



Spring 2020

## The Komsomol Experience Under Stalin

Grace E. Gallagher  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship)



Part of the [Political History Commons](#), and the [Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Commons](#)

**Share feedback** about the accessibility of this item.

---

### Recommended Citation

Gallagher, Grace E., "The Komsomol Experience Under Stalin" (2020). *Student Publications*. 871.  
[https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student\\_scholarship/871](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/871)

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# The Komsomol Experience Under Stalin

## Abstract

Founded in 1918, the Communist Youth Organization, more commonly known as the Komsomol, was used as a method for political socialization for Soviet youth by providing a sense of community, activities, and a sense of identity. The organization was also used as a way to bolster the Soviet military and generate propaganda. The Komsomol was at its height during the Stalinist period. Members played substantial roles in the major highlights of Stalin's political career, including the Five-Year Plans, the Purges, and World War II, giving them the political experience necessary to rise as a new generation of party leaders.

## Keywords

Stalin, Soviet Union, Komsomol

## Disciplines

History | Political History | Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies

## Comments

Written for HIST 216: Modern Russia and the Soviet Union

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The Komsomol Experience Under Stalin

Grace Gallagher

Professor Bowman

HIST 216 – Modern Russia and the Soviet Union

24 April 2020

### *Defining the Komsomol*

Founded in 1918, the Communist Youth Organization, more commonly known as the Komsomol, was used as a “major vehicle of political education and mobilization for Soviet youth.”<sup>1</sup> This organization was appealing for providing a community, activities, identity, and leadership positions.<sup>2</sup> The Komsomol had a deep involvement in patriotic campaigns such as attracting members, bolstering military recruitment, and generating propaganda.<sup>3</sup> The official view of the Communist Party during this period was that the “younger generation [was] fanatically and passionately devoted to Communism.”<sup>4</sup> The Komsomol was at its height during the Stalinist period. Members played substantial roles in the major highlights of Stalin’s political career, including the Five-Year Plans, the Purges, and World War II, giving them the political experience necessary to rise as a new generation of party leaders.

### *The History of the Komsomol*

The Komsomol was largely created because the Bolsheviks knew those who lived under the Tsar would be unlikely to give up their long-held beliefs and traditions.<sup>5</sup> Children, however, could more easily be molded. The Bolsheviks were also aware that every generation comes with its own unique set of historical experiences.<sup>6</sup> It would be crucial to educate future Communists on the struggles of the Revolution.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne E. Gorsuch, “Communist Youth Organizations,” *Encyclopedia of Russian History* 1 (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2004), 313.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Merle Fainsod, “The Komsomols: A Study of Youth Under Dictatorship,” *The American Political Science Review* 45, no. 1 (March 1951), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Karel Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (March 1962), 363.

<sup>6</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 19.

The Komsomol originated from a loose organization of young Petrograd workers led by P. Shevtsov.<sup>7</sup> This union would evolve to become the Soviet Association of Young Workers.<sup>8</sup> This program “removed as it was from the immediate realities of political and economic struggle, provided the Bolsheviks with their opportunity to make a vigorous counter-appeal to working class youth.”<sup>9</sup> The First Party Congress of the Komsomol in 1918 marked the first efforts to create an all-Russian Communist youth organization.<sup>10</sup> Initial membership at this meeting was around 21,000 who signified themselves by using a pin of Lenin [fig. 1].<sup>11</sup> The organization was technically an “independent” body.<sup>12</sup>

During the Civil War, the focus of the Komsomol was to act against the Whites.<sup>13</sup> Many were mobilized at the front “where they functioned as agitators, commissars, and shock troops, to provide leadership and inspiration for less dependable conscripts.”<sup>14</sup> This involvement was considered to have created a culture of self-sacrifice within the organization.<sup>15</sup>

In October 1920, the Third Congress of the Komsomol was held, with membership having risen to 480,000.<sup>16</sup> At this gathering, Lenin remarked:

The task before the elder generation of revolutionaries was comparatively simple. For them it was a matter of doing away with the bourgeoisie, of inspiring hatred for it among the masses, of awakening class-consciousness in the workers. The task before your generation is infinitely more complicated: the erection of the Communist society.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>15</sup> Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” 368.

<sup>16</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21.

Following this, the primary goal of the Komsomol and related Soviet Youth Organizations was to become educated in the ways of the great Communists and to use this knowledge to better the U.S.S.R.

