

**Escaping a Nazi Youth: Do German's have the right to  
consider themselves victims of World War Two?**

By Christopher Shire

**“We belong to a generation struggling out of the darkness into the light”**

-Johnathan Von Goethe

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## **Introduction**

An almost infinite literature exists for those who wish to study the Third Reich, the Second World War and the multitude of subjects contained within. Indeed, those nations who participated in the conflict have embraced the history of the period in different ways, including how they view other nations. This, unfortunately, is especially true in a country such as the United Kingdom. The British experience has seemingly been rather reduced in detail, when the period is considered by the general populace, to a set of populist images. This is evident at a basic level at football games against a nation such as Germany. It is all too common (the 2006 World Cup being a prime example) to see English fans waiving inflatable Spitfires around and even dressing as Churchill. It is very hard to imagine the reaction if these fans German equivalents decided to embrace their history of the period in the same way. Whilst this is all too specific an example, the fact remains that the Second World War and the atrocities it brought is generally considered in terms of certain symbols rather than events and issues. For the British this would conjure images of Churchill's famous 'V' sign, the Blitz or even the evacuation scheme. However, these sorts of images are difficult to replicate for anyone of German nationality, although for obvious reasons. Unfortunately for Germany, the horrors committed by the Third Reich against its own people are still very much a subject that is both taboo and overshadowed by the crushing devastation of the holocaust. Germany has never reconciled its past in terms of the 1930's and 1940's in the way other nations have, with this extending to those unfortunate and innocent victims of the regime; German children. It was Germany's youth, born in the war years, who inherited the nation after it was ripped apart first by advancing Allied armies, and then by the 'Iron Curtain' of Stalin's Soviet Union.

Despite this, public acknowledgement of the plight of the German war child has been rather scant until very recent times. It is unfortunate that only in their twilight years can the majority of those ordinary German children who suffered the Nazi regime begin to reconcile their past as the subject is broached academically. Indeed, the scope and depth of war trauma that some people have lived with due to the Nazi regime and Second World War is nothing short of tragedy. Certainly in the United Kingdom the subject has not gained much more than a footnote in the history of the period; although its own history perhaps gains precedence. Thus the historiography of this academic area, be it documenting infant and adolescent German society under the Nazi's and beyond or the psychological after effects of such a regime, is decidedly limited when compared to other study within this field. A major reason for this is Germany itself and the ways and methods in which it recovered and dealt with the stained legacy of the Third Reich. Indeed, even today there is resistance to the pursuit of research in this area, as some delegates who received death threats at a war child conference in Germany in 2005 found out.<sup>1</sup> Certainly bitterness is still felt by many in the United Kingdom towards this, seemingly consumed as the nation is with its rivalry with Germany. However, the reaction the author has experienced from many is the simple denial of potential for German war trauma on the basis of guilt, denying also the right for the German people to be seen as victims of the Third Reich and war. Much of this is due to Germany having been the aggressor in the war, but to refute the German experience being traumatic solely on this basis is pure folly and simply incorrect. This is especially true when considering German children; surely their nationality is unimportant in the context of war trauma? A child has no control over a state of affairs such as war and so must be considered a victim of this circumstance,

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous comment

regardless of nationality. A recent study by Professor Elmar Brähler suggests that around three million patients in Germany suffer from the damages of their wartime experiences.<sup>2</sup> Thus it is clear that the issue is growing in Germany, suggesting that “thorough analysis and discussion of war trauma and its psychotherapeutical, sociological and social-political dimension are long overdue.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, in addressing this question this paper will explore those traumas which were suffered by German children under the Nazi's and how it has affected an entire generation to the present day. This will include the pre-war years whereupon the Nazi's started to slowly indoctrinate and dominate German Youth, as well as the war years which saw that indoctrinated youth armed and fighting against Allied forces. This will naturally include an examination of the Hitler Youth and similar State controlled Youth organizations and their impact upon those who were members. The physical and psychological remnants of the War upon German children will also be considered. This is especially important as perhaps the most dramatic and lasting traumas were inflicted during this period. This includes the evacuation scheme ordered for urban German youth, which itself has left lasting effects on many of those who experienced it. Also of relevance to this question are both the societal and psychological remnants of the Nazi era within Germany and how they have been dealt with post-war. This examination of how the issue has been addressed in the post-war world is key in that it suggests why it is only recently that academic study within this field has been conducted. The long term psychological effects of war trauma will be examined in relation to their causes, for example the Russian advance into Germany

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<sup>2</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.2, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Helga Spranger, “Covered Images: Remarks On A Topical Discussion Concerning War Trauma In The German Population”, *Children in War*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Nov 2005), pp37-43

and subsequent horror that this brought for many Germans. Focus will be placed upon the German experience, although it is important from a contextual standpoint to gauge a comparison between said German experience and those of other nations. The example of Britain will be used here as it is similar in that it too had an evacuation scheme and is itself only recently coming to recognize the potential for the trauma of its own war children. This study and contextual comparison will explore the nature and extent of childhood war trauma and will demonstrate the validity in viewing the German war child experience with sympathy. In this way perhaps the reduction of the Second World War period to a series of populist images can be stopped and the real toll in terms of the psychological trauma of an entire generation can be accepted regardless of what nationality is being considered.

## Chapter 1: The Nazis and German Youth

### 1.1 Hitler Youth

Youth was both crucial and integral to National Socialist society. Hitler himself never underestimated the importance of educating and indoctrinating Germany's young generations completely into National Socialist ideology. Through this indoctrination the Reich could establish itself for the future, rooted in the minds and actions of an obsessively loyal youth. "Whoever has the youth has the future" is one of Hitler's more oft-quoted phrases, perhaps best encapsulating and explaining the Führer and Reich's focus upon its young.<sup>4</sup> After all, the thousand year Reich would have no chance of surviving if its young citizens were not committed to the National Socialist model. This consideration motivated the Nazi's to hold certain doctrinal aims for the nations youth, and these aims were rapidly integrated into children's lives not only upon the party's rise to political domination in 1933, but through party organisations from the 1920's onwards. Personal qualities such as obedience, total dedication to Führer and fatherland and complete social conformity were central to these doctrinal aims and were forcibly instilled in the minds of German youth. Popular examples such as anti-Semitic textbooks in schools tell only half the story in terms of how children became so wrapped in the heavy blanket of Nazi indoctrination. The key to understanding just how powerful the Nazi machine was in brainwashing its youth is in its ability to penetrate all spheres of existence within German children's lives. Indeed, when the school day had finished there was still a ready and waiting expanse of state run organisations for German children to attend. The most obvious of these are the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) and *Jung Mädel* (Young Maidens) organisations;

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<sup>4</sup> Edward J. Kunzer, "The Youth Of Nazi Germany", *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol. 11, No. 6, The Challenge Of Youth (Feb 1938), pp342-350

although there were others designed for German youth of varying ages. Created in 1926 (although a similar Nazi organisation existed prior to this), Hitler Youth membership understandably saw huge growth in the 1930's. However, the speed and methods attributed to that growth are almost predatory in their workings in that the largest expansions for the Youth occurred when they forcibly merged other organisations with themselves. The Evangelical Church in Germany Youth Organisation is a good example of this aggressive expansion, contributing around 600,000 members to the Hitler Youth. Through such State controlled organisations, the horrific ideology of Nazism took root in the minds of German children both in the classroom and beyond. It was inescapable in its all encompassing hold over young minds and this is key in the understanding of German trauma and the fact the country is still coming to terms with its own recent brutal and violent history.

