

The background features abstract geometric shapes. A dark blue triangle points downwards from the top left. A light blue triangle points upwards from the bottom left. The remaining space is white.

Conference Reports



In Search of the Migrant Child: Entangled Histories of Childhood Across Borders

Conference held September 19-21, 2022 at the University of California in Berkeley. Co-sponsored by the GHI Washington and its Pacific Regional Office at UC Berkeley, the Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Dresden, the University of Minnesota, the German Research Foundation (DFG), and the Free State of Saxony. Conveners: Sheer Ganor (University of Minnesota), Bettina Hitzer (Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Dresden), Friederike Kind-Kovács (Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Dresden), Swen Steinberg (GHI Washington). Participants: Natalia Aleksion (University of Florida), Ulf Brunnbauer (Regensburg University), Antoine Burgard (University of Manchester), John Connelly (University of California, Berkeley), Anca Cretu (Masaryk Institute, Prague/ERC Vienna), Jeroen Dewulf (University of California, Berkeley), Lauren Heidbrink (California State University), Laura Hobson Faure (Panthéon-Sorbonne University-Paris 1), Olga Gnydiuk (Central European University), Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Mahshid Mayar (Bielefeld University), Susanne Quitmann (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich), Thomas Lindenberger (Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies, Dresden), Chelsea Shields (University of California, Irvine), Kelly Condit-Shrestha (University of Minnesota), Sören Urbansky (Pacific Office of the GHI Washington), Nino Vallen (Pacific Office of the GHI Washington), Emma Wyse (Queen's University).

Just a few days after the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the German Children's Fund called for an overall governmental strategy in dealing with refugees, to be directed towards the well-being of the most vulnerable

¹ See Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk, “Kinderrechte von Kindern aus der Ukraine umfassend berücksichtigen,” <https://jugendhilfeportal.de/artikel/kinderrechte-von-kindern-aus-der-ukraine-umfassend-beruecksichtigen>, accessed November 22, 2022.

among them – that of the fleeing children. The “primacy of the best interests of the child in all decisions by the state and society and the right of children to promotion, protection and participation”¹ must be guaranteed, as must the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Child and Youth Welfare Act. Unaccompanied minors arriving in Germany were placed in state custody to protect them from potential abuse and exploitation. The children had as little influence on the decision of what was in their best interest as they did on the decision to leave their war-torn homeland in search of protection and safety.

When the conference “In Search of the Migrant Child” was planned, it was not foreseeable that the subject would in this very year become a dramatic experience within Europe. Viewing children not only as objects of state care, but also as subjects with their own migration experiences, and exploring historiographical possibilities for capturing their experiences, was the goal of the conference. The event kicked off with the presentation of Friederike Kind-Kovács’ 2022 book, *Budapest’s Children: Humanitarian Relief in the Aftermath of the Great War*, which was chaired and moderated by John Connelly. Kind-Kovács’ study, which reexamines transnational humanitarian aid for Budapest’s children after World War I, is a paradigmatic signpost for the conference’s most important approach to the history of childhood. It shows that childhood history is much more than the history of children. If one pursues it as the author and the conference participants did, histories of childhood also form global and political histories that provide important insights into the connection between war, flight, and violence in the twentieth century, both from the perspective of migrating minors and of national and international welfare providers.

After welcoming remarks by Simone Lässig and Thomas Lindenberger, Friederike Kind-Kovács and Swen Steinberg

highlighted the political dimension and social urgency of the topic. The current flight of now more than 1.5 million children from Ukraine, as well as the illegal forced deportation of an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 Ukrainian children to Russia, point to historical antecedents of forced migrations in which children and their bodies became governed objects. The organizers of the conference countered this depersonalization, which often still dominates the majority of sources and thus also the research approach, with a reversal of perspective that consistently placed children's experiences at the center of the investigation. How, the conference asked, did age shape the experiences of international migration? How were migrant children's bodies perceived, marked, and managed? What role did the migration context and the experience of migration itself play? And how should historians capture and uncover children's voices as well as their silences or potential losses?

