

Hair Bows and Uniforms: Entangled Politics in Children's Everyday Lives

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Participation in adult-initiated political processes, such as pioneer organizations or summer labor camps, was an everyday part of children's lives in socialist societies. In research, however, children and politics were mostly considered in the framework of political socialization (Connell, 1987). This perspective was shared by researchers on both sides of the Iron Curtain, who viewed children as receptacles of political norms, values, and behaviors acceptable and desirable in a political system (Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Mead & Silova, 2013; Millei, 2011; Philo & Smith, 2003; Skelton, 2010). The top-down view of political socialization positioned children as passive objects, failing to consider children's subjectivity, agency, and the politics of everyday life (Connell, 1987; Kallio, 2014).

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It was only with the emergence of the “new sociology of childhood” during the 1990s that children’s role in society has been reevaluated, recognizing their active participation. Researchers reframed their understanding of children and politics and began exploring how children participate in shaping institutions, themselves, and others while accepting that children are simultaneously socialized into numerous societal institutions and roles (for example, Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Philo & Smith, 2003; Skelton, 2013). Shifting the focus away from adult-created domains of politics, researchers have turned to explore children’s “mundane lives as permeated by politics in which they have their own positions and roles” (Kallio & Häkli, 2011, p. 21). Highlighting the constitutive nature of politics and positioning of children as minors, Kallio and Häkli (2011, p. 27) have suggested studying children’s political lives as they gradually “take their places as full members of their communities and societies ... and rehearse certain kinds of subjectivities and agencies” as political actors. From this perspective, children’s political worlds are intertwined with adults’ political worlds in “ordinary life” (Taylor, 1989), where children perform “banal practices” in relation to institutions, media, and their peer culture that can gain political charge (Kallio & Häkli, 2011, p. 104).

Using this perspective as a starting point, we are interested in those spaces of children’s lives that fall outside of “official” political spheres. Philo and Smith (2003) differentiate between “P”olitics and “p”olitics (or macro- and micropolitics), where “P”olitics refers to political arenas created by adults in which children participate, whereas “p”olitics is a child-generated arena. Importantly, Philo and Smith (2003) separate personal politics from micropolitics. Personal politics entail the struggle to gain power over one’s immediate conditions of existence. Micropolitics is not individualistic. It is based on how groups of people act together. Children’s micropolitics resonate with “their own perceptions, stories, hopes and fears” (Philo & Smiths, 2003, p. 109). In this way, “the choice available at school lunches, the attempt to introduce compulsory school uniforms, or even the organisation of the school playground are, in this respect, just as “political” as what goes on in parliament” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 204). Buckingham (2000) also warns against the premature collapse of personal politics with micropolitics. Personal politics could meet the criteria of micropolitics if connected with experiences of other social groups, for example, when one’s personal worries intersect with similar worries by a group of other people. In this chapter, we explore children’s negotiations of their everyday lives—their personal and micropolitics—in preschools and primary schools in Hungary and three parts of the former Soviet Union (Latvia, Russia, and Ukraine).

We focus on school uniforms, and more particularly the ribbons in girls' hair called *bantiki* in Russian, *bante* in Latvian, and *masni* in Hungarian. Despite having grown up in different geographic and temporal contexts—Zsuzsa in Hungary, Iveta in Latvia, Nelli in Karelia, and Elena in Ukraine—our memories of the bows resonated with one another. We use our memories to disentangle when and how our actions of tying and wearing (or not) the bows—as a part and ritual of our becoming schoolgirls—fused with the politics of everyday life. We use the term “schoolgirl” in a broader sense to denote children in institutions, kindergartens, and primary schools. Our aim is to show how these banal objects—hair bows—as well as the discourses and practices associated with them, afforded potentialities for our political subjectivities to unfold. In addition, the focus on the bows enables us to reveal the manifold ways in which an everyday object and practice can become differently political in various geopolitical and personal settings. In what follows, we first introduce the historical contexts within which we undertake our analysis and then explain our approach of working with collective biography to explore the multiple ways in which we participated in the dynamics of everyday life and politics.

