Book Review

Joanna Beata Michlic, **Yuliya von Saal**, **and Anna Ullrich** (editors) "Childhood during War and Genocide", *European Holocaust Studies*, n°5, Center for Holocaust Studies at the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History, Wallstein Verlag GmbH, Göttingen, 2024.

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The selection of articles in this volume stems from a conference entitled "Childhood at War and Genocide: Children's Experiences of Conflict in the 20th Century – Agency, Survival, Memory and Representation". As the editors remind us, it took place in Leipzig in October 2022, against the background of the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and its themes have found renewed echoes with the events in Israel and Gaza since October 7, 2023. Thus the book sadly demonstrates "the topicality of the field of children, war, and genocide studies both in the past and in the present." (8) Mass-murder, torture, forced displacement of children and separation from their parents, followed by the imposition of a new language and culture over their original ones, affect the young victims of today's conflicts as much as their predecessors in previous wars.

The essays aim at offering a comparative and cross-national perspective on the difficult subject of children, war and genocide. While children are inevitably perceived as particularly vulnerable, the authors insist on the necessity to consider them not only as victims but also as agents in their own right during those trying times. In order to do so, they focus on the voices of children themselves, as evidenced through a variety of what they refer to as "ego documents" (16), i.e. material artefacts, drawings, paintings, diaries and testimonies, both oral and written, paying due attention to the complex methodological issues attached to the use of such fragmentary, subjective sources, in which individuals sometimes revisit their childhood at a much later stage of their lives, and may be influenced by subsequent wartime narratives.

The book is divided into three sections. The first one consists of seven classical "research articles". The second one, entitled "source commentaries", comprises

Correction note: Correction added May 27, 2025 after online publication April 4, 2025: The conference "Childhood at War and Genocide: Children's Experiences of Conflict in the 20th Century Agency, Survival, Memory and Representation" mentioned in paragraph 1 page 1 was mistakenly located in Leipzig, whereas it took place in Munich.

three contributions; the third one, called "project descriptions", is dedicated to three instances of work in progress.

The research section begins with an article by Edita G. Gzoyan, dedicated to the Armenian tragedy of 1915 which is recognized by many as the first genocide. In "Forcibly Transferred and Assimilated: Experiences of Armenian Children during the Armenian Genocide" (31–51), she aptly describes how Armenian children who escaped slaughter were often exposed to forced displacement and assimilation as a result of being either gathered in state-controlled orphanages or allocated to Turkish families. Their physical survival depended on their acceptance of the new names, the new language and new religion imposed on them by their oppressors. The author, whose work relies on children's testimonies and later first-person narratives, also evokes the difficulties faced by those freed after the war as they tried to return to their previous selves and identities, and shows that the end of the conflict did not put an end to their suffering.

Perhaps inevitably, this first section is dominated by articles dealing with WW2 (5 out of 7). Each offers a distinctive and often fairly new angle on the period. Thus, the issue of Jewish refugees is addressed through a comparison of French and American practices by Laura Hobson Faure in "Jewish Child Refugees from Central Europe in France and the United States: Transnational Perspectives on their Care, 1938–1945" (131–149). She considers the little-known case of *Kindertransport* children first sent from Germany to France, just after *Reichskristallnacht* (November 9–10, 1938), then relocated to the USA in the early years of the conflict. In such a short time span, they experienced two different childcare policies that reflected the distinct traditions of the two countries in that matter, each "based on a view of what families and children should be like, with the goal of promoting certain values." (133) Hobson Faure shows that such cases of "serial displacement", which forced children "to adapt to a new language and culture, but also a new social system" (134) several times in succession, with lasting consequences on their later lives, have been sadly overlooked.

Like her, Johannes-Dieter Steinert addresses a fairly common topic from an unusual angle. In "Echoes from Hell: Jewish Child Forced Laborers and the Holocaust" (81–100), he focuses on the experiences of Jewish youngsters forced to work in the ghettos or in the camps, often in harrowing proximity with the Nazis' death-industry process (87–88). Unearthing many hitherto under-exploited testimonies, he assesses the role played by work in survival, in relation to other factors, such as inmates' solidarity and sheer luck, and the implications of the survivors' war experiences for their later lives.