In the first keynote lecture of the conference, Mahshid Mayar showed how migration itself was used to shape politics. Based on the example of the "American Geography Classrooms," she illustrated how children in the U.S. were taught about migration and the binary opposition of "home" and "homelessness." According to Mayar, American pupils in the late nineteenth century were often taught to associate migrants with diseases rather than learning about the reasons for and experiences of migrating children. Their placement in quarantine stations marked migrants as "others" and promoted a negative, but ultimately imagined notion of what a migrant was. In the discussion that followed, it was suggested that both the transitory quarantine spaces and the emotional worlds of the migrating children should be subjected to closer analysis.

The psychological and physical effects of childhood migration were also addressed in the presentations that followed. Friederike Kind-Kovács dealt with the evacuation of

unaccompanied children in the twentieth century and asked to what extent their forced separation – despite the underlying humanitarian motivation – had to be understood as a form of non-physical, invisible violence and was also experienced as such by the children. According to recent studies, children often suffered more from the separation from their primary caregivers than from the actual acts of war. According to Kind-Kovács, the reasons why physical well-being was nevertheless prioritized over emotional well-being must be critically historicized.

Bettina Hitzer looked at transnational adoptions in West Germany and asked whether the “unconditional” love that adoptive parents believed they were giving their adopted children should be understood as a form of neocolonial appropriation of a child from the Global South. The belief that their children’s non-white appearance had no meaning for them, that their love would be colorblind, had far-reaching consequences for the children, according to Hitzer. Not knowing their background but perceiving their non-white bodies as different as they grew older, the children lacked the opportunity to come to terms with their origins so that they would no longer feel exoticized and othered. Precisely because their otherness was seen as insignificant in the family, they lacked a space in which this otherness could have been talked about in a constructive way.

Chelsea Shields presented the history of social science studies of “racial knowledge” between the 1930s and 1960s in the British Caribbean, Europe, and the United States, drawing in part on the controversial 1956 “Moynihan Report” on Black poverty in the United States. In the report, Daniel Moynihan argued that the increase in Black single mothers was not due to a lack of jobs, but to dysfunctional traditions in “ghetto culture” that dated back to the time of slavery and discrimination that continued thereafter. According to Shields, this form of sociologically-constructed racial memorizing, which

was accompanied by a belief in the intra-familial inheritance of patterns of feeling, was causal in viewing children as carriers of these patterns and the resulting psychological dispositions. Significantly, the results of studies designed in this way were used to legitimize the rollback of welfare state policies; if the state could rely on these studies to claim that the behavior of poor children of color depended not on economic backgrounds but on cultural ones, then there would be no need for state funds to improve their circumstances.

In her presentation on the evacuation of children mainly from England to the British Dominions, Emma Wyse shed light on dimensions of state action that directly targeted the bodies of migrating minors. Only children of supposed “good parentage” were eligible for evacuation. They had to be British citizens by birth and pass a medical examination confirming their physical fitness. Their bodies were thus emblematic of perfect examples of the so-called “British race” and of the importance of British imperialism abroad. Surviving sources show, however, that children sought to evade this interpretive high ground over their bodies in multiple ways or failed to live up to the adult notions associated with it. Documents tell of children who were labeled “dirty,” “difficult,” or “perverted” because of, as Wyse showed, their perceived bodily disobedience regarding weight, sexual behavior, sexual deviance, and susceptibility to disease.

The presentation by Kelly Condit-Shrestha also focused on tensions in dealing with refugee minors, here using the example of U.S. debates in the interwar period. She presented the still little-known history of German Jewish refugee children who were at the center of the first major push by the U.S. towards large-scale adoption from abroad. These children, alternately referred to as refugees, immigrants, adoptees, and foster children, were to find refuge in the United States at a time when it was considered socially and politically unacceptable to advocate for adult immigration in light of

the global depression and increasingly isolationist foreign policy. Nevertheless, their planned admission, and especially the underlying Wagner-Rogers Act of 1939, ignited numerous controversies in which, Condit-Shrestha argued, sometimes-contradictory narratives about migrating children were linked to arguments about race, law, and labor.

