

2003 Theme

Children and the Holocaust

Introduction

The theme of Holocaust Memorial Day 2003 is Children and the Holocaust. This paper sets out the historical framework necessary to understand the experiences of children under Nazism.

- Over 1.5 million children from across Europe were murdered under the Nazi regime, 1933-1945.
- The majority of those targeted were Jewish, but disabled children, Roma children and children in the occupied territories were also killed as a direct result of Nazi racial policies. The lives of hundreds of thousands of other children were significantly affected by Nazi policies.
- The Nazis, obsessed with the notion of creating a 'biologically pure', 'Aryan' society, deliberately targeted Jewish children for destruction, in order to prevent the growth of a new generation of Jews in Europe.
- Children defined by the Nazis as a 'threat' to German society, irrespective of their different backgrounds, languages, religions and customs, became potential victims of Nazism simply by being alive during the Nazi regime. These innocent human beings were denigrated as 'life unworthy of life'.
- Only an estimated 11 per cent of Jewish children alive in 1933 survived until 1945. A fortunate few left Europe as refugees before the war and others survived the war years in hiding. The vast majority were shot into ditches or thrown into trains, ghettos, camps or industrial killing installations where they died through disease, malnutrition, lethal injection or asphyxiation.
- Since the Second World War, international legislation has been passed to protect the rights of the child, yet children continue to be pawns in conflict situations around the world. The danger to children distinguishes genocide from other kinds of conflict and the predicament of children is the severest test of perpetrators and 'bystanders'. Millions of children have been displaced or have refugee status.

Children under Nazism: the pre-war years

In the 1930s a series of Nazi laws aimed at removing the civil and economic rights of Jews and other groups, including political opponents and the disabled. These laws had a severe impact on the lives of children.

- Jewish children also suffered direct discrimination and segregation. In 1938 Jewish children were expelled from German schools. They were banned from many public spaces. Everyday activities such as playing in the park or swimming in the municipal pool were no longer open to them.
- Gypsy children, who along with their parents were regarded by the Nazis as inferior, were subject to discrimination. From the mid-1930s some Gypsy children were sterilised and later suffered round-ups and incarceration.

- The children of Black soldiers and German women were subject to discrimination and labelled in Nazi propaganda as 'the Rhineland bastards'. They were prevented from attending universities and taking up certain jobs. They, too, were viewed as inferior and a 'threat' to 'racial purity'. By 1937, many Black people in Germany had been sterilised and some were incarcerated and later killed.
- In both these cases of sterilisation, including the sterilisation programme directed at German nationals, many of the procedures were carried out without the permission of the individual.
- Meanwhile, the education of German children deemed to be 'Aryan' was subverted to fit Nazi aims. In school and through the Hitler Youth organisation, children were taught spurious history and biology (including 'race science') from textbooks that carried propaganda about the 'inferiority' of Jews. There was an emphasis on physical education rather than academic studies. From a young age boys were prepared for military service and war, girls for a life as mothers in the home.
- In the face of increasing discrimination in Germany, many Jewish families emigrated. Young Zionists in particular were encouraged to learn agricultural skills and embark on a settler's life in Palestine. Those families who emigrated only as far as neighbouring countries, for example, the family of Anne Frank, tragically found themselves caught up once again by the Nazi regime during the war years.
- The majority of Jewish families were prevented from travelling abroad due to a lack of funds or the stringent visa controls imposed by countries such as Britain and the USA. Following Kristallnacht, the night of violence organised against the Jewish communities in Greater Germany (Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia) on 9 November 1938, pressure was placed on the British government to relax immigration controls for a limited number of children. Charitable organisations organised the Kindertransport, whereby nearly 10,000 unaccompanied children, most of them Jewish and between the ages of 5 and 17, were allowed to travel to Britain by train and boat via Holland. Most lived with foster families or in hostels with fellow children and found that sympathetic carers helped them to cope with their displacement and adapt to a new life. A minority who were not so lucky were treated cruelly by foster families. British generosity in granting refuge did not extend to the parents of these children and after the war many of them found themselves orphans.
- Meanwhile, for those children left behind, the level of exclusion and deprivation increased with the coming of war in 1939. The rations for Jewish families were reduced and they were forced to give up those things such as radios, cars and telephones, which connected them with the outside world. Eventually, they were banned from leaving Germany as emigrants. The Nazi authorities began to deport them to Poland so that Germany might be declared 'Jew free'.

