Yuliya von Saal

Forced Maturity: Children's Experiences under German Occupation in Belarus, 1941–1944

A story by Andrei Platonov, first published in 1946 as "Sem'ia Ivanova" ("The Family of Ivanov") in the literary magazine *Novyi mir,* recounts the soldier Ivanov's return from the front to his wife and two children, whom he has not seen for four years. His little daughter Nastia and his wife Liuba seem distant, and Ivanov barely recognizes his son Petrushka: The eleven-year-old concerns himself with the preparation of meals, issues orders and instructions on business matters, metes out praise and blame to his mother and sister, and even assigns tasks to his father. His self-assured and decisive manner is disturbing to Ivanov. Speaking to his wife, Ivanov blurts out reproachfully, "Just what kind of person has Petrushka turned into? He grumbles like an old man, but he's surely forgotten how to read."[1] Later, when the parents are talking at night, they begin to argue after Liuba admits to her husband that she has carried on a relationship with another man. Again, it is Petrushka who is listening and intervenes. He lectures his father, saying that other families have similar wartime experiences but handle them with humor. One just has to be able to overlook them and go on living, he says.

Platonov's story touches upon the phenomena of adultification and parentification, in addition to other signs of disintegration in Soviet families after the Second World War.[2] While adultification signifies a

1 Andrei Platonov, "Sem'ia Ivanova, Rasskaz," *Novyi mir*, no. 10–11 (1946): 97–108, here 103.

2 Platonov's realism was criticized in the Soviet Union as "sordid" and "slanderous." "In the whole world, there is no purer and healthier family than the Soviet one," a critic pointed out to the author in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on January 4, 1947. The story could not be published again until 1962, under the title "Vozvrashchenie" ("The Return"), but it remained largely forgotten and is less well known today than other works by Platonov, although the story was adapted in film in Russia the 1980s and 2000s.

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rapid process of maturation, parentification refers to a reversal of social roles between parents and their children. Parentified children may perform everyday tasks within the family system, such as taking care of younger siblings, working, and running the household, and/or they may take on the emotional responsibilities of another family member by providing advice, comfort, or protection and, in the process, set aside their own need for attention, security, and care.[3] The term and its associated theories, which come from the field of family psychology, began to be extensively developed and studied only in the 1980s, although psychoanalysts such as John Bowlby provided the earliest descriptions of such phenomenon in the 1950s.[4] It is all the more astonishing that the phenomena of adultification and parentification during the Second World War have thus far received relatively little attention in historical research.[5] In the context of the German-Soviet War,[6] which redefined the roles and responsibilities of numerous Soviet children, this gap in the scholarship is all the more striking.[7]

3 For a good overview of the concept of parentification, the history of its development, and its interdisciplinarity, see: Nancy D. Chase, "Parentification: An Overview of Theory, Research, and Societal Issues," in *Burdened Children: Theory, Research, and Treatment of Parentification*, ed. Nancy D. Chase (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999), 3–33.

4 John Bowlby is considered the originator of attachment theory, which posits a close connection between the mother's affection and the child's healthy psyche. In his works, he also discussed the problems of the parentification of children, which he termed "role reversal" and viewed as a cause of agoraphobia and depression. See the following German editions of works first published in the 1950s: Bowlby, *Frühe Bindung und kindliche Entwicklung*, 7th ed. (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 2016); Bowlby, *Verlust, Trauer und Depression* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 2006); Bowlby, *Trennung: Angst und Zorn*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 2018). For a summary of the essentials of his theory, see: Bowlby, *Bindung als sichere Basis. Grundlagen und Anwendung der Bindungstheorie* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 2018); Claudia Moisel, "Geschichte und Psychoanalyse. Zur Genese der Bindungstheorie von John Bowlby," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 65 (2017): 51–74. In the project "Bowlby Revisited. Eine Geschichte der Bindungstheorie im 20. Jahrhundert," Moisel examines the life and work of the psychoanalyst. More at: https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/250301533.

5 The elaborated exceptions focus mainly on children in Poland: Joanna Beata Michlic, ed., *Jewish Families in Europe. 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University 2017); Joanna Sliwa, *Jewish Childhood in Krakow: A Microhistory of the Holocaust* (London: Rutgers University, 2021).

6 The "German-Soviet War" is commonly used in German historiography, while Russian and Belarusian historiography speaks of the "Great Patriotic War." Following the former, I am using the term "German-Soviet War," with the "Eastern Front of the Second World War" in mind.

7 A single study of Stalingrad children by Russian historians offers a discussion of the problems caused by the blurring of age boundaries in wartime and the ensuing stress

Children of war often say that their childhood ended when the war began, and they grew up fast. By this they mean primarily the subjectively perceived disappearance of secure and safe environments and the ensuing redefinition of their own agency, culminating in a role reversal, as in the case of Petrushka. In his father's absence, Petrushka assumed the role of the male head of the family. The distortion of the generational order that Platonov observed, the blurring of the boundaries between adult and child, was indeed a formative experience for many war children throughout Europe.[8] As a result of their wartime experience, most of them perceived the world in a considerably more sophisticated way than their contemporaries who had grown up under normal circumstances. The war accelerated their process of maturation. War children had to "function" as adults and, in so doing, frequently had to take on the function of surrogate partner or parent. The changes were particularly profound wherever the destruction of sheltered childhood environments was all-embracing, as in ghettos or camps, and the previously applicable criteria for what was age-appropriate in childhood had lost their authority. The reframing of the category of "child" and the phenomena of adultification and parentification were observable, however, even when children were lucky enough to belong to the so-called majority society of persons who were not systematically persecuted. Indeed, in the Soviet Union, it was expected and demanded that children grow up quickly, conforming to the model of "Sacrificing Childhood."[9] In the interior of the country, many children as young as twelve worked on behalf of the military front on equal terms with adults instead of going to school.[10] The experience of losing childhood during wartime was so

for children. The study does not delve into conceptual details, however. Marina Ryblova et al., eds., *Detstvo i voina: Kul'tura povsednevnosti, mekhanizmy adaptatsii i praktiki vyzhivaniia detei v usloviiakh Velikoi otechestvennoi voiny (na materialakh Stalingradskoi bitvy)* (Volgograd: University Press, 2015). An approach to the topic is offered by Julie K. deGraffenried, *Sacrificing Childhood: Children and the Soviet State in the Great Patriotic War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014); Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

8 Hartmut Radebold, Gereon Heuft, and Insa Fooken, eds., *Kriegserfahrungen und deren Folgen aus psychohistorischer Perspektive* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2009); Hartmut Radebold, Werner Bohleber, and Jürgen Zinnecker, eds., *Transgenerationale Weitergabe kriegsbelasteter Kindheiten. Interdisziplinäre Studien zur Nachhaltigkeit historischer Erfahrungen über vier Generationen* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2008); Michlic, *Jewish Families in Europe*.

9 DeGraffenried, *Sacrificing Childhood*.

10 The directive issued by the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union in May 1942 lowered the official working age to fourteen for city dwellers and twelve

ubiquitous that it seemed commonplace, even normal, to many, and for decades, it was neither scrutinized nor discussed.

This essay examines the breakdown of the generational order, in the case of the occupied Socialist Soviet Republic of Belarus (BSSR), as defined by the Soviet-imposed borders of the time. There, a redefinition of childhood took place as a result of the standards set by the occupation society and the subjective experiences, actions, perceptions, and feelings of those affected, who are the focus of this analysis. All children were affected, although the dimensions of the imposed adultification and the intensity of the concomitant role reversal varied from person to person.

This essay cannot offer an exhaustive account of these developments, nor can it offer a comprehensive discussion of their effects on those concerned or on society more generally. Instead, it focuses on the ubiquity and ambiguities of these psychological phenomena among Soviet children in the BSSR. As such, these phenomena are understood not merely as potential handicaps and pathological conditions but also as "resources" for survival and mechanisms for coping with postwar trauma. Furthermore, the essay considers external forms of adultification and parentification, as well as their gender-specific characteristics, and discusses whether and how the generational order that was suspended during wartime was articulated in and problematized by Soviet society. Platonov's story, which after its initial publication in the literary magazine in 1946 was not allowed to be reprinted for some time, and the return to "postwar normality" frequently described by historians suggest, above all, a minimization or trivialization of the consequences of the phenomenon.