CREATING MEMORY STORIES OF OUR CHILDHOODS: CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Everyday life in different socialist societies and during various time periods was far from uniform, and we had diverse experiences of participating in schooling. The first period of state socialism (1948–1970s) in Hungary resulted in a demographic change where most women of working age were engaged in full-time wage labor, and the proportion of women at almost every level of the educational system reached that of men (Corrin, 1993). During the second period (1970s–1989), or reform socialism, the state withdrew partially from the economic realm (Lampland, 1996). This opening up of the “second-economy” and the diversification of economic and social practices, such as partial commodification (Lampland, 1996), became influential in education as well. An increasingly flexible curriculum was created, ideological practices were relaxed, and teachers gained increased autonomy (Millei & Imre, 2010).

In the 1970s and early 1980s, education institutions in Latvia, Ukraine, and Karelia were largely driven by the Soviet standardization policies and practices (often referred to as *Russification* and *Sovietization*), which were visible in strictly standardized curriculum, buildings, and uniforms. During

the Soviet period, Karelia constituted an autonomous republic of the Russian Republic (RSFSR) while Latvia and Ukraine were two of the 15 Soviet Republics. In the mid- and late-1980s, schools saw some fundamental changes as a result of Gorbachev's initiated *perestroika* (reconstruction) and *glasnost* (openness, public discussion). In Soviet Latvia, these reforms roughly coincided with the "national awakening" (*atmoda* in Latvian). Across the Soviet Union, this period brought the revival of national identities, as well as minority languages and cultures, eventually leading to the independence of Latvia and Ukraine in 1991. These changes were accompanied with the increasing questioning of the fundamental assumptions of the Soviet education system, particularly its ideological nature and a lack of child-centeredness and critical thinking (see Webber, 2000; also Janmaat & Piattoeva, 2007). During this period, schools underwent major reforms, including the loosening of the previously imposed standards and eventually revamping the school curriculum and culture. Finally, independent from the influence of the Soviet empire, the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union (including Russia, Latvia, and Ukraine) and Hungary found themselves to be a part of the new project of Western (European) democracy and market economy (Silova, 2010).

In this chapter, we look back at our personal memories of everyday childhoods through collective biography. In collective biography, memory stories and their interpretations are produced in the intersubjective spaces of participants and in the interrelations between participants' presents and pasts. Thus, we cannot and do not claim the position of the neutral observer of our lived experiences. In researching our own memories, the subject and object of our research are collapsed (Davies & Gannon, 2006, 2012). All four of us currently live and work in contexts vested with modern Anglo-American conceptions of the self. Thus, the "re-remembering" of our memory stories is necessarily shaped by these life experiences and particular scientific worldviews we have developed through our academic training.

By engaging in this collective biography, we strive "to know differently, through ... [our] own remembered past and the past of others" (Davies, 2000, p. 187 cited in Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 33). We do not claim that the stories we produce reflect objective truths. The "truth" that emerges in these stories does not serve to validate the veracity of one's experience but functions as "a means to provide knowledge about the ways in which individuals are made social, are discursively constituted in particular fleshy moments" (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 4). Claims to knowledge

emerge in the in-between spaces of memories where something surprising disrupts the usual way of thinking and poses questions to reexamine the taken-for-granted views about everyday life (Davies & Gannon, 2006). We reject notions of identity as a set of characteristics or a fundamental substance of a person. By following post-structural approaches, we understand identity not as an expression of what one is but something that one does, that is, for the analysis here, acts of negotiating everyday life. In this way, collective biography rejects a “fixed identity” and “linear developmental understanding” of persons, including their political becomings (Gonick & Gannon, 2014, p. 2) and joins efforts of resisting the proposition of a “socialist self” that we as children supposedly “fashioned, inhabited and exhibited” (Chatterjee & Petrone, 2008, p. 985).

