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Tara Zahra. *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 320 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04824-9.

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Children: The Spoils of War

As we have seen repeatedly in the recent past, young children caught in the maelstrom of a humanitarian disaster, be it war or earthquake, tug on the heart strings of all but the coldest. It is not by accident that today international agencies mobilize the image of the small child, bereft of family, lost, terrified, and starving, big eyes staring soulfully into the camera, to encourage public support, donations, and interest in the plight of a nation, region, or continent that has been devastated by disaster. While the number of children afflicted by a disaster is typically proportionally smaller than adults (with the exception of the AIDS epidemic in Africa, perhaps), they assume an importance far beyond their numbers, as Tara Zahra points out in her study, when after the Second World War, they first became âsymbols of both wartime dislocation and postwar renewalâ (p. 8).

This was not always the case. Zahra makes clear that children only became a special category of victim, deemed worthy of special consideration, in the aftermath of the First World War, and especially as a result of the numerous international humanitarian crises of central and eastern Europe during the interwar period. She focuses on four in particular: the Armenian genocide; the famine in eastern Europe that spurred the creation of Herbert Hooverâs American Relief Association (ARA); the problem of transnational families (families that found themselves separated by borders at the warâs end, unable to reunite because of political and legal obstacles); and the Spanish civil war. In each case, for the first time, children received special attention. During the Armenian genocide, the focus was on locating children who had been taken from their families by Turks, removing them from wherever they were found and restoring them to their families if possible, re-Armenianizing them in the process. In the case of the ARA, while the organizationâs ostensible mission was to stave off the famine sweeping central and eastern Europe, it was also about instilling ââAmericanâ values of self-help, efficiency, cross-class solidarity,â and anti-Bolshevism in the children receiving aid, as the ARA considered East European society to be inherently backward, corrupt, and violent (p. 39). The International Migration Service was established to help reunite shattered families, whose members had ended up scattered across several countries. In the interwar period, new but formidable legal obstacles had emerged which made it impossible for these individuals to cross national boundaries otherwise. Finally, the evacuation of tens of thousands of Spanish children to France, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere during the Spanish civil war generated considerable concern about the denationalization of these children. In every case, Zahra argues, those caring for the children became as concerned about the childrenâs psychological health as their physical well-being. The growing consensus was that the worst threat that children could face was to be separated from their family and/or their nation.

The second chapter then explains the different approaches to social welfare for children that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s in the United States and Europe. These gelled with the shift in concern among humanitarian agencies. In the United States, where psychoanalysis was gaining popularity, emphasis was placed on the emotional environment provided by the family as key to a childâs well-being. It was considered especially important not to separate a child from a mother. Zahra argues that this familist approach was largely embraced in Great Britain as well, as shown in the experiences of the Kindertransports during the Second World War.

On the flip side, Zahra contends that European social workers emphasized a collectivist pedagogy, one that downplayed the importance of families and individuality, and instead stressed collective discipline, cleanliness, order, and self-sacrifice–to âsave children from ... corrosive egoismâ (p. 83). In reality, what she describes so evocatively and effectively in this section is not a European social welfare approach, but a Jewish and Zionist one, born in concentration camps and ghettos (where families had been decimated and large numbers of children orphaned or abandoned), and continued in the post-WWII era in the form of Jewish childrenâs homes (as reconstruction of the families was impossible due to the devastation of the Shoah). This is made clear by the text itself, which describes only the Jewish experience, while calling it a European approach. Thus, the contrast Zahra points out is between a Zionist and socialist model, on the one hand, and a liberal and democratic one, on the other. This distinction is especially important to make, given that there was a considerable degree of exchange between the American and non-Jewish West European social workers, with Americans coming to France and vice versa, especially in the 1920s. Indeed, French social welfare workers embraced the American concept of casework, although they may have implemented it slightly differently. My points are twofold. First, the distinction drawn between the American and European social welfare approaches is too stark. Second, the contrast Zahra makes is not really between American and European social welfare approaches, but between the American approach and the Zionist approach–or perhaps even more accurately, a liberal democratic approach and a Zionist socialist one. It is an important distinction that is unfortunately muddied in the text by the conflation of European and Zionist social work–unfortunate because the difference in approaches ultimately resulted in clashes in the field, as she makes clear later in the book.

