze. Regardless of the reason, children are fascinated by flags, even if they do not fully grasp the symbolism behind the objects themselves.

For this reason, flags have become a popular tool for sociologists to gauge the socialization of children into the national context. At some point during childhood, flags shift from being a colorful object to being an important symbol in a child's life. As children mature, they develop a sense of nationality and their national flag becomes an important symbol of that identity. Sociologists have determined that there are distinct stages of this development. In the first stage (ages 6–7) children have little understanding of their nationality. At ages 8–9, they begin to understand more about the country where they live and begin to understand that there is a specific flag which is associated with their country. Finally, at ages 10–11, children develop a more complex understanding of their nationality and can express an understanding of the political ideas associated with that nationality.¹

Several studies have revealed a little about the nature of children's knowledge about, and understanding of, flags. For example, one study demonstrated that children show a preference for their national flag at a very young age. When British 4-year-olds were shown a page with eight national flags and asked which flag they liked best, 79% picked the Union Jack. The percentage increased with age, so that 96% of 7-year-olds preferred the British flag. Interestingly, it wasn't until about age 8 that the majority of the children were able to name the flag correctly. When asked why they had selected the flag, the youngest children responded that it had nice colors, even though the sample also contained other red, white, and blue flags (France and Norway). Older children typically responded that they had selected it "because it is our flag". Another study conducted on American children showed that 60% of second graders (ages 7–8) and 89% of third graders (ages 8–9) preferred the flag of the United States. By the 5th grade (ages 10–11) 100% of the children selected the U.S. flag as their favorite. As with the British children, the youngest children explained their preference because of the colors, while the older children stated that they had chosen the flag of their country.²

Another American study confirmed these findings, showing that as early as kindergarten the children would select the U.S. flag as their favorite. Interesting, in this study the same children chose the "Russian" [Soviet] flag as their least favorite. In yet another American study, the views of the children about particular flags were recorded. For example, while the youngest children cited "pretty colors" for their preference, the 7-year-olds preferred their own flag because it was the national flag. This age group also typically identified the purpose of a flag as "to identify ownership". By this they meant, for example, that a ship flying the American flag clearly identified it as belonging to the United States. As the age of the children increased, their understanding of other meanings of the flag became more complex, so that by age 11 or 12 the children exhibited a fully-developed concept of both the meaning of the flag and of their own national identity. A later Canadian study conducted to gauge children's opinions about flag burning showed that the older children were more likely to object to the symbolism of such an act.³

Further, for some reason, the use of flags by children can evoke different emotions than a similar use of flags by adults. For example, a demonstration by adults all waving national flags might be interpreted by those outside that culture as overly nationalistic, militaristic, or even threatening. The same demonstration by children somehow seems to take on the innocence of the participants. Clearly, a group of uniformed Boy Scouts or Girl Guides/Scouts performing a flag ceremony does not seem to evoke the same nationalistic concerns as might a group of uniformed adult civilians performing the same activity. An anthropologist studying nationalism in Norway observed that "the assumption seems to be that a nation that puts schoolchildren with flags at the center of national celebrations cannot be suspected of the wrong sorts of nationalistic and militaristic intentions."⁴

In the Soviet Union (1922–91), the use of flags by children was quite common and a number of flags were designed specifically for them. The flags either represented Soviet children's organizations or were closely associated with their activities. Within the Soviet Union, there was no competition among children's organizations—all were directed by *Komsomol* (an acronym of *Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhi*), the Communist Union of Youth. *Komsomol* was the youth arm of the Communist party and thus was responsible for the development of all organizations for the country's children. Membership in the organizations was not only supported by the government, but heavily encouraged as well.

Soviet Children's Organizations

Many Scoutmasters and Boy Scouts fought against the Red Army in the Russian Civil War (1917–21) which followed the Russian Revolution. During 1918–20, *Komsomol* debated the fate of the Scouting movement in the country, and replaced Scouting with a children's organization sponsored by the Communist Party. The official Russian name of the new organization was *Vsesoiuznaia pionerskaia organizatsiia imeni V. I. Lenina*, which translated as "All-Union Pioneer Organization in the Name of V. I. Lenin". In English it is usually called the "Young Pioneer Organization of the Soviet Union" or simply "Young Pioneers".⁵

Formed with the assistance of former Scoutmasters, the Pioneer Movement retained many elements from Scouting. For example, the organization replicated the basic structure of troops and patrols used by the Scouts, calling them “groups” and “detachments”. Many of the elements of the Scout oath and laws carried over to the new organization, including the promise to serve the country, to be truthful, to help the young and the old, and to serve as an example for others. While joining the organization was voluntary, nearly every child in the Soviet Union participated, at the very least, in the youngest age group. For Soviet children participation in these organizations was simply a part of growing up.⁶