We participated in repeated collective biography workshops (Davies & Gannon, 2006, 2012), which were conducted both online and in person to share our memory stories. We refined these initial stories through recurring discussions, during which we asked each other for clarifications, and through the exploration of the affective and sensory aspects of our memories. As we connected through our memories, we also helped each other to avoid clichés and nostalgia. Sharing memory stories facilitated dialogues and the generation of more memory stories.

We analyzed our memory stories as discursive products through post-structural discourse analysis with a sensitivity to material actors that we borrowed from Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005). ANT helps to train “researcher’s perceptions and perceptiveness, senses and sensitivity” (Mol, 2010, pp. 261–262). As part of girls’ uniform, we understood the hair bow as an object, a mediator that has the capacity to “transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements [it is] supposed to carry (Latour, 2007 [2005], p. 39). Understanding the meanings of the bow this way “open[s] up the possibility of seeing, hearing, sensing and then analysing the social life of things—and thus of caring about, rather than neglecting them” (Mol, 2010, p. 255). Actors—human and non-human—join with other actors to form networks, acquiring meanings through associations and relations. In our analysis, we aimed to answer the following questions: How did we negotiate our everyday lives in preschool related to the bows, and how could we understand those actions as political? How did we make sense of the bows and available discourses (ideological, mundane, or other)? By revealing an entanglement of discursive and material body work, memory stories open ways to generate understandings and analyses of macrosocial processes.

THE “P”/“P”OLITICS OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS AND BOWS

Although the bow appeared differently in our memories, it was a part of our everyday lives. Girls either wore bows or not; but when they did not wear them, they often felt their absence, so bows shaped their experiences:

In preschool she was expected to wear bows in her hair. She never had long hair and rarely wore big puffy bows. On special occasions, all girls were expected to wear white bows, and she vaguely remembers longing—if only fleetingly—for bows just like the other girls.

Remembering the bow is not easy. The first thought that comes to her mind concerns school pictures: a group photo in school uniform with a ponytail and a big bow, or another picture on the first day of school in grade one. She is dressed in a funny red, furry coat with her hair braided and two big bows woven in the braids. There is one more picture taken on that first day of school, but this time by a professional photographer (see photo in Fig. 1). In this picture, she sits next to a globe, with colorful autumn leaves spread over the desk and a primer in her hands. The two braids were her usual hairstyle because it was the only one her mother could manage on a busy morning before leaving for work. On regular



Fig. 1 A girl with a white apron and bows
Source: From Nelli Piattoeva’s family archives

days, the braids would be kept together with a simple invisible elastic band, but on special occasions, a white bow would replace or supplement the band. She never wore black or brown bows reserved for regular school days. But she always wore the white bows for celebrations and official school photos.

The emergence of hair bows as an official part of a Soviet school uniform dates back to the end of the 1940s, reflecting an attempt by the Soviet education authorities to encourage a “gender-determined dress” in Soviet Russia (Kelly, 2007, p. 379). Initially, bows were small, modest ribbons woven in girls’ hair—white ribbons used for special occasions and dark (usually brown or black ribbons) used in everyday school life. However, as the Soviet economy grew after World War II, so did hair bows. They quickly developed from small silk ribbons carefully woven into girls’ hair to huge puffy gauze bows placed on top of their heads (see photo in Fig. 3). Commonly found across the Soviet republics (although less so in the socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe), these bows became a symbol of the idealized Soviet childhood, projecting the



Figs. 2 and 3 A girl photographed twice on the same picture day—with and without a bow

Source: From Iveta Silova’s family archives

images of national prosperity, progress, and happiness. When America's youngest goodwill ambassador, a ten-year old Samantha Smith, visited the Soviet Union in the early 1980s at the invitation of Yuri Andropov, hair bows were used by the Soviet media to distinguish a Soviet child from an American one. As one of the Soviet reporters covering Samantha Smith's trip to the USSR recalls, "big white bows turned out to be Samantha's soft spot. She has never worn bows like this in the US. Soviet pioneer girls were seriously competing for and standing in lines for several days to get an opportunity to tie Samantha's bows. Some never had a chance" (Noviye Izvestiia, 2013).