Laura Hobson Faure addressed the history of Jewish children who migrated from occupied France to the United States in 1941-42. Situated at the little-explored interface between Holocaust Studies and Childhood Studies, she argued for thinking collectively about children's experiences of displacement and the Holocaust, and for examining the coping strategies of these two experiences in relation to children's agency. According to Hobson Faure, children were also, but not only, victims of displacement. They had their own agency, both on an individual and collective level, for example as part of a social group. This social context must be taken into account if one wants to better understand the coping strategies that children used to grapple with the reasons and consequences of migration.

Olga Gnydiuk, who analyzed the experiences of Ukrainian and Polish-Ukrainian children against the background of their re-migration by international organizations such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the International Refugee Organization (IRO), was also concerned with agency. Gnydiuk showed that children often tried to influence the decisions of the organizations and social workers about their re-migration, albeit with limited success. While some minors succeeded in emigrating to Canada, Australia, or the United States at their own request instead of returning to their home country, the wishes of other children were not considered. Referring to the trauma the children experienced due to forced deportation and war, Gnydiuk discussed how they were denied agency, particularly the ability to make rational decisions about their future.

Lauren Heidbrink, the conference's second keynote speaker, focused on the migration of indigenous people from Guatemala to the U.S. as a form of intergenerational caregiving, or a cultural elaboration of care resulting from decades of displacement. These young people's understanding of migration was both contextual – i.e., as a result of migration experiences transmitted by their families since Spanish colonialism and the armed conflicts between 1960-1996 – and relational – e.g., as a result of social and familial obligations to care for one another. Not infrequently, migration was perceived as an investment in the future well-being of one's family. Contrasting U.S. border protection regimes with anti-racist laws – such as Italy's "Zampa Law" – Heidbrink showed how the "Politics of the Possible" in the case of Guatemala helps young people envision a future in which all people would have the right to non-migration as well as the right to migrate.

The following presentation by Antoine Burgard focused on the notions of "truth" and "trust." Drawing on a dataset of 1,115 official forms filled out by caseworkers from the IRO, the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and other Jewish organizations that conducted interviews with young Holocaust survivors who entered Canada between 1947 and 1952, Burgard illustrated young refugees' efforts to create a coherent autobiographical narrative. He showed, however, that the narratives found in the files ultimately reflect the views of the caseworkers and thus suggest a "paper identity," which Burgard presented as an empirical and theoretical challenge for future research. How can historians recover the messiness of individual lives in a migration context that is often erased by political or administrative power structures? And how can historians also look at the emotions and representations of young migrants, the ways they make sense of their journey, their experiences of persecution and grief, or how they imagine their futures? Burgard critically evaluated the notion of agency in this context. After all, he said, the young refugees often traveled in a collective and

adult-dominated environment that provided little room for individual choices. Moreover, agency only became visible when young people disrupted or rebelled against power structures, while those who remained silent or conformed mostly were invisible.

Swen Steinberg also focused his presentation on underaged, unaccompanied refugees who fled Nazi persecution to North America in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Drawing on a rich body of source material collected at Columbia University's New York School of Social Work and elsewhere, Steinberg provided insight into both the transit situations of young refugees and the ways that people in transit themselves thought about this particular transitional group. Steinberg's presentation offered perspectives on early refugee research in the context of contemporary assimilation debates while emphasizing the role of children as mediators between different conceptions of childhood in their countries of origin as well as upon arrival. He showed the interesting insights that can be gained from researching strategies of knowledge acquisition as well as the translation and transformation of this knowledge into new settings. At the same time, Steinberg raised the question of when, by whom, and why the young migrants' knowledge was perceived at all, and what agency the children were actually able to develop on the basis of this experiential knowledge.