Since childhood is a social phenomenon and is historized differently depending on the time of study and society, any definition of a child and childhood is also relative. This means that childhood is not strongly linked to distinct and universal age phases but rather to structural characteristics that imply power relations. Accordingly, the definition of who is still a child and who is already an adult varies depending on time and the particular social and cultural context. Even though there are no universally valid criteria to distinguish children from adults, when I speak of children, I use the age limit of sixteen years old. In doing so, I follow a functional delimitation that results from the Soviet sources I worked

for farmers' children, orphans, and children on their own. See Olga Kucherenko, "State v. Danila Kuz'mich: Soviet Desertion Laws and Industrial Child Labor during World War II," *Russian Review*, no. 71 (July 2012): 391–412. Before the war, children were allowed to work starting at the age of sixteen, with some restrictions even from the age of fourteen.

with in the context of my research project.[11] The term "children" encompasses all minors, including Jewish children.

This article comes out of the research project "War Childhoods in Occupied Belarus (1941–1944): Experiences, Consequences, Remembrance", which is based on a wide variety of sources. In addition to contemporary first-person documents and official sources, almost one hundred interviews from various oral history projects, self-conducted interviews with survivors, and published and unpublished testimonies were analyzed. In the following, I cite only some of these sources and deal with only one aspect of wartime Soviet childhoods, which affected Jewish as well as non-Jewish children to varying degrees.

The Dissolution of the Generational Order during the War

After Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Belarus was completely conquered within two months. It remained occupied for three years. The western part (mostly consisting of the region annexed from Poland in 1939) of the country was fragmented and then—renamed the General Commissariat of Belorussia (GKW, Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien)—was incorporated into the Reich Commissariat Ostland (Reichskommissariat Ostland).[12] The eastern part of the country

11 In Soviet statistical compilations from the war and postwar period, adolescents under sixteen were usually referred to as children. I am guided by this age limit. Nevertheless, it is not the only definition and is, therefore, relative. For further information on the project, see: https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/en/research/ea/research/war-childhoods-in-occupied-belarus-1941-1944-experiences-consequences-remembrances.

12 Hitler's decree of July 17, 1941 placed the RK Ostland under the control of Reich Commissioner Hinrich Lohse, the governor and Gauleiter of Schleswig-Holstein, and subordinated it to Alfred Rosenberg, the head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories. Under German civil administration, around 2.5 million persons lived in an area of approximately 54,000 km² (20,850 square miles). The region around Hrodna went to the district of Białystok, which was annexed to East Prussia on August 1, 1941. The areas around Brėst and Pinsk were added to the Reichskommissariat Ukraine as parts of the GK Volhynia-Podolia. For more on the administrative partitioning of the occupied country and the history of the occupation see: Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrussland 1941–1944* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1998), 51–95; Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), 128–214; Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Munich: De Gruyter, 2008), 97 and the following pages.

remained under military administration. The entire region was supposed to become a colony of the Greater Germanic Reich of the German Nation someday.

Children never featured in the Nazi planning of *Blitzkrieg*. There were no concrete plans except for Himmler's megalomaniac ideas about the "sifting and screening of youth" for the purposes of Germanization, which he had first developed in connection with Poland.[13] The only consensus that existed, and the one that largely drove Nazi policy, concerned the notion of the extraction and colonization of the east, and the fear that a future local intelligentsia would develop. Consequently, at the beginning of the war, there were no plans for schooling, educational work, or training for children.

From the beginning of the occupation, however, the established administrative structures issued regulations that also applied to minors—thereby redefining the generational order in the context of official instructions and occupation practices. In the zone under military administration, the November 1941 regulation on labor obligations beginning at the age of fifteen fixed this age as the biological boundary between minors and adults.[14] In the GKW, the "labor service obligation" for male youths beginning at the end of their fourteenth year and for females at the end of their seventeenth year was one of the first measures introduced by Wilhelm Kube.[15] In reality, however, even children under fifteen years old were forced to work; thus a normative concept of childhood as a "sheltered phase" no longer existed. Even though individuals under fourteen years old ordinarily were registered as "children" in the statistics and records of the local administrative structures and the General Commissariat (for example, in institutional children's homes or orphanages), this age limit hardly played a practical role in everyday life for those living under occupation. For the Nazi occupiers, an individual's ability to work was the decisive criterion. During the second phase of the war, even ten-year-old children were deported to Germany as "workers" and treated as adults. "From the end of their tenth year, children are deemed fit for work," according to an internal designation of the Second

13 Helmut Krausnick, "Denkschrift Himmlers über die Behandlung der Fremdvölkischen im Osten (Mai 1940)," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 5, no. 2 (1957): 194–98.

14 Verwaltungsanordnung Nr. 10, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter BA-MA), RH 23/270.

15 "An die Bewohner Weissrutheniens!" *Amtsblatt des Generalkommissars für Weissruthenien*, no. 2 (1941): 6.

Army *(Armee-Oberkommando 2)* dated January 1944.[16] A further criterion was the occupiers' attribution of "racial biological" characteristics to children. The occupiers decided whether someone, as a "child of good race," would receive compassionate treatment.[17] Rather than biological age and generally applicable standards, external and arbitrarily subjective criteria governed the status of "child."

It is undisputed that "childhood" is a social construct created in the process of ongoing social ordering within a society and is, thus, subject to natural change.[18] Under the Nazi occupation, however, neither a new order nor a new definition of childhood was institutionalized by law or norms. Rather, a diffuse generational disorder arose and became an operational framework. This development affected above all the Jewish population, which was completely deprived of its rights. The killing of Jews began with the start of the war. As early as August 1941, the systematic mass extermination of Jews began, initially concentrated in the eastern parts of the country.[19] Age was relevant only for identification and categorization. The first directive in the Army Group Rear Area, dated July 7, 1941, required all Jews over the age of ten to wear a yellow Star of David on a white stripe at least 10 cm (3.9 inches) wide on the right sleeve of their clothing. Alternatively, they could wear a large yellow patch at

16 Armee-Oberkommando 2, O.Qu., Erfassung der Zivilbevölkerung, January 31, 1944, in Anlagenband VII, 1. Teil zum K.T.B. Nr. 11, BA-MA RH 24-56/341, 54–55, here 54. On the forced labor of children, see: Johannes-Dieter Steinert, *Deportation und Zwangsarbeit. Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa 1939–1945* (Essen: Klartext, 2013).

17 Many witness reports indicate that children classified as "Aryan" were deported for Germanization. The history of the abduction of children from Soviet territories has not been researched, however, because of the lack of sources. For general information on the subject of child abduction, see: Isabel Heinemann, *Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut. Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003).

18 On the concept of childhood, see: Allison James and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London: Falmer, 1997); Michael-Sebastian Honig, *Entwurf einer Theorie der Kindheit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1999*);* Michael-Sebastian Honig, *Ordnungen der Kindheit. Problemstellungen und Perspektiven der Kindheitsforschung* (Weinheim: Juventa, 2009). An excellent historical overview is offered by Martina Winkler, *Kindheitsgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

19 For a general overview, see: Bert Hoppe and Hildrun Glass, eds., *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, vol. 7: *Sowjetunion mit annektierten Gebieten I. Besetzte sowjetische Gebiete unter deutscher Militärverwaltung, Baltikum und Transnistrien* (München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2011), and especially the introduction to the volume.

least 10 cm wide on their sleeve.[20] This rule enabled many younger children to move about unnoticed outside a ghetto. Being a child, however, offered no protection; quite the reverse. While a number of Jewish skilled workers in the GKW were allowed to go on living until 1943, the Nazis proceeded to murder Jewish women and children as early as 1941. No effort was spared in the attempt to seek out Jewish children in orphanages and shoot them.[21]

Maturation as a Compulsory Experience for Jewish Children and Adolescents: Resources and Limits of Adultification