Hair bows were present everywhere: "model girls in posters, magazine photographs, and paintings always had their *bantiki*" (Kelly, 2007, p. 379). They also appeared in children's books, poems, movies, and even on wall murals inside school and preschool buildings (see photo in Fig. 1 as example: a book cover with a girl wearing the bow). Beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, in countries such as Hungary, the popularity of bows was less pronounced. Bows were mostly part of celebratory events, communist celebrations, and school events, such as receiving end-of-year certificates (Géczy, 2010). Bows appeared as part of uniforms for *kis dobos* ("small drummer" in grades one to four) and *úttörő* ("path breaker" or "pioneer" starting from grade five) and were usually displayed in long hair. Bows were tied from white ribbons and were connected to socialist ideology (Géczy, 2010). Géczy (2010) examined photos of children during the socialist era in Hungary and found that schoolgirls mostly appeared with short hair, as the memory story below demonstrates, and without bows in most pictures from the 1970s. The disappearance of bows as part of Hungarian uniforms happened at the same time as clothing in general became more simple to accommodate changing behavioral standards (Valuch, 2002) and during a shift toward liberalization in many spheres of life.

The bows in girls' hair were a part of the school uniform in most contexts, thus serving as a mechanism of political socialization. While school uniforms promoted egalitarianism, they also helped to normalize, unify, and discipline the bodies and conducts of children, making children "docile" for schooling (Kamler, 1994; Meadmore & Symes, 1997). By wearing the uniform (including bows), children took up the subject position of a "pupil" defined in a standard of norms (Kamler, 1994). The ritual of tying the bow or losing the possibility of wearing the bow came also with physical pain and strong emotions:

She had short hair only when she was very little. Around the age of four, her hair started getting longer. At first, when the family had to take a train from home to the kindergarten, her mother would brush her hair and tie it up with bows on the train. The girl screamed bloody murder because it hurt so badly. Other people on the train got involved several times, telling her mother how to hold her hair differently when tying it or that the girl was a poorly behaved child for not tolerating pain quietly. The pain was so bad that later in school the girl learned to brush her own hair and instead of sticking the bows on top of her head to tie up a ponytail, she would braid it into a pigtail. That was so much easier and the bows just hung in the back.

Her mother, who worked full-time and was a university trained professional in Hungary, always put her daughter's pigtails up high (twintails) with white ribbons secured so tightly that it pulled on her hair. It was done quickly during those hustling and bustling morning moments when all of them were getting ready for their days. The girl developed a rash because of the constant pulling, and the nurse gave her mother the advice to either cut the hair short or to let it out for a few days for the skin to get better. The mother did not like the second option. The girl was begging all afternoon not to have her hair cut. They arrived early at the mother's hairdresser to get a haircut. While waiting for the haircut, the girl looked at all the fashionable short haircuts in magazines and the ladies with short hair at the salon. She still wanted long hair and ponytails with bows, so that she would look like the other girls in the kindergarten.

While producing “good” subjects, such as desiring to wear the bow and look like the others, regimes of practices also produce “rebels,” silences, or minor “internal displacements and mutations” in the discursive regime (Yurchak, 2005), such as attempts to develop alternative ways of wearing the bow that was less painful but perhaps fitting less within the officially sanctioned norms. As Foucault (1977) suggests, “disciplinary power is not only negative or repressive, it is also productive, as it produces a certain “reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (p. 194). Children, in relation to school uniforms in general and bows in particular, then act with/in and against normalizing discourses that offer ways of becoming “good schoolgirls” or otherwise. Schoolgirls might subject themselves to these normalizing discourses, resist them, or act with/in them but in ways that alter the discursive frame.

Longing, pain, frustration, and shame accompanied the experiences of putting on and wearing the bow. Ahmed (2015) considers emotion or how “we feel our way” as a kind of “world making” or cultural politics. Being subjects to the cultural politics of a bow, our bodies and worlds materialized in line with the ideology that prescribed us wearing the bow.

