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“Boys with Swords” – The Heroes of the Last Soviet Generation and the Models of Masculinity in Vladislav Krapivin’s Fiction¹

Abstract: The prose of Vladislav Krapivin is one of the most significant phenomena in Russian children’s literature of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Krapivin’s stories became popular in the 1970–1980s largely due to the new type of hero offered therein. Krapivin’s typical protagonist is a teen boy displaying the features of both traditional and new norms of Soviet masculinity. This type of protagonist was named by critics and readers as a “Krapivian boy.” The focus of this article is on the gender analysis of the character of Krapivin’s protagonist in the socio-cultural context of the Soviet epoch. This essay deals with Krapivin’s texts considered the core of his work: the vignettes, novellas, and novels distinguished by the image of “Krapivin’s boy” – the main character type in Krapivin’s writing. The article also contains the analysis of the readers’ reception. The author aims to show the connection of Krapivin’s literary characters with the reality of male gender socialization in the years after the Second World War, and to explain what led to the demand for the “boy with a sword” character in Soviet and post-Soviet culture.

Keywords: Soviet children’s literature, Vladislav Krapivin’s prose, “Krapivin’s boys,” gender socialization in Soviet children’s literature

In contemporary Russian culture the term “Krapivin’s Boys”² means the typical character found in Vladislav Krapivin’s prose for young readers – a teenage boy with certain personality traits and a distinctive appearance. Moreover, it also describes real teenagers similar to Krapivin’s characters, including fans of his books and members of the Krapivin’s movement³. Since the 1950s Krapivin has written over 200 books for young readers – his latest novel was published

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² Currently there is no data as to when and by whom this definition was first introduced.

³ Krapivin movement, krapivinism, or Krapivin squads is at first informal and then an officially sanctioned movement in “cooperation pedagogy” – a novel strain of Soviet pedagogy emerging in 1950–1970s. This phenomenon came to life inside Komsomol and pioneer culture with the initiative of particular youth leaders and students. One of their foundational ideas was the return to the ideals of revolutionary romanticism (cf. Dimke 2018).

in 2013 – showing an extraordinary artistic longevity. Krapivin is an acknowledged master of children's literature, the winner of many awards, he even has an award presented in his name. There are numerous internet communities devoted to his work. Some characters and plots become the basis of fanfiction, provoking heated discussions between his fans and critics. On the LiveLibe site⁴, for example, there are about 1500 reviews of his books, written mostly by adolescents and young adults. These facts lead us to think that his books are an important social phenomenon of current interest which cannot be strictly described as a literary one.

As various sources, such as memoirs and interviews, demonstrate, Krapivin's books have had a significant influence on the readers. Krapivin's readers turned to innovative Soviet pedagogy, formed groups like the Caravel, started studying navigation, the art of war, fencing, archery, participated in role-playing. Since Perestroika (1990–1991) the voices of criticism, negatively assessing Krapivin's books, his pedagogic doctrine and the Krapivin's boys, have become louder. Reviewers write about his characters' immaturity and infantilism, their ethical rigorism and narrow-mindedness, note that dividing children into "spiritual aristocrats" and "backyard plebs" is unacceptable, point out the sexism and the grotesque portrayal of the adults, discuss the authoritative and militaristic nature of the Caravel-like groups, which are sometimes likened to cults; and some former members of such groups tell about the psychological abuse they endured (cf. Kirtys 1998). As of today the concept of Krapivin boys is noticeably reflected in Russian culture – numerous texts have been written about these boys, both scholarly and non-scholarly⁵. This article introduces Krapivin's work to the Western reader and aims to show the connection of Krapivin's literary characters with the reality of male gender socialization in the years after the Second World War. The article also explains what led to the demand for the "boy with a sword" character in Soviet and post-Soviet culture.

While Vladislav Krapivin is a household name in Russia, he is relatively little known to the Western reader, despite the fact that his books have been translated into various languages. Born in 1938 in South Siberia, Krapivin received a degree in journalism in Ekaterinburg, at that time known as Sverdlovsk. Since that time most of his life was connected to that city. Krapivin's early works were published

⁴ LiveLibe – Russian-language social network of readers, a site where reviews are posted.