The vulnerability of children did not inevitably give rise to passivity. Indeed, their vulnerability could even be converted into a "resource." Children had behavioral options and adaptation practices that adults lacked. Maria Hochberg-Mariańska, the Central Jewish Historical Commission staff member who conducted the first interviews with underage Holocaust survivors in liberated Poland, was one of the first to describe this paradox. In the source volume *The Children Accuse* published in 1946, she put on record her observation that children had been "tougher and more resourceful," exhibiting greater physical resilience and quick-wittedness than adults.[22] Children, she argued, had shown more will to survive and sometimes had also been more capable of survival than adults. Whereas adults were quicker to give up hope and surrender to their fate, some children seemed to develop diametrically opposite powers of resistance. Additionally, children are curious and flexible by nature. These characteristics alone helped them learn—faster than adults—to "organize things," put on a false front, lie, or steal. They were able to leave a ghetto unnoticed, pass through checkpoints or roadblocks, escape from the group,

20 Verwaltungsanordnungen Nr. 1, BA-MA, RH 23/270, here 3. The forms of marking and age limits varied. In Gomel', Jews had to sew yellow squares onto both sleeves of their clothing; in the small town of Kublichi (Kublichy), the letter "Z" was sewed; in many other towns, Jews had to wear white armbands and/or mark their houses with the Star of David. See: Gennadii Vinnitsa, *Kholokost na okkupirovanoi territorii vostochnoi Belorussii v 1941-1944 godakh* (Minsk: Kovcheg, 2014), 199 and following pages.

21 On the occupation and the Holocaust, see standard works by Gerlach and Chiari as well as *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, vols. 7 and 8 (Munich and Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2011, 2016).

22 Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds., *The Children Accuse* (London: Mitchell, 1996), xviii.

and find places to hide. The Jewish Belarusian historian Leonid Smilovitskii speaks of a "survival mechanism" that was reactivated in children in wartime conditions.[23] Jewish children who were condemned to death proved less passive than previously assumed, as recent studies on Jewish children in Poland have shown.[24] Anika Walke also demonstrates that adolescents in the Minsk ghetto had been "the most vulnerable and the most resourceful group within the ghetto."[25] The status of "child" generally meant death, but it was children and adolescents who also found it easier to elude an extermination operation and locate a hiding place. Children were usually the ones who took up adults' roles and procured food or medicine for other family members. As girls might be subjected to sexual violence, it was primarily male youths who performed these procurement tasks. In the meantime, the role of head of the family fell, unsought, to young sons or brothers, often when their parents were no longer alive and they were forced to assume responsibility for their younger siblings.

Examples of this imposed role change for children are numerous. Six-year-old Maia Krapina, who was in the Minsk ghetto with her mother, grandfather, two little sisters, and ten-year-old brother Iosif, was rarely allowed to leave the ghetto.[26] Her brother, however, was constantly on the move outside the ghetto and occasionally provided the family with food. After his mother died, Iosif completely assumed the role of head of the family and did so in full awareness of what this entailed—at least, this is how he describes it in his memoirs: "Now I was forced to obtain something to eat. I left the ghetto to go out and beg. [. . .] Sometimes I went to the Cherven market and bought a bucketful of potatoes there, which I then resold in the ghetto. [. . .] Then I started going far away from the city to the villages and didn't come back until late in the

23 Leonid Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii 1941-1944* (Tel Aviv: Biblioteka Matveia Chernogo, 2000); Leonid Smilovitskii, "Voina, otrazhennaia v detskom soznanii. Perepiska evreiskikh detei so svoimi roditeliami, voennosluzhashchimi Krasnoi armii v gody sovetsko-germanskoi voiny 1941–1945gg.," *Wschód Europy* 1, no. 3 (2017), 217–76.

24 Michlic, *Jewish Families in Europe*, and Slowa, *Jewish Childhood in Krakow*. See also the pioneering study by Deborah Dwork: Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

25 Anika Walke, "Jewish Youth in the Minsk Ghetto: How Age and Gender Mattered," *Kritika–Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 3 (2014): 535–62.

26 Maia Krapina, interview by author in Minsk, August 30, 2016. Many girls were not even allowed to leave the building in which they lived with other families in crowded conditions. See also: Alla Rakovshchik, Visual History Archive—USC Shoah Foundation Institute (hereinafter VHA), Interview Code 36510.

evening."[27] A similar practice can be observed in the other ghettos of the occupied BSSR.[28] Other children signed up as "fit for work" or as skilled craftsmen so they could leave the ghetto in a work gang and support the family with the food they received as payment.[29] Children's flexible role identity, i. e., their ability to adapt, was one of the central resources for the survival of entire families.

But even without taking on an active role in the family, children had to abandon the light-heartedness of their youth and grow up fast. Vladimir Trachtenberg, a survivor of the Minsk ghetto, had to master "everyday life" all on his own when he was just three/four years old because his mother was out working with other adults. When I asked whether he remembered "everyday life" in the ghetto and what it consisted of, he replied that he spent the whole time looking for hiding places and food. He knew many places to hide, he said, and could sit there, silently, for hours on end; he knew exactly how to play dead, how to get dressed on his own, with lightning speed, at any time of day or night.[30] Most small children, out of fear, probably developed similar behaviors that were uncharacteristic for their age. Berta Malomed, who was also held in the Minsk ghetto, writes in her memoirs that small children understood everything incredibly quickly and very seldom cried. "No screaming of children was heard. They sat meekly, there was no need to explain anything to them. They understood everything, did not ask for food. They knew: if there's something to eat, then they'll get it."[31] The freedom and playfulness of childhood was brutally replaced by existential knowledge of how they had to behave, what to do and what not to do, and by concern for family members.

To survive the Holocaust, children developed amazing powers of action and autonomy at which they themselves marveled decades later. Ten-year-old Kagan Zalmanovich managed to escape shortly before the

27 Vospominaniia Levina Iosifa Isaakovicha, 1931, Belaruski dziarzhaŭny arkhiŭ-muzei litaratury i mastatstva, BDAMLM (Belarusian State Archive and Museum for Literature and Art), f. 490, vop. 1b, spr. 194, 32–36; Maia Levina-Krapina, *Trizhdy rozhdennaia. Vospominaniia byvshei uznitsy minskogo getto* (Minsk: Zmitser Kolas, 2008), 6.

28 According to Iurii Tsaretskii in Mihail Rywkin (Mikhail Ryvkin) and Arkadij Schulman (Arkadii Shul'man), *Chronik der furchtbaren Tage: die Tragödie des Witebsker Gettos* (Minsk: Medisont, 2007), 75–76.

29 According to Savelii Kaplinskii in Vladimir Levin and David Mel'tser, eds., *Chernaia kniga s krasnymi stranitsami (Tragediia i geroizm evreev Belorussii)* (Baltimore: Vestnik, 1996), 202–3.

30 Vladimir Trachtenberg (b. 1938), interview by author in Minsk, September 3, 2017.

31 Berta Malomed, "Menia rasstreliali 2 marta 1942 goda. . .," in *Vyzhit'—podvig*, ed. Inna Gerasimova and Viacheslav Selemenev (Minsk: NARB, 2008), 70–114, here 83.

extermination of the Jews in the Rahachoŭ ghetto. In appearance, he resembled a Belarusian village boy and, thus, was able to survive the war. Nonetheless, today he is astonished by his behavior back then: "I was just twelve years old but already had to make serious adult decisions. Now, many years later, [. . .] I don't understand how I succeeded in doing all that."[32] Due to the genocidal policies that the German occupiers directed at Jews, only very few Jewish children and adolescents survived the occupation in the region.[33]

Children and Adolescents from the Majority Society

The distortions of the generational order were extreme in the case of Jews condemned to death. Concepts such as "child" and "adolescent" lost their meaning. In order to survive, however, almost all children in the occupied territories had to "function" as adults. Still, the lives of non-Jewish children were undoubtedly shaped by a lesser degree of brutality. They were neither confined into ghettos nor were they systematically killed. In some places, especially in the western part of the country, the "sheltered environments" of childhood such as schools and kindergartens even continued to exist. Non-Jewish orphans were allowed to remain in institutional children's homes, whereas orphaned Jewish children were separated from their peer group and murdered.[34]

However, non-Jewish children were subject to role changes and underwent an accelerated process of maturation as well. While fathers were mobilized for Red Army service after the onset of war, children stayed behind with their siblings and mothers and were confronted daily with hunger, wartime atrocities, and violence. Many state today that they lost

32 Leonid Rubinshtein, ed., *Deti voiny* (Minsk: Medisont, 2015), 25.

33 It is no longer possible to determine exactly how many there were because survival in many cases involved the loss of Jewish identity, and in postwar Soviet society, Jewish victims were not counted. The number of children killed also cannot be precisely determined. The data on the total number of Jewish victims varies widely. The Belarusian-Israeli historian Leonid Smilovitskii sets the total number of murdered Jews in Belarus by the end of the war in 1944 at a minimum of 800,000, whereas Franziska Exeler, in her recently published study, gives an estimate of 500,000 to 671,000. Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev*, 29 and the following pages; Franziska Exeler, *Ghosts of War: Nazi Occupation and Its Aftermath in Soviet Belarus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2022), 250.