Membership of the Hitler Youth became compulsory in 1936, just three years after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. It is hard to imagine in a modern liberal society any youth organisation growing so rapidly, even with the backing of the State. Thus, the understanding of the context in which the Nazi system was able to traumatise its youth through effectively infiltrating all aspects of their lives is crucial in the eventual understanding of trauma in later life. Upon becoming compulsory, the Hitler Youth already counted just over five million children as members, with attendance at Youth meetings becoming stringently noted. Repeated absence would often warrant the parents of the absent child a visit from the local Youth leader, which would usually exercise enough pressure to ensure their child's attendance. Proclaimed the "Year of the *Jungvolk*" by Balder Von Shirach, 1936 consolidated the power of the Hitler Youth, mutating it beyond a simple club and into an extremely powerful tool of the

State. To the children this was rarely a concern, especially in the earlier years. In the midst of economic depression, German youth saw the Hitler Youth in much the same way as the rest of Germany viewed the Nazi Party. That is, in the context of their own chaotic lives, children saw the organisation and apparent drive exuded by uniformed Youth members in an increasingly uniform- led society. The feelings of helplessness caused by economic depression and felt by so much of the population could so easily be eased by the control which a uniform seemed to give. Children waited eagerly till their tenth birthday and their chance to join the *Jungvolk*, envious of their older brothers or sisters whom were already members. However, a shift in activities offered and engaged in by the Youth began to slowly alter children's attitudes towards the organisation. Indeed, the Youth gradually emanated a distinctly more militaristic air throughout the decade, with increasing emphasis being placed upon marching or drill. For some members, this was welcomed in that they felt somewhat more mature copying their elders in the Wermacht, SA or SS. No longer did they feel controlled by parental forces, but rather saw themselves as providing an essential role in the running of the Nazi state. So imbued in party propaganda, children began to love the Führer sometimes ahead of their own parents. As is typical with children everywhere however, the growing militarism and demands began to grow tiresome and even resented. One member remembers that, "It was not long...before plain-faced leaders taught us marching drill and marching songs. I hated marching."<sup>5</sup> The challenge posed to German youth by Goebbels in 1935 increasingly lost its verve and motivational importance in the minds of children as Nazism firmly consolidated its power with the State.<sup>6</sup> As an indicator of the young adults the Hitler Youth created, it is significant that the SS began using them as a key recruiting ground. This became more common

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Christopher Shire, "A Lost Generation: The Effects of Nazism on German Children 1933-45", *Children in War*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Dec 2006), pp27-30

<sup>6</sup> Guido Knopp, *Hitler's Children*, Sutton Publishing, 2000, p2

in the later 1930's and early years of war however. The insatiable drive for loyalty and conformity in German youth inevitably became an unobtainable standard for all children. For those children who were deemed dangerous to society (and it is notable that a great many petty things were considered a real social danger by Nazi leaders), terrible punishments and abuse were never far away.

## **1.2 Standards of Behaviour**

Nazi manipulation of German youth was designed to serve two ends; the liberation of potential for juvenile aggressiveness whilst “impressing the adult public with the degree of discipline to which youth could be subjected.”<sup>7</sup> The two ends were not necessarily easily reconcilable. Thus, standards for behaviour under the Nazis were so impossibly high that, unsurprisingly, there simply were not the resources to deal with every child and incident deemed potentially dangerous to society. However, there were various reformatories that existed to ‘rehabilitate’ children back into a National Socialist environment. The former Benedictine monastery of Breitenau stands as a notorious example of the horrors and abuse inflicted upon those Nazi children considered a social danger or lacking in conformity with the National Socialist agenda. Such was the Nazi drive for the purification of its youth that there are examples of police chiefs banning children under eighteen from smoking in the street and unaccompanied girls in dancehalls under the age of eighteen being liable to be sent to reformatories.<sup>8</sup> Living conditions were brutal, compounded by the ruthless, badly trained and very poorly paid guards employed there. Despite beatings and abuse by guards not being officially sanctioned, they became a regular and almost routine

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Grunberger, *A Social History Of The Third Reich*, Weidenfield And Nicolson, 1971, p267

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p273

part of existence for those children incarcerated in Breitenau. Under Nazi orders guards were issued with revolvers for the first time and from 1937 were allowed to shoot at unarmed escapees. With minor infractions of rules a beating was fairly expected as punishment, although the most severe disciplinary action was “*Arrest.*”<sup>9</sup> This was a spell in solitary confinement, which by the war years could consist of any length of time up to four weeks. This sentence in the years before the war would only be given to adult prisoners, underlining the rising brutality of the institution and perhaps the entire Nazi system itself. As detailed in Nicholas Stargardt’s book, “*Witnesses of War,*” some children’s physical states deteriorated so much that they could not complete the full sentences bestowed upon them. Liselotte Widlt is such a case. Upon her return to Breitenau following attempted escape she could serve only two weeks of a three week sentence of *Arrest*. She would only be deemed fit enough to serve the final week of her sentence around five months later, such was the recovery period and brutality of existence within the institution.<sup>10</sup> Despite the dreams of those trying clinging to survival within the confines of Breitenau’s imposing walls, escape was improbable and the probability of staying escaped was even more limited. Perhaps inevitably, the first place the authorities would check for those that did manage escape would be at his or her home; the usual primary destination of escapees. As Stargardt recounts, Herbert Pflaum escaped from Breitenau, only to be arrested ten minutes after his eventual arrival at his mother’s house. Parents themselves were warned that housing their children when they still had sentence to serve was a “punishable offence” and “contrary to the spirit of compliance demanded by the Reich.”<sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup> Effectively Breitenau can be viewed as an institution in the style of

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War*, Jonathan Cape, 2005, p60-61

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p61

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p59-79

<sup>12</sup> Shire, *A Lost Generation*, p28

Nazi concentration camps, but housing those whom could be considered racially normal (that is, conformist to the Aryan ideal held so central to Nazi racial doctrine).<sup>13</sup> Upon the onset of war conditions within the institution became much more severe, as already evidenced by the extension of potential periods of *Arrest*. Funding was reduced and so rations became accordingly smaller. This, coupled with an extension in working hours producing for the war effort, reduced the ordeal of living in Breitenau from a mental and physical hardship to plain fighting for survival. Disease was common, adding to a forever rising death toll. The case of the Breitenau institution, despite its treatment of its young inmates being especially brutal even for the Nazis, serves well the demonstration of the punishment administered by the Third Reich upon its purportedly wayward younger generations. However, the brutal castigation of those in such places is an extreme example when viewed in the context of the entire young population. Indeed, it is easy to recognise how trauma experienced within such places could affect people's later lives. What is not so immediately obvious is potential for trauma suffered by those whom belonged to the majority of the population. That is, it is important to see Nazi systems of punishment not as isolated examples, but rather part of a larger image of horrific abuse directed at German children.