⁵ Their authors consider the archetype created by Krapivin both as a literary character as well as a sociocultural one, that appeared in the Soviet society in the 1970s and the 1980s (E.g.: Shchupov 2017; Anikina 2014; Arbitman 1993; Meshavkin 1988; Razumikhin 1982). An article about Sergey Kakhovsky, the protagonist in *Мальчик со шпагой* (the most exemplary character illustrating the archetype, was included in the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the Russian Childhood* (Borisov 2008). There are publications on the topic in online encyclopedias, fandom sites, forums, and countercultural portals. Noticeably, the Internet entries often describe the Krapivin boys archetype either ironically or negatively. Krapivin's work was featured in the studies of Western academics, although briefly (Salminen 2005; Hellman 2016).

in the late 1950s in various youth-oriented magazines, such as *Уральский следопыт* (*Ural Stalker*), *Вожатый* (*Pioneer Leader*), *Мурзилка* (*Murzilka*). He released his first novel in 1962. Between the mid-1960s and early 1980s he wrote a significant number of works, including *Оруженосец Кашка* (*Kashka the Armor-bearer*, 1966), *Та сторона, где ветер* (*The Side Where the Wind Is*, 1965–1967), *Тень каравеллы* (*Caravel's Shadow*, 1968–1970), *Мушкетер и фея* (*A Musketeer and a Fairy*, 1978), *Колыбельная для брата* (*A Lullaby for a Brother*, 1979), *Трое с площади Карронад* (*Three Some from the Square of the Carronades*, 1981), *Журавленок и молнии* (*The Little Crane and the Lighting*, 1982) and the trilogy *Мальчик со шпагой* (*The Boy with a Sword*, 1973–1975). It is in these texts that Krapivin's protagonist is best described, although some elements of Krapivin's boys were emerging even in his earlier work: *Костер* (*The Campfire*, 1961), *Настоящее* (*Real*, 1961), *Капитаны не смотрят назад* (*Captains Don't Look Back*, 1964), and *Звезды пахнут полынью* (*Stars smell of sagebrush*, 1965). While these books were written as realistic teen novels, Krapivin also wrote literary fairy tales. Moreover, in the 1980s the themes of fantasy and social satire became prominent in his works.

Despite conflicts with adherents of official pedagogic doctrine, in 1964 Krapivin became a member of the Union of Soviet Writers. In the 1970s and the 1980s he became a prominent author and then an editorial board member in *Pioneer*, the leading magazine for Soviet schoolchildren, which helped Krapivin, a nonconformist, penetrate the powerful Soviet bureaucracy. One of the most important events in Krapivin's life happened in 1961. While he was a pioneer leader in his hometown of Sverdlovsk, Krapivin founded the Caravel group⁶. It was an unusual one: firstly, it was not a school group but a neighborhood-based one; secondly it presented itself as a fleet; thirdly, it had its own charter – by and large, it was similar to the charter of the pioneer organization, but still somewhat differed – its own uniform inspired by navy uniforms of various countries, its own insignia, motto, and rituals. Initially the group only included boys who were studying navigation, fencing, building sailing vessels. The discipline was strict, there was a hierarchy of new members and captains, and many various symbolic rituals were developed, such as lifting the flag, greetings, guarding the flag. The authority of an adult leader, in this case Krapivin himself, was unquestionable. When members of the group turned 14–15 years, they graduated and left the group. Despite the criticism from the official pedagogic doctrine, the Caravel was successful and in the 1970s and 1980s in different Russian cities similar groups were founded, some of them existing to this day⁷.

Thus, a type of socio-literary recursion occurred in which the characters described in Krapivin's books had real life inspiration in the boys of the Caravel, and at the same time these characters were influencing his readers, creating

⁶ The name "Caravel," solidified later, was given to the group in 1968 (cf. Krapivina 2013).

