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“... We’ll Make a New Toy for Soviet Kids”: On Soviet Toys of the 1940s: Archival Materials of
the Gorky Region

Abstract

The article addresses the problem of providing Soviet children with toys and toys production in the USSR in the 1940s. On the basis of modern historiographical material, situation in the “toy” industry of the 1940s is reflected. When presenting the material, a large number of interesting and valuable examples is given, as well as fragments from memoirs of the “children of war.” All these materials mention that toys of the difficult 1940s were mostly homemade. There was an acute shortage of factory-made toys and there were problems with their quality and high cost. Throughout the 1940s (and even in the wartime), Soviet leadership attempted repeatedly to solve these problems. Lack of toys for Soviet children was recognized by the authorities as a problem demanding urgent solution. Drawing on unique archival material of the Gorky region, which is being introduced into scientific use, the article narrates of the competition organized in 1947-48 by the Scientific Research Institute of Toys and aimed at development of new samples of toys and games, improvement of their quality, and launch of their mass production. According to the typology of toys cited in the competition regulations, there were 16 categories of toys for children of all ages, ranging from dolls and balls to a variety of construction kits, cardboard games, and educational materials. The main criteria were complete safety, possibility of mass and, preferably, inexpensive production from local materials, and compliance with educational tasks set by the state. Soviet citizens, enterprises and artels, children’s institutions were invited to participate in the competition; there were prizes amounting to 120,000 rubles or more. Given the realities of 1947, this seems an important marker of the state’s attention to organization of children’s leisure and education, which was deemed an integral component of combatting child homelessness and neglect. The article identifies main trends in solving the problem of toy shortage in the second half of the 1940s. It is to complete the picture of everyday life and consequences of the Great Patriotic War.

Keywords

Historical sources, archival documents, toys, USSR, children, Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, education.

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