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, those working at the institution were told of the "inferiority" of those parents whose children were incarcerated in the institution. Stargardt, *Witnesses Of War*, p62

## Chapter 2: Evacuation

### 2.1 *Kinderlandverschikung*

As was the case in Britain, the urban population of Germany lived under the heavy threat of Allied bombing campaigns. The evacuation of children living in German cities was ordered by Hitler in September 1940, giving Baldur Von Shirach (former Hitler Youth leader and then Gauleiter of Vienna) the responsibility for organising it. Hitler explicitly ordered that the term evacuation not be applied to the scheme, but rather favoured '*Kinderlandverschikung*,' or '*despatch of children to the countryside*.' It was decided that labelling the scheme an evacuation would suggest an air of defeatism and may even incite panic amongst Germans. This attempt to play down the severity of the situation continued, as evidenced in 1942 by the Gauleiter of Hamburg. By this point the ferocity of conflict at the front had significantly increased, furthering the need to evacuate. Not wishing to give the impression that the fighting at the front was of major importance, the Gauleiter simply explained the evacuation as being for the safety of the children against the winter.<sup>14</sup> The order for evacuation was not for the sole humanitarian reason of removing the nation's youth from danger however. Indeed, an entirely more sinister motivation drove the scheme, the removal of German children from their parents was also designed to step up and consolidate the total indoctrination of German youth into National Socialist ideology and philosophy. Moulding German children to fit National Socialist doctrine was "inexorably more attainable" if parental influence was eradicated, or at the very least highly reduced, from the young lives of the evacuees.<sup>15</sup> The scheme was theoretically voluntary, although enormous pressure was placed upon parents to sign their children up to be

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Parsons, "Kinderlandverschikung: An Introduction To The Expanded German Evacuation Scheme", *Children in War*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Dec 2004)

<sup>15</sup> Shire, *A Lost Generation*, p28

sent to the countryside. Certainly from a doctrinal standpoint it was preferable to have as many urban children as possible in the firm grasp of a state controlled program. Local authorities pressured parents by informing them that those children staying behind would have to “expect to be transferred to a class containing a collection of children from other classes or to another school,” thus on a basic level being without their friends and having a potentially poorer and unhappy education.<sup>16</sup> As the war began to intensify schools in urban areas began to close, bombing raids became more frequent and intense and food shortages all heavily affected the urban population. Coupled with ever increasing state pressure, many parents felt they simply had no choice other than to place their children in the evacuation scheme. This is reflected in the increasing number of *Kinderlandverschickung* (KLV) camps opened or converted to house the urban evacuees.

Child evacuees were split into two groups; group one consisting of six to ten year olds, and group two consisting of ten to fourteen year olds. The younger group would generally be housed with families, whereas the older children in the second group would live in hotels, hostels or designated camps. An attempt was made to place children in homes similar in economic circumstance to that which they were used to. However, upon the acceleration of the scheme this proved simply unworkable. Despite it being technically contrary to Nazi doctrine, there was a distinct underlying class tension at work in both evacuation and reception areas. Indeed, some Berliners complained that a disproportionate amount of attention was given to middle-class families. This to a large extent was justified, with policies giving preference to evacuating those in office jobs over those whom worked in factories. Kurt Pritzkoleit

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<sup>16</sup> G. Dabel, *KLV. Die erweiterte Kinder-Land-Verschickung. KLV Lager 1940-45*. Freiburg 1981 p 32. cited in Nazism. 1919-45 Vol 4. ed J.Noakes. University of Exeter Press. 1998 p428

notes that from mid 1943 towards the end of 1944, the young population of more middle-class West Berlin was reduced 26.5% more than that of the working class north of the city.<sup>17</sup> Class conflict was not the only difficulty faced by the German evacuation program. Similarly to Britain, residents of those reception areas the evacuees were moved to often expressed hostility towards their arriving urban counterparts. Indeed, there are accounts of British evacuees being taken in and immediately being bathed in baths containing Dettol and having hair shaven off under the excuse that urban children infected the countryside with lice and suchlike.<sup>18</sup> Often localised people simply rejected the influx of strangers from the cities, as evidenced in southern Germany where women evacuated from the Rhineland were referred to as “bomb wenches.”<sup>19</sup> Despite the underlying friction between evacuees and reception areas, the evacuation scheme accelerated, with around 5,500 camps being built or converted to house the older grouping of children by 1943.<sup>20</sup> The Hitler youth was encouraged to take an extremely active role in the running of these camps and, as would be expected of children of that age being placed in positions of obvious authority, some seriously abused their power. Schoolwork played only a minor part in life within the camps. Most lacked many basic materials. Teachers were also in short supply and “from time to time had to teach subjects they knew nothing about.”<sup>21</sup> Schooling was often supplanted with “toughness exercises.” Indeed, Hitler’s ideas upon the survival of the fittest were very much evident within the camps. Boys were taught to kill animals, and horrific attacks on each other were generally tolerated. Draconian punishments and beatings were commonplace, many for simple

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<sup>17</sup> Kurt Pritzkolet, *Berlin*, Dusseldorf, 1962 p55. Cited in Parsons, “Kinderlandverschikung: An Introduction To The Expanded German Evacuation Scheme”, *Children in War*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Dec 2004)

<sup>18</sup> Martin Parsons, “*I’ll Take That One*”, Beckett Karlson, 1998, p14

<sup>19</sup> Parsons, *Kinderlandverschikung: An introduction to the expanded German Evacuation Scheme*

<sup>20</sup> Knopp, *Hitler’s Children*, p183-88

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p186

'misdemeanours' such as daring to "swipe a little spoonful of pudding before it was served."<sup>22</sup> Through the camps the regime was able to "get their hands on young people totally, in a broad context and for a considerable period of time."<sup>23</sup> It used this opportunity in a typical brutal way to produce young people moulded to Hitler's social dream for Germany. That is, they were not "shrinking violets... toadies or creeping hypocrites," but rather an entire generation of Germans taught to hold their Führer and nation in higher regard than their own lives.<sup>24</sup> This learned devotion to the Reich (albeit stronger in some children than others) inevitably led to severe trauma and difficulties upon the German defeat in 1945 and post-war period.

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p186

<sup>23</sup> Shire, *A Lost Generation*, p28

<sup>24</sup> Knopp, *Hitler's Children*, p187

## Chapter 3: Defeat and the Russians

### 3.1 Advancing Soviets

The eventual capitulation of the Donitz government, signalling the end of the war may have been an effective end to Nazism, but its effects would be so far reaching as to spill out into the remainder of the twentieth century and even into the next. Rather than the German people being immediately liberated from Nazism, the defeat of 1945 produced an entirely new range of horrors facing German children and indeed the larger population. Displacement and mass poverty were crippling problems for the now broken nation. Estimates suggest around 60 million Europeans being moved from their homes in during the war, or in the period immediately following it.<sup>25</sup> Upon the death of Hitler the need to save as many German's from the "clutches of the Soviets" became immediately apparent to Dontiz in his new role as President.<sup>26</sup> For those whom were in the East of the country despite Dontiz's best efforts,<sup>27</sup> the advancing Russian army was an obvious and immediate threat. This was due not only to feared retribution for German atrocities in the East, but also an ideological fear of Bolshevism. This was especially true of the German high command. This fear of the Russians manifested itself in one of the great tragedies of the war that too often gets forgotten when considering the nature of Germany's defeat. A huge wave of suicides crashed through Germany from the beginnings of 1945, with around 5,000 in the months of April and May in Berlin alone. Mirroring the deaths of Goebbels and his family, often children were murdered by their parents before they took their own