⁷ The group exists to this day as a press-center and a sailing fleet in Ekaterinburg.

a following and forming the profile of a Krapivin boy. So, what is this socio-literary archetype? What ideas and writing devices are used when describing this character? What is his origin in Russian literature and Soviet culture?

Most authors writing about Krapivin's work, indifferent to the genre of their writing, be it an academic study or a popular or informal publication, note the stereotypicality of the portrayal of boys in Krapivin's work. The high degree of clichés of the plotlines and the characters distinguishes Krapivin's style from Soviet realistic prose for children and adolescents, even considering that according to a number of researchers, schematic plots and the simplicity of literary devices is generally more common in children's literature.

This aspect of Krapivin's work helps to merge different characters of different books into one recognizable archetype, as, for example, in one of Russian online encyclopedia:

Krapivin's boy is always courageous, bright-eyed, bare-kneed, long-legged, with curly hair and extremely acute sense of justice, which he usually defends left and right. Typically he cannot live without marine romance, is a member of a yacht club, or at least constantly dreams of the sea and the sails. [...] Loves fencing, almost in all instances he has a sword, at least a wooden one. Usually dressed in a shirt and shorts. Doesn't like shoes, in extreme cases wears sandals. What is also characteristic of Krapivin's boys is the way the author himself feels about them – with tenderness bordering on obvious admiration for his own characters. (*Krapivin's Boys*, 2019)

Interestingly, Krapivin himself once took part in the discussion on the cliché of his characters, having given his own description of the protagonist's formula in the words of one of the characters of his fantasy novel *Сказка о рыбаке и рыбке* (*The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish*, 1991):

you created yourself an ideal – a small knight in ripped trousers and dusty sandals. With sharp scratched elbows and tangled hair... And based on that ideal you make and release your characters. While women reviewers sigh in admiration or complain about your self-repetition: "Why are your characters so similar?". And their similarity is in the combination of their outward defenselessness and inner courage. Volynov's style... [...] For "Volynov's boys" are you, [...] their origins – in you. These boys are who you wanted to be as a child, but failed. (Krapivin, 1991)

Researchers note not only the uniqueness of Krapivin's protagonist, but also the universality of his image for Soviet children's literature and Russian literature in general. Critics call Krapivin's boys heirs to the tradition of the 1920s-1930s Soviet prose, emphasizing the closeness with "Gaidar's tradition of romantically portraying the world of childhood" (Grishin, 2005: 298), likening them to "Russian boys" of Dostoyevsky (Velikanova 2008), and comparing them with canons of Western adventurous and melodramatic books (Sinitskaya 2013; Sinitskaya 2016).

However, one has to note that Krapivin’s protagonist, although included in the literary tradition to a great extent, is still largely defined by the autobiographical context. If we look closer at the sociocultural situation of the Krapivin’s boy and focus on the habitus of this character, we will see many modifications of the same author’s projection – a teenager whose life circumstances match those of Krapivin himself. His protagonists live in small, often nameless, Russian towns, in the years after the Second World War – which were characterized by hunger and poverty, but also happiness – or during the more prosperous and safe years of the Thaw and Brezhnev’s stagnation⁸. Families, in which Krapivin’s boys are raised, are united by belonging to the same socio-cultural class. Despite the fact that the level of psychological well-being varies from problematic (*Всадники со станции Роса; Журавленок и молнии*) and dysfunctional (*Трое с площади Карронад*) to decent (*Тень каравеллы*) and almost ideal (*Мушкетер и фея; Колыбельная для брата*), the protagonist always has access to books and school education. Moreover, the adult family members have the system of values that makes it possible to categorize them as provincial intelligentsia. Therefore, it is reasonable to view the story of Krapivin’s protagonists as a literary portrayal of a Soviet “bookworm’s” socialization in the cultural space of a provincial town in the after-war period, the Thaw period or the Brezhnev era.