34 Yuliya von Saal, "Mehr als Opfer. Kriegskinder und ihr Überleben in den Kinderheimen im besetzten Belarus," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 68, nos. 3–4 (2020): 403–31.

their "childhood" the first time they saw dead bodies or the act of killing itself.[35] In many recollections, early traumatic experiences such as death or separation from parents mark the boundary between their prewar "happy" childhood and their wartime childhood. Most frequently, the phase of imposed transition to adulthood is connected with the burden of responsibility for oneself and other family members and the need to make decisions and undertake physical labor.

Experiences of hard physical labor and the feeling of having been robbed of a childhood are expressed in almost all the oral and written accounts. Even children who retained both parents were forced to move into the roles of adults or caregivers. The parents of Arkadii Osipuk, for example, regularly went out in partisan areas in order to obtain food and other necessities while he, a nine-year-old child, stayed home alone with his little sister for one or two weeks at a time. Every day, he said, he chopped wood, heated the stove, and cooked meals all by himself. There was more to his adult role, however. Like many other children, he equipped himself with a pot and tried his luck at the German soup kitchens. If he got a ladleful of soup, he took it home to share with the others.[36] The historical records even include reports by adults that emphasize that their survival as a family was possible solely thanks to the actions of children, who went regularly to German soup kitchens and carried out minor tasks there.[37]

Children were needed by their parents in the household, for work in the fields, and for the harvest, and they also were sent out to search for food and work.[38] Small children mostly looked after the livestock, and girls undertook the "rearing" of their younger siblings and performed

35 According to Vasilii Boikachev in S. Papara and L. Gramovich, eds., *Dzetsi vainy. Kniha narodnai pamiatsi* (Minsk: Iunatstva, 1993), 33.

36 E. Borshchevskaia et al., eds., *Deti voiny* (Vitsebsk: Nash dom, 2009), 82.

37 See: Iaukhim Kipel' (Jauchim Kipel), *Epizody* (Minsk: Limaryus, 2013), 200.

38 The use of children in the household was often the reason parents gave for not allowing their children to attend school. By the same token, the Germans used schoolchildren for various tasks such as clearing snow, cleaning the streets, and helping with the harvest. See for example: Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht Einsatzgruppe B vom 1. 9. 1942 für die Zeit vom 16.8.–31. 8. 1942, in *Die "Ereignismeldungen UdSSR" 1941. Dokumente der Einsatzgruppen in der Sowjetunion, I,* ed. Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Andrey Angrick, Jürgen Matthäus, and Martin Cüppers (Darmstadt: WBG, 2011), 381–405, here 391; Spravazdacha inspektara Narodnai As'vety menskaha pavetu za 1942–1943 navuch god. Dziarzhaŭny arkhiŭ Minskai voblastsi, DAMV (Belarusian State Archive of Minsker Region), f. 623, vop. 1, spr. 484, st. 10–11; testimony of Regina Kazenko in Papara, *Dzetsi vainy,* 105–14. Some children preferred work to a German school. See: Uladzimir Kisialiou, *Askolki paranenai pamiatsi. Autabiiagrafichnaia apovests'* (Minsk: Khursik, 2004), 61.

household chores.[39] Male adolescents often worked as shoeshine boys, baggage porters, newsboys, or peddlers in the markets. The Belarusian lyric poet Larysa Heniiush, who came to Minsk in June 1944, was so appalled by the sight of the many children at the train station offering their services as rickshaw drivers that she called what she had seen "utter barbarism."[40] What Geniiush perceived as barbarism, and German government agencies and Einsatzgruppen interpreted in their reports as vagrancy and banditry—without revealing the underlying causes—was the fight for survival by orphans or children earning extra income for their family members at home.[41] It is striking that a gender division of labor was retained in all the upheaval: girls were expected to assume typical women's roles, whereas boys were more likely to perform physical labor and take on the appearance and manner of grown men (see Figure 1).

The disappearance of the notion of childhood as a protected period of development was a widespread experience during the war. It can be observed not only in photographs but also in egodocuments and interviews with contemporary witnesses, official documents, and in literature in which various aspects of premature maturation of minors were problematized. It should be noted that for many children in the Soviet Union, these experiences were not very new. The myth of the happy and protected Soviet childhood ran up against the harsh reality precisely in the Soviet Union's rural regions, of which the BSSR was one.[42] In these areas,

39 See the testimonies in the collective volume edited by Papara: *Dzetsi vainy*, here testimony of Zoia Nazarova, 63–74; Borshchevskaia, *Deti voiny*, here testimony of Mariia Dulinets, 34.

40 Larysa Heniiush, *Spovedz'* (Minsk, 1993), 87. Geniiush spent the entire war in exile in Prague, and as a lyric poet with a strong sense of national identity and an associate of the exiled Rada of the Belarusian People's Republic established in 1918, she was forced to serve as a delegate to the so-called Second Belarusian National Assembly on June 27, 1944, only a few days before the city was retaken by the Red Army.

41 According to Vadim Vorob'ev (b. 1929), who worked as a newsboy and baggage porter, among other things, at the train station in Brest. Vadim Vorob'ev, Vospominaniia ob uchastii v deiatel'nosti Brestskoi podpol'noi partiino-komsomol'skoi organizatsii, 250 pp., dated April 26, 1974 (held by the archive of Brestski ablasny kraiaznauchy muzei/Brest Local History Museum), here 20 and the following pages. On neglected and parentless children, see the reminiscences of Kim Sokolovskii and Volodia Sokolovskii, *Detskii dom v tylu vraga* (Minsk: Belarus, 2008); see also testimonies in the collective volume edited by Papara: *Dzetsi vainy*, here the testimony of Zoia Nazarova, 63–74.

42 Along with the teaching of literacy skills and the promotion of the Belarusification of the country, there was an enormous push for industrialization and the associated

childhood was shaped by poverty, physical labor, violence, and the loss of parents (as a result of Stalinist repression). The prewar childhoods of most children were not "modern" and "happy" in terms of the Soviet notion of progress, nor were they easy and passive.

While many children could draw on their prewar experience of everyday life as defined by physical labor, and quite a few of them were already familiar with exclusion, the utter vulnerability caused by the occupiers' war of extermination was undoubtedly new. The psychological stress was especially great for those children who had to take the place of mothers for their younger siblings. That was most notably the case in the Nazi camps located in the eastern part of the country, where entire families were interned as of 1943.[43] There, many children were subject to the high expectations of their family members, who asked too much of them psychologically and physically. Like Jewish children in the ghettos, only children and adolescents could crawl under the fence surrounding the camp in order to find food for the adults and younger children who remained imprisoned. Nina Rusachenko, in her notes from the Slutsk prisoner-of-war camp, described the pressure she felt on such occasions:[44] She regularly left the camp, she said, to beg in the villages nearby.

urbanization. As a result, at the end of the 1930s, 24.6 percent of the population lived in the large cities of Minsk, Vitsebsk, Homel', Mahilioŭ, and Babruisk. Most of the country, however, remained rural. In the Kresy region, the urban population barely reached 12 percent in 1939. See Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 39; Pavel Tereshkovich, "The Belarusian Road to Modernity," *International Journal of Sociology* 31, no. 3 (2001): 78–93, here 83.

