
H-France Review Vol. 12 (June 2012), No. 74

Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II*. Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2011. xi + 308 pp. Archival sources and abbreviations, notes, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-674-04824-9.

Review by Shannon L. Fogg, Missouri University of Science & Technology.

In an academic climate that values interdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies, scholars are often enjoined to demonstrate the wider implications of their national studies. Others choose a more explicitly comparative or transnational approach. Tara Zahra, a historian of Eastern and Central Europe, has followed this second path in her examination of the postwar "lost children." Zahra focuses her study on these children who had been displaced, orphaned, or murdered during the Second World War. The massive number of people displaced by the war (the Allied militaries estimated they had provided aid to 13.7 million displaced persons by the end of September 1945) created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis (p. 7). Displaced children, Zahra argues, assumed an importance in the postwar atmosphere of reconstruction that was disproportional to their numbers. While the United Nations had only 153,000 children under fourteen in its care by July 1945, the lost children became the symbol of wartime dislocation and postwar renewal (p. 8). The book seeks to show how these quintessential victims of war (p. 24) became the center of debates about children's best interests, democracy, human rights, and the very survival of nation-states after the destruction of World War II.

Europe needed to be rebuilt physically after five years of war, and the youngest war victims also needed moral and emotional reconstruction. Zahra demonstrates that this postwar focus on the psychological well-being of children was new and was explicitly linked to the survival of nations for the first time. Both western democracies and eastern socialist states pointed to the rehabilitation of children as essential for repudiating fascism and rebuilding families and homelands. Displaced Persons (DP) camps became the place where humanitarians, psychologists, and politicians all observed the effect of war on children and drew conclusions about child development. These observations were then employed by different constituencies to support their vision of a new Europe. Different ideas about nationalism, internationalism, familialism, collectivism, and individualism all came into play, and the fate of children was seen as the universal concern that would bring the disparate groups together. But by examining the responses from different governments, aid organizations, and individuals, Zahra demonstrates that there was no universal understanding of how best to rehabilitate children after World War II.

In order to support the argument that the basic ideals of family and childhood were redefined as a result of the war, Zahra places children's experiences with war into a longer historical context. The book's first chapter examines reactions to the Armenian genocide during the Great War and to the Spanish Civil War. In so doing, the author firmly establishes the continuities and breaks between these earlier conflicts and attitudes towards children following the Second World War. She maps a shift from a focus on meeting refugees' physical needs to a more psychological approach to relief. The examination of the precursors to postwar policies

continues in the second chapter, which addresses the wartime rescue of children by the British, Americans, and continental Jews. Zahra identifies a basic divide between Anglo-American “individualism,” which stressed self-reliance and independence and continental “collectivism,” which stressed the importance of communities in caring for children. The British and Americans welcomed unaccompanied children into family settings while continental Jews created children’s homes (even inside camps like Terezín) with Zionist or Socialist pedagogy. Despite the apparent differences, Zahra argues that these two approaches were both a “form of socialization for particular national and familial collectives” (p. 87). The real unresolved question, according to Zahra, was really which community (American, European, or Zionist) would create a better future for Jewish children once the war was over.

Beginning with chapter three, Zahra focuses specifically on the Second World War and its legacies. Zahra finds that the separation of families was viewed as a form of psychic trauma and a wartime tragedy for the first time. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) worked to reunite biological families in the “best interests” of the children, drawing on the work of psychoanalysts like Anna Freud. However, these family-based solutions to repatriating displaced children posed problems for Jewish children whose families had been murdered and whose homes had been expropriated. As a result, Jewish aid organizations such as the *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE) in France and the Central Committee of Jews in Poland focused on restoring the psychological health of Jewish children through group homes. Thus families and the psychological well-being of children became major themes in postwar rehabilitation efforts and in ideas about human rights.

Beyond psychological concerns, the repatriation of displaced children had political ramifications in a postwar world that was marked by strident nationalism. This theme is the focus of the book’s later chapters. In the postwar period, national rights often trumped individual rights and countries’ attempts to reclaim displaced children were all justified in the “best interests” of the child. A strong national identity as well as a stable family were seen as essential to rehabilitation. As a result, a sort of custody battle ensued that often pitted families, aid organizations, countries, and political groups against each other. Case studies of France and Czechoslovakia provide Zahra with the opportunity to examine differences in postwar attitudes and actions. Both countries wanted to increase their populations and weaken Germany following the war. In France, German children were viewed as the most assimilable displaced persons, which led to the creation of an adoption program that favored certain kinds of children. The program was meant to be an example of French democratic values, but was based on national self-interest and racist selection criteria. In Czechoslovakia, officials used the postwar period to determine which families were “worthy” of reunification and which were undesirable due to mixed national heritage. It was an opportunity to rid the country of foreign, German blood through ethnic cleansing. Children, Zahra shows, were central to this project. She concludes that both France and Czechoslovakia used the postwar period to try to create “nationally homogenous states in the name of national security” (p. 197).

Zahra’s study then moves beyond the immediate postwar years to place on-going repatriation efforts within the context of the Cold War. Another shift occurred as the resettlement of children was no longer seen as a nationalist and demographic contest between Germany and other European countries, but rather as a battle between democracies and communism. The “best interests” of the child were once again redefined: western family values and democratic ideals now trumped family reunification in communist countries. Politicians and judges demonized Nazism and Communism as two systems that were similarly destructive to families.

Zahra then concludes that nationalist principles were reinforced in the war's wake with a special emphasis on national sovereignty and homogeneity. Discussions of psychology, human rights, and children's best interests justified these nationalist ideals in a more universalist language.

Zahra's work is an important contribution to the growing literature on displacement, youth, and the postwar period.[1] She draws on examples that readers may already be familiar with (such as Ruth Kluger's memoir, the Finaly Affair, the Buchenwald boys, the Lidice massacre), but places them within the context of children and postwar reconstruction in ways that reveal their connections to larger, international issues. Utilizing an impressive range of sources in Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United States, she also provides an example of the strengths and weaknesses of transnational history. Her argument is well-supported and clear throughout the book and approaching children and the DP question from an international perspective provides a welcome addition to the literature. However, there are times when country-specific material maybe less detailed than a specialist would like. Scholars of France will find ample references to the country throughout the book, but also a few minor errors in the details. Additionally, academics would find it useful (especially since Zahra is drawing on such a broad historiography both geographically and temporally) to have a bibliography in the book instead of just endnotes and a brief list of archival sources. Overall, *The Lost Children* is a well-written book that illuminates the ways family could be mobilized for political ends in the postwar period. Scholars interested in displaced persons, children, families, gender issues, relief work, psychology, nationalism, the devastating effects of war, the Holocaust, and the Cold War will all find something of interest in this book.

NOTES

[1] For example: Richard Ivan Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2007); Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007); Daniella Doron, "In the Best Interest of the Child: Family, Youth, and Identity in Postwar France, 1944-1954," (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2009). On children and the Second World War itself, see Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007) and Lynn H. Nicholas, *Cruel World: The Children of Europe in the Nazi Web* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

Shannon L. Fogg
Missouri University of Science & Technology
sfogg@mst.edu

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views

posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172