The figure and the situation of the main character forms the spectrum of the plot lines in Krapivin’s realistic prose. The central subject of his writing is the integration of a ten- or eleven-year-old boy into the company of his peers. These can be street gangs (*Август, месяц ветров; Тень каравеллы; Оруженосец Кашка*), pioneer squads (*Палочки для Васькиного барабана; Валькины друзья и паруса*) and, typical of Krapivin, brotherhoods of like-minded people which are the literary projection of the Caravel group – the Espada fencing club (*Мальчик со шпагой*), the Windjammer sailing club (*Трое с площади Карронад*), the crew of “Captain Grant” ship (*Колыбельная для брата*). These communities are interpreted as spiritual brotherhoods, as a sacred union of comrades, and in opposition to other characters who are described as hostile or dull as they lack a dream and spirituality.

The story of his protagonist’s coming of age and finding his masculine identity is told by Krapivin with the same storyline tropes found in almost every book written in the 1960s-1980s. These are: finding an extraordinary best

⁸ The Thaw is the unofficial designation of the period in Soviet history after the death of Stalin, lasting roughly ten years, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. It was marked by condemnation of the “cult of personality” of Stalin and the repressions of the 1930s, a loosening of totalitarian power, the emergence of some measure of free speech, the relative liberalization of political and social life, openness to the Western world, and greater artistic freedom. The Brezhnev era is the period when Leonid Brezhnev was in power of USSR, from 1964 to 1982.

friend⁹; finding – usually involuntary – a younger friend, a six or seven-year old boy or a peer in a vulnerable position who needs his care and protection; participating in a unifying “real men’s work” like flying a kite, fencing, archery, building sail ships and navigation; a conflict with his antagonistic peers, be it a competition or a rivalry; rescuing a friend, a ward, a younger boy or a significant object (e.g., ship, flag), often connected was a great amount of risk; possessing or learning how to use a weapon (e.g., a stick, a board, a nail, a knife, self-made slingshots, bows, swords, sabers, toy guns) or a drum, drumsticks, a horn; a sudden appearance by an unexpected protector, when the protagonist is in danger, mostly when he is under attack from superior forces.

The protagonist is always presented with a choice: to stay aside and be silent or to enter an open conflict with the adults, his classmates or the school bullies. Krapivin describes the boy’s hesitation, his fears and doubts. In the end, however, the boy always finds the courage to interfere and usually wins.

However trivial the observation, the main subject of Krapivin’s books is the story of the protagonist’s trials and initiation. The conflict of Krapivin’s bookworms and their peers, members of a worse-to-do class, which is mostly influenced by the criminal environment, reflects not only the Russian reality of the after-War and late-Soviet eras, but also the universal traits of masculine gender socialization. One of the most important conflicts, in which Krapivin’s boys engage, is the physical confrontation to those whose values not only allow but prescribe threats of violence and violence itself. Krapivin’s boys choose to take the fight and defend themselves. “He felt that if he flees, he will always have to run and hide” (Krapivin 1979). Interestingly, the culmination of Krapivin’s central work – *Звездный час Серёжи Каховского* (*Serezha Kakhovsky’s Finest Hour*, 1974) – is the fight scene. The protagonist, defending two younger boys, fights an armed bandit, and wins, because of his courage and his fencing skills:

The fear would not go away. But Serezha knew that they may beat him to death, but he will not let them turn his pockets and will not run without a fight [...] – You can beat me, but you won’t kill me [...] What were they hoping for? Well, they did not understand that some things are stronger than fear. That one can be afraid and still stand up straight. Because there is the insignia with riders and the Sun, there are friends, swords, vows. Songs of Grasshopper, the riders of Grenada. And somewhere far away – little Alejandro Alvarez Rios, threatened by the bullets. And the red tie, that you don’t hide in your pocket, when you leave the school, like these thugs. And the captain’s golden angle. (Krapivin, 1979)

⁹ E.g.: “Timofey Sel, a student in the fifth B class of public middle school №20, has lived four life in eleven years and three and a half months. [...]. The third life included just one last month, September. After Slavka appeared. Everybody starts a new life, when among many peers and comrades someone becomes your one and the most needed friend” (Krapivin 1981: 179).