43 Research on the civilian population in camps that were converted from POW camps to civilian prisoner camps as of 1943 is largely nonexistent. I base my remarks here on my own research project "War Childhoods in Occupied Belarus (1941-1944): Experiences, Consequences, Remembrances," which focuses on children's experiences under German occupation and is affiliated to the Leibniz Institute for the Contemporary History in Munich. For more on the project, see: https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/en/research/ea/research/war-childhoods-in-occupied-belarus-1941-1944-experiences-consequences-remembrances. See also: Yuliya von Saal, "'Bandenkinder': Kinderlager im Spiegel der Quellen und Erinnerungen der Überlebenden im besetzten Belarus," in *Kindheiten im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Francesca Weil, André Postert, and Alfons Kenkmann (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2018), 411–29.

44 The report does not indicate which camp Nina Rusachenko was in or for how long. According to her account, they first entered the camp in 1943 and were interned there for only a short time. In Slutsk between 1941 and 1944, there was at least one camp for POWs and the civilian population, one camp for refugees, and one prison. See: Vladimir Adamushko et al., eds., *Handbuch der Haftstätten für Zivilbevölkerung auf dem besetzten Territorium Weißrusslands 1941–1944* (Minsk: Gosudarstvennyĭ Komitet po archivam i deloproizvodstvu Respubliki Belarus'

Figure 1: Minor baggage porters waiting on the main square in Vitsebsk (Russian/English: Vitebsk) for the work (Source: Vitsebsk Regional Museum of Local History)

Sometimes, she returned empty-handed and beaten by the police until she bled, while her mother and brother, suffering from hunger, looked at her "in silent hope."[45] Performing a similar role as caregiver, fourteen-year-old Valentina Belova looked after her sick nine-year-old nephew in the Russian camp in Idritsa.[46] She supplied him with food and, because

2001), 132. See also: http://nasledie-sluck.by/ru/sluchina/historical_dates/6259/; and Geoffrey P. Megargee, Rüdiger Overmans, and Wolfgang Vogt, eds., *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945,* vol. IV, *Camps and Other Detention Facilities under the German Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Indiana University Press 2022), 333, 365–66.

45 Borshchevskaia, *Deti voiny*, 102.

46 Evidently this was Dulag (*Durchgangslager*; transit camp) 150. Originally established in Poland, it was transferred to Idritsa in the autumn of 1941 and was not closed until September 20, 1943. See: *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 89.

he could no longer walk, carried him when they were sent on a forced march to Lithuania.[47] If parents were no longer alive or nearby, older siblings assumed responsibility for little ones. The dependent relationships arising from this situation could be both psychologically and physically burdensome.

Self-perception and Habitus

The children's sources contain numerous statements about the burden of responsibility, which was simultaneously accompanied by helplessness. It is striking that, looking back, the survivors do not describe themselves as "children" but rather as "adults," in accordance with their assumed roles. Vladimir Trachtenberg, who escaped from the Minsk ghetto at the age of five in the autumn of 1943, asserted in an interview that he was already a "grown man."[48] Ten-year-old Kagan Zalmanovich, who escaped from Rahachoŭ and was given shelter by a farmer's wife, herself the mother of three children, describes his position there as that of the "only man in the household." He took on the burden of all the household work.[49] Twelve-year-old Petr Shnitko, in his postwar reminiscences, also describes his position as "head of the family." When the war began, he said, his father joined the partisans, leaving Petr, his mother, and two small siblings behind at home. From then on, it was his job to live in anticipation, stockpiling goods for periods of shortage or emergency. In the forest, he dug large holes in which he concealed food supplies and clothing.[50]

Today, a large number of Soviet war children assert that even at the age of five or six, they were "a man," "grown up," "independent," "self-reliant," and "serious." They describe this development as something for which there was no alternative.[51] Admittedly, such a self-perception can be deconstructed by reasoning that it derives from an ex post facto perspective.

47 Valentina and her nephew were able to find shelter with a Lithuanian family temporarily. Later on, they were taken to Germany in a transport but managed to escape. Only after liberation by the Red Army and the placement of her nephew in an orphanage did Valentina end her role as surrogate mother for the boy. Valentina Belova (b. 1929), interview by author in Moscow, July 3, 2017.

48 Vladimir Trachtenberg, interview by author in Minsk, September 3, 2017.

49 Rubinshtein, *Deti voiny*, 26.

50 Dziarzhaŭny arkhiŭ Vitsebskai voblastsi, DAVV (State archive of Vitsebsk Region), f. 9742, vop. 2, spr. 36, 1–13.

51 Krinko, *Detstvo i voina*; Nadezhda Romanenko, *My rodom iz detstva, voennogo detstva* (Kamyshin: Kamyshin, 2003). See also the numerous interviews with survivors in the VHA: for example, Boris Ozerskii, 1936, Interview Code 37356.

Yet this interpretation does not alter the fact that children actually functioned as adults. The reversal of the generational order and the lowering of the age boundary between adulthood and childhood meant that boys as young as thirteen or fourteen were already regarded as "men" or "guys," and girls as "women." Children adopted the habitus, the appearance, and the language of adults. This was especially true of Jewish children, whose relationships with each other consisted of sharing what they knew about obtaining food, hiding places, and pogroms.

As mentioned previously, children also learned very quickly to suppress their emotions and rarely cried. Many children became emotionally "numb" in wartime—one of the typical symptoms of destructive parentification and traumatization. When speaking about it, they themselves use the corresponding vocabulary and imagery.[52] They were serious and vigilant. Jewish children in particular, as well as those in institutional children's homes, were characterized by a strongly pronounced seriousness and sternness. Many, looking back, describe this state of mind as a kind of "apathy" that was reinforced by malnutrition and illness.[53]

War children also practiced a coarse style of speech, smoked, drank alcohol, and, of necessity, usually wore oversized clothing. Iakov Kravchinskii started smoking in the Minsk ghetto at the age of eight, he said. Like most of the other boys, he smoked at that age to suppress the pangs of constant hunger.[54] Additionally, some memoirs, communications of the Einsatzgruppen, and Soviet and contemporary sources such as diaries contain indications that drinking alcohol was not unusual among minors.[55]

52 Kazenko speaks of "numbness" and refers to her postwar life as a "thawing out." In addition, she says she was used to looking at herself askance. Papara, *Dzetsi vainy*, 105–14.

53 See for example: the interview with Vladimir Sverdlov, Interview za013, 15. 9. 2005, Das Interview-Archiv "Zwangsarbeit 1939–1945."

54 Iakov Kravchinskii (b. 1933), interview by author in Minsk, August 30, 2017. The image of children smoking can be found in many photographs taken by Wehrmacht soldiers and in the press. On the photos, see: BA (Bundesarchiv), Bestand 101, Propagandakompanien der Wehrmacht.

55 Marat Kuznetsov writes that he was given his first moonshine for Christmas, at the age of eleven. *Eto tozhe nasha istoriia*, 227. See also: Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht Einsatzgruppe B vom 1. 9. 1942 für die Zeit vom 16.8.–31. 8. 1942, in *Die "Ereignismeldungen UdSSR" 1941*. A further source is a report by the organization Belarusian People's Self-Assistance (BNS, Belaruskaia narodnaia samapomach) dated December 13, 1941. It contains information about the forcing open of German storage facilities by institutionalized children, who stole alcohol and cigarettes. The report does not indicate, however, whether they sold the stolen goods on the black market or consumed them. The report noted that there were many such instances. Natsyianal'ny arkhiŭ Rèspubliki Belarus', NARB (National Archive of Belarus), f. 384, vop. 1, spr. 11, 1.

Among neglected male adolescents and minors in institutional homes for children, alcohol was much in demand—and after the war, it was a problem. A report on the situation in institutional children's homes in the Vitsebsk region states that institutionalized children stole things in order to trade them for vodka; moreover, institutionalized children were encountered in a drunken state.[56]

A further consequence of the distorted social and generational order was the sexual precocity of the adolescents and the increased incidence of sexually transmitted infections among them. Soviet postwar reports show a marked spread of sexually transmitted diseases between children living in orphanages. For example, in two children's homes in the city of Hrodna, up to thirty-six children under the age of fourteen were infected with gonorrhea in 1946.[57] At a meeting of the Central Committee of the Komsomol in November 1945, issues of precocity, coarsening behaviors, and widespread venereal disease were openly discussed. It was alleged that youths, starting at the age of twelve, drank alcohol on a regular basis and kept company with girls; beginning at the age of fourteen, many became sexual surrogates for absent men. In some rural areas, it was said, adolescents lived together with grown women.[58] This observation was very likely not the only one of its kind given that it was discussed openly at the party level. Furthermore, it indicates that adults, too, viewed adultified children as mature individuals and treated them as such.

