

War children in the Post-war. A West-East perspective on child policies, child experiences and war childhood remembrance cultures in Europe since 1945

Veranstalter: Machteld Venken, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres; Maren Röger, German Historical Institute, Warsaw

Datum, Ort: 12.12.2012-15.12.2012, Vienna

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„War children in the Post-war. A West-East perspective on child policies, child experiences and war childhood remembrance cultures in Europe since 1945.“ (Vienna, Dec. 12th – Dec. 15th 2012, Dr. Machteld Venken, Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for European History and Public Spheres; Dr. Maren Röger, German Historical Institute, Warsaw)

„War children“ have been in the focus of both scientific and public attention for at least the last decade. Especially in Germany, these debates have been intertwined with general reconsiderations of German experiences of the Second World War and controversies about a supposed reevaluation of German sufferings during the war. While some scholars have argued that these childhood experiences often had traumatic consequences that could only be articulated in recent years for the first time, other scholars like the sociologist Michael Heinlein have analyzed the German discourse about the so-called „Kriegskinder“ as an „invention of memory“ (Erfindung der Erinnerung), which had more to do with contemporary medial attention-politics than with genuine experiences of the war. In the context of these political subtexts, the organizers of the conference „War children in the Post-war. A West-East perspective on child policies, child experiences and war childhood remembrance cultures in Europe since 1945“ can only be congratulated for having chosen a comparative and transnational approach that put into connection personal experiences, politics and memory cultures of both Western European and Central and Eastern European cases.

The introductory note was presented by MAREN RÖGER (Warsaw) in the name of both organizers. She described the manifold ways in which children were affected by the war. Even though personal experiences differed, „war children“ can thus be interpreted both as a „community of experience“ and as an object of social and political projections of hope for an anticipated post-war future. As Röger argued, these post-war politics are often interpreted as a dichotomy, in which Western European policies focused on the family as the main safeguard of emotional reconstruction after the atrocities of the war, while Central and Eastern European states downplayed the role of the family and instead focused on the political mobilization of children and youth. As Röger outlined, one of the central aims of the conference was to put this dichotomy into question, while at the same time taking into account the social and cultural differences of all European states, as for example in their emerging remembrance cultures, different forms of scientific research and expertise, as well as varying concepts of individualism and subjectivity.

The opening keynote, given by TARA ZAHRA (Chicago), picked up on this political dimension by looking at „Displaced Persons“ in the aftermath of the Second World. As Zahra argued, children played a major role in this context and often became objects of dispute in the escalating cold war, when all European states tried to repatriate „their“ children to their own homeland. While both sides argued to be acting „in the best interest of the child“, this argument often became a political claim in the context of post-war politics and the emerging cold war.

In the first panel, which focused on individual child experiences, LU SEEGER (Hannover) talked about the phenomenon of „fatherlessness“ in a comparative approach, drawing on oral history interviews with German and Polish interviewees. As Seegers argued, many life narratives referred to the supposed „normality“ of a complete family, which the interviewees themselves had not experienced. In the context of post-war memories, Seegers claimed that many West German interviewees had the feeling of belonging to a transnational generational commu-

nity which shared the same experience of „fatherlessness“. This, however, did not happen in the same way in the former GDR and in Poland, where similar memory cultures and psychological discourses were not present to shape such self-interpretations. Then ANNA WYLEGALA (Warsaw) talked about children’s experiences of deportation in Poland and Ukraine, drawing on sources of biographical narratives from two ethnical and cultural heterogeneous borderland cities in both countries. In both cases, feelings of fear, anxiety, and insecurity were predominant in their memories of the early post-war years. These feelings were at the same time a result of past experiences of violence during the war, but stemmed also from the insecurity of migration itself in the post-war years. MACHTELD VENKEN’S (Vienna) paper on „Nationalisation Campaigns and Teachers’ Practices in Belgian-German and Polish-German Border Regions (1945-1956)“ looked into nationalisation and education in European borderlands in the early post-World War II period. Belonging to Belgium and Poland respectively in the interwar years, the Eupen-St. Vith-Malmedy and the East-Upper Silesia regions came under German rule for the duration of World War II. Returned to the Belgian and Polish nation states once the war was over, the regions experienced a pronounced upheaval in the population profile as a result of population transfers and reorientations in education curricula. In her contribution, Venken compared the methods employed by the authorities in selecting educational personnel for their borderlands, the nationalising role teachers were to play, and the way teachers gave meaning to their professional practices.