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<sup>25</sup> Chauncy D. Harris; Gabriele Wulker, "The Refugee Problem Of Germany", *Economic Geography*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Jan 1953), pp10-25

<sup>26</sup> Martin Kitchen, *Nazi Germany At War*, Longman, 1995, p291

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, pp288-301

lives.<sup>28</sup> It is hard to very accurately assess the underlying reasons for the suicides and panic because there were simply so many. There are many potential ones however. Certainly the German propaganda machine had resolutely refused to accept the slow and bloody advance of the allies, reducing them to monstrous caricatures (although this was a common method in many nations and also employed by the allies). Indeed, rumours of Soviet atrocities (including barbarities such as cannibalism) had been circulating for many years in Nazi Germany and this may have provided the underlying fear necessary to mutate into terror upon the Russian advance. This fear would have been very easily transmitted to children whom had been taught and believed in the inferiority and barbarism of other races from birth. It is suggested that many simply could not imagine a future for the nation following defeat. Children watched as jewellery and valuables were stashed and hidden by their parents. The way in which the Russian army conducted itself in their march to Berlin would, unfortunately, confirm for many Germans the fear and terror they had felt however. It is estimated that around 10-20% of the female population in the capitals of Berlin, Budapest and Vienna were raped and sexually abused in just the first few months of the Russian occupation. Many children were deeply traumatised as their mothers, sisters and friends became victims of the mass sexual violence inflicted by the Russians on a terrified population. Germans turned on each other in desperation to protect themselves or their daughters from the Russian army. Mothers cut the hair of their daughters and dressed them as boys in attempts to protect them from sexual violence that was on display for all to see.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, women were raped “in front of neighbours, husbands, children and complete strangers,” and the nights echoed with

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<sup>28</sup> Shire, *A Lost Generation*, p29

<sup>29</sup> Stargardt, *Witnesses Of War*, p321

the phrase “*Frau komme.*”<sup>30</sup> Children’s reactions to the Russians were mixed, in that despite considering the Soviet army as an almost liberating force, “the Russians violated our women and took a lot away from people.”<sup>31</sup> The psychological scarring of this wave of violence resonates until the present day, with many examples of women or young girls who were gang raped by Russian soldiers committing suicide. Gerald Schneider remembers his childhood friend, Jutta Rieger being raped by an entire unit of men at the age of thirteen. Following her ordeal, “she staggered up to the loft and hanged herself.”<sup>32</sup> Certainly young girls whom were subjected to abuse, or perhaps even witnessed it first hand would have trouble in later life trusting men and maintaining relationships. Orders were given from the Russian high command to halt the attacks, although it is recounted that officers would sometimes respond with laughter at those German women whom would complain.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, often it was officers who perpetrated these crimes themselves.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2 Child Soldiers

For other German children, especially those born in the final years of the 1920’s, experiences of fighting would become much more real than the constant training they had received through the Hitler Youth as the Third Reich lay in its death throes. The massively depleted Wehrmacht was suffering from a lack of resources as well as manpower, and many now saw that the war was effectively lost for Germany. Despite this, those in high command could conceive of nothing but total victory or total

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p321

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p321

<sup>32</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.1, 2005. Gerold Schneider interviewed.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous, *A Woman In Berlin*, Virago, 2004, p74

<sup>34</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.1, 2005. Eva-Maria Stege interviewed.

defeat, depicting the losses as part of some heroic and epic battle. The decision to mobilise the nations youth in an attempt to bolster the numbers at the front was perhaps the final act of utterly inhumane criminality the Nazi's embarked on. As pointed out by Guido Knopp, "The regime could rely on the young, or more precisely the willing self-sacrifice to which they had been educated."<sup>35</sup> The age of conscripts to the Wermacht slowly lowered from the beginning of the war until, by 1944, those whom were born in 1928 and 1929 began to be enlisted. This would have made some as young as fifteen and sixteen liable for service. The story of sixteen year old Dieter Borkowski, recounted through his diary *Wer Wiss, Ob Wir Uns Wiedersehen* (Who knows if we will meet again) captures the hopelessness felt by many of the young recruits. He muses on what appears to be impossible to him; the Russian army advancing to Berlin. Rather ironically, the diary entry states that if that were to happen it would mean that, "the Führer and his government have lied to us for years." For Dieter, the indoctrination of his youth had not affected him so badly as to propel him into futile conflict against the Red army. He was captured and eventually released by the Russians.<sup>36</sup> Others were not so lucky and could not shake the propaganda and indoctrination urging that they should fight on. In a KLV camp, ironically surrounded by Allied troops, Gerhard M. was still listening to Goebbel's speech on loyalty and victory for the Führer's birthday on the 20th April, 1945. Even at this point he remembers being, "immensely proud and had only one thought- to join the war and to sacrifice my life for the final victory."<sup>37</sup> Luckily for Gerhard he lost his opportunity when Americans occupied the camp just two days later. There are numerous accounts of young soldiers being shot to pieces whilst poorly armed, yet still attempting to

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<sup>35</sup> Knopp, *Hitler's Children*, p233

<sup>36</sup> Emmy E. Werner, *Through The Eyes Of Innocents: Children Witness World War II*, Westview Press, 2000, pp132-135

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p54

attack Russian or American forces advancing into their towns and cities.<sup>38</sup> So full of propaganda were these ill-trained and ill-equipped young soldiers that many simply did not question their own actions, resulting in the deaths of thousands. To give some perspective on the Third Reich's final sacrifice of its youth, the average life expectancy of those recruited in 1945 was just one month.<sup>39</sup>

### **3.3 Refugees and Displacement**

The trauma and pain of war did not suddenly halt upon the Nazi capitulation of 7<sup>th</sup> May 1945 for Germany however. The concept of war cannot solely be defined in terms of armies fighting in a case such as this. That is, the war and its impact on the lives of Germans were so intertwined that it continued long past the 'officially' recognised end. Certainly in the years immediately after 1945 it was remarkably evident that Germany would take time to recover some sense of normality. For those in the Russian zone of occupation, this normality would become perhaps even more repressive than the previous Nazi regime had been. The ending of war presented millions of Germans with a multitude of problems, not least of which was the question of simple physical survival. The anonymous work "A Woman in Berlin" records this struggle for survival in the final months of the war under the Russians. The horrific personal account given speaks of the violence and rape suffered by the conquered German people.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, shared by much of the nation, the experiences stemming from the enormous displacement of people, poverty and starvation across the destroyed nation would traumatise some forever. This displacement coupled with the advancing Russian army signalled a huge movement of German refugees

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<sup>38</sup> Knopp, *Hitler's Children*, p255

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p279

<sup>40</sup> *A Woman In Berlin*, Virago, 2004

attempting to get back to their homeland, with often highly traumatic and horrific consequences. Upon the 'officially' recognised date marking the end of the war, thousands of people had been uprooted and spread across Germany. The fight to survive became immediately and especially difficult for those families who had been evacuated or made their way to the countryside for safety during the war years. Mothers now often found themselves without the fathers of their children amongst an increasingly hostile local population. Added to this was the rapidly growing issue of poverty. Certainly the urban population felt this scarcity of food very hard (notably in Berlin which had been under siege of the Soviet army for months). What must be remembered is that no welfare system existed in Germany at this time, and certainly there was not the organisation to run any such system if there had been one. Those families whom were evacuated to rural areas were aided during the days of the Nazi regime by government funding which had now become nonexistent. The starvation and cold suffered by a poverty stricken population, be they refugees or not, would manifest itself as war trauma in people affecting their lives for years after the guns fell silent and the fighting ceased.