Children under Nazism: the war years

All children suffer in wartime and during the Second World War food shortages, evacuation, shock, uncertainty, and the death of family members meant that young people suffered a great deal. For some groups of children, however, war was to mean genocide.

- The first group to be targeted were disabled children in Germany, branded as 'useless eaters' and a threat to the 'perfection' of the 'Aryan race' by the Nazis. Under the cover of war, Hitler authorised a programme to murder infants and young people, which was later extended to adults. Parents gave up their children to be treated in a number of special wards around the country, believing the children would receive the latest medical

attention and perhaps be cured. In fact these wards were part of a top-secret so-called 'Euthanasia' programme, where compliant doctors administered lethal injections to the children before issuing fraudulent death certificates and letters of condolence.

- Whilst the lives of these German children were expendable in the pursuit of 'racial purity', a group of Polish children were brought into the Aryan fold in an equally cynical move. Following the invasion of Poland in 1939, 50,000 Polish children with blond hair, blue eyes and fair skin, whose looks matched the Aryan model, were effectively kidnapped and presented to childless German couples to be brought up in the Reich. Many were later rejected and died in camps.
- The war also brought displacement for Polish Jewish children, but of an altogether more murderous nature. Following the invasion of Poland, the Germans established ghettos in the most rundown areas of major Polish cities and towns. Jewish adults and children were herded into these overcrowded, prison-like areas and forced to live and work amongst dirt and disease on starvation rations. The conditions meant that the death rate, especially for the poorer, younger, more vulnerable children, was very high. In the winter, small children would commonly be found starved and frozen to death on the streets.
- The extent to which parents could offer protection for their children was severely restricted by the harsh realities in the ghetto. Jewish ghetto authorities attempted to normalise life for children by organising underground schooling and other social activities. The extraordinary conditions and everyday brutality of the ghetto forced many children to grow up quickly and take responsibilities way beyond their years. Many played a role in smuggling food into the ghetto, through small holes in the wall, which only children could negotiate. This was risky work but was vital in keeping the ghetto alive. Young people also played a vital role in the underground political movements, which took up arms against the Germans; the average age of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising organisers was only 17.
- As the Germans invaded more countries, so more Jewish children were brought under the Nazi's regime of suffering. With the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the murderous actions of the Nazis reached a new level of barbarity. Closely behind the army followed Einsatzgruppen. These armed units swept through towns and villages and shot whole Jewish communities - men, women and children - into newly dug graves and ditches in cold blood. In the towns the Nazis established more ghettos.
- In the Theresienstadt ghetto near Prague the Jewish authorities set up separate children's homes and created an educational system to protect the 15,000 children from the miserable realities of the ghetto. Most, however, ended their lives in Auschwitz. Poems and drawings by the children survived the war and offer a poignant insight into the lives and thoughts of these children.
- Children, then, were no less the targets of the 'Final Solution', the murder of Europe's Jews in specially constructed extermination centres. In 1942 the Germans began to clear the ghettos in 'resettlement actions', in reality taking people by train to extermination camps. The Jewish ghetto leaders, forced to organise the deportees, began to suspect the nature of these 'actions' when young children were included on the German lists. Adam Czerniakow in Warsaw chose to commit suicide rather than sign an order for a transport containing children. The deportations in Warsaw continued. Chaim Rumkowski in Lodz, a working ghetto, was asked to give up the least productive of the population, children under 10 and people over 65. He complied, feeling sure he could save at least part of the ghetto so long as it was economically viable: 'I simply must cut off the limbs to save the body! I have to take away the children, because otherwise others will also be taken, God forbid.'