In the second panel about nationalization politics after 1945, RUTH LEISEROWITZ (Warsaw) described the experiences of children in the soviet repatriation policies in the years 1944-59. As Leiserowitz argued, the repatriation of all Soviet citizens to the USSR was a central aim of Soviet post war politics. From the perspective of post-war authorities, this was often seen as a success story, in which children learnt the Russian language and cultural practices and forgot their former cultural and religious bounds. Only after 1989 some of these children – now grown-ups in their 60s

– started to find out more about their early childhood background and to re-narrate their own life stories.

In the second keynote of the conference, BENGT SANDIN (Linköping) drew attention to the intersection of war and childhood in a neutral country. He gave attention to the importance of the Second World War for the development of a welfare system for children in post-war Sweden. While the formation of the Swedish welfare system is often interpreted as a linear process, Sandin argued that the experience of the war played a major role in this development by strengthening the ideas of „state responsibility“, „social planning“ and the fear of a „vulnerability of the family“, which resulted in different social policies like housing support, child allowances and debates about legal abortion.

In the third panel, which focused on the „competition for war children“ in an international framework, MICHAL SHAPIRA (New York) talked about the „second generation“ of psychoanalysts who fled from Austria and Germany to Great Britain, where they became actors of social expertise on the long-term effects of civilian war experiences. Concentrating on Anna Freud and her staff, Shapira described the foundation of the „Bulldog Bank“ as a home for children who had survived the concentration camps and lost their parents during the war. Helping these children to adjust to the new post-war society, the „Bulldog Bank“ became at the same time a laboratory for studying the effects of the war on children. As Shapira showed, this was part of a more general story about the emergence of new psychological concepts that became of central importance in the post-war decades. Then CHRISTINA NORWIG (Göttingen) talked about initiatives of European unity in the first post-war years. She showed how concepts of „Europe“ focused on the group of „war children“ as a supposed „founding generation“ of European unity and reconciliation. As Norwig pointed out, this idea was in opposition to similar claims in Eastern Europe, where the „young generation“ was mobilized in a different international rhetoric, as for example in the „Weltjugendfestspiele“ 1951 in Berlin. In Western Europe the central focus of public initiatives was

in creating a shared European memory, which at the same time often silenced the memory of Germany as the perpetrator of the war.

Opening the fourth panel on „perpetrators' children - child perpetrators“, BARBARA STELZL-MARX (Graz) talked about occupation children in Austria, which she defined as children who resulted in love affairs of Austrian women with Soviet soldiers during the years of occupation, or of rape in last days of war and the early post-war period. As Stelzl-Marx argued, these children can be interpreted as an invisible generation, whose identity was often hidden behind a social taboo. Both mothers and children were often discriminated in their own family and in the local community. While many of those children did not know anything about their biological father, some of them started in old age to find out about their own roots and family backgrounds. In the following presentation, Maren Röger talked about children born in Poland as the offspring of German occupiers during the war. Similar to the findings of Stelzl-Marx, Röger emphasized the discrimination of these mothers and their children in their family and local community. Because of their difficult social status, many of them fled from their home towns in order to start anew in an anonymous surrounding.

In the third keynote, JOANNA MICHLIC (Brandeis University) talked about Jewish child survivors in Poland in the early post-war years. She argued that for many of these children, the post-war period was a time of continuing anxiety, loneliness and a deep sense of loss. As Michlic pointed out, many children were very aware of the fact that the war had ended their childhood and had not given them the chance of a „normal“ up-growing. Because most of these children survived the Shoah only by hiding in non-Jewish families, many of them found themselves caught up in conflicting identities after the end of the war.

The fifth panel was dedicated to the subject of „war children“ and religion. SARAH VAN RUYSKENSVELDE (Leuven) talked about „Catholic education, pupils' memory and World War II“ in the case of Belgium. By analyzing questionnaires from the catholic and francophone region of Wallonia and conduct-

ing oral history interviews in the northern part of Flanders, her project focuses on personal war experiences and memories of the war. In the second presentation of this panel, MARTA ANSILEWSKA (Berlin) talked about Jewish children in a Polish Catholic surrounding. In much the same way as Joanna Michlic, she pointed to the aspect of a shattered identity in the aftermath of the war. As she argued, Catholic identity was at first part of a hiding strategy, while after the war many children were in the dilemma of having to decide between their ingenious religious roots and their learned and habitualized Catholic identity.