Emotions played a significant role in our politicization, but as all regimes of practices, they also created openings to act the “bowed subject” in other ways: to reinterpret the bow, to wear it or go without it, or even to have short hair.

*“What Would You Have Without a Bow? Just the Head!”:
Bows and Appearances*

As Dussel (2005) explains, “the preoccupation with appearances stems from long ago,” marking divisions, identifying spaces of belonging, and defining “the inside/outside limits of the schools” (p. 180). Tying the bow is guided by a particular knowledge about how it should look, constituting a “regime of appearance” that made individuals subject to particular knowledges and associated practices through a “reciprocal bond” (Foucault, 1994, p. 315). Appearance is also tied to morality, because “clothes do inform others about the moral condition of a person, her sensibility and education, and that is why appearances have to be so closely monitored” (Dussel, 2005, p. 185). With the act of wearing the bow, we embodied a tidy and orderly appearance and also the moral subject position of a “good,” “proper,” “socialist girl”:

Bows were a part of the school attire, similar to aprons, collars, and cuffs that had to be sewn onto the dresses, but not necessarily a part of a dress for other social occasions. Playing with friends after school required no bows; family celebrations, similarly, did not require one to wear bows. But even for family celebrations or school parties, loose hair, especially hair longer than shoulder-length not constrained by bows, pins, or pigtails, was rarely allowed—one had to request parents’ permission to wear hair down. As the girl’s grandmother once asked: ‘What would you have without a bow? Just the head?’

If we wore the dark bow that went along with the dark apron and stockings—a uniform intended for regular school days—getting dirty during lessons, recess, or meals would be permissible, because the dirty spots would not be that visible on the dark uniform. In dark uniform, we could thus be more childlike and fallible because we did not need to perform the roles of perfect socialist schoolchildren. These variations in the color of particular pieces of the uniform—apron, bows, and stockings—were very informative. They were manifestations of the rules of behavior associated with different physical and temporal spaces through a dress code condensed in a single piece or color of clothing.

We recognized these differences in appearance and subjected ourselves to the norms expected in various social situations. In this way, we became involved in the reproduction of official representations. The bow was an ornament to carry symbolic meanings which we learned to perform in practice. As Yurchak (1997) explains, “whether or not one consciously believed in the officially proclaimed goals was less important than the act of participating in routine official practices, perceived as inevitable” (p. 168). This is what Yurchak termed as *pretense misrecognition*. By wearing the bow and other uniform items of different color, we thus learned to navigate social situations that allowed for more or less freedom and flexibility. When needed, together with carers and teachers, we aligned ourselves with how socialist schoolchildren should look and act even though we did not believe in or could not identify with the official ideology behind it:

For the official school pictures, a girl had to wear three white items: white bow(s), white apron, and white stockings. If one of the items was missing, this girl would either have to stand in the back row or someone else from another class would lend her the missing item(s). Teachers did not get upset when this happened, but simply tried to calmly deal with the situation.

One day, there was a picture session at preschool. The girl's parents were not present at the time when the pictures were taken because they were working. The preschool nurse was assisting the teacher with preparing children for the pictures and, when she looked at the girl, she sympathetically exclaimed, “Poor little girl! You don't even have a puffy bow! I will make you look as beautiful as all the other girls. I will make a big bow just for you!” She took off her big gauze scarf and miraculously turned it into a big purple bow. The girl was so happy inside, but also so shocked to suddenly find a big puffy bow towering on top of her head. She did not know what to think, but she went with the flow.