- Conditions in the deportation trains were often unbearable and children, already weakened, died en route. Children rounded up in Western European countries, such as France, Belgium and Holland, were also sent on the long journey east to their death.
- The Nazis invented a murderous operation on an industrial scale using industrial methods. Children who were taken to the extermination camps of Chelmno, Belzec, Treblinka and Sobibor, where the vast majority of people were killed with gas on arrival, were doomed. Two camps - Auschwitz and Majdanek - operated a selection policy and the fittest arrivals were chosen for slave labour. Babies and small children were sent straight into the gas chambers with their mothers. Teenagers, particularly if they claimed to have a skill, had a better chance of surviving selection. Forced into work, however, the majority died of exhaustion and disease. The conditions were so extreme that even the fittest people rarely survived more than a few months in the camps. Some children were kept back from the gas chambers, only to be subjected to horrific experiments.
- In the war years, Gypsy families were also rounded up, shot and sent to concentration and extermination camps across Europe. At Auschwitz in 1943, a Gypsy compound was established and over 20,000 people were incarcerated, including children. Many died from lack of food and medical attention. In 1944 the able-bodied men and women were transferred to work camps while the elderly and young children were gassed in August that year.
- Not all the threatened children who experienced the war in Europe found themselves in camps and ghettos. Some spent the war years concealed from the Nazi authorities. Thousands of children were physically hidden in Europe; they spent their days locked in an attic or a barn or a pig sty, usually with the agreement of the householder but sometimes not, attempting to avoid the round-ups and searches organised by the Nazis. Many moved around constantly hoping to avoid detection, depending on the good will of strangers at a time when it was difficult to trust anyone. The pressures acting upon these children were incredible. They lived on their wits and gained a maturity way beyond their years.
- Other children lived in the open but hid their true identity by pretending to be distant relatives of their hosts, or evacuees or orphans. Many were given up by desperate parents in the hope they would have a chance of survival. Those that were old enough to remember the pre-war years had to learn new customs and act out a role - as a Catholic, for example - in order to pull off the deception. Most children concealed in this way were hidden singly or in pairs, but there are recorded examples of resistance movements saving children en masse. The Belgian cleric Joseph André worked with the Comité de Défense des Juifs, to rescue hundreds of Jewish children by finding hiding places in convents, monasteries and private homes. The Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE; Children's Aid Society) operated underground networks in France and succeeded in saving the lives of hundreds more children, concealing them in Christian homes and institutions.
- At the end of the war, only a few thousand children were found in the liberated camps - a children's hut survived in Belsen, for example. Those that survived were forced to live in Displaced Persons camps after the war until they were able to obtain visas to settle elsewhere, the lucky ones with surviving relatives or family abroad. Older children returned to hometowns to trace family members, usually in vain. The sole survivors of huge pre-war families, they had to face the uncertainty of their future alone. Some 700 child camp survivors were allowed to settle in Britain after the war; their experiences have been documented in the book *The Boys*. Like many child survivors, they had little left in the world, their formal education had often been truncated and they carried with them the

scars of loss and the memories of a uniquely horrific and unnatural childhood. Yet they went on to rebuild their lives and have families of their own.

Child victims and refugees today

Coming Soon

Children and Genocide: some conceptual approaches

1. Children are the first and last victims of genocide.

- They are the primary targets in a campaign to biologically exterminate a people since a people can regenerate from the young, but not the old.
- Children who survive a genocide will be the last to carry the memory of it.

2. The fate of children in a genocidal situation is one of the indices by which genocide can be assessed.

- Children are innocent, weak, defenceless and cannot be seen as a political or military threat.
- Therefore, an assault upon children can only be ideologically driven and designed to annihilate an entire people.