The Komsomol was originally considered to be an elite organization, focused mainly on “Proletariat males,” but soon became a massive group.<sup>18</sup> “By March 1926, there were approximately 1.75 million young people in the Komsomol; more than half of the working-class youth in Leningrad and Moscow were members. A few years later, the Komsomol was almost twice the size of the Party.”<sup>19</sup> This large membership can be accredited to the young people in the organization itself. One of the duties of the Komsomols was to go into the countryside where the organization was weaker in order to recruit new members and build up local organizations.<sup>20</sup> In the 1930s, the Komsomol began to shift towards a more liberalized and inclusive approach, especially as Stalin’s leadership directed increased attention toward the countryside with his policy of collectivization.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Organization***

The Komsomol was a single step in the educational process of the All-Union Leninist Communist League of Youth. Young members would first join as Little Octobrists, graduate to the Young Pioneers (ages 10 – 14), then become members of the Komsomol (ages 14 – mid-20s).<sup>22</sup> The organization of the Komsomol was based largely on the hierarchy of the Communist Party.<sup>23</sup> The primary organizations were broken into subgroups.<sup>24</sup> In smaller primary organizations, a secretary acted as the main leader while secretaries of larger organizations acted

---

<sup>18</sup> Gorsuch, “Communist Youth Organizations,” 313.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>20</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Gorsuch, “Communist Youth Organizations,” 313.

<sup>23</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

as directors to smaller groups.<sup>25</sup> The primary Komsomol was under the jurisdiction of the Komsomol secretaries of their respective district or town.<sup>26</sup> These local secretaries and their organizations worked under a regional organization which was led by a central committee with a smaller internal bureau staffed with employees who directed different aspects of Komsomol activities.<sup>27</sup> The All-Union Congress was the highest body in the Komsomol hierarchy and was required to meet every three years.<sup>28</sup> While the Congress was supposed to represent forty-four nationalities, “850 delegates, or over 60 percent, were Great Russians.”<sup>29</sup> One of the responsibilities of the Party’s Central Committee was to supervise the policies of the All-Union Congress and the Control Commission, which oversaw budget, personnel, and other decisions.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Education and Training*

Under Stalin, “the main task of the Komsomol was now declared to be Communist indoctrination of the youth,” the goal of which being the creation of Soviet citizens and Party leaders.<sup>31</sup> The Komsomol organization worked to instill ideals such as discipline, a love for work, anti-religious and anti-foreign sentiment, and an appreciation for the arts and sciences.<sup>32</sup> Soviet youth were “expected to develop and use their individual talents for the benefit of the entire Soviet society rather than for their own advantage.”<sup>33</sup> Older members in the Komsomol were trained to pass on these ideals through leading younger Soviet youth groups.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 25; Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” 365.

<sup>32</sup> Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” 365.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 366.

At a young age, youth were taught Soviet ideals through games, songs, and stories.<sup>35</sup> Upon joining the Little Octobrists, they were educated about civic responsibilities, which, in the case of the Soviets meant performing “any task asked of him by the Party or the government.”<sup>36</sup> In the Young Pioneers, young members were taught stories about the childhoods of Lenin and Stalin while older members studied their biographies more carefully, paying close attention to their “revolutionary activities.”<sup>37</sup> They also celebrated the heroism of the Red Army and were lectured on the Constitution.<sup>38</sup>

The education of the Komsomols primarily entailed a mastery of Marxism-Leninism, primarily through participation in “study circles.”<sup>39</sup> They were encouraged to raise their “political literacy.”<sup>40</sup> The rules of the organization specifically required them:

to fulfill the decisions of the Party and Komsomol organizations, to participate actively in the political life of the country, to provide an example of socialist attitudes toward work and study, to protect socialist property, to struggle decisively against all breaches of socialist legality and order, to demonstrate political vigilance by guarding war and state secrets, to master the cultural, scientific and technical knowledge which will enable him to perfect his qualifications, to study military affairs, to be always ready to give all his strength and if necessary his life for the defense of his Socialist Fatherland, to seek to stamp out drunkenness, hooliganism, the remains of backward religious prejudices, and uncomradely attitudes toward women, to participate actively in the work of his Komsomol organization, to attend all meetings, and to fulfill all decisions swiftly and accurately.<sup>41</sup>

### *The Komsomol Experience Under Stalin*

#### **Stalin’s Five-Year Plans**

The First Five-Year Plan, brought about in 1928, created “an outburst of zeal and fervor among the Komsomols for which only the period of Revolution and Civil War furnished a

---

<sup>35</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 28.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 28; Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” 367.

<sup>37</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 28 – 29.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>39</sup> Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” 365 – 366.