In our Soviet school experiences, when official school photographs were taken, such as at the beginning of someone's schooling (see photo in Fig. 1) or when important guests visited the schools and teachers would give exemplary lessons (Rus. *pokazatel'nye uroki*), schoolgirls were dressed in their perfect white aprons and white bows to participate in the official rituals that simulated surface support to the system. Behind this façade, however, we believed in these symbols, signs, and representations in our own ways. The prototypical dresses were mirrored in exemplary behavior—as no mistakes could be made, spotless white aprons and stockings obliged us to behave properly, to watch every step. The teacher and the photographer acted as the guards of perfect appearances—they would

mold, and if necessary, even hide the rule-breakers by placing them behind their perfectly dressed classmates or instantaneously creating a bow for them. However, we all understood that these expectations were not requirements for our everyday lives.

BOWS AND THE RITUALS OF TRANSITION BETWEEN SPACES

So far, we have argued that the bow subjected us to particular forms, norms, and practices of school appearance and order. Putting on the bow was a ritual that marked regular transitions between spaces, signaling to its owner that different rules of conduct would apply from the moment the bow was put on. It was as if we were theater actors who prepared for roles by putting on a costume and a mask that went with it. We resembled and felt like “a normal subject, who saw the truth behind the mask, had no other choice but to pretend that the mask was the actual true face” (Yurchak, 1997, p. 180):

When she looks at the family photographs taken outside of school, she sees a smiling girl with two braids, wearing the clothes brought by a family member from another socialist country, and having no resemblance to the photos taken in school. She has no recollection of any moment when her mom would tie in the bows, and no recollection of any feelings or bodily sensations associated with bows. All that she sees in front of her eyes are the school pictures of her that don't look like her. She remembers feeling uncomfortable looking at these pictures as a child—as if she was not looking at the real her in the pictures.

Feeling as not real was part of a double pretense, as the socialist state itself was a pretense and we ourselves pretended to be socialist citizens. As the story about the gauze bow continues: *That day, the photographer took two pictures of the girl—one as expected by her parents (see photo in Fig. 2) and one as recommended by the preschool (see photo in Fig. 3).* Perhaps the official photo day required only one photo with the bow, but two pictures were taken that day. The possibility of two photos, with and without the bow, occurred as a displacement in the discursive regime. In this in-between space, the possibility of a child generated politics emerged.

Perhaps because of the feelings of awkwardness and confusion washing over her when she sees her first picture with the big gauze bow taken in preschool, the girl remembers that she could not recognize the face—her

“real” self—looking at her school photograph when the pictures arrived. It was the uncomfortable feeling of estrangement that the incompatibility of these parallel spaces made real and yet not fully understandable to her. The girl felt uncomfortable about her ideological mask put on for this occasion. Even though that feeling did not lead to immediate actions that would explicitly resist the pretense character of the regime and the practices associated with it, the awkward feeling placed these (more or less ideological) discourses and spaces under her observation and question. Knowing, observing, and acting with/in and against these discourses of everyday life and the cultural politics of emotions associated with those, we argue, marks the mundane politics of childhood during the period of socialism.

The story about the gauze bow continues with a marked politics on the parents’ part after they saw that two pictures of their daughter were taken that day:

The girl realized later that her parents were not particularly fond of big puffy bows. “Bows are for the Russian kids,” her Oma (grandmother) would say. And she was from a linguistically and ethnically mixed Latvian/Russian family. When her parents received the pictures a few weeks later, they were shocked. Her dad was particularly unhappy, threatening to go to the preschool and face the director with a complaint. The girl remembers begging him not to do it and saying, “It’s ok, Daddy ... it’s just a bow. I look like all the other girls now ... Please don’t say anything to the preschool director!” The scandalous nature of the bow incident remained deep in her heart, leaving a feeling of guilt and bewilderment ... as well as a picture proof of how confused she looked wearing the big puffy bow on top of her head in the official photograph.