## Chapter 4: The Psychology of War Children

### 4.1 Study and Recognition of German War Trauma

At this point both a more psychological and comparative approach will be adopted. As demonstrated, the scope for war trauma (and indeed trauma suffered in the pre and post-war years) is enormous. The number of ways in which events and experiences within this period affected the lives of those children whom bore witness to them is incalculable. A comparative approach to the main patterns in trauma between German children and those of other nations affected by war is thus necessary for a number of reasons. Firstly, it aids in placing the German experience in the wider context of the trauma suffered by children of different nationalities caused by the Second World War. Secondly, with this established the nature and validity for an accurate answer can be more easily garnered. Focus will now be given to the events and issues concerning those children who survived the war and Nazi terror and the general repression of their experiences; both by society through deeming the discussion of such things uncomfortable and even unacceptable and the personal repression of traumatic experience to the subconscious. Rainer Koeppen explains that “it was simply terrible, and frightening, and I resorted to the same attitude as everybody else; I suppressed it.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed the societal element to repression of German war trauma is important, as it is only relatively recently that this has been challenged. Admittedly part of this is due to the again recent theory of war trauma being carried from childhood deep into later life through both the conscious and subconscious. Germany has not dealt with the issue particularly well itself however as the war still remains largely a taboo subject in light of the events of the holocaust and other horrific acts

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<sup>41</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.2, 2005

inflicted on those who the Nazi's saw as inferior peoples. According to German historian Jörg Friedrich, many Germans believe the total destruction of Germany through bombing was almost retribution for the crimes of the Nazi regime.<sup>42</sup> It is partly this feeling that has restricted dialogue upon this subject for Germans. Demonstrative of this are the relatively small number of academic works, especially relating to the field of children and war child trauma, available even presently. It is strange indeed that the historiography of German and child suffering under the Nazi regime and Second World War is particularly short in comparison to other aspects of the Nazi experience. However, in recent years those children who survived the Nazi's have begun the often arduous task of recounting their early experiences through memoirs and interviews.<sup>43</sup> In relation to the trauma suffered through rape, Dr. Ute Schmitz suggests that women now in old age are suffering more than ever as the events of their past return to their minds when they are alone. The suppressing of trauma for this generation is now much harder and so treatment and recognition of their trauma is important.<sup>44</sup> To accurately explore a question of this nature, a certain amount of psychological research is required in that it illustrates how trauma suffered relating to the Nazi regime has affected people in varying ways and to varying degrees over time. Psychiatrists such as Dr. Peter Heinl have provided invaluable research and expertise in this field, in which the history of the period and the psychological effects of it converge. The range of cases in which Dr. Heinl has studied enables the historian to construct an assessment of how valid a label of victim is upon a German war child in light of other historical evidence as previously highlighted. The long term effects and devastation of war trauma will also be considered.

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<sup>42</sup> Luke Harding on Jörg Friedrich, Guardian Unlimited 22/10/2003 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,7792,1068437,00.html>

<sup>43</sup> Titles such as Erich Kuby's 'The Russians and Berlin 1945' were among the first to be seen.

<sup>44</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscheid. Film no.2, 2005

## 4.2 The British Experience

As previously stated, In order to accurately assess a question of this nature, the German experience must be placed in context. One must thus investigate how children in other countries who participated in the war were affected. Following the Battle of Britain, RAF control of the air prevented the Wermacht reaching British shores. A direct comparison to the German experience thus cannot be made on this front (that is, the trauma of a land based conflict). However, the British evacuation scheme drew certain parallels with the German equivalent and produced sometimes equally traumatic effects. Also important are the young British witnesses and victims of the German bombing campaigns on the civilian population, also engaged in by the British air force upon German cities. This again brought trauma and tragedy into the lives of children through war. The evacuation scheme was particularly traumatic for some, affecting those whom were traumatised by their own experiences for the rest of their lives. This is certainly at odds with the traditional view of the evacuation scheme in Britain which has been created in the 'official' historiography of the event. The complexity of the scheme and its effects has been reduced over time to the popular image of children from slums, bedwetting their way through a happy existence in the countryside. Whilst this view has been become the most common interpretation, not helped by the wealth of children's fiction written underlining the image, it is far too simplistic and generally simply incorrect. The work of organisations such as The Evacuees Reunion Association and various academics go some way to dispelling this myth.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, in this reduction by 'official' historiography of the trauma the evacuation scheme brought to many children's lives who participated, the British

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<sup>45</sup> On British evacuation: Martin Parsons, "*I'll Take That One*", Beckett Karlson, 1998, Reflections on the untold story of the evacuation scheme: James Roffey, "Why Do They Cry?", *Children in War*, Vol.1, No. 1 (May 2004), pp97-99

experience rather mirrors that of the German. In both countries there has been a real failure to properly engage with the trauma of evacuation in the post war years. Much like in Germany, the experiences and trauma of those whom were evacuated from and within the United Kingdom are only relatively recently coming to light. Unlike the German experience, the scheme was not particularly well planned and so the potential for psychological trauma for children was present from its very beginnings.

### **4.3 The Trauma of Sexual Abuse**

Problems for the Anderson committee (charged with organising the British evacuation) in the assessing of suitable reception areas led to organisational issues that immediately manifested themselves upon the arrival of children in those areas. Often there was an overestimation of how many evacuees residents within the reception areas could house. This organisational negligence stretched further still to those foster parents who would be taking in evacuees. There was no screening process in place whatsoever with the resultant effect being that some children were billeted with adults who were simply not capable of looking after children. On a more sinister note, this meant that violence and sexual abuse towards children was simply not considered when moving them into billets, and so the system and the children were inherently open to abuse. Drawing a parallel between the experiences of an albeit low percentage of girls and young women who were sexually abused in the United Kingdom through the evacuation scheme and those in Germany whom were sexually abused by the Red Army provides a pattern in the effects of such trauma in the long term. This type of trauma is certainly a shared experience between many German and British women who then had to deal with it often for the rest of their lives. In terms of

being suppressed by society in the post-war period, there are again comparisons between the sexual abuse subjected to women and children in the eastern areas of Germany. The concept of paedophilia was by no means a public concern for British society, nor did most people even know what the term meant. Children's experiences of abuse would go unheard in an age of 'being seen but not heard.' Similarly, complaints of sexual abuse for German women were increasingly discouraged in the years following the war. However, the comparison becomes difficult when considering the scale of the abuse, with the German experience being far more expansive than that of the British. The anonymous author of "A Woman in Berlin" demonstrates this clearly during one of her ordeals. She begs of one of her attackers, "Only one, please, only one."<sup>46</sup> A harrowing illustration of how gang rape was common for too many German women at this time. The war brought the experiences of rape and abuse into the lives of so many people and the long term effects of this are clearly not limited to one nationality alone. As mentioned before, and is common in extreme circumstances, children whom were abused in such as way sometimes simply cannot or will not form relationships with the opposite sex throughout the rest of their lives.<sup>47</sup> However, this is just one (admittedly extreme) example of the resultant effect of this type of war trauma.