As one can see in the example of this episode, what is almost the most important for the protagonist is building his heroic identity which foams from many different elements and is built painfully throughout the story. Sergey considers himself to be a part of the male heroic tradition as a member of the Espada fencing club – which is essentially a sacred union of men – his rank as a captain of Espada leads to responsibility, he relates to a young Chilean revolutionary Alejandro Rios¹⁰, thus projecting his actions as confronting the world forces of evil. The more important is the plotline about the Grenada riders¹¹, connected to the Red army troopers, heroes of the Civil War, who in the 1960s culture become symbols of revolutionary heroism.

Therefore it is interesting to look at the inalienable part of Krapivin's books – mandatory representation of a romantic and heroic world which the protagonist dreams of and to which he relates. This world is represented by a bitty, yet holistic and recognizable, paradigm of “true male heroics,” part of which in the 1960–1970s were images and plotlines of Western adventure-themed fiction, the obsession over travelling by sea, pirates, exotic – and absolutely inaccessible to a Soviet citizen – countries, and the events of the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War, reabsorbed as purely epic and heroic. Krapivin's characters are almost always in love with the sea – they dream of long journeys, of sailing, of heroism, and glory. His boys read books on the subject of sea travel and study navigation rules. Sailors, especially sea captains, navy members and officers are regarded as god-like and considered role models.

Critics have noted multiple times the escapist nature of Krapivin's prose, the infantility and simplicity of the “adult world,” which the protagonists aspire to join (Sinitskaya 2016). However, one has to point out that claiming the heroic discourse by Krapivin's boys is not only part of a larger cultural context of the 1960–1970s, but also an important part of the boys' gender socialization which leads to them becoming “real men,” brave and strong, not threatened by hooligans.

Krapivin's boys are often vulnerable because of their physical weakness, timidity, age, inner taboo on violence, and lack of fighting experience. It seems that Krapivin tries to transport his protagonist as fast as possible from vulnerability and helplessness into a status of a more mature, and therefore less vulnerable, masculinity. The protagonist, having passed the test, be it a fight with an adversary, with nature, or with his own fear, inevitably gets a symbolic reward. For instance, after

¹⁰ The fictional hero, young participant in the communist resistance of the period of the military coup in Chile (mid-1970s).

¹¹ The Grenada riders are the characters of the first installment in Sergey Kakhovsky trilogy (Riders from Rosa station). In this novel “Grenada” is the name of a student squad, members of which work in a kolkhoz (collective agricultural unit) in the summer (“helping the village,” which was mandatory in Soviet times). The name is a reference to a well-known eponymous poem by Mikhail Svetlov, which expresses the idea of revolutionary romanticism and the dream of a world revolution. Students of the Grenada squad, dressed in a fantasy revolutionary uniform, rescue Sergey Kakhovsky from bullies, when they accidentally find themselves at the scene.

Sergey Kakhovsky's fight there is a newspaper article published with the headline "There are musketeers still!" and the protagonist, despite his tendency toward humility and self-reflection, takes this comparison for granted (Krapivin 1973).

Another common theme in Krapivin's writing, along with fighting "evil" in the form of adults and bullies, is the description of the boys' friendship, filled with extraordinary lyricism, intimacy, as passionate as romance, but exclusively platonic. This detail of Krapivin's books, along with a consistent fixation on a certain type of clothes and appearance of the characters, gives the modern critics reason to discuss its homoerotic element. Obviously, there could be no homoeroticism in Soviet children's literature, and, in case of Krapivin, it seems to be more about portraying a homosocial gender model in the genre of young adult prose, which could be described as a "bromance."

Krapivin's boys are almost entirely immersed in their isolated masculine world, in which they are surrounded with their peers and younger boys whom they guard. They are under command of grown men – pioneer leaders, enthusiastic educators, but not school teachers. The most important thing to Krapivin's characters is the approval by other members of their male brotherhood, the most significant is the process of turning from "just a boy" to a "real man," "a captain," a fighter, a warrior, the process that occurs when confronting the enemy. Symbolic values (e.g., a book, a painting, a gun) are passed onto them by elder men – relatives or acquaintances, often with military experience, whose characters are romanticized and simplified to the point of a reference.