Here, the bow marked a feeling of national belonging for the girl’s parents. For us children, appearances were just what they were—only appearances. And that is how we learned to relate to them. Just as adults pretended to follow the ideology on the surface, be present physically but not emotionally or cognitively, we too knew that it sufficed to look as expected, without embodying the ideals through and through. This behavior implied neither active resistance nor subversion, but rather active ignorance, or perhaps the creative reinterpretation of situations. Just as a grandma remarked on a question about the role of bows—“They just were there.” Through meticulous attention to appearances we learned, perhaps unintentionally, the shrewd reality of the (late) socialist era—things had to

“look right” and that sufficed. Instead of adherence to the official party line, we learned to interpret representations instead of making them our own. This ambiguous relationship with the system is well captured in Yurchak’s (1997) notion of “pretense misrecognition,” as we noted before. These kinds of political acts were not laden with the ridicule of or resistance to power, but rather with *a lack of interest in it* (Yurchak, 1997, pp. 162–163, our emphasis). In this manner, political pretense and ignorance were learned as part of our mundane schooling. While politics is commonly associated with the existence of interests in agendas related to groups, here “the lack of interest” and the discomfort that was associated with the reiterative practices of being different kinds of schoolgirls in various spaces created opportunities for childhood politics in mundane, day-to-day life.

CONCLUSION

We applied the concept of mundane politics to the everyday spaces of childhood and schooling in socialist societies. Through our memory stories, we explored how children understand and generate political spaces in their everyday lives that link with the official or mundane politics of other groups. From a Foucauldian perspective, action is always already read, that is, constituted by operative discourses, acting with/in or against them. By tying, attaching, and wearing the bow—or not—we read and acted with/in and against the operative discourses, some of which were explicitly ideological while others were banal. With our actions and understandings about the bow, we have interpreted official representations and ideologies in our own ways and on our own terms. With our mundane acts, we silently joined others in showing no interest in the official ideology, and/or pretended to misrecognize it, or were casted by others in small oppositional acts to official expectations. We learned to read spaces and discursive formations attached to schools, classrooms, assembly halls, hairdressers, or homes that govern action, thought, and feeling that were politically charged with official ideology or gained their charge through people’s everyday participation in it. Within these spaces, learning is a “process of exploring the operative rules and mores, the texture and limits of available discourses and subject positions, and of finding a place within/against these, of becoming a subject and becoming a person, again and again, in the process (Davies et al., 2001)” (Millei & Petersen, 2015, p. 26).

Yurchak (2005) similarly explains that agency should be understood not in terms of open resistance to the official political regime, but rather through inconsequential and often invisible acts that introduce “minute internal displacements and mutations into the discursive regime in which they are articulated”:

[These acts] do not have to contradict the political and ethical parameters of the system and, importantly, may even allow one to preserve the possibilities, promises, positive ideals, and ethical values of the system while avoiding the negative and oppressive constraints within which these are articulated. (p. 28)

According to Yurchak (2005), the “non-official” was not only something that allowed spaces for resistance against the dominant political ideology but also maintained the system as such. In a similar manner, actions against stated ideology manifested in a form of outward resistance against official politics and included actions that were differently political, such as those of humor or pretense. Within these complicated political arenas, we understood ourselves as children or schooled subjects, and subjected ourselves to the operating discourses. Through the “selving-work,” we undertook ourselves to become particular kinds of socialist schoolgirls (Davies et al., 2001; Kofoed, 2008). Different spaces afforded us with shifting reiterations, (in)actions, and feelings that made us explore operative discourses and subject positions. They also produced opportunities for us to act politically, joining the collective struggle to gain power over immediate conditions of existence. This is how the bow afforded opportunities for us to act politically, created bridges between the everyday spaces of childhood and politics, and generated spaces for children’s “p”olitics.

Through our memory stories, we aimed to problematize the concepts of “socialist” and “post-socialist” education as simply repressive and to complicate our understanding of politics by introducing children’s politics. Therefore, we see in the geographical area and concept of (post)socialism tremendous potential for further analysis of politics because of the complicated political maneuvering that this system required us as children to engage in. Our memory stories do not only talk about the past. Rather, they become fertile grounds for our contemporary understanding of politics, political agency, and subject formation that needs further investigation. Our memories of childhoods supply a rich resource and complicate simple understandings of what it meant to be a child in schools during the Cold War.

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