Susanne Quitmann raised important conceptual issues in her presentation, which was based on court transcripts from a criminal trial investigating the death of an abused migrant child. Using the example of 16-year-old George Green, who died in Ontario, Canada in November 1895, seven months after his arrival from Britain, Quitmann addressed the question of how the "voice" of children could be historically captured. Drawing on subaltern and childhood studies, Quitmann argued for including not only the narrative dimension but also the context, sound, and form of children's

verbal and nonverbal voices to analyze child migration programs, such as those that brought socially disadvantaged children from Britain to British settler colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The voices of these children, who were trained in private homes, farm schools, and orphanages to become farm workers and domestic servants, should be included, according to Quitmann, not as illustrative metaphors, but rather for their heuristic value. In this way, the focus would not be on moral framing – “giving” children a voice – nor on a fruitless search for authenticity, but on the multiple forms of sound and silence in the production, recording, archiving, and excavation of children’s voices. The compassionate notion of the weak and needy child, she argued, should be replaced by a historiographical attitude that understands children and childhood as a malleable, social, and complex categories.

Anca Cretu also dealt with the voices of children, which she reconstructed from diaries of former Italian-speaking refugee children. In their memoirs written decades later, these children, who were housed in refugee camps on Austro-Hungarian territory during the mass exodus after World War I, recalled above all the loss of their dignity due to the brutal camp conditions. The camps functioned both as an instrument for authorities to detain seemingly undesirable populations and to shape their bodies and minds into an “ideal” future citizenry, but the experiences of imprisonment, suffering, deprivation and misery prevailed in the adult voices of the camp inmates. Cretu was able to capture the gap between the state’s ambitions, which were motivated by welfare but instrumentalized the children in terms of cultural policy, and the actual well-being of the children.

Natalia Aleksion discussed the consequences that flight and expulsion could have for those who acted as helpers or rescuers of underage refugees. Using the example of surviving Jewish children and their non-Jewish caregivers in Poland,

she examined the complex web of bonds during wartime, separations in the postwar period, and expectations of financial compensation. Referring to letters sent by Polish rescuers to Jewish institutions – such as the JDC and the Central Committee of Jews in Poland – immediately after the Second World War, Aleksiu showed the ways in which their requests for financial and material support intertwined with loyalties and emotions. These letters, according to Aleksiu, reflected a strong emotional bond that sometimes developed between non-Jews and Jews, both adults and children, often leading to conflicts about whether to give the children away at all after the war ended. As Holocaust testimonies of non-biological kinship, the letters allow us to better understand the contours of gender roles in Jewish, non-Jewish, and surrogate families and to analyze the relationship between rescuers and rescued, a relationship marked by responsibility but also ambivalence.

The conference concluded with an instructive discussion on the strengths and limitations of its thematic and methodological approaches. Bettina Hitzer reflected on how results were influenced by the predominant concentration on the European and North American area as well as on the material and economic dimensions of child migration, which have so far received little attention. She also emphasized the visible and fruitful interconnection between the history of migration and the history of knowledge. In particular, questions of causalities, correlations, and interactions between policies of migration and different disciplinary knowledge about migration have to be further investigated and promise far-reaching new insights. From a theoretical and empirical perspective, the complexities of children's voices and agency remain challenging. At the same time, the aspect of physical and psychological violence to which migrating children were often exposed has to be an indispensable component of future research.

What would this research look like, Sheer Ganor added, if migration of unaccompanied minors were no longer seen as an exception but as the rule? The efforts of states to regulate, restrict, or enable migration, and the social and cultural effects of those efforts, will continue to shape our knowledge of childhood and migration. In this respect, Simone Lässig asked whether childhood history could also offer a lens through which to better examine global political, social, and economic issues. As the conference “In Search of the Migrant Child” and especially the closing discussion made clear, childhood history offers both constructive insights into the history of childhood and children and innovative perspectives on phenomena that are interwoven with or underlie childhood experiences related to migration, such as war, violence, and racism.

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