#### **4.4 The Effects of Being Constantly Uprooted**

Other effects are perhaps a little less extreme in origin, yet just as traumatic in their resultant psychological effect. Indeed, one of the most common results of evacuation trauma is the inability for said evacuees to feel truly comfortable with their

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<sup>46</sup> *A Woman In Berlin*, p77

<sup>47</sup> Stargardt, *Witnesses Of War*, p320, Peter Heintz, *Splintered Innocence: An Intuitive Approach To Treating War Trauma*, Brunner-Routledge, 2001, pp4-5

environment and surroundings. Jim Bartley describes how despite his “lovely house” and family, as a direct result of his experiences as an evacuee he feels that somehow he is “still waiting to go home.”<sup>48</sup> This also extends to refugees and the psychological impact of being uprooted from family and friends. For many British evacuees, this is a direct result of the evacuation schemes failings in its organisation. Not only were these children removed from their parents at sometimes a very young age, but were often moved repeatedly between their home city and the reception area. This was often due to parents simply taking their offspring back home again, but there are cases of those whom ran away in search of their parents. Aside from the bureaucratic troubles this caused, (that is, official records of those in reception areas were often left without being updated if children moved back to the city) the psychological effects are easy to see. Evacuees often were simply denied the opportunity of settling in one place before being uprooted and moved, effectively removing their chances of forming lasting bonds with parental figures. This was also the case in Germany, although trauma of this type was not solely limited to those Germans involved in the Nazi evacuation scheme. Indeed, this trauma would manifest itself in refugees, of which there were millions across Europe at the final moments of the war. Some, such as Edith Warthold, walked hundreds of miles to escape the Russian advance. She had been evacuated to Dresden and walked two hundred kilometres back to her hometown of Breslau with her mother and five school friends. When they reached Breslau it was just as destroyed as Dresden.<sup>49</sup> Former war children affected by experiences such as this develop this inability to trust and rely on other people due to the knowledge as children they were under the constant threat of having their situations changed and

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<sup>48</sup> Jim Bartley, former evacuee. Taped interview. November 1996. Cited in Parsons, *“I’ll Take That One”*, p9

<sup>49</sup> Phil Robins, *Under Fire: Children Of The Second World War Tell Their Stories*, Scholastic Press, 2004, p260-261

people taken away from them. Also of note is the inability of some former evacuees to simply say goodbye; another trauma inflicted by the war. This again is most often caused by the uprooting and moving of them at a young age, usually between host and biological families in the case of the British experience. It is important to remember however that the traumas of the British evacuation are reflected in the German experience due to the similarities between them. This inability to say goodbye very much stems from the removal of parental and other familial figures in their lives at a young age. The regularity of this is also a factor; obviously some children were moved more than others. However, to form a mental link between the traumas of saying goodbye to parental figures, sometimes relived through the experience being repeated, and normality at such a young age is almost inevitably going to cause issues in later life. This was never really considered in the planning stages of either scheme however. The German experience concentrated on the removal of children from their parents to be brought up by the State with the British scheme being bureaucratic, ill-considered and without significant interest in the wellbeing of the individual.

## Chapter 5: Poly-trauma

### 5.1 Clusters of Trauma

Given the scale and inherent complexity of the issue, attempting to identify and rationalise war trauma is a monumental task. That is, libraries of books could be created from all the different individual stories and accounts people would be able to give. However, it is possible to draw some generalisations from this wealth of resources. Dr Peter Heidl explains that two elements of trauma suffered are fairly concurrent in stories. The most obvious is the actual witnessing of the effects of war; be it fleeing as a refugee, losing someone or the threat of being killed yourself. Whilst this often leaves the witness, be they child or not, often marked for life by what they have seen, Dr. Heidl discovered that rather than finding a single trauma with patients, a whole spectrum or “cluster” of traumas was more frequent and usual. These poly-traumas usually included some form of “primarily physical detriment” which could include such things as continued exposure to the cold and starvation.<sup>50</sup> These physical traumas had left a psychological mark on those young victims who experienced them and as such should be looked at within the same context as the more obvious trauma. Dr. Heidl evidences this kind of trauma by the case study of a patient who had suffered repeated bouts of depression throughout her life, with seemingly no cause or viable solution. After her revelation of being sheltered in a children’s home during the particularly harsh winter of 1944 to 1945, it became clearer that exposure to the cold had had a definite psychological effect on her. Coupled with the more psychological trauma of her father being held prisoner in Siberia, the trauma had permeated and

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<sup>50</sup> Heidl, *Splintered Innocence*, p71

persisted through her life remaining unrecognised and undiagnosed.<sup>51</sup> This particularly extreme case was treated by advising the patient to keep herself as warm as possible in an attempt to “thaw” out, thus relieving her depression and treating her trauma. With this in mind, the identification of war related trauma is further made more difficult by looking at what constitutes a trauma for the victim. Indeed, if one were to spend ones entire childhood surrounded by people being killed and suffering then it is not unusual for one to believe that this is normality; thus metaphorical goalposts of normality tend to be shifted by collective experience of horror. Due to this shift in perceiving what constitutes a normal existence, the denial of major suffering is common for many sufferers of war trauma in the post war years due to the widespread and all encompassing nature of the horrors around them. Often it is the case that denial of war trauma is countered by the belief that simply surviving compensated for the horrors witnessed, or even that those horrors were felt harder by others. Although surviving is admirable in light of the horrific events of the time, to downplay the possibility of war trauma due to ones own shifted perception of what could cause it endangers one’s psychological wellbeing. This is of even greater importance when considering the “primarily physical” type of trauma. This can be harder to recognise given that the witnessing of obvious horrors may not be present. The poly-trauma concept is thus highly valuable in recognising, diagnosing and treating war-related trauma.

## **5.2 Loss, Mourning and the Familial Structure**

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p15

Of the more obvious and frequent psychological traumas of war, loss unfortunately generally ranks as most common. Loss and bereavement of course go hand in hand with conflict such as war, although the Second World War highlights the problem of loss particularly well due to the sheer number of soldiers and civilians killed in it. In terms of soldiers being killed, removal of the father figure from the family structure would prove highly traumatic to the development of an entire generation across the world. The Third Reich's eventual reliance upon child soldiers demonstrates how hard the population was hit in terms of young men being killed in the conflict; the creation of the *Volkssturm* is proof enough of this.<sup>52</sup> This removal of father figures from war children's lives is significant in causing post war trauma for a number of reasons. The extra strain placed upon the remaining members of the family is perhaps the most immediately obvious problem here. Indeed, mothers living within the east of the Reich are a good example of this; many widows were so terrified without their spouse's protection against the Russian advance that they not only took their own lives, but that of their children as well.<sup>53</sup> For those mothers who did not take such drastic action, there were still the extra stresses of single parenthood in a country being rapidly destroyed. In this way, the loss of a father figure or other supporting male to a family unit could trigger an entire set of traumatic circumstances that are not immediately apparent. An example of this would be that the place of a child in the family unit would sometimes mutate, with children often being thrust into roles far more suited to those more mature than them. In effect, there could be a reversal of roles in that children would undertake the adult responsibility of looking after their psychologically stressed mother. The experiences of being a refugee or having your home bombed also forced children into a premature maturity. Nora S. remembers