<sup>40</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 29.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 29 – 30.



parallel.”<sup>42</sup> During this time, members of the Komsomols were mobilized for the construction of industrial centers and participation in collectivization and dekulakization.<sup>43</sup> Generally, youths were sent to the countryside to act as reporters to the Party of “every shortcoming, mistake, breach of discipline, waste,” and to combat cultural issues, including illiteracy, superstition, and alcoholism, etc.<sup>44</sup> Such sentiments were further expressed through pervasive propaganda, including posters such as fig. 2, which encouraged Komsomol members to participate in farm work [fig. 2] Some members recorded their experiences, such as Antonina Solovieva, a member of the Komsomol during this period. Upon arrival to a village in the Urals, she was told:

Your task is to engage in mass agitational work among the village youth from the unaffiliated middle stratum and to find out where the kulaks are hiding the grain and who is wrecking the agricultural machinery.<sup>45</sup>

She and fellow Komsomols were instructed to convince farmers to join collectivization and inform them of Party policies.<sup>46</sup>

This was also a period of disenchantment for some, as represented by a 1934 resignation letter sent to the Komsomol by a young Soviet worker. She stated “I wanted to give all of myself to my work, to forget my individuality, to lose track of time, to live solely for the joys and worries of the collective.”<sup>47</sup> She soon lost her youthful, idealistic sentiment and found disappointment. She claimed, “They gave me my Komsomol card and they forgot all about my existence.”<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>44</sup> Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” 369.

<sup>45</sup> Antonina Solovieva, “Sent by the Komsomol,” *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 236.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>47</sup> Kh. Khutonen, “Farewell to the Komsomol,” *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 354.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 354.

## The Purges

Despite being involved in carrying out the purges, the Komsomol was not spared from them. The Great Purge of 1936 – 1938 decimated the central leadership of the Komsomol, mainly through mass expulsion in 1937.<sup>49</sup> The Komsomols, like many Soviet citizens, denounced anyone they felt could be uncovered at a later time, fearful that they, themselves, would be accused of harboring anti-Soviet sentiments.<sup>50</sup> The Komsomol organization engaged in expulsion of many members during the purges and those who did not make appeals were arrested.<sup>51</sup>

The general feeling of mistrust in the Soviet Union made it difficult to join both the Party and the Komsomol, negatively impacting membership in both organizations. Some Komsomol members even “refused party membership based on their own apprehensions about connecting themselves with potential enemies.”<sup>52</sup> Despite this period of hypervigilance, youth within the Komsomol were more secure than those outside.<sup>53</sup> “The relative indulgence youth activists enjoyed during the Great Terror reflected a shift in young people’s place in Soviet political culture. By the late 1930s, youth had become political minors.”<sup>54</sup> 1938 saw a partial reversal of the purge in order to “rebuild Soviet political culture.”<sup>55</sup> During this time, the Komsomol emphasized forgiveness of its members.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 25; Seth Bernstein, “The Rehabilitation of Young Communists, *Raised Under Stalin: Young Communists and the Defense of Socialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 121.

<sup>50</sup> Bernstein, “The Rehabilitation of Young Communists,” 121.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

The Komsomol proved key to recovery from the Great Purges. In addition to a slow in the purges, 1938 saw a rise in Komsomol membership. From February to September of 1938, they admitted 130,000 young Soviets.<sup>57</sup>

## WWII

During WWII, the Komsomols were deeply involved in patriotic campaigns and used propaganda to attract enthusiastic new members.<sup>58</sup> The Communist Party, particularly via the Komsomol, focused such propaganda on a common hatred of the Nazis.<sup>59</sup>

By October 1945, Komsomol membership had reached 15,000,000, “approximately half of the population in the eligible age group.”<sup>60</sup> These members were sent to the front to fight and then assigned to rebuild the country.<sup>61</sup> The sharp drop in membership following the war demonstrated a loss of appeal. As a reaction to membership decline, as well as a fear of the young Soviet minds having been tainted by Nazi propaganda, the Komsomol engaged in an “intensified program of Communist indoctrination of the youth.”<sup>62</sup> This was accomplished through a new set of courses for study introduced in 1947, including Komsomol Statues, U.S.S.R. Constitution, Lenin and Stalin Biographies, and Party history.<sup>63</sup> Young members learned of heroic Russian acts against the Nazis.<sup>64</sup> Educators also began to apply theory by teaching through Soviet newspapers.<sup>65</sup> The beginning of the decline of the Komsomol during this

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>58</sup> Gorsuch, “Communist Youth Organizations,” 313.

<sup>59</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 26.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>61</sup> Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” 369 – 370.

<sup>62</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 27; S. I. Ploss, “Political Education in the Postwar Komsomol,” *The American Slavic and East European Review* 15, no. 4 (December 1956), 489.