The third chapter shifts our focus firmly into the post-WWII period, the immediate postwar refugee crisis and the work of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA; and not UNNRA as it is repeatedly abbreviated in the book). UNRRA was established in 1943 (interestingly, before the actual United Nations) and was given the task of providing relief for non-German and ânon-enemyâ refugees in Europe (note, it also operated in Asia, where it had a huge mission in China, as well as in the Philippines, Korea, and the Middle East). It is at this point, according to Zahra, that we see these emerging approaches to child welfare come to fruition and into conflict. UNRRAâs mission was not just one of addressing the material needs of displaced persons (DPs) (UNRRAâs mandate restricted it to caring for only non-German refugees, called âdisplaced personsâ), but, even more important, its welfare workers saw their mission as one of psychological reconstruction and rehabilitation. In fact, a point Zahra does not mention, much of UNRRAâs efforts and resources went into its supply operations–child welfare was only one small part of its operations. Key for UNRRAâs social welfare workers was the reunification of families, but also the cultivation of democratic values in postwar Europe (so much for its purported goal of remaining apolitical). It is UNRRA, dominated by American and British social welfare workers, that embodied the liberal democratic, individualist, and family-centric version of child welfare. It was the Jewish relief agencies, which moved into postwar Europe just as quickly, that favored the collectivist approach, if simply because the familist approach was not possible for Jewish children, whose families had been destroyed. Childrenâs homes, they believed, would provide an âoasis of securityâ for these children, where the children would be cared for in a safe, nonauthoritarian environment (p. 101). Again, in this chapter, Zahra unconvincingly claims that this collectivist approach was pan-European in reach, without offering evidence of it. Instead, her examples are steadfastly Jewish. The fact that this is a Jewish, rather than European, solution is quite significant and important, and her discussion of the logic underlying the Jewish approach is insightful, but the significance is obscured by this conflation.

Chapter 4 is of particular interest to me, as it focuses on a subject that I have been studying for some time (in the interests of full disclosure)–UNRRAâs child welfare operations in Germany. It is also, perhaps because it is only one chapter in what is a very sweeping study, disappointing. Zahra correctly recognizes that the child welfare workers considered the ârenationalisationâ of the children to be in the childrenâs best psychological

interests, as well as key to the advancement of human rights. It was, as she points out, also partly a response to considerable international sympathy with the notion of strengthening both national sovereignty and international stability through the pursuit of ethnic homogeneity within the borders of any particular state. That being said, the child welfare workersâ primary goal was to reunite children with their families (those who had been separated from them) and facilitate their return to their native countries. This was about psychological healing, certainly, but there were other reasons for this goal as well that she neglects. One such was the importance of a childâs legal status, which was largely determined by the childâs nationality. This draws on a point Zahra raises earlier, when discussing the International Migration Service. At the end of the Second World War, refugees were first and foremost sorted, supported, fed, clothed, and housed according to their nationality. The simple fact that UNRRA could not provide relief to German refugees meant that people showing up at UNRRAâs centers and camps had to be screened for nationality. This was not just UNRRAâs position (and it is important to remember that, like the United Nations, UNRRA was an organization accountable to its forty-four member nations, and especially to its major financiers), but the position of the nations that had created it. It was also a reflection of the DPsâ attitudes themselves, who almost immediately self-sorted into nationality groups in DP camps (note that, by autumn of 1945, Jewish DPs were effectively considered a nationality and were assigned their own camps) and engaged in exile nationalist political agitation. All of this is to say that childrenâs access to support and their ultimate disposition (to use the terminology of the time) was determined by their nationality. UNRRA workers were deeply concerned about ensuring that a childâs legal rights were protected. By this time, as Zahra points out earlier in the book but perhaps could have emphasized more strongly, an individualâs legal rights were based on oneâs citizenship. Without citizenship status (as was the case for the stateless), one had no rights, no legal status, and no government to speak for you, represent you, or protect you. One was left, literally, in legal limbo. It was a fate to which the child welfare workers wished to avoid condemning the children at all costs. So, yes, it was about psychological rehabilitation, but there were other, very pragmatic and very important, concerns that shaped the way in which the children were handled at this time–and that helps to explain more fully why ânational claims on children largely triumphed over individual rightsâ (although which *rights* in particular were being denied is unclear) (p. 128).