Two of the primary purposes of the Pioneer Movement were to build character and to teach children to function within a collective. Lenin’s wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, explained this philosophy: “We believe that a child’s personality can be best and most fully developed only in a collective. For the collective does not destroy a child’s personality and it improves the quality and content of education.” However, for the participants there were other reasons to participate besides “building character”. As with Scouting groups in other countries, there were a variety of activities available through the Pioneer Movement such as camping, arts and crafts, dramatic arts, science exploration, and many other extracurricular activities.⁷

Little Octobrists

The youngest age group in the Soviet Pioneer Movement was the *Oktiabrista*, or “Little Octobrists”. Named after the term used for children born in the years of the October Revolution (1923–24), the group was an introduction to the Pioneer Movement for ages 7–10, similar to the Cub Scouts in Boy Scouting or Brownies in the Girl Guide/Scout organizations. Octobrist groups were organized in the schools, making it convenient for the children and their leaders. Children in the same class were organized into detachments of Octobrists called *otriad oktiabriat*. Within a detachment, the children were organized into groups of 5 called *vezdochki* or “little stars”. “Little stars” were led by a Young Pioneer responsible for the children in his/her group.⁸

At the age of 7, children were initiated into the Little Octobrists with a formal ceremony. They were taught that “Octobrists are hard workers, love school, and respect their elders; only those who love work are Octobrists.” During the ceremony, a Young Pioneer pinned the badge of the organization onto the left lapel of the new initiate. The emblem of the organization consisted of a red star with a portrait of a three-year-old Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in the center. While the look of the membership pin varied over the years, the basic design remained the same (Figures 1–3). After the initiation, the Young Pioneers would take charge of their “little stars” and present them with an Octobrist *flazhok* (little flag)—a small red flag featuring the Octobrist emblem (Figure 4). Octobrist groups used these flags during ceremonies and gatherings.⁹



Figures 1–3. Badges of the Little Octobrists from various years.



Figure 4. *Flag of the Little Octobrists.*

During their third year in the Octobrists, children began to learn about their country's national symbols. They were taught that the 5-pointed star symbolized the unity of workers from all five continents,¹⁰ and that the hammer and sickle represented the workers and the peasants. They also learned about the symbolism of the Soviet arms. At the age of 10, Octobrists were ready to transition into the Young Pioneers. While most children eventually moved into the next level of the organization, they were admitted in small groups and it was considered very prestigious to be one of the first promoted from one's class. The promotion ceremony included a parade with bugles, drums, and flags. During this ceremony the initiates were presented with the badge of the Young Pioneers and with the red scarf worn by children throughout the Soviet Union.¹¹

Young Pioneers

The Young Pioneer organization incorporated many elements of Scouting. The most obvious example is the Pioneer motto *Vsegda gotov!*, which translates as "Always prepared". It is very similar to the "Be Prepared" motto used by Scouts around the world. As part of the Pioneer ritual, the leader would say "*Bud' gotov!*" (Be prepared!) to which all the children would

respond “*Vsegda gotov!*”. The motto was a major element at the base of the Young Pioneer badge. Behind the motto was a red star with a profile of Lenin centered on it. At the top of the badge behind the star was a three-tongued flame, mildly reminiscent of the 3 petals of Scouting’s fleur-de-lis (Figure 5). The three tongues of the flame represented “the unbreakable alliance of the three generations: the Pioneers, the *Komsomol*, and the Communists, true to Lenin’s teaching and ready to fight for the Party cause”.¹²



Figure 5. Badge of the Young Pioneers



Figure 6. Flag of the Young Pioneers.

The flag of the Young Pioneers had the Pioneer badge centered on a red field (Figure 6). Variant designs included the phrase “*Bud’ gotov*” along with the emblem. One example is a larger flag with the words “*Bud’ gotov!*” on either side of the Pioneer badge. Above the emblem in script is the phrase “*K bor’be za delo Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza*”. Combined with the motto, the writing on the flag means “Be prepared to fight for the cause of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union” (Figure 7). These flags were used in ceremonies, parades, and demonstrations by all Pioneer groups in the Soviet Union and are often seen in photos and posters showing the activities of children in the organization. Combined with the badge and red scarf, the flags of the Young Pioneers were part of everyday life for Soviet children through the age of 15 and reinforced various aspects of the national symbolism of the Soviet Union.



Figure 7. Alternate flag of the Young Pioneers.

Banners of the Octobrists and Young Pioneers

In addition to the formal flags of the organizations, children in these groups also used small vertical banners. Of the banners illustrated, two are unit awards. The Octobrist example includes the Octobrist badge centered within a pentagon. Writing below the image reads “*Luchshei Oktia-briatskoi grappe*”—“To the best Octobrist group” (Figure 8). The Young



Figure 8. Banner for the best Octobrist group.

