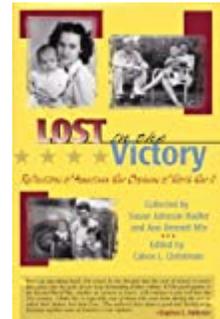




**Calvin L. Christman, ed.** *Lost in the Victory: Reflections of American War Orphans of World War II.* Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1998. xxvii + 251 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57441-033-4.



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## A Hidden Cost of War

The human toll of war reaches far beyond the official statistics compiled once the fighting is over. Behind every soldier killed or missing on the battlefield lies a family that has to cope with the loss of a son or daughter, husband or wife. In far too many cases, dead soldiers leave young children behind—girls and boys forced to proceed in life without the care and guidance of at least one of their parents. *Lost in the Victory: Reflections of American War Orphans of World War II*, edited by Calvin L. Christman of Cedar Valley College, explores the experiences of Americans who lost their fathers in the Second World War.

The book is the result of years of activism, research, and organizing by two women who lost their fathers in the last days of World War II, Susan Johnson Hadler and Ann Bennett Mix. “Both of us,” they write, “grew up knowing almost nothing about our fathers” (p. xiv). As children, the girls’ grieving mothers said little about the fathers who never returned home from the war. “With the arrival of the death-announcing telegram,” they write, “silence descended like a fog” (p. xix). Growing up without fathers in the house, Hadler and Mix de-

scribe how they felt different from the other children who had two living parents. They also note that the government seemed to care little about their plight; “our condition as ‘fatherless’ was somehow to be magically fixed by a government check, a mother’s remarriage, or a step parent’s adoption” (p. xviii), they write. But by the time Hadler and Mix had reached middle age, both were gripped by an overpowering impulse to learn more about the fathers they never knew. “As children,” they write, “we struggled against our mothers’ desire to forget and our own desire to remember, [but now] we want to learn all we can before its too late” (p. xxiv).

By the early 1990s, Hadler and Mix were pouring through government archives and contacting the men with whom their fathers served in order to learn more about their fathers and the circumstances of their deaths. Their individual quests brought the two women together, and together they began to learn more about the circumstances of those Americans orphaned by World War II. Hadler and Mix were shocked to find that very little information about World War II orphans existed. Indeed, they discovered that the federal government did not even

count the number of children orphaned during the war, only the number of those who applied for survivor benefits (a figure that peaked at 183,000 in 1957). Their research also brought them into contact with numerous other war orphans who felt just as lonely and neglected as they did. In 1991, Mix founded the American World War II Orphans Network (AWON), an organization designed to bring those orphaned by World War II together, to collect data on war orphans, and to facilitate the research of orphans seeking to learn more about their lost parents.

The bulk of *Lost in the Victory* is a compilation of letters, reminiscences, and interviews with World War II orphans collected by AWON. Several consistent themes emerge from the stories. For example, orphaned children grew up witnessing the pain their mothers felt in having lost a husband and in raising children on their own. Many orphans reported that their mothers never remarried, and that some succumbed to despair, alcoholism, and mental illness. Reactions from society as a whole also bewildered many orphans. For example, an orphan named Tony recalled that as a boy his school classmates sometimes referred to him as a “bastard” because he did not have a father (p. 191). Another named Mary recalled that an uncle “felt sorry” for her and her siblings because “we wouldn’t amount to anything because my dad was gone” (p. 146). Many also described feeling something like a wet blanket on Americans’ joyous memories of victory in World War II. “Do you know how people get really uptight when you say, ‘my father was killed in the war?’” asked one orphan in an interview with AWON, “you’re automatically shunned. It’s like a sin ... They can’t deal with it. There was a victory party” (p. 104).

Though society seemed to discourage keeping alive the memories of their fathers, war orphans nevertheless maintained a place in their hearts for the parents they only vaguely remembered or never knew. Photographs, films, or artifacts of their fathers were (and are) among a war orphan’s most cherished possessions. Some orphans fantasized that their fathers were still alive and would one day return. One orphaned boy imagined, for example, that his father was not really dead, but secretly working as a CIA agent in South America. “As a child I would fall asleep nights crying and praying for God to send my father home,” recalled another, a girl who conjured a fantasy world in which she and her father would go for walks and read stories, even dreaming that her father would give her away on her wedding day (p. 212). Though the soldiers had been killed in war, they lived on in the memories and fantasies of their children years after

the cessation of hostilities.

The maelstrom of emotions surrounding the absence of their fathers and the public’s reaction to it created a variety of responses among the war orphans featured in the book. Many expressed feelings of shame or guilt about not having a father. At the same time, war orphans also declared considerable pride in their fathers’ service and contribution to victory in World War II. Some orphans believed that since their fathers had died young, they were destined to do so as well. Some women noted difficulties in their adult relations with men, as the result of not having a father. In a sense, those children orphaned in World War II were as much war casualties as their fathers had been.

Page after page of *Lost in the Victory* reveals the continuing impact of World War II on the lives of thousands of ordinary Americans. The stories of these war orphans are poignant, some heart wrenching. It is a difficult book to read. One cannot help but be deeply affected by the profound impact that losing a parent had on these people, and how the battles of the Second World War continue to reverberate through American society and culture more than fifty years after the war’s conclusion. By collecting these stories, Hadler, Mix, and Christman have taken a painful aspect of World War II, one Americans have seldom considered and would rather not think about, and brought it into public view. Scholars interested in assessing the long-term impact of World War II are in debt to the authors for bringing this hidden cost of World War II out of the closet and into the light.

*Lost in the Victory* contains very little analysis of the experiences of America’s World War II orphans. Hadler, Mix, and Christman allow those orphaned by the war to tell their own stories without the filter of scholarly interpretation. However, the work raises numerous questions in need of intellectual inquiry: Why did the federal government fail to collect comprehensive statistics on war orphans? How do the experiences of those Americans orphaned by World War II compare to orphans of other wars? How does the American situation compare with that of other nations? *Lost in the Victory* provides raw data for further inquiry into the world of American war orphans and the continuing impact of the Second World War. It will be up to the scholarly community to follow the path that Hadler, Mix, and Christman have broken.

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