In the last presentation of the conference, ANNA HOLIAN (Arizona State University) dealt with the role of „war children“ in post-war European films. As Holian pointed out, children became a central topic in post-war cinema, reflecting a new attention of the experiences of children and the social problems of childhood. By looking at the film „Jeux interdits“ (France, 1952), Holian showed how this movie expressed a new psychological interpretation of children's feelings and their desire of making sense of death. In their attention on psychological matters, the film can also be interpreted as a critique on contemporary child policies, which were centered on material problems, while at the same time downplaying the importance of deeper psychological phenomena.

It is of course impossible to put all these different subjects and approaches in a general framework. Nevertheless, the conference has pointed to at least two important aspects of contextualization. On the one hand, the transnational perspective has shown that the experiences of „war children“ in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War are part of a social and political history of the European post-war period, which was radically shaped by the emergence of new political powers, ideologies and cultural struggles in the context of the escalating cold war. While the West-Eastern dichotomy was not rendered insignificant in the context of this conference, many of the presentations pointed to the importance of specific national and cultural differences that cannot be grasped in a supposedly clear distinction between 'democracies' and 'socialist dictatorships'.

More importantly, this contextualization refers to the central task of putting these individual experiences into connection to the social and political developments of the post-war period – for example to the emergence of new expert cultures, contemporary political and media discourses, and socially constructed taboos and „rules of communication“. Such an approach might help to contextualize some contemporary research that has been conducted mainly in the realm of an individual „Erfahrungsgeschichte“; but it might also pose the question, if the term „war children“ is still able to integrate all these mentioned perspectives. As Bengt Sandin pointed out at the end of the conference, It might be more useful to talk about different „childhoods during the war“ in order to integrate the different transnational perspectives of the conference. Such a terminology might also help to critically analyze the specific political and generational claims that are connected with the term „war children“ in the memory politics of the post-war decades.

Conference Overview

Welcome notes

Claudia Lingner, Managing Director of the Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft
Boguslaw Dybaś, Director of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Vienna
Ruth Leiserowitz, Research Director of the German Historical Institute in Warsaw

Introduction

Maren Röger and Machteld Venken

Keynote I

Tara Zahra: The Lost Children. Reconstructing Europe's Families After World War II

Panel I: Comparing child experiences in East and West

Lu Seegers: „Living with A Dead Dad“. Experiences, Memories and Interpretations of Fatherless War Children in Germany and Poland

Anna Wylegala: Children's experience of the deportation and cultural adaptation: comparative study of biographical narratives from Poland and Ukraine

Machteld Venken: Children's War Experiences in European Border Regions

Commentary: Tara Zahra

Panel II: Competition for war children I: Nationalization

Beata Halicka: Children's everyday life in Western Poland in the early post-war – methodological remarks on the work with written memories

Ruth Leiserowitz: Children as Objects of Desire. The Soviet Repatriation Policy 1944-1959

Commentary: Bengt Sandin

Keynote II

Bengt Sandin: The war time experience – neutrality - and building of welfare for children in Sweden

Panel III: Competition for war children II: International framework

Michal Shapira: Psychoanalysis and Jewish Child Survivors

Christina Norwig: The ideological competition for the war children: The European Youth Campaign 1951-1958 in the context of European integration and Cold War

Commentary: Machteld Venken

Panel IV: Perpetrators' children - child perpetrators

Barbara Stelzl-Marx: Occupation children in Austria

Maren Röger: Occupation children in West and Eastern Europe

Gregory Weeks: Giving Meaning to a Wartime Childhood in the Post-World War II Era. The Case of Herbert L.

Commentaries: Lu Seegers / Maren Röger

Keynote III – Public Lecture

Joanna Michlic: What Does A Child Remember? The Recollections of the War and the Early Post-War Period Amongst Child Survivors From Poland

Panel V: War Children and Religion

Sarah Van Ruyskensvelde: A school trip down memory lane ... Catholic education, pupils' memory and World War II; the case of Belgium.

Marta Ansilewska: Jewish Children in a Polish Catholic Surrounding

Commentary: Joanna Michlic

Panel VI: Patterns of Cultural Remembrance in East and West

Ulrike Präger: 'Musicking' Children from the Bohemian Borderlands: Hidden and Nurtured Musical Practices on Both Sides of the Iron Curtain

Anna Holian: Children and War in Postwar European Films

Commentary: Muriel Blaive

Final Remarks

Maren Röger and Machteld Venken

Tagungsbericht *War children in the Post-war. A West-East perspective on child policies, child experiences and war childhood remembrance cultures in Europe since 1945*. 12.12.2012-15.12.2012, Vienna, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 23.03.2013.