Two articles explore lesser-known aspects of occupation in wartime Europe. Yuliya von Saal considers occupied Belarus (53–80), and the collapse of "normative childhood" (20) experienced by both Jewish and non-Jewish individuals. The evidence she collected suggests that taking on responsibilities for themselves, for younger siblings and sometimes for their remaining parents was the only possible choice open

to children; but early "adultification" (53) had lasting psychological implications. As is also the case for individuals considered by other articles, the end of the war did not (and could not) signify a return to the normality of childhood. Survivors experienced something akin to PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), however during the Soviet post-war era, their problems were neither diagnosed nor addressed. As von Saal suggests, "[T]he acceptance of responsibility associated with maturation was essential for survival during the war. Furthermore, it could be positively assimilated as resilience later on. How many survivors of the war succeeded in doing so, however, will remain unknown forever." (79)

In "Challenging Narratives: Unveiling Encounters between Jewish Children/Adolescents and Italian Military Units in Transnistria during the Holocaust" (101–130), Lilia Tomchuk, like von Saal, uses individual testimonies and memories so as to unveil the complex interactions between the two populations she considers. She shows that the Italians' comforting post-war narrative of themselves as "the good people" [*Italiani brava gente*] (130) may not always match the individual memories of those who, as children and young people, engaged in begging and various types of bartering to improve their chances of survival (115). She concludes: "Overall, this study reveals simultaneously Jewish youths' agency in the framework of the Holocaust and Italians' treatment of Jews in Transnistria in ways that were not uniformly benevolent. As such, it challenges monolithic generalizations and simplifications about both groups' experiences of the Holocaust." (130)

The penultimate article in this section, "The Best Interests of the Child in National Terms: Policies Concerning Children of Polish Female Forced Laborers and Displaced Persons in the Early Cold War Era", is a study of Poland's post-WW2 government's policies concerning its "stolen children". The term primarily refers to those forcibly deported to Nazi Germany, but Jakob Gałeziowski shows that children born to Polish mothers in the context of British and American occupation, and often abandoned at a later stage, were also a concern in a country preoccupied with demographic issues and the need for reconstruction in a new political context. He thus identifies a new sub-category of child-victims, the CBOWs (Children Born of War). Echoing Hobson Faure's article, he shows how "the best interests of the child" (106), to which authorities and associations always referred, were defined in different ways by different people, out of sincere conviction and/or political strategy. This affected the choices made to place children with families or institutions, as well as the degree of attention paid to their religious cultures and specific needs, again with lasting implications for their adult lives.

This series of WW2 case studies is completed by a truly fascinating article by Anna M. Parkinson entitled "Revisiting the 'Talking Cure': Capturing Children's Wartime Experiences through Hans Keilson's Work on Sequential Traumatization" (177–204). Keilson was a German-Dutch-Jewish psychoanalyst, who was involved in the Resistance and specialized in the treatment of traumatized Jewish children. He

had to deal with Jewish "orphans" whose fate, like that of Faure's refugees or Gałeziowki's stolen children, was decided by authorities whose motivations have since been questioned. Parkinson explains the historical context which led many Dutch Jewish children to be considered as wards of state and have their future decided by the Commission for War Foster Children (*Commissie voor Oorlogspleegkinderen*/OPK). Although a specific foundation to help Jewish children had been set up, the OPK alone would most of the time decide where to place the orphans and often ignored cultural and religious differences (181). Parkinson suggests "[…] this erasure of Jewish identity later generated confusion, disorientation, and suffering as documented in many of the interviews with former Jewish child orphan survivors included in the longitudinal research undertaken by Keilson." (183)

She testifies to the immense complexity of the psychoanalyst's task in his attempt to solve the paradox of using the "talking cure" with individuals who, in his own words, precisely "owed their lives to silence" (191). Keilson's longitudinal approach led him to talk of "sequential traumatization", involving three successive, cumulative traumas: first, the beginning of persecution and dislocation of the family; second, the experience of being deported to the camps or that of living in hiding, often moving from place to place; and finally, the end of the war, which meant his patients were "[…]confronted unambiguously with the immense and irrevocable losses suffered by their original family" (190). Keilson's contribution – notably his insistence in taking meticulous account of the specific psychological, sociological and political contexts of each single case – still informs research on trauma and memory studies and the dynamics and significance of both language and silence.