Pioneer award features profiles of three Young Pioneers, one wearing a forage cap, one a helmet, and the third a *budenovka* cap. Text below reads “*Luchshemu pionerskomu zvenu*”, or “To the best Pioneer unit” (Figure 9). A second example of a Young Pioneer banner shows the Pioneer badge with the “Be Prepared” motto below (Figure 10). The final example features a uniformed bugler with a flag attached to his bugle in the center. Around the bugler are discs with symbols illustrating the various activities of Young Pioneers. These include the primary Soviet symbols of a star, hammer, and sickle, as well as a 5-pointed star and items such as a book, campground, bugles, lyre and dramatic mask, and a nautical wheel. Below the image is the Pioneer motto “Always Prepared” (Figure 11). While the first two



Figure 9. (upper left) Banner for the best Pioneer unit.

Figure 10. (upper right) Pioneer banner with the motto "Be Prepared".

Figure 11. (middle) Pioneer banner with the motto "Always Prepared".

examples were clearly awards, the other two could have been displayed in a school or used by an individual member of the organization.

Holiday Flags

Besides the flags and banners of the Octobrists and the Young Pioneers, there were other flags that are commonly associated with these organizations. In Russian, the flags were called *flazhki prazdnichnye* or “little holiday flags”. These flags were readily available to children—they were inexpensive (about 20 kopeks), sold in toy stores, and given out to children participating in various Pioneer activities. A sample of these flags was obtained through the online auction site eBay. As “holiday flag” suggests, they were sometimes used for public events associated with various official Soviet holidays. Thematically, there is a lot of variety to the flags. They suggest that these flags were also used to socialize children to life in the Soviet Union. As one Russian vexillologist has commented, “It was pretty typical to see a Soviet child holding a flaglet of this kind in hand.”¹³

Many of the flags use typical Soviet symbols associated with the nation and its history. For example, one flag had text that said “*S prazdnikom*” or “With the holiday” with several different symbols: the hammer and sickle from the Soviet national flag, poppies (a symbol of revolution in the Soviet Union), and a dove (a symbol of world peace) (Figure 12). This flag would have been appropriate for parades celebrating International Worker’s Day on 1 May, or for other days celebrating the unity of the world’s workers. A second “With the holiday” design had the text below a star similar to those mounted on top of the Kremlin towers, with fireworks in the background. It would have been a good flag for New Year’s or for any public holiday that featured fireworks displays (Figure 13). Another patriotic design featured the Soviet national arms with the abbreviation “SSSR”, or “USSR” in Russian (Figure 14). Yet another design featured a view of the Kremlin from Red Square, showing Spasskaya tower on the left and the dome of the Kremlin Senate building on the right (Figure 15). Long the seat of power in Russia and the Soviet Union, the Kremlin became a symbol of the Soviet state. The wall on the Red Square side of this segment of



Figures 12–14 (top to bottom). Patriotic symbols on holiday flags: 1) hammer & sickle, poppies, dove, and text “With the holiday”; 2) Kremlin star, fireworks, and text “With the holiday”; 3) Soviet national arms with letters “СССР” (USSR in Russian).



Figure 15. Patriotic symbols on holiday flag: the Kremlin as seen from Red Square.

the Kremlin is the burial place for the most respected heroes of the Soviet Union, with Lenin's tomb on the square just in front of the other memorials. Many parades and public demonstrations during the Soviet era took place in Red Square.¹⁴

Three flags have military or paramilitary symbolism. One example in this category is the only flag in the collection with a reversed image relative to the hoist. It shows the Cruiser *Aurora*, a ship that became a symbol of the Russian Revolution (Figure 16). The story of the *Aurora* was well-known to all Soviet school children. During the Revolution of February 1917, part of the ship's crew sympathized with the revolutionaries and joined the ranks of the Bolsheviks. On 25 October 1917¹⁵ the ship fired one shot as a signal for the revolutionaries to storm the Winter Palace. During this event the Provisional Government was arrested by the Bolsheviks. In 1957 the cruiser was moved to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) where it is now a museum.¹⁶

Another such flag features a *budenovka*, or "broadcloth helmet", part of the uniform of soldiers in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War (Figure 17). The hat was based upon by the helmets worn by soldiers of the Kievan Rus and evoked a connection with the long continuity of Russian history. This style of cap was later popular as a hat for children and was sometimes worn by uniformed Young Pioneers shown in Soviet propaganda posters. Either of these designs would have been ideal for celebrating the anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution on November 7. An