For these reasons, in 1944, Soviet artists, writers, and filmmakers seriously debated which films and literary works were appropriate for the war children who, despite their young age, had become adults as a result of their experiences of violence. One filmmaker contended that "war children" should not be treated as children or adolescents according to a traditional understanding of the concepts because they were effectively "grown-up persons" at the age of thirteen or fourteen.[59] Ultimately, the suspended generational order was reflected in films and in literature, as in the story by Platonov described at the beginning of this essay. Similarly, the orphaned underage hero in a poem by Sergei Mikhalkov is given

56 See: Spravka o sostoianii detskikh domov vitebskoi oblasti, 22. 8. 1946, NARB, f. 4p, vop. 17, spr. 51, 54–61.

57 CK KP(b)Belorussii tovarishchu Ponomarenko P. K. o sostojanii ustroistva deteisirot po respublike, NARB, f. 4p, vop. 17, spr. 51, 66–81, 75.

58 See: Record of the meeting in RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), f. M1., op. 2, d. 234, here 175–76. See also: Set Bernstein (Seth Bernstein), *Vospitannye pri Staline. Komsomol'tsy i zashchita sotsializma* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 2018), 262.

59 Bernstein, *Vospitannye pri Staline*, 261–62.

no name and is called only a "ten-year-old man" rather than a child.[60] Even without the phenomenon of adultification being labeled as such, it was indeed tackled as a conflict between the reality of war and the actual age of children, especially by the children's literature of the war years.[61]

The Return to "Happy Childhood" after the War?

When the war ended, by no means did most children return to their well-protected "happy childhood." Apart from the fact that the notion of "happy childhood" was a Stalinist myth even before the war began, the official announcements of a rapid return to normalcy proved to be propaganda that was far removed from reality. Many children emerged from the war as orphans. In June 1945, the number of parentless children was at least 70,000 in the BSSR alone. In early 1946, as many as 91,000 parentless children were registered there, and by the autumn of that year, the number was at least 138,000.[62] In the Soviet Union as a whole, at least three million children were orphans in 1948.[63] Several years after the war, these children still lived in intolerable circumstances. Small children and girls in particular were often adopted or found surrogate families, but older children had to continue to "function" on their own, regardless of whether they were Jewish survivors or not. At the age of fourteen, adolescents were treated as "grown-ups" and assigned to vocational schools. Alternatively, they had to earn their own keep. Valentina Belova, who had to look after her nephew during the war, did not return to civilian life as a "child": as an adolescent fit for work, she was immediately sent to a vocational school and had to work.

But even children who had parents did not regain their sheltered existence as "children" or "adolescents." Older youths still had a duty to continue on in parental or caregiver roles. Nina Bykova, who was deported to Germany for forced labor at the age of ten, did not attend school after

60 Sergei Mikhalkov, "Desiatiletnii chelovek." Text: https://www.culture.ru/poems/45353/desyatiletnii-chelovek. "Danila Kuz'mich," another poem by Mikhalkov, also addresses the adultification of children.

61 Less well-known is the story by Lev Kassil', "Dorogie moi mal'chishki" (1944), whose hero, fourteen-year-old Kapka Butyrev, has the role of a grown man not only at the factory but also within his family. He has to take his father's place and take care of two little sisters. The image of the adult child is reflected in a great number of other works.

62 NARB, f. 7, op. 3, d. 1494, 111.

63 See: Mariia Zezina, "Sotsial'naia zashchita detei-sirot v poslevoennye gody," *Voprosy istorii* 1 (1999): 127–36.

her return; instead, she found a job: "I was the older one in the family, I had to help Mama."[64] These are statements often heard from war children. Others, such as Arkadii Shkuran, who was only ten years old in 1944, continued to go to the villages or to encampments of Red Army soldiers, where they begged for food.[65] Boys took the place of absent men, much like Petrushka in Platonov's novel. Together with elderly persons and women, children, and adolescents rebuilt the dugouts and villages and schools consumed by fire; they tilled the fields and ran the household. Many were unable to attend school because, like Nina and Arkadii, they had to work. Moreover, tuition fees, books, and clothes were usually in short supply. Children who had survived a camp, an institutional home, or the Holocaust often suffered from both physical and psychological effects such as severe headaches, permanent infirmity due to years of malnutrition, and illnesses that made regular school attendance difficult.[66] Older children would refuse to go to school out of shame because they were not placed in the sixth or seventh grade, in keeping with their age. Instead, they were put in the second grade, in a classroom with considerably younger children. At the age of sixteen, Wladimir Swerdlow was sent by his father to the third grade. He ran away from school on the very first day because other children had teased him, he recalled.[67] It was not a rare occurrence for children of thirteen or fourteen to be placed in the first or second grade. During the 1946/47 school year, children and adolescents with an age difference of ten years (between seven and sixteen years of age!) sat together in the first-grade classrooms of the Soviet Union. The fifth and sixth grades included pupils between ten and twenty years of age.[68]

64 *Deti voiny*, 23, contains many additional examples.

65 Arkadii Shkuran and Anatolii Rozhkov, eds., *Deti Belarusi v voine 1941–1945 gg. Prestupleniia vermakhta: aktsiia "Seno," 1944 god* (Minsk: Knigazbor, 2020), 290.

66 Larysa Lazavaia, in Kuz'ma Kozak, Mariia Zhukova, eds., *Voina prichiniaet mne bol'* (Minsk: Logvinov, 2012), 86–87.

67 Wladimir Swerdlow, Interview za013, September 15, 2005, Interview-Archiv "Zwangsarbeit 1939–1945."

68 Mariia Maiofis, "Predvestiia ottopeli v sovetskoi shkol'noi politike pozdnestalinskogo vremeni," in *Ostrova utopii. Pedagogicheskoe i sotsial'noe proektirovanie poslevoennoi shkoly (1940–1980)*, ed. Il'ia Kukulin, Mariia Majofis, and Petr Safronov (Moscow: NLO, 2015), 35–106, here 60.

Postwar Processing

The postwar period was characterized by extreme material deprivation. Disease, high mortality rates, especially among small children and those in institutional homes, and dire poverty arising not only from wartime destruction but also from a revived Stalinism and mismanagement shaped the postwar period in the country.[69] In view of the widespread fatherlessness, material destruction, and intense deprivation, the early postwar years brought no restoration of the generational order.

Recovery was complicated by the way in which Soviet society dealt with its wartime experiences. With the victory over Nazi Germany, the mythologization of the war began. The loss of countless human lives was trivialized, and survival during the occupation period quickly aroused suspicions of collaboration. Experiences that failed to conform to the formula of the heroically sacrificing child—who, for example, fought on the side of the partisans against the occupiers—became taboo, and those children whose lives did not fit this narrative were stigmatized.[70] Jewish survivors wanted, above all, to forget the annihilation of their people. They were pressured into silence, and a similar model of such silence was offered by schools as well as postwar films and literature. As "happy Soviet children," they were supposed to continue to "function" and produce proof of their industriousness, capability, and patriotism in the course of rebuilding the country.

In professional circles, by contrast, an awareness of children's suffering arose quite early and was sustained by humanistic ideas. It even triggered a discussion among experts about the war's possible physical and psychological consequences for minors. While the war was still underway, educators observed the phenomenon of role reversal and recognized it as problematic and burdensome, especially for older siblings.[71] A study of children and adolescents carried out at the Kashchenko Psychiatric Hos-

69 Nikolai Ganson, "Detskaia smertnost' i gosudarstvennaia politika v SSSR v gody poslevoennogo goloda," *Dialog so vremenem. Al'manakh intellektual'noi istorii* 17 (2006): 377–96.