Her discussion of the child search operation in postwar Germany, which is a part of this chapter, is frustrating and misleading. As she explains, a central task of the child search teams was âto comb the German countryside in search of children who had either been kidnapped by the Nazis or left in the care of German foster homes and institutions by their parentsâ (p. 128). When found, the children were removed to national childrenâs homes, where they were imbued with a renewed sense of national pride, identity, and feeling, with the assistance of child welfare workers. Zahra contends that, for the most part, UNRRA workers believed that both the exercise in identifying the childrenâs nationality and restoring or instilling a sense of national identity was a clear-cut exercise. âOnly in exceptional casesâ did the child welfare and search officers acknowledge that a childâs nationality might be ambiguous. Rather, these officers worked from the assumption that every displaced child âpossessed a single âauthenticâ nationality of origin, which could be scientifically determined through an ethnographic and psychological investigationâ (pp. 129-130). It was, in fact, not quite that simple. By early 1946 (UNRRA was fully operational in the field in Europe in the autumn of 1945, and child search only truly operational in January 1946), child welfare workers, like welfare workers working with adult DPs, were pleading for clarification from their superiors (who were themselves pleading with various national governments for clarification). It was not clear at all who exactly was to be considered what nationality, or even what nationalities were considered legitimate (two brief examples of their quandary: what was the status of the illegitimate child of a Polish mother and German father? Was âUkrainianâ to be considered a nationality?). Even when those in the field received that clarification, it generally proved unhelpful because it was impossible to determine a childâs legal nationality definitively, unless accompanied by a relative. It was often a âbest guess,â and recognized as such.

Nonetheless, UNRRAâs mission was to settle these children, one way or another, and get them out of the camps (the financial pressures on UNRRA, and then the International Refugee Organization [IRO], to close the camps were considerable–yet another factor shaping the way in which the children were handled). And the military occupation governments in Germany had their own agendas–in the case of the American zone at least, to clear DP camps as quickly as possible and to reduce the number of children whose nationality would remain permanently âundeterminedâ as quickly as possible, even if

that meant arbitrarily assigning them a nationality (usually German)–which they attempted to impose on UNRRA, and which, in turn, had an impact on what UNRRA was able or not able to accomplish. Thus, the story is much more complicated and fraught than Zahra intimates. It was a story of several sets of clashing objectives (UNRRA, DP, military occupation governments, and national governments), some of which Zahra identifies, some of which she does not, with the children caught in the middle. All this said, Zahra does a superb job of discussing the implications of this for the children, and the wrenching stories of children being removed by force from foster families, for whom many, by all accounts, had great affection, are powerful. As Zahra makes clear, custody battles raged across Europe as everyone claimed the children–families, nations, and political movements. Children were, as Zahra forcefully and effectively argues, truly the spoils of war.

Chapters 5 and 6 take the book in a different direction, looking at two case studies of national governmentsâ efforts to rebuild their nations demographically and ethnically, and the place of children in those efforts. These chapters show that national governments were much less concerned about the needs of the children than they were with their nationsâ need for not only an ethnically homogenous population, but also a rejuvenated one. Children were the future labor force and therefore worth fighting for. But not all children were considered prizes–these national governments were selective. They wanted children who were acceptable racially and ethnically. They wanted children who were physically and psychologically sound. And they wanted children because they were assimilable. Thus, national interests trumped the definition of the childrenâs best interests according to the social welfare theories of the time.