Figures 16–18 (top to bottom). Military symbols including 1) the Cruiser Aurora, symbol of the Russian Revolution; 2) a budenovka cap and sword; and 3) a young sailor on the deck of a small boat.

additional design shows a young sailor on the deck of a small boat flying strings of signal flags (Figure 18). The hammer and sickle symbol on the bow and smoke stack clearly identifies it as a Soviet boat.¹⁷

Not all designs used on holiday flags are overtly patriotic. Some designs focus on lighter themes. For example, one flag shows three children from different continents—one Asian, one European, and one African, all looking happy with the term “*Druzhba*” or “Friendship” underneath (Figure 19). It was a common theme in Soviet art to show people from different races united in friendship. Sculptures and art work used this imagery to represent the unity of the working people of all nations, and to remind Soviet citizens of an important slogan from the Communist Manifesto—“Workers of the World, Unite.”

Another flag in this category shows two children drawing a smiling sun and a child holding several balloons. The text on the flag says “*Pust’ vsegda budet solntse!*”, which means “May there always be sunshine” and was the title of a popular Soviet children’s song (Figure 20). In translation, the partial lyrics are:

*The sky’s bright blue.
The sun is up high—
This is the little boy’s picture
He drew it for you
and then wrote there for you.
Just to make clear what he drew.*

*May there always be sunshine,
May there always be blue skies,
May there always be my mama,
May there always be me!*

Written in 1962, this song became a standard at Young Pioneer meetings and camps. Octobrists sang it, as did children in preschools. It has remained popular in Russia even after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The final flag in this category also fits with the theme of the song, showing a smiling sun (Figure 21).¹⁸

Another theme of holiday flags was world peace. On one flag a dove carries a flower in its beak (Figure 22). A second flag shows a dove flying in front of a red star. Beneath the dove, written on a golden ribbon, is the text “*Miru mir*”, which means “Peace to the world” (Figure 23). A third



Figures 19–21 (top to bottom). Fun flag designs including 1) children of three races with the text “Druzhba” or “Friendship”; 2) children drawing with the text “Pust’ vseгда budet solntse!” or “May there always be sunshine”; and 3) a smiling sun.



Figures 22–24 (top to bottom). Peace-themed flags including 1) a dove; 2) a red star with a dove, and text reading “Miru Mir!” or “Peace to the world”; and 3) three children holding small flags reading “Mir” or “Peace”.

peace flag shows three children holding flags which spell out the word “*Mir*”, which not only means “peace”, but also means “world” (Figure 24). Flags with friendship and peace themes could have been used for a variety of events such as May Day parades, sporting events, or at Pioneer camps. The Artek camp, located on the Crimean peninsula on the Black Sea coast of Soviet Ukraine, was one of the best-known Young Pioneer camps in the Soviet Union. Pioneers from throughout the Soviet Union and from other socialist countries attended this camp, making these unity themes especially meaningful. When American schoolgirl Samantha Smith visited Artek in 1983, the children greeted her with signs, balloons, and holiday flags.¹⁹

When asked about these little holiday flags, Russians consulted by the author all described them as “children’s flags” or “toy flags”. One Russian vexillologist mentioned that people did not view the flags as “serious vexillological objects”, saying “They looked like toys. And [were] used like toys too”. Clearly, the low price and availability in toy stores were meant to make these flags available to all Soviet children whether involved in official children’s organizations or not. However, several of the Russians also recalled using these flags as part of official Young Pioneer activities. They were handed out to children when their Pioneer groups marched in organized demonstrations. And, according to one Russian vexillologist, they also had a practical use. Leaders at each end of the columns of children carried these flags as a way to mark the beginning and end of the groups.²⁰

Conclusions

Viewing these children’s flags as a group, several patterns become readily apparent. Every flag and banner used the national colors of the Soviet Union—red and yellow. Thus, they reinforced in the children’s minds the importance of the national colors and, by default, of the national flag. Official flags of both children’s organizations used the red star, one of the most prominent of all Soviet symbols. Again, using an important national symbol helped to socialize children to the body of Soviet symbolism. In addition, these flags also featured images of Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks and first leader of the Soviet Union. Images of Lenin were

everywhere in the U.S.S.R., thus using these images on the flags served as yet another vehicle for socialization.

The holiday flags simply continued this strategy. They appealed to children's natural interest in flags while reinforcing themes important to all citizens of the Soviet Union. They conveyed the history of the revolution, the unity of the workers, the importance of functioning within the collective, and the official Soviet appeal for world peace. Images of children holding small red flags were common on postcards, in children's books, and on posters. Clearly, such flags were more than just toys and played a significant role in the socialization of Soviet children, preparing them for life within the context of the Soviet state.



End Notes

All photographs of membership pins and flags were taken by the author. Items are held in the author's personal collection.

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