There are girls in Krapivin's books, however, they are all outside the closed world of the boys. Krapivin depicts girls as boring and dull, or as openly hostile to the boys – snitches who are dumb and loyal to the authority. The word "girly" is almost always an insult – girly character traits, girly whining, girly meanness – while "boyish" is a positive descriptor. More than anything, Krapivin's boys fear being called a girl, while the word "man," when used to describe them, makes them shiver with pride. The socialization of a Krapivin's boy is in line with a principle formulated by an American sociologist Michael Kimmel: "being a man means not being like women" (2009: 41). Kimmel notes the specificity of boys' socialization, which happens in gender (self)isolation, calling the formation of masculinity a "homosocial play" (2009: 63).

There is no direct misogyny in Krapivin's books, though. They give an accurate depiction of the gender dynamic, typical of the patriarchal Soviet society. Even the female protagonists who are friends of the boys and are objects of their affection are described broadly and scarcely. For example, we do not see an extensive description of any girl's appearance, while many pages are devoted to that of the boys. Usually, the girls are portrayed as "little moms" – they groan, sigh, cry, tell the boys off for untidiness, cook and feed the boys, send to the store for food, make the boys wash their hands before eating, tend to their wounds, and repair their ripped clothes like Valentina in *Трое с площади Карронад* or Vika in the Johnny Vorobiev cycle (cf. Krapivin 1969, 1975, 1985).

Even the protagonist in *Мушкетер и фея*, Krapivin’s only book of the Soviet period based on the main character’s affection, is portrayed rather vaguely. The reader cannot understand whether a girl named Katya is sincerely responding to the 11-year-old Johnny’s feelings or manipulating him. One of the conflicts of the story is especially peculiar – to be with Katya at the school fair, Johnny is ready to give up his musketeer’s costume (i.e. masculine and heroic identity) and change it to Pinocchio’s (which does not have a sword or any other weapon). Only on the night before the fair Johnny, who has a fairly Freudian nightmare in which he, unarmed, meets his adversary and shamefully drowns in front of Katya’s eyes, who is in character as the Blue Fairy, realizes the frightening consequences of his decision. “Johnny realized he’s a traitor: he exchanged his sword for bright clothes” (Krapivin 1999: 131). The protagonist is afraid of this unspoken symbolic castration and goes to the fair as a musketeer, thus preserving the right to carry a sword. Images and plotlines of other books also imply that the feminine side is not only down-to-earth and full of chores, but also dangerous, even potentially deadly.

Soviet critics noted this asymmetry as something positive and natural:

The most precious in Krapivin’s books are the boys. The boys that wore the same ties as us, went to school like us and fought with the teachers like us, but still were those beautiful Krapivin’s boys, the wonderful dream of all the Soviet girls. Girls knew that somewhere in a far away city of Ekaterinburg lived the noble Serezha Kakhovsky, impulsive Johnny Vorobiev and others. (Danilov 2008: 21)

Why did Krapivin’s repetitive and stereotyped characters become so popular among Soviet readers, children and adults alike, and are today an inalienable part of the Soviet and post-Soviet culture? The main reason is the way Krapivin’s books organically incorporate a number of societal and cultural ideas of the post-war USSR:

1) Romanticism, which was long banned, went through a revival in the 1960s. Films, songs, and children’s folklore explored themes of sea travel, pirates, filibusters, exotic (and unreachable for Soviet people) faraway lands. The dream of something far and unreachable became a prominent theme in mass culture, turning into a legitimate form of escapism. An instant classic that signified this concept was the film *Алые паруса* (*Scarlet Sails*, 1961). Marine romanticism in Krapivin’s prose correlates with this important concept in the Soviet culture of the Thaw period.