Chapter 7 returns to the story of Germany, only now the cold war has hardened and UNRRA has been replaced with the IRO, which does not include the Soviet bloc countries as members. In this chapter, the focus is on the Polish and Yugoslavian stories–yet another complicated chapter in the story of displaced children–and the way in which refugee children from eastern Europe became pawns in the cold war, trapped in DP camps in the western occupation zones of Germany. These are both powerful stories, emblematic of the complicated machinations and growing tensions between East and West, with the children as symbolic capital to be mobilized to advance the interests of both sides. The broad sweep of Zahraâs account is correct, but as elsewhere, the devil is in the details, and she has a disturbing number of them wrong. Again, in the interests of full disclosure, I have written about the Polish story that she uses, that of the children from an east African refugee camp who were brought to Canada in 1949, but in a book-length monograph, not just a few pages (she acknowledges my book in an endnote, which is appreciated). Recognizing the constraints imposed by this, it is still disturbing to see her report that the children were brought to Salerno, Italy, âfollowing the liquidation of the African campâ (p. 208). In fact, the children were brought to Salerno so that they could be screened by the Canadian immigration mission there, as there was no such mission in Africa. The camp continued to exist for some time after the childrenâs departure. While Pierre Krycz, the IRO repatriation officer who receives a great deal of Zahraâs attention in this account, was indeed determined to interview the children to determine their willingness to return to Poland, and to present the case for repatriation, rather than resettlement (as was his responsibility and job description as a repatriation officer), the second IRO officer, Charlotte Babinski, was as determined to get the children to Canada (with the assistance of many others both within and without the IRO). Indeed, when a few of the children were refused by the Canadian mission for health reasons, she worked all her connections to get the missionâs decision overturned, successfully. Interestingly, neither had an issue with the other. Both were also tasked with constructing case files for each of the children, as these were nonexistent, and they could not, according to IRO policy, proceed with settling or repatriating the children, without first completing the casework files–one of the reasons that both were determined to conduct a thorough interview with each child. Furthermore, while J. D. Kingsley, director general of the IRO, publicly articulated the IROâs preference for repatriation over resettlement, as was mandated in the organizationâs constitution, in private he was always quite convinced that the children would go to Canada. Permitting Warsaw access to the children was intended to placate the Poles, without any expectation that it would change the childrenâs minds.[1] For a person in his position, there is always a public face and a private face. The IRO, and UNRRA for that matter, for better or worse, was an organization that became very process driven and bureaucratic, in part to protect itself from criticism from the multitude of organizations and national governments to which it was accountable, and in part to ensure that all options for every child had been explored and all pertinent information about the child recorded before a decision was made. Finally, it was not clear that Warsaw actually wanted the children back. Complaining on the international stage that Canada and the West were

kidnapping these children for use as slave labor in factories and on farms had tremendous propaganda value, but when given the opportunity to meet the children to persuade them to return to Poland, Warsaw generally demurred. After all, as Zahra has made very clear, these children were decidedly not assimilable. They were vehemently anti-Communist youths, vocally opposed to the Communist regime in Poland. Their repatriation would certainly not have been in the nationâs interests.

