

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

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“Whereas interwar humanitarian efforts had focused primarily on meeting children’s material needs, Europeans were particularly obsessed with restoring the psychological stability of youth after World War II.” The above quotation from the introduction of Tara Zahra’s book “The Lost Children” adequately presents the main message of the monograph. This sharp-eyed observation of the author is a recurrent scheme of the book. While after World War I national and international social workers, politicians, diplomats and other agents involved in child welfare were mainly concerned with the physical and moral well-being of children in crises situations, they have added an extra-angle to their work after World War II. The new paradigm of relief became the focus on the psyche.

Based on the intensive use of archives in several countries, such as Germany, the Czech Republic, France, Poland or the United States, of postwar displaced persons and relief organizations, Zahra presents an impressive study on the entanglement of

the concept of childhood with ideas about nation and national interests as well as on the development of national and international institutions and policies of child well-fare during wartime and the post-war era of the 1940s and 1950s. Millions of children were left homeless and abandoned by the Second World War. Their precarious situation needed urgent attention. Zahra demonstrates how the different agents envisaged diversely the rehabilitation and future of Europe's youth together with Europe's political and social rehabilitation and future development. Children became symbols of the reconstruction of new European democracies and the creation of sovereign nation states. They became national property.

The book more or less follows a chronological order, starting with child well-fare and humanitarian relief for children during the interwar era. It continues through the wartime period up until the Cold War era of the 1950s. It closely focuses on the development of the varying views of agents and their policies on the "best interest" of children. As Zahra clearly illustrates throughout the book, defining the "best interest" of the child was a changing variable in time and in the work of agents.

The first four chapters of "The Lost Children" present the evolution of the professionalization and institutionalization of social work with children. International organizations were set up and their co-operation with each other as well as with national agents became more and more harmonized by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In these chapters, Zahra introduces the reader to the gradual shift of focus of the social agents from the material needs of children to the importance of their psychological development. While during the interwar period social workers, politicians or government officials paid little attention to the importance of family unity in children's healthy development, after World War II the role of the family environment (especially the mother-child relationship) became primordial. Children and childhood together with the family were more and more politicized in national and international discourses. The recovery of the psychological well-being of children was envisaged via unambiguous, stabile family and national identities. However, in reality individual cases confronted the social workers with the fact that neither family unity nor national identity can be taken for granted. Consequently, there were contesting views on whether familial or collective care would suit better the rehabilitation of Europe's "lost children".

In chapter five and six, Zahra calls the attention to two case studies on France and Czechoslovakia during the second half of the 1940s. She describes the obsession of these two countries with their demography and population planning. And although France and Czechoslovakia had different approaches in achieving population growth, unity and stability, their main objectives were both heavily nationalistic and involved the politicizing of children and their families.

At the end of the monograph the author arrives to the Cold War conflict. The emerging contest and conflict between East and West Europe had a crucial impact on the future social work with displaced children. Zahra argues that another shift had taken place in the conceptualization of children and their relationship to the nation state. While before the intensification of the conflict children were objects of nationalist projects for achieving population growth and national sovereignty, in a couple of years, children simply became "pawns" in the escalating Cold War. The so high-

ly praised importance of reuniting families, restoring national identities and psychological well-being suddenly, under the aegis of the “best interest” of children, were reformulated. The idea of what constitutes democracy and family life had once more been changed.

In retrospect, Zahra concludes that “the family was more politicized than ever in 1945, as it seemed to hold the key to European peace and to the future of democracy.” She suggests that the Second World War and its consequent massive displacement of people transformed both children and childhood and remade home and homeland as we now know it.

With the aid of an incredibly rich material, the monograph paints a very vivid picture of destructed Europe and its “lost children”. However, this richness of information often becomes overwhelming. This makes this intriguing book a very difficult read. In the small and countless details the main message is sometimes lost and disintegrated. Certain organizational problem of the material adds to this impression. For instance, the introduction does not clarify enough the intentions of the author concerning the organization of the next eight chapters. Therefore, the arrangement and the connections between the individual chapters are also not entirely clear.

There are complex issues discussed in each chapter. They are approached from many different and thought-provoking angles. The chapters discuss gender, refugee and human rights questions, institutionalization of the emerging profession of social work, bi-racial and transnational family relations as well as international adoption. The detailed and numerous case-studies used as illustrations enhance the complexity of the story and sometimes hinder the author to go deeper in the theory. The question of gender, for example, is one of the major issues in discussing family and nation state in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nira Yuval-Davis argues in her seminal book, “Gender and Nation”, that the construction of nationhood involves specific notions of both ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’. She suggests that in nationalist projects women often become national properties and acquire symbolic positions as cultural and biological reproducers of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Zahra’s arguments would nicely fit into this line of inquiry, however, the lack of elaboration or the better situating of the issue in the structure of the book often prevents the reader to see the link and similarity between the concepts of motherhood and childhood in the context of national discourses. The connection between pre-World War II maternalist and familialist policies and the after war developments is also missing. Women’s symbolic position in the future of the family and the nation was also central after World War I. After all, the expression, “Back to home and duty!” was born in the aftermath of the Great War. The lack of connection with interwar social tendencies and policies (relation to family, demography, etc.) gives the reader the impression that the phenomena that Zahra describes in the post-Second World War context are entirely new and were developed under the influence of social work with displaced children. However, these issues were already present in both Western and Central-Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> Yuval-Davis, Nira: *Gender and Nation*. London 1997.

Europe. They were just reformulated and adapted to the new socio-political context as the consequence of the war.

Socio-geographic concepts such as “Eastern Europe”, “Central Europe” or “Central-Eastern Europe” are also not clarified, in spite of the intense interdisciplinary debate on their definition and position throughout history (especially the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Moreover, discussing issues of forced population movement, shifting national boundaries or national identities in the region in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would require the mentioning of the cases of Hungary and Romania.

In conclusion, Zahra’s book is a significant and valuable contribution to the history of childhood. She brilliantly places the history of children into the general political and social history of Europe during and after World War II. Her research demonstrates the new direction in historical writing, which emphasizes that the history of childhood “is the true missing link: connecting the personal and the public, the psychological and the sociological, the domestic and the state.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Mintz*, Steven: Why the History of Childhood Matters. In: *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 5 (Winter 2012) No. 1, 15-28, here 17.