2) The return to the theme of the Civil War¹² and its rethinking. The Civil War started to be interpreted as a time of the true fight for revolutionary ideals, happiness, and dignity of mankind. The Civil War heroes, “commissars in

¹² The Russian Civil War (1918–22) represented a series of battles between various political, ethnic, and social groups in the territory of the former Russian Empire after the Bolsheviks came to power in the October Revolution of 1917. A large-scale and bloody struggle, it was marked by great casualties, from eight to thirteen million people.

dusty helmets” were mythologized, portrayed as selfless and idealistic warriors, possessing the courage and stoicism of the era. They turn into a symbol of heroism and self-sacrifice, famous bards dedicate songs to them, many films are released where the Red Army is romanticized and idealized. This attitude towards the Civil War somewhat helped to distance the society from Stalin’s era, to return to the original communist doctrine and live through the trauma of Stalin’s terror without mentioning it, replacing any conversation about it with a symbol of silence “commissars in dusty helmets.”

The theme of continuity is common in Krapivin’s books – the boys receive a kind of heroic relay from the heroes of the civil War who delegate to the boys the right and the responsibility to protect the weak, to fight the good battle. For example, the main character of *Мальчик со шашкой*, named Sergey Kakhovsky, says “[m]y grandfather was a red horseman. He fought greatly, even became a commander.” But even without that phrase, the very surname “Kakhovsky” is very symbolic to the Russian reader. First, it is the surname of one of the participants of the 1825 rebellion – the first revolt against absolutism. Second, the Ukrainian town of Kakhovka was the place of deadly battles between the red and the white armies, which later inspired a famous song “Песня о Каховке” (“A song about Kakhovka”). Therefore the surname “Kakhovsky” has revolutionary, military, and rebellious symbolism obvious to the Russian reader.

3) A significant and an uncommon element in the Krapivin’s boy’s description is the fact that he knows how to use a weapon – he is a fencer or an archer. For characters of adult Soviet literature, it was almost impossible. In the 1960–1980s authors sometimes risked portraying characters dissatisfied with the system, and even ones fighting it, but adult characters rebel either by self-marginalization, such as the protagonist of Venedikt Erofeev’s *Москва-Петушки* (*Moscow-Petushki*, 1973) or Alexander Vampilov’s play *Утиная охота* (*Duck hunt*, 1970); escape into self-reflection, like characters in Yuri Trifonov’s novels; or die as the character in Vil’ Lipatov’ novel *И это все о нём* (*It’s all about him*, 1974). It is impossible to imagine a rebel protagonist being armed in adult Soviet literature. Weapons were reserved only for heroic policemen, the military or criminals¹³.

And in this context, Krapivin’s “boys with swords” embodied a Soviet reader’s dream, a sense of nostalgia for the time of heroes in capes and with swords; they transported immensely popular plots about musketeers from Alexander Dumas’ novels and knights from Walter Scott’s novels into the Soviet reality. Many readers of Krapivin’s books note their affinity for the knights’ honor code that the boys followed.

¹³ Obviously, Soviet state security (the KGB) could not not be worried about the idea of “arming the pioneers.” As Andrey Shchupov, Krapivin’s biographer, writes in his book, in 1976 a KGB officer, Arkady Shpetny, was sent to inspect Krapivin’s group, however, he came to the conclusion that Krapivin mostly “introduces the kids to only the best eternal values” and later became a powerful ally of the group (Shchupov 2017: 264).

4) Within the gender socialization of the Krapivin's boy a great role is played by the glorification of war. The characters do not want it, but prepare for it. Of course, it is explained by the fact that Krapivin himself was part of the war generation, while the boys he wrote about were part of the first post-war generation. The memory of the war that had just ended was fresh, the divide between us and them, us and the enemies, was transformed into the divide between USSR and the capitalist countries and became the founding of the Cold War.

In these circumstances, Krapivin's boys, bravely fighting the bullies in their backyard, were seen as future warriors who would have to fight a real external enemy. Creating such a profile was entirely in line with the ordinary in children's literature of Brezhnev's era. Moreover, it had a tradition in the pre-war Soviet children's literature, for example in Arkady Gaidar's work. While seeing boys as future warriors is an ancient concept that dates back to archaic times, it makes one remember Robert Bly's words that “the structure at the bottom of the male psyche is still as firm as it was twenty thousand years ago” (qtd in Kimmel 2009: 58).

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