70 In the whole territory of the USSR, according to the estimation of British historian Olga Kucherenko, the share of minors in partisan units was between 10 and 16 percent. In Belarus, according to official data, children and adolescents under eighteeen made up 9.48 percent of partisans. Expressed in figures, there were 25,003 minors involved with the partisans. For reasons of space, it is not possible to go into this aspect in detail. For more on this, using the example of the entire USSR, see: Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers*, 198; Belarus data: RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 18.

71 D. Averbukh, "Moia rabota s evakuirovannymi det'mi," *Doshkol'noe vospitanie*, no. 12 (1941): 16–18.

pital in Moscow between 1943 and 1951 was unusually progressive. The head of the hospital, the Ukranian Professor Grunia Sukhareva, detected in war children a psychological aging that reflected the change in the generational order: "The normally cheerful disposition of childhood disappeared entirely. The children became apathetic, listless, disinterested, real old men."[72] She and her colleague Tat'iana Simson observed numerous somatic and psychological disturbances, particularly in children who had directly experienced death and acts of war. They found the same symptoms (speechlessness, rudeness, agitation, irritability, antisocial behavior, etc.) as their colleagues in the West who were studying the psychological effects of war on orphaned children, especially on young Jewish survivors from continental Europe.[73]

The question of the possible traumatization of children was only hesitantly posed in accordance with the prevailing understanding in the academic world of psychiatry. Generally, it was thought that the earlier children confronted an experience of violence, the more resilient and adaptable they became. At the same time, awareness of the phenomena of adultification and parentification was largely nonexistent. The very possibility that children could develop long-term post-traumatic disorders was not recognized until the mid-1980s, in the wake of changing Holocaust discourse and the emergence of the category of "child survivors." Not until 1988, with the adoption of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)-III-R,[74] did the experts acknowledge the occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorders in chil-

72 Grunia Sukhareva, "Psychologic Disturbances in Children during War," *American Review of Soviet Medicine* 5, no. 1 (1947/48): 32–37. Tellingly, this publication did not appear in Russian.

73 See, for example: Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud, *Infants without Families and Reports on the Hampstead Nurseries, 1939-1945* (London: Hogarth, 1949); Hans Keilson, *Sequentielle Traumatisierung bei Kindern. Untersuchung zum Schicksal jüdischer Kriegswaisen* (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2005); Keilson, *Kein Plädoyer für eine Luftschaukel. Essays, Reden, Gespräche* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer-Taschenbuch, 2011). See also: Thérèse Brosse, *Homeless Children: Report of the Proceedings of the Conference of Directors of Children's Communities, Trogen, Switzerland* (Paris: Unesco, 1951); Dorothy Macardle, *Children of Europe: A Study of the Children of Liberated Countries; Their Wartime Experiences, Their Reactions, and Their Needs, with a Note on Germany* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1951), here esp. chapters 20 and 21; See also the artice by Anna M. Parkinson in this volume: Anna M. Parkinson, "Revisiting the 'Talking Cure': Capturing Children's Wartime Experiences through Hans Keilson's Work on Sequential Traumatization," in *Childhood during War and Genocide: Agency, Survival, and Representation*, ed. Joanna Michlic, Yuliya von Saal, and Anna Ullrich (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2024), 177–204.

74 The 1987 revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

dren.[75] Sukhareva and Simson, by contrast, observed that even during the war, children and their psyches were much more unstable and easier to traumatize than was the case with adults. Additionally, they emphasized the close connection between mental and physical health. Pathologies, behavioral disorders, and social abnormalities among the children were interpreted as natural reactions to wartime events and separation from parents.[76]

Together with the scholar E. Osipova, Sukhareva even sent a noteworthy position paper to the Ministry of Health of the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1943, in which the authors confronted the Soviet government apparat with the growing incidence of "psychoses" and pathologies among minors. The authors singled out children and adolescents as a separate and especially vulnerable category of war victims, and they appealed to the Soviet People's Commissariat for Health to take the war-related psychological damages of this group seriously.[77] They stressed the great vulnerability of small children, and especially those who had been under German occupation, which had led in many instances to speech disorders, somatic illnesses, and epileptic reactions. They identified adolescents as an additional at-risk group because they, like adults, had to perform heavy physical labor for the front and, as a result, could exhibit "pathological reactions." Without identifying the phenomenon explicitly, the authors of the paper described the process of adultification—not yet established at that time—as well as its pathological psychological and physical consequences. They advocated for an early response of compassionate medical treatment and humane education. Such opinions, however, conflicted with both real-life medical practice and official Soviet discourse.

Consequently, no systematic clinical studies on Soviet war children are available to us today, studies that would have recorded the full extent of damaging events at the time according to age, gender, and individual and

75 Stefan Grüner, "Kinder und Trauma. Zur wissenschaftlichen Konzeptualisierung von kindlicher Kriegs- und Gewalterfahrung seit dem 19. Jahrhundert," in *Zucht und Ordnung. Gewalt gegen Kinder in historischer Perspektive,* ed. Stefan Grüner and Markus Raasch (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2019), 321–70. See also: José Brunner and Nathalie Zajde, eds., *Holocaust und Trauma. Kritische Perspektiven zur Entstehung und Wirkung eines Paradigmas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011).

76 Sukhareva, "Psychologic Disturbances"; Tat'iana Simson, "Reaktivnye sostoianiia u detei rannego vozrasta v usloviiakh voennogo vremeni," *Pediatriia* 6 (1946): 47–48.

77 K voprosu o vozstanovlenii [sic] nervno-psikhiatricheskoi pomoshchi detskomu naseleniiu soiuza v usloviiakh voennogo vremeni. Dokladnaia zapiska, Zamestiteliu Narkoma NKZ SSSR tov. Kovriginoi, 30.10.1943, GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. P8009, op. 21, d. 60.

group experience. Furthermore, we will never obtain the necessary empirical material because the traumatizing experiences and the related defense and coping strategies of affected persons were not verbalized at the appropriate time. Unlike, for example, the generation of war children in Germany, Soviet survivors have never undergone therapy. For the same reasons, we are unable today to separate the multiple traumatic experiences that were caused by the routine witnessing of violence and murder from the psychologically stressful process of parentification or adultification.[78] Hence, it is impossible to make a broad, data-based assertion about the long-term aftereffects of the premature transition to adulthood during the war. Nonetheless, conclusions can be drawn retrospectively, based on modern trauma research involving international and domestic military conflicts that has been undertaken since the 1980s.

Today it is known that the psychological defense mechanisms of children have narrow limits, and that emotionally parentified children are especially prone to depression and somatization.[79] It is also known that the events of war have an especially traumatizing effect on children if they become prematurely autonomous, that is, if they are exposed to traumatic wartime events in the absence of adult attachment figures and are no longer able to assimilate the events later on.[80] It is largely undisputed that the probability of developing PTSD is heightened if memories of the traumatic event are insufficiently elaborated or if they were only faintly embedded in the autobiographical memory or not at all.[81]

78 According to the definition in the DSM-V (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), diagnostic criteria are differentiated by age. In children older than six, the existence of a traumatic event is assumed if the individual was exposed to death, the threat of death, actual or threatened grievous bodily harm, or actual or threatened sexual violence. Other stressors include injury or threat to another person, the witnessing of an unexpected or violent death or of profound suffering, or the threat of death or injury of a family member or loved one. Also recognized as traumatic stress are events that go beyond the normal stress of daily life. The development of characteristic symptoms after confrontation with an extremely traumatic event is known as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. See Peter Falkai and Hans-Ulrich Wittchen, eds., *Diagnostisches und Statistisches Manual Psychischer Störungen DSM-5* (Göttingen: Hogrefe, 2015), 369–72.

79 Katarzyna Schier et al., "Parentifizierung in der Kindheit und psychische Störungen im Erwachsenenalter," *Psychotherapie, Psychosomatik, medizinische Psychologie* 61, no. 8 (2011): 364–71.

80 See for example: Lynne Jones, *Then They Started Shooting: Children of the Bosnian War and the Adults They Become* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2013); John A. Shaw, "Children, Adolescents and Trauma," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2000): 227–43.