The second section deals with small-scale and rather uncommon sources. Wiebke Hiemesch (207–228) considers a drawing book that belonged to a Jewish boy who lived in Hamburg in the 1930s, before his family emigrated to America. The methodological problems of dealing with such materials, with limited access to the context in which the drawings were produced, are extensively discussed. But the article also suggests what a wealth of information may be derived from its study: it gives a glimpse of what an Orthodox Jewish boy's childhood could have been like at the time, while also pointing out to the transformations of the surrounding urban landscape. Zofia Trebacz's contribution (229–246) examines two poignant sets of correspondence between children in the ghettos of Warsaw and Łódź and their absent fathers. Like Hiemesch, she is careful to point out the limitations of such a study: the letters are incomplete sets, and show only the children's side of the exchange. But they testify both to the daily difficulties encountered by the young authors and their determination to protect their fathers from anxiety and assure them of their enduring affection. Finally, Lorraine McEvoy (247–266) studies an even more limited sample: just three letters written by British people in response to a proposed post-war scheme to offer some German children a recuperative stay in Britain, as had been offered to Dutch and other European children. Extending the

scheme to Germans obviously raised a number of moral, political and practical obstacles. The letters provide an insight in their authors' motivations and their willingness to host a German child, choosing to see him/her as a victim of war rather than an enemy raised on Nazi ideology, and sometimes implicitly acknowledging some responsibility for the Allied bombings of German cities. As in the other two cases, evidence remains scarce and its interpretation difficult, but helps draw our attention to an intriguing facet of post-war British policies.

The final section presents three accounts of research in progress. Oksanna Vynnik (267–275) deals with *Holodomor*, the mass-starvation organized in Ukraine during the 1930s by the Soviet regime, and studies how medical schemes attempted to alleviate its effects on children. More precisely, she shows that children themselves, while particularly vulnerable to famine-induced diseases, could and did take action to secure help for themselves or siblings, through testimonies which have only recently been collected because of the silence long maintained on that horrific episode. In the following article (276–282), Barnabas Balint emphasizes the agency displayed by a specific group of young people, born in the 1920s/1930s within the Hungarian Jewish community. Using academic research in Hungarian, French and English and innovative cross-disciplinary methodologies, as well as first-hand testimonies, he traces their fates and responses to the various stages of their experiences, before, during and after German occupation and deportation. Finally, Lucas Schretter and Nadjeschda Stoffers (283–296) consider another taboo subject: that of children born in the *Lebensborn* maternities set up by the Nazi regime, first to provide perinatal care for "good" Aryan families and later also to Germanize children stolen from occupied countries. The interviews of 34 individuals born in the Wienerwald Home in Austria were "keyworded" in a process that is meticulously described and the 28 recorded ones were analyzed in detail, and completed with interviews with siblings and/or descendants, in order to assess the impact of such specific birth conditions on individual lives. The research shows very different degrees of awareness of, and interest in, what lay behind such institutions.

To someone who, like the present reviewer, is more familiar with Western European history, the book offers some very informative perspectives on wartime experiences in Eastern Europe. Besides, the articles all prove to be innovative in terms of their sources and detailed methodological approaches, including their common determination to follow Sarah Maza's insistence on writing "history *through* children rather than history *of* children." (15) By doing so, they add to our understanding of those conflicts, and remind us of the lasting consequences of children's wartime experiences: there was no quick return to happy childhoods and early adultification had lifelong effects. While, as duly pointed out by the authors and editors, the articles definitely favour micro-histories, they provide a valuable focus on small-scale, little-known aspects of the whole picture, and raise a number of fascinating questions as to the location and exploitation of new sources related to the field.