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<sup>52</sup> *Nazism. 1919-45 Vol 4.* ed J.Noakes. University of Exeter Press. 1998, pp643-647

<sup>53</sup> Heintz, *Splintered Innocence*, p72

“walking through this inferno of rubble, picturing the bodies of the victims under the ruins.”<sup>54</sup> Thus the realities of war were pressed upon children. This burden of responsibility was “wholly inappropriate, given their age, and were too heavy for their small shoulders.”<sup>55</sup> This asymmetric family structure suffers the removal of the important catalytic force for development in children’s lives of the father, very much threatening their psychological wellbeing later in life. This was not limited to families however; Dr Heintl notes a woman’s explanation of how her formative years spent in an environment devoid of men had caused her to miss out “crucial social learning” involving the meeting of and becoming accustomed to the presence of the opposite sex.<sup>56</sup> Her father and most of the other men in her village were engaged in the fighting. Thus, in effect, many had to learn how the opposite sex worked in the years those who had survived the fighting returned home (although often psychologically traumatised themselves as will be discussed later). It is thus evident how, on a practical level, the reduction in father figures for German families (and of course families of other nationalities) produced some traumatic effects on the family unit as well as the psychological development of children. However, on a more personal and tragic level, the issue of mourning is also of huge significance. Dependent upon how significantly mentally developed the child is in comprehending the loss of a parent through war, trauma can develop in a number of ways. Commonly, the way in which a father was lost from the family unit had a resultant effect upon a child’s psychological development, especially true in light of the societal taboo in speaking about it in the post-war years. If a father were to be pronounced missing in action rather than as dead the process of mourning can be prolonged. Sometimes this can

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<sup>54</sup> Ulla Roberts, “War And Memory: The Long Shadows Of Childhood In Nazi Germany”, *Children in War*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Nov 2005), pp65-71

<sup>55</sup> Heintl, *Splintered Innocence*, p74

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p74

manifest itself as a decades-long period of unresolved bereavement. This anguish and obvious trauma of war can then unconsciously affect people as a poly-trauma, as in the case of the woman whom needed to ‘thaw out’; her father had been held prisoner in Siberia. This goes some way to supporting the theory of poly-trauma, with a trauma as severe as loss and bereavement often triggering a series of other traumas suffered by German children, as well as those whom had parents whose lives were taken by the conflict.

### **5.3 Generational Transmittal of Trauma**

The psychological damage that can be caused by war related trauma in the long-term, stemming from the loss of a parent physically, emotionally or both, should not be underestimated. Indeed, a number of scenarios can trigger a child to develop a feeling of being emotionally alone, be it the loss of one or both parents through their deaths or being so traumatised themselves that they can no longer provide the emotional nurture that children need. This lack in provision of emotional attachment and comfort can be quite common amongst those families where males did return from the conflict at the end of the war. Often these ex-servicemen were themselves so traumatised by their experiences that they had become shadows of their former selves. This psychological trauma simply prevented many in providing the emotional environment necessary for the correct and healthy development of their offspring, being so encased and trapped by their own mental anguish and suffering. This proved to have a devastating effect on many children still reeling from such traumas as being a refugee or having their lives destroyed by Allied bombs. The sense of anarchy was complete in Germany at this point and this registered with children, as evidenced by

those suffering deep emotional anxiety in relation to war for many years after. This lack in parental ability to provide the emotional stability necessary for healthy development leads to one of the most tragic aspects of the psychology of war children. The psychological trauma suffered by those parents whom could not provide the appropriate emotional environment for their children was often passed on and replicated in their offspring. This is understandable given the sometimes crippling anxiety and trauma suffered by the parents. However, the trauma of war passed from parent to child often stunted and maladjusted the child's healthy psychological development into adulthood. This suggests that war trauma is transgenerational and extends further than the end of conflict, or even the youngest generation to actually witness war.

A particularly persuasive example of this can be seen in the generation born after the end of both the war and its anarchic after-effects. This generation cannot be considered war children in the sense that they bore no direct witness to conflict themselves, nor to the trauma of trying to survive in a nation effectively destroyed and rapidly torn apart by Allied forces. There are numerous examples of people from this generation exhibiting symptoms of war trauma however. This is due to the unresolved issues and traumas being transmitted to them from their parents, years after the official end of the Second World War. The lack of psychological help available to the victims of war in the rubble of Germany effectively made it inevitable that war trauma would go untreated and passed on to another generation. It is a harsh reality indeed that successive generations of innocent children are subject to the exposure and sufferings of war trauma many years after the actual fighting has ended. Dr Heintz evidences such a case in which he recounts a patient who was born in the 1960's. Her

suffering was centred on the fact that she thought that “one day, a war might take everything away from her;” a common trauma exhibited by those who were refugees or caught up in Allied bombing raids. Through the exploration of her anxiety in this matter, it was discovered that both her parents had been traumatised by their experiences during the Second World War. Effectively, they had transmitted their trauma to her during her childhood through a “barrage” of their own fears and anxieties. This woman was thus subject to trauma long after the end of the war through the constant unresolved psychological issues exhibited by her parents. This lady may have been born at a point in German history often referred to as the “economic miracle,” but in terms of psychological help there was no such equivalent.<sup>57</sup> The emotional needs of an entire generation born long after the war have in many cases been left unmet due to the legacy of war and post-war trauma suffered by their parents.

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p77

## Chapter 6: War Children and Social Taboo

### 6.1 Recognising the Potential for Trauma in Young Children

As previously mentioned, the societal constraints on dialogue about the German war child experience have until fairly recently been so great as to effectively make it taboo. There are a variety of reasons for this. Annemarie Langfeld knows these constraints only too well. Even as a pensioner she still deeply misses her father, who was killed when she was just three years old. However, Annemarie's father was a Hitler Youth leader and later a soldier and so remembering and speaking of him became almost forbidden in post war Germany. The pain is still existent for Annemarie; that she knew her father for such a short time and that her children never had a grandfather. Her father, it was held, "had belonged to the Nazi's" and so Annemarie had to suppress her memories of him for almost her entire life.<sup>58</sup> Despite being only just three years old at the time, Annemarie still has images of her father stored in memory. This partially demonstrates another reason for the neglect in study and recognition in child war trauma until fairly recently. Dr. Helga Spranger offers the explanation that it was generally held that children were really too young to "realise what was going on."<sup>59</sup> This view is still held by many today, although Dr Spranger explains that is view is "utterly wrong."<sup>60</sup> Strong neurobiological evidence backs Dr. Spranger's view, with research showing that even very young children are capable of storing vast amounts of memories. These memories are not able to be consciously accessed as memories are when children mature, but rather form a key influence in a persons mental and psychological wellbeing often for the rest of their

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<sup>58</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.2, 2005

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* Dr. Helga Spranger interviewed.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* Dr. Helga Spranger interviewed.

lives. The research thus suggests that rather than being unaware of their surroundings, young children are actually very much attuned to their environments. The environment a child is placed in thus also has an important effect on his or her development. The underestimation of the adverse effects a traumatic environment can have on a child's development and later life is not confined to Germany however. Just as so many other things mirror the German experience, the effects of war upon children have been largely misjudged in Britain also. There are numerous accounts of very young children being evacuated and feeling extraordinarily "betrayed" and "rejected" by their parents.<sup>61</sup> For many, this sense of rejection would remain and tarnish the relationships children had with their parents forever. In this sense, when considering also the generational transmission of war trauma as discussed before, it is easy to see how this could impact on former evacuee's children and remain within a family structure. In essence, those children who witness war trauma at a very young age are just as likely to be psychologically affected by their experiences. Only in recent years with the new dialogue and recognition of the major effects of childhood war trauma has this been considered.