<sup>63</sup> Ploss, “Political Education in the Postwar Komsomol,” 493.

<sup>64</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 29.

<sup>65</sup> Ploss, “Political Education in the Postwar Komsomol,” 497.

period was marked by habitual absence of classes. Some estimated claim that “up to one-half of all persons enrolled in such groups failed to attend exercises on a systematic basis.”<sup>66</sup>

### *Conclusions*

The Komsomol acted as a “record of the persistent and strenuous efforts of the Party leadership to anchor itself as firmly as possible in the support of the oncoming Soviet generations.”<sup>67</sup> It is important to note, however, that this process of

political education or indoctrination does not distinguish the Soviet society from other countries. In all societies youth are indoctrinated with the prevailing ideology. The difference is in the intensity of indoctrination. The Soviet ideology is a reversal of ideologies which had existed for a millennium.<sup>68</sup>

The Komsomol and other party-organized Soviet youth organizations provided a variety of educational, extracurricular, and leadership opportunities for young people. Membership in the ranks of the Komsomol also provided an identity. One major motive for joining was the careerist opportunities. The Komsomol provided opportunities and preferential treatment as it acted as a “reservoir” for future Party members.<sup>69</sup> The Program of the Komsomol even stated that the Communist League of Youth was “auxiliary to the All-Union Communist Party and [was] its reserve.”<sup>70</sup> This was mainly achieved through required interaction between future Komsomol members and Party members during the recruitment process. In order for a young person to join their local Komsomol, they needed to be recommended by at least two members of the Communist party before being approved by their local organization.<sup>71</sup> The desire to join the Komsomol was largely bolstered by a desire for economic and political improvement that came

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 498 – 499.

<sup>67</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 27.

<sup>68</sup> Hulicka, “The Komsomol,” 372.

<sup>69</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 29 – 30.

<sup>70</sup> Tenth Congress, “Program of the Komsomol,” *Moments in Soviet History: An On-Line Archive of Primary Sources* (Pravda: April 23, 1936).

<sup>71</sup> Fainsod, “The Komsomols,” 29.

with the promise of important positions within the Party.<sup>72</sup> This aspect of the organization, coupled with idealistic fervor fostered and activities engaged in under Stalinism, is likely to have aided key leaders to gain the power that would allow them to leave a lasting mark on the Soviet Union.

---

<sup>72</sup> Gorsuch, "Communist Youth Organizations," 313.

*Appendix*



Fig. 1

73



Fig. 2

74

<sup>73</sup> "VLKSM Member Pin," photograph, *Guided History: History Research Guides by Boston University*.

<sup>74</sup> "Komsomol Propaganda Poster," image, *Guided History: History Research Guides by Boston University*.

## Bibliography

- Bernstein, Seth. "The Rehabilitation of Young Communists." In *Raised Under Stalin: Young Communists and the Defense of Socialism*, 121-41. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1vjqr4g.11>.
- Fainsod, Merle. "The Komsomols: A Study of Youth Under Dictatorship." *The American Political Science Review* 45, no. 1 (March 1951): 18-40. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1950882>.
- Gorsuch, Anne E. "Communist Youth Organizations." In *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, edited by James R. Millar, 313-14. Vol. 1. New York, NY: Macmillan Reference, 2004. <https://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2134/apps/doc/CX3404100289/GVRL?u=gett36723&sid=GVRL&xid=e403b18c>.
- Hulicka, Karel. "The Komsomol." *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (March 1962): 363-73. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42867730>.
- Khutonen, Kh. "Farewell to the Komsomol." In *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine, 354-55. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv36zq2h.38>.
- Komsomol Propaganda Poster*. Image. Guided History: History Research Guides by Boston University. <http://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/files/2013/02/imgres-12.jpeg>.
- Ploss, S. I. "Political Education in the Postwar Komosol." *The American Slavic and East European Review* 15, no. 4 (December 1956): 489-505. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3001307>.
- Solovieva, Antonina. "Sent by the Komsomol." In *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine, 235-40. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv36zq2h.24>.
- Tenth Congress. "Program of the Komsomol." In *Moments in Soviet History: An On-Line Archive of Primary Sources*. Previously published in *Pravda*, April 23, 1936. <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1936-2/childhood-under-stalin/childhood-under-stalin-texts/program-of-the-komsomol/>.
- VLKSM Member Pin*. Photograph. Guided History: History Research Guides by Boston University. [http://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/files/2013/02/120px-VLKSM\\_Member\\_Pin.jpg](http://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/files/2013/02/120px-VLKSM_Member_Pin.jpg).