81 The repressed experiences remain stored in the working memory and come back in flashbacks and nightmares. For this reason, the return of the memory and the inte-

Affected children generally withdraw and develop so-called dissociative symptoms: emotional numbness or a "frozen" spatiotemporal sense. Many also suffer from reduced affect, flashbacks, anxiety states, depression, feelings of guilt and shame, personality disorders, or overexcitability, symptoms that can be manifested in sleep disturbances and difficulties with concentration. Almost all of these symptoms appear to some extent in the oral recollections of Soviet war children.[82]

Generally, it is thought that the younger the child, the more they react by engaging in emotional avoidance, which often leads to the false conclusion that the child is less affected.[83] There are also studies that indicate that very young children have a certain protection against trauma because they lack adult-like cognitive skills.[84] Today, most experts agree that children between five and nine display the greatest vulnerability because they already perceive events very consciously but do not yet have adequate coping mechanisms.[85] In older children, dissociative and somatic symptoms are likely to be diagnosed, and adolescents are increasingly

gration of the traumatic experience into the autobiographical memory represent a key element of therapeutic treatment. For an introduction to the subject area, see: Renate Volbert, *Beurteilung von Aussagen über Traumata. Erinnerungen und ihre psychologische Bewertung* (Berlin: Huber, 2004).

82 The naming of the symptoms above did not occur until decades after the war. As a rule, they were mentioned unconsciously and in passing during the interviews that were conducted with contemporary witnesses beginning in the 1990s. Conscious reflection did not occur. A rare exception appears in the recollections of the war child Marat Kuznetsov, who became a psychiatrist after the war and dealt with the psychological consequences of wartime experiences in war children in detail. Although he could not conduct any comparative longitudinal studies, his retrospective analyses reflect the state of knowledge of contemporary research on the traumatic effects of wartime events in children. He also pointed out the subjective factors as well as the negative consequences for personality development if there was no reprocessing of the traumatic experiences. See: Kuznetsov, *Eto tozhe nasha istoriia*; Kuznetsov, "Psikhoanaliticheskie aspekty formirovaniia sindroma sotsial'noi deprivatsii u malon letnikh uznikov natsional-sotsialisticheskikh presledovanii," *Vesnik Mahiliouskaha dziarzhaŭnaha universiteta imia A. A. Kuliashova* 12, no. 2–3 (2002): 168–73.

83 Werner Bohleber, "Kriegskindheiten und ihre lebenslangen seelischen Folgen," in *Kindheiten im Zweiten Weltkrieg und ihre Folgen,* ed. Harmut Radebold et al. (Gießen: Psychosozial-Verlag, 2012), 55.

84 Joshua Barenbaum, Vladislav Ruchkin, and Mary Schwab-Stone, "The Psychosocial Aspects of Children Exposed to War: Practice and Policy Initiatives," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 45, no. 1 (2004): 41–62. Interestingly, many Soviet war children share this opinion when they reflect on their early childhood experiences of the war. See: Krinko, *Detstvo i voina*.

85 Gordana Kuterovac-Jagodić, "Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Croatian Children Exposed to War: A Prospective Study," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58, no. 4 (2003): 9–25; Keilson, *Sequentielle Traumatisierung*.

prone to acting out with behaviors such as aggressive outbursts, delinquency, suicide attempts, and drug abuse.

Numerous studies have identified phase-specific consequences based on age and have concluded that the severity of the consequences of stress depends not only on age and the nature of the trauma but also on various cultural and social factors, as well as personal predispositions. Children can be resilient to some degree, provided they have certain protective factors (social/emotional support, "open" coping strategies) at their command. Above all, children can develop greater resilience if they have secure family ties and/or are convinced that they did not make sacrifices in vain.[86] Accordingly, not every experience of violence led to pathological findings, and a number of Holocaust survivors were able to process their experiences in a positive manner.[87] Historian Lisa Kirschenbaum follows the concept of resilience, even interpreting the use of official heroic narratives by Soviet war children as a way of processing traumatic war experiences. Kirschenbaum argues that the government propaganda about children's willingness to make sacrifices should be regarded as part of the concept of resilience.[88] If we follow her interpretation, we must not automatically view every instance of imposed adultification and role reversal as pathological and, relatedly, all affected war children as damaged victims. After all, perhaps the early maturation process could be a source of upward mobility, enhanced status, and recognition within the social community for the child's own family or the constructed surrogate family, as Platonov showed with the example of Petrushka. These considerations by no means lessen the severity of children's suffering during the war and the psychological and physical stress placed on them. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the complexity of children's

86 See for example: Brian K. Barber, *Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lewis A. Leavitt and Nathan A. Fox, eds., *The Psychological Effects of War and Violence on Children* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1993), here esp. James Garbarino and Kathleen Kostelny, *Children's Response to War: What Do We Know?*, 23–40; Bennett Simon and Roberta J. Apfel, eds., *Minefields in Their Hearts: The Mental Health of Children in War and Communal Violence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); John J. Sigal and Morton Weinfeld, "Do Children Cope Better Than Adults with Potentially Traumatic Stress? A 40-Year Follow-Up of Holocaust Survivors," *Psychiatry* 64, no. 1 (2001): 69–80.

87 Jacob Lomranz hypothesizes that many Holocaust survivors were able to process their experiences well. See: Jacob Lomranz, "'Aintegration'. Ein komplementäres Paradigma zum Verständnis von Holocaust-Überlebenden," in *Holocaust und Trauma*, 223–41.

88 Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, "The Meaning of Resilience: Soviet Children in World War II," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 47, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 521–35.

functioning during and after the war, and to see not only pathological consequences but also the resources inherent in war-related role reversal, as well as the transformative effects of such a reversal on the society as a whole. The acceptance of responsibility associated with maturation was essential for survival during the war. Furthermore, it could be positively assimilated as resilience later on. How many survivors of the war succeeded in doing so, however, will remain unknown forever.

Conclusions

The study of wartime childhoods and the phenomena of adultification and parentification opens up a number of fresh perspectives on war and wartime societies. First, the active role of children in the everyday routine of war becomes visible. Rapid maturation and role reversal affected all children and adolescents regardless of ethnicity, religion, or location of experience (city, village, or partisans), but it especially affected those children who were concentrated in ghettos and camps. Adultification and parentification were a form of adaptation to the everyday routine of war; they were not solely life-saving measures for children and adults. Both phenomena could be positively assimilated by those affected during their subsequent efforts to cope with the consequences of war.

Second, the examination of childhood war experiences also reveals processes of change in wartime societies. It becomes clear that childhood itself is a relative category. It was not age but German regulations, occupation practices, and the war of annihilation that defined the meaning and experience of "being a child." As a consequence, children of various ages, and especially Jewish children, were forced into adult agency, decision-making, and actions. Along with altered roles and generational parameters, wartime societies were transformed as well. Social and familial orders changed, as did social mores. However, the war triggered neither a new order nor a new definition of childhood but a generational disorder with far-reaching and long-lasting consequences.

Despite parallel prewar experiences of the Stalinist era on which both children and adults could build, the German-Soviet War signified an enormous social rift. As a result, in Soviet society as a whole, traditional families and family roles were profoundly shaken and replaced with new, alternative models of family.[89] In the process, children could attain a

89 For more on this, see: Yuliya von Saal, "Familiäre Gemeinschaften. Kriegsbedingte Familientrennungen und Neukonfigurationen in der UdSSR," in *Familientrennungen*

higher social status in both the family hierarchy and society as a whole. Clearly, this generational break found widespread acceptance. Thus, as previously discussed, it emerges from postwar literature, discussions of creative artists, and the Komsomol, where fourteen-year-old adolescents entered into asymmetrical sexual relationships with adult women and were elected to serve as managers and leaders in kolkhozes.[90] In other words, they literally replaced men who had been killed in action. These observations are reason enough to question our view of children in wartime. Despite their traumatic experiences, they were not simply passive victims but active participants who inflenced Soviet society even years after the war.[91]

Translated from German by Kathleen Luft

im nationalsozialistischen Krieg. Erfahrungen und Praktiken in Deutschland und im besetzten Europa 1939–1945, ed. Wiebke Lisner, Johannes Hürter, Cornelia Rauh, and Lu Seegers (Munich: Wallstein, 2022), 335–65.

90 Bernstein, *Vospitannye pri Staline*, 261–62.

91 Juliane Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).