## **6.2 Changing Attitudes in Germany**

The failure of German society to reconcile itself effectively with its own past has led to huge debate in recent years. The issue of possible war trauma being present in those who had not been persecuted by Nazi ideology was largely overshadowed by revelations and events regarding events such as the holocaust and, to a certain degree, the guilt carried by many Germans in the post-war years for this (regardless of how

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<sup>61</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.2, 2005. Janet Kirwan interviewed.

involved they may have been). Certainly when academics began to broach the issue of war trauma suffered by those Germans who were not explicitly targeted by the Nazis there arose a lot of suspicion and ill feeling in the country. This exists to a certain extent currently, with the previously mentioned example of delegates of a conference upon war children in Germany receiving death threats. When Ulla Roberts published her work *'Starke Mütter, ferne Vater: Über Kriegsend und Nachkriegskindheit'* (Strong Mothers, Distant Fathers: Childhood during the War and Post-War years) she recalls that "many critics misunderstood my intentions when the project was published."<sup>62</sup> Other works by historians actively emphasizing the trauma and suffering inflicted on Germans have been met with equal suspicion and misunderstanding. Jörg Friedrich's book *'Der Brand'*, or The Fire was met with an enormous amount of publicity both in Germany and in the United Kingdom. The book almost goes so far as to brand Churchill a war criminal for his bombing campaigns in the closing months of the war. Friedrich argues that they served no real strategic purpose and resulted in nothing but the suffering and death of German civilians on a massive scale. A book such as this would have been unthinkable just a short number of years ago, demonstrating the changing attitudes in Germany towards this subject. Slowly the trauma of war suffered by so many Germans, sometimes for the entire length of their lives, is being recognised and treated.

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<sup>62</sup> Ulla Roberts, *War And Memory*, p65

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

Fifteen million babies were born in Germany between 1930 and 1945.<sup>63</sup> The horrific effects of war inflicted upon these children are, as with all wars involving the innocent, nothing short of criminal. Indeed, as put by Dr. Heintl, “There is one conclusion, which can be drawn firmly with respect to children in war time, be it victory or defeat: children tend to be the great losers overlooked by history.”<sup>64</sup> This is certainly the case when considering the plight of those children caught up in the conflict of the Second World War, be they German or not. As I have demonstrated, German children most certainly were not psychologically immune from war trauma, the Nazi regime and the horrific anarchy of the post war period. In reality, those Germans whose childhoods coincided with the Third Reich and immediate post war years were witness to horrors so great they have adversely affected many for their entire lives. Upon reading the personal testimony of so many German children there seems to be one overarching similarity that comes out; the sense that they had been lied to. This feeling of being deceived is especially traumatic when placed in context; everything that these children were taught, learnt and believed in was wrong and based on the ideology of a mass murderer. The scale and totality of the belief in the Nazi lie was so great as to inevitably leave lasting trauma on its victims. It is thus truly tragic that this crime against an entire generation has gone so unrecognised until relatively recently. Despite not being directly persecuted by the Nazi’s, ordinary German children were denied a normal childhood by a State maniacally obsessed with exercising complete control over its citizens, in both action and mind. Breitenau, for example, will forever stand as a permanent symbol of the sheer brutality of the Nazi

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<sup>63</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.2, 2005

<sup>64</sup> Heintl, *Splintered Innocence*, pX

regime towards its own children. The militaristic attitude cemented into the mindset of German youth through being constantly bombarded by party propaganda would eventually and tragically manifest itself in poorly armed adolescents attempting to defend the nation from advancing Allied armies as part of the doomed *Volkssturm*. The willingness of children to die for what they had been taught really illustrates clearly the crimes of the Third Reich in stripping away the innocence of a normal childhood in favour of creating soldiers. Children's pain did not ease at the capitulation of Germany to Allied forces either. Whilst they may have survived the fighting, a new set of problems faced them in the form of sheer physical survival. As put by Erich Kuby, people were now "forging paths through the ruins and the debris in the desperate search for the bare necessities of life."<sup>65</sup> The emotional toll of this period on all of Germany is still felt today. Indeed, this anarchy children were immediately confronted with at the official end of the war is really quite difficult to comprehend. Add to this the level of sexual violence inflicted upon the east German population by the Soviet Red army and it is not so hard to imagine that the psychological scars of these events will remain as trauma in the minds of many for years to come. Thus it becomes clearer the need for public dialogue on this issue, if only to provide some personal liberation to people from their trauma. This lack of an appropriate forum for those who suffer war trauma to talk about their experiences openly in the post war period has in many cases exacerbated their suffering. The difficulty for Germany in reconciling its own past and recognising ordinary German's as victims of war seems to stem historically from a sense of guilt in relation to the horrors of the Nazi regime. However, of utmost importance here surely is the realisation that the two issues can coexist, and to deny German children their status as

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<sup>65</sup> Erich Kuby, *The Russians And Berlin 1945*, Ballantine Books, 1969, p270

victims of the war is intensely cruel. When comparing two experiences of war for children, such as the German and British, obvious similarities in the types of trauma suffered can be seen. If it is accepted that British children were victims of war, then it is impossible not to extend this to German children in light of their plight. When nationality is removed from the equation, it is plain to see that all children affected by war are innocent victims. The way in which German and British society has chosen to deal with the issue of its children's wartime experiences is also fairly similar. That is, suppression of peoples stories in favour of "official historiography" deeming schemes such as the evacuation an unmitigated success.<sup>66</sup> In light of the countless personal testimony that now exists and is still growing, this view appears as it is; utterly ridiculous. The war child generation have almost reached retirement age now; a time where their trauma is harder to suppress in the same way that so many have since the end of the war. Dr. Heintl suggests that,

"Time as such does not heal all wounds, at least according to what I see. Actually these wounds can only heal when they are dressed properly. It is important to bring these subconscious traumatizations [sic] to the surface of consciousness before they can eventually heal."<sup>67</sup>

Without taking anything away from those who were persecuted by the Nazi's, in light of German children's plight and collective experience of trauma they, as all children affected by war, are thoroughly entitled to be labelled as victims of the Second World War. Truly they are a "generation struggling out of the darkness into the light."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.2, 2005

<sup>67</sup> Frontal 21 (For German television), Written by Karsten Deventer and Eva Schmitz, Edited by Jan Dottscharis. Film no.2, Peter Heintl interviewed.

<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Von Goethe

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