Perhaps again because of the brief space allotted to this particular part of the story, the tortured relationship between UNRRA, and then the IRO, and the American military government is glossed over. Contrary to what Zahra asserts, American occupation authorities in Germany did *not* âuntil 1950 ... typically accept the recommendations of UNRRA or the IRO for the repatriation and resettlement of unaccompanied childrenâ (p. 216). By mid-1946, UNRRAâs Child Welfare Division and the American military occupation authorities in Germany were at war, with the Americans determined to shut down the child search operations and to ârelease to the German economyâ (to use their own, rather chilling expression) the remaining children. From mid-1946 on, the American occupation government stonewalled UNRRA, leaving children in limbo in the camps, sometimes for years, in limbo, because UNRRAâs mandate precluded resettlement. UNRRA was only mandated to repatriate DPs, not resettle them. Thus, if a DP refused to repatriate, UNRRA could do nothing other than care for them in the camps. It was only in the last months of operation (UNRRA ended operations mid-1947), when the IRO was about to assume responsibility for the DPs, that UNRRA was permitted to entertain resettlement as an option for the remaining DPs.

The final chapter is a thought-provoking one in that it provides much food for thought. It also, perhaps, gives us a better sense of where Zahra wanted to go with this broad-ranging work. At the heart of her argument is the recognition that, in the postwar period, we see an important new emphasis on the need to protect the family, on the importance of maintaining family unity and especially of keeping the child in the bosom of its family. What is striking, and this is made clear again and again in the study, is that this conviction is one embraced in the United Nations and the new international humanitarian agencies that came into existence in the last half of the twentieth century. It is *not* embraced by national governments, although its language, the language of âthe childrenâs best interests,â is often appropriated by them as justification for their own, non-familist policies regarding âtheirâ children. What struck me in reading this work was the conflict, not between the two approaches to child welfare (familist versus collectivist), although this was intriguing and reflects (as well as explains) what I have seen in my own research, but between organizations like the United Nations that wanted to enshrine and protect a certain interpretation of childrenâs and familiesâ rights as human rights, and the national governments for whom national interests took precedence over the needs and rights of children and families, however defined. Zahraâs exploration of the implications of the new definition of childrenâs and familiesâ rights (which entrenched certain core âhierarchies,â based on gender, race, nation, modern versus backward societies, and a certain definition of family) forces us to look at postwar humanitarian relief efforts in a new, more nuanced light. This is important, because the way in which the DP crisis in postwar Germany was handled has set the pattern for international responses to all subsequent humanitarian crises, for better or worse.

As mentioned earlier, Zahraâs is a sweeping book. It deals with a hugely disparate population–orphans; children who had lost only one parent; those who had lost their homes and those who had not; those who had been evacuated from their city homes into the countryside and those who had not; those who had been abducted with or without their families; and those who had been abandoned or separated from their families by war, civil war, and genocide. This narrows as the book progresses, but this approach has both weaknesses and strengths. First, it leaves the author open to errors in detail, as she draws on such a wide range of different experiences. This is almost inevitable as it is impossible to be an expert on each of these historical contexts. It also requires the author, unless writing a multiple-volume study, to simplify, condense, or pare down each of the storylines, losing much of the nuance in the process. Finally, the multitude of comparisons, between different parts of Europe, between qualitatively different experiences, and between different periods of time, makes it difficult to develop any of the comparisons in any depth.

The strength is that this approach gets us to âthink out of the box,â to use a clichÃ©, to think beyond the narrow national borders that contain much of our own work and to think about issues supranationally. Zahraâs book makes a very important point: that children have become, over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, a special form of social and political capital. Completely disproportionate to their numbers in the grand scheme of humanitarian disasters, they typi-

cally have become the face of those disasters–literally the âposter childâ (a term first used in the *Washington Post* in 1938, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*). In every case, the ostensible objective of the various competing interests claiming the children is to protect the childrenâs best interests. But just exactly what is the best interest of a child is never certain. It is, like most things, a construct, rather than an absolute. This, Zahra makes quite clear. The best interests of a child are determined by the cultural values, needs, and expectations of the person or entity doing the determining, and these shape that particular definition of what is considered the appropriate solution for a child bereft of a legal guardian (or not). And it was because of national interests that children became both the spoils of hot war and the pawns of cold war.

Note

[1]. Lynne Taylor, *Polish Orphans of Tengeru: The Dramatic Story of Their Long Journey to Canada 1941-49* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009), 211.

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