3. The situation of children also crystallises the chief characteristics of genocide.

- Children are the bearers of ethnic, religious, and cultural identity so their health, welfare and education becomes a battleground between perpetrators and victims.
- The provision of health, welfare and education services to children is attacked by the perpetrators and defended by the victims.

4. The danger to children in a genocidal assault distinguishes genocide from other kinds of conflict.

- Soldiers and armed combatants do not usually have to worry about direct risk to their families or offspring.
- People facing genocide are severely constrained by the need to protect children and families.
- The presence of children immobilises the people targeted for genocide: they die for their children.

5. The predicament of children in a genocidal environment is the severest test of perpetrators and 'bystanders' for the same reason.

- If perpetrators will kill babies and children, they will kill anyone.
- Hiding or protecting children offers no material benefit: children consume resources so if rescuers save children, they will save anyone.

6. What happens to children in the aftermath of genocide also tests 'bystanders' and rescuers.

- If they have been saved on condition of exchanging their religious and cultural identity for another one, or have 'lost it' in the meantime, to give them up may mean their conversion back to what they were.
- Because rescuing children is purely altruistic, giving them up is harder: they were protected without payment or provision of services in lieu of payment, so rescuers may feel cheated if they are taken away.

7. The fate of children is also the test of a refugee and asylum policy since their reception is purely humanitarian: initially they can only be a 'burden' on the state and offer no incentive to the rescuer except sentimental gratification.

8. As memory bearers, child survivors can nurture a desire for revenge or seek reconciliation or achieve an accommodation with the past: they can deny but they cannot escape this past - therefore, child survivors crystallise the responses to genocide and its legacy.

Testimony

I was just eight years old when Hitler came to power. I was already at school then and had some friends there. My mother always tried to make a birthday party for us ... The table was set. I was very excited. Nobody came. Not a single child came to this birthday party. That was the first terrible blow to me. I know it sounds trivial, but it was the first sort of comprehension for a child that you're ostracized, that there's something different about you. I found that very hard. I can still vividly experience that disappointment.

Ursula Rosenfeld

I see them every time I go out ... Their heads are shaven, clothes in rags, frightfully emaciated tiny faces bring to mind birds rather than human beings. Their huge black eyes, though, are human; so full of sadness ... The younger one may be five or six, the older ten perhaps. They don't move ... The little one sits on the pavement, the bigger one just stands there with his claw of a hand stretched out.

Janina Bauman, Warsaw Ghetto, diary entry by a witness who was a child herself

I was chosen for heavy labour to unload train cars full of war material, just at the exit of Auschwitz ... I worked there for many months, and although it was really hard work, I managed to pass another two selections and was still considered fit for work ... I lacked food, naturally, vitamins, and so on, and so boils and eczema broke out all over my body, however the body itself was healthy, and my youth helped me to resist well.

Emilio Foa

I cannot begin to express, or describe, how awful those experiments were. One twin was terribly fat, and the other terribly thin. One of them was sad and melancholy, and the other awfully gay and happy.

The first word little children who could not yet speak learned was 'Nachtwache', which means 'night watchman'. Not 'mama'. ... This was because in the night they had to [use] the toilet, and if

they couldn't call for the Nachtwache ... they lived no more. If they urinated in their bed, they would be sent to the crematorium.

Magda Somogyi, on the twins barracks in Auschwitz

When I was an infant growing up in German-occupied Poland, I was called Henryk Stanislas Kurpi. To all the world, Bronislawa Kurpi was my mother. Actually she was my Catholic nanny who promised my parents she would take care of me. I was baptized and raised as a Catholic. My parents survived the camps and returned to claim me. A custody battle with my nanny ensued but my parents won. Eventually, my family and I moved to the United States. Imagine the confusion and pain this turn of events inflicted on all involved. There was I a Jewish child, making the sign of the cross in the home of my parents, who were observant Jews. Slowly I had to reclaim my identity and learn about Judaism and what it means to be a Jew.

Abraham Foxman