

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Tarah Brookfield.** *Cold War Comforts: Canadian Women, Child Safety, and Global Insecurity.* Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012. xiii + 290 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55458-623-3.



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For thirty years following the end of World War II Canadian women, imbued with a sense of national and global purpose, engaged in defense, peace, relief, and rescue work. In *Cold War Comforts*, Tarah Brookfield convincingly argues that child welfare, a seemingly domestic issue, lay at the heart of Canadian, indeed Western, popular reactions to the Cold War; this concern refused to be domestically contained as children became the emotionally driven symbols of Cold War successes and failures (p. 14). Beginning in the early postwar era and ending with the Vietnam War, *Cold War Comforts* maintains a tight focus on local Canadian female activists as they addressed the goal of keeping children safe at home and abroad. In explicating this multi-sited story Brookfield demonstrates how our understanding of the Cold War and the creation of global insecurity is richly served by social history.

Organized into two sections, "At Home" and "Abroad," the book's seven chapters address the responses of women to Cold War threats against children. In the first section, *Cold War Comforts* details Canadian women's response to the new reality of the nuclear threat. Brookfield shows how the Canadian government in the wake of World War II continued to recruit female efforts for the new, albeit cold, war. Appealing

to women on patriotic and maternal grounds, vast numbers of women helped organize and execute the country's civil defense. By the end of the chapter we see the rejection of this type of conformity, at least by some women, who turned toward disarmament and peace to protect the family. In the second section Brookfield shows the substantial engagement of Canadian women in international causes related to child welfare, most often through United Nations organizations. She links these efforts to earlier ones, showing how foster parent schemes and other foreign relief measures represent the "globaliz[ation of] *the children are our future*" mantra that had come to drive civil defense and peace movements (p. 17). The book ends with two chapters about the Vietnam War, a focal point for Canadian women's global child welfare projects (p. 18). These chapters reveal how the antiwar movement helped to expand relief for children living under communism and configure Canada as haven for the world's desperate young people.

This volume adds to scholarship on North American women's history that refutes the notion that women retreated, politically apathetic, to the family rooms of the postwar suburbs. It also joins a large literature on the deployment of maternalism as the basis for women's social and political activism, revealing its persistence and

even centrality in the Cold War era. *Cold War Comforts* weaves together disparate threads of political activism spearheaded by women who themselves were diverse in their politics—representing anticommunist and radical perspectives—demonstrating at once how women activists relied on their identities as mothers while insisting on a place in the world of international relations. Women and the organizations they populated at times supported Canada's position in the Cold War (by organizing for civil defense) and at others insisted the government move toward disarmament and peace. Yet regardless of the increasingly radical positions taken by the anti-Vietnam War movement, "security" during the thirty years under study remained consistently tied to family integrity, with mothers at the center.

In the early postwar period maternalism—and concern for children and the future—was directed locally, spurring civil defense initiatives in the face of a potential nuclear attack. Women as nurses, social workers, and teachers helped to transform Canada into a bastion of readiness, with complex evacuation schemes and formulas for surviving the bomb. These initiatives involved coordination with multiple governmental organizations and were promoted as important steps in safeguarding the young in anxious times. Since the nature of the Cold War brought the threat of nuclear destruction to Canadians, women's attentions turned to converting the home and school into safe spaces from which to ensure the future of the nation. Professional women played key roles in the mobilization of civil defense projects. Nurses learned how to respond to radiation poisoning while teachers taught the duck-and-cover generation about limiting exposure to radiation. In connection to this civil defense preparation, the bomb shelter, Brookfield shows, became a Canadian obsession, even if relatively few households followed prime minister John Diefenbaker's enthusiasm by actually building one.

Like many studies of mid-twentieth-century North America, this book promotes the framework of an acquiescent 1950s population becoming an activist one by the 1960s. Brookfield describes this most clearly when civil defense and "fallout shelter madness" (p. 51) gave way to the reconsideration of preparing for war and the rise of the disarmament movement. In the middle chapters of the book we see how concern for child welfare and global (in)security led many women's organizations to reject civil defense measures in favor of ban-the-bomb campaigns. Brookfield demonstrates how internationalism infused women's activism and the multiple sites of

that activism from the local to the global.

Most innovative in this study is Brookfield's juxtaposing women's disarmament and peace initiatives with foster parent and international adoption schemes. She shows how women as activists and individuals operated both at home and abroad, traveling to such Cold War hotspots as Greece, Korea, and Vietnam in an effort to carry out child protection work. They did this in the name of the United Nations, as Canadians, and as representatives of private organizations. While some women remained at home and collected children's teeth (to determine the levels of atmospheric radiation), or organized UNICEF boxes on Halloween (to help the world's neediest children), others set up foster parent schemes to connect Canadian women with "orphans" of the Cold War. Being good Canadian citizens, especially during the 1960s, meant for these women working within a framework that was both maternalist and internationalist. In the final chapter of the book Brookfield examines Operation Babylift, the "rescue" of alleged orphans from Vietnam in the wake of the fall of Saigon in 1975. This chapter skillfully demonstrates how global child welfare practice driven by maternalism and internationalism led to questionable actions at home and abroad: 600 Vietnamese children (of 2,600 child evacuees) were airlifted to Canada in 1975; at least some of them were not orphans at all, Brookfield poignantly notes, and in subsequent decades rediscovered families in Vietnam.

The history of children and youth has a tangential relationship to scholarship on international relations. The Cold War saw the emergence of growing rights for children—at least at the level of rhetoric—and the child as global symbol played a role in exposing the lunacy of nuclear sabre-rattling. In Brookfield's study, children appear primarily as icons of vulnerability and representatives of a potential future world worth fighting for. Importantly, although her focus is on women's activism, she writes children into that activist history, showing how the Cold War infiltrated schools and fundraising and perhaps shaped children's consciousness concerning their place in the emergent global village. It's here that the reader searches for more; although it is a sign of a good book that it points so clearly to subsequent research questions.

Activism around child safety and global insecurity is an expansive topic, as is female activism in Cold War Canada. One might imagine this study, or indeed others that could follow, would address such issues as women's activism around food security and alternative health

practices that became prominent in the 1960s and 1970s in Canada. Brookfield does an admirable job of laying the groundwork for the maternalist rhetoric that underscored the actions taken by diverse Canadian women to protect children in the face of Cold War extremes, although one is left wondering about conflict and disagreement between the various women's groups and individuals. These are but quibbles. This book demonstrates that the global insecurity produced by the Cold War was transformative for many ordinary women and female organizations which recognized that at a basic level the threat to children near and far required immediate, concerted, and varied action. In doing so these citizens helped to shape public policy at home and abroad. This lively and rewarding book helps us reconceptualize important twentieth-century developments, confirming the place of women and children in the history of the Cold War.

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