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**Janina Kostkiewicz (Ed.), *Crime without Punishment...  
The Extermination and Suffering of Polish Children during the  
German Occupation 1939–1945*, Jagiellonian University Press,  
Kraków 2020, pp. 272**

**ABSTRACT**

The text is a review of a collective work devoted, as the title indicates, to the extermination and suffering of Polish children during World War II. The content of the chapters focuses on the fate of Polish children in the General Government and East Prussia of the Third Reich as well as in the territory of Germany after 1945. The individual chapters contain documented crimes against Polish children not only in concentration camps but also in places of residence (Łódź, Zamojszczyzna, CONFIDENTIAL: FOR PEER REVIEW ONLY Białystok, and others). The book includes 12 chapters presenting the effects of the policy of the occupant towards the youngest generation in the period indicated by the caesura, and 2 chapters devoted to the fate of Polish children, who the end of the war found in Germany. The publication of this monograph in English enables the dissemination of knowledge about the fate of Polish children during World War II among a wide range of English-speaking readers. It also fosters reflection on the long-term consequences of wars and the paradox of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the “Centenary of the Child” that was announced by Ellen Key

**Keywords:**

Childhood, II World War, Crime, extermination, victims.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century as the Century of the Child, proclaimed by Ellen Key, turned out to be times of unheard-of paradoxes. On the one hand, it was the time of taking initiatives and implementing activities aimed at ensuring decent conditions

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for development and respect for children's rights, including the establishment by Eglantyna Jeb of the Save the Children organization (1919), the announcement of the Geneva Declaration (1924), the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and on the other side, it was a time of experiencing untold suffering, mainly in times of global and regional wars. Children's dramas caused by armed conflicts are still ongoing. It is the children who suffer the cruel consequences of wars. Places such as Beslan, Chibok, Kumbo, where children are victims of fundamentalisms and extremists actions, remain in the memory. The perpetrators of these sufferings, of these crimes, are not punished.

One must add, children's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic are painful. Due to their universality, despite numerous initiatives and actions undertaken mainly by non-governmental organizations, many people and groups are indifferent to the current and future tragedies of children.

Childhood experiences leave permanent debris in individual biographies and collective fates. These dramas are still hidden in archival documents. They are the content of poignant documents and reports. Thanks to the sensitivity and cognitive inquisitiveness of the researchers involved in the history of education and childhood, the scales and powers of the suffering of children and adolescents are revealed.

Among the most recent effects of such works, the collection of the dissertations included in the monography entitled *Crime without punishment. The extermination and suffering of Polish children during the German occupation 1939–1945* edited by Janina Kostkiewicz (Kraków, Wyd. UJ 2020, pp. 270).

The book includes 12 chapters presenting the effects of policy of the occupant towards the youngest generation in the period indicated by the caesura, and 2 chapters devoted to the fate of Polish children, who the end of the war found in Germany.

In the chapters of the monograph, the reader will find information and images of the fate of children in various war situations. The chapter titles are telling a lot: *The German Policy of Extermination of Polish Children during World War II* (J. Kostkiewicz), *A Crime without Punishment: The Extermination of Polish Children during the Period of German Occupation from 1939 to 1945* (A. Kołakowski), *Polish Children and Youth in Auschwitz* (H. Kubica), *Suffering of Children in Auschwitz – Biological and Mental Extermination* (B. Gola, D. Pauluk), *When There Were No More Tears to Cry: The Tragic Fate of the Polish Children Displaced from the Zamość Region in 1942–1943* (B. Kozaczyńska), *Children of the Zamość Region in the Majdanek Camp (in Selective Archive Files and Personal Accounts)*

(M. Gajderowicz, R. Skrzyniarz), *The German Camp for Juvenile Poles in Łódź at Przemysłowa Street* (K. Ledniowski, B. Gola), *The Role of Gaukinderheim Kalisch in Germanization during World War II* (D. Wiczorek), *The Germanization of Polish Children and Youth in Gdańsk Pomerania and the Role of the Stutthof Concentration Camp* (D. Drywa), *Children's Experiences in the German Displacement and Forced Labor Camp in Potulice and Smukała – Memories of Female Prisoners* (A. Molesztak), *The Fate of the Children of Białystok under Soviet and German Totalitarianism during the World War II* (E. Kryńska), *Extermination of Juvenile Scouts in the Lands of Poland during the German Occupation of 1939–1945* (A. Massalski), *The Fate of Polish Children in Allied-occupied Germany in the Years 1945–1950* (A. Ryk), *The Return of Polish Children from German Lands and Scouting Activity at the Transitional Center in Munich. The Polish West State Banner Established by Władysław Śmiałek and Its Role in Simplifying the Fate of Polish War Orphans* (M. Michel).

It is not my goal to discuss the individual texts in this monography in detail, nor to summarize them, but only to indicate their importance for the knowledge and understanding of these facts and their social consequences that are marginalized or left unsaid in political as well as pedagogical discourse, not only about the Second World War but also about what is happening today.

The contents of the chapters focus on the fate of Polish children in the territory of the General Government and East Prussia of the Third Reich. As the editor of the monography points out in the Introduction, individual texts document only a part of the wartime fate of Polish children. It is understandable, if only because of the archival resources used by the authors. I am aware, that a huge amount of fates have not been documented. How much suffering of children in towns and villages remains to be discovered. Therefore, in my opinion, despite such an extensive spectrum, these are fragmentary childhood history in Poland during the Second World War. Their fragmentary nature is deepened by a focus on ethnicity that is difficult to understand for me. The argument that the fate of Jewish children is described in many sources, while, as Janina Kostkiewicz writes: “publication and research on the extermination, Germanization, and the suffering of children of Polish ethnicity are scarce doesn’t (p. 8). From my point of view, it is not enough of a child’s nationality to be the criterion for selecting data illustrating the scale of violence and crime where children are victims. I think, many of the individual fates and experiences one couldn’t find in the archives, but they are in the deepest levels of minds and memories of those who are/were enough lucky to survive. The fates of Polish girls and boys during the occupation still have white spots. This applies especially to children and young people living in villages where and in the

vicinity of which there were resistance and partisan fights. Children who lost their lives, who had been physically, mentally, and morally mutilated are the silent victims of the atrocities of war. Some of them remain silent for the rest of their lives, but there are also those who tell their grandchildren and great-grandchildren about it. Their stories also deserve to be recorded as documents of such cruel times.

As A. Kołakowski writes:

The crimes committed on Polish children took many forms, from planned extermination (including mass murders in concentration camps and abortion), through debilitating forced labor and homicides committed during the pacification of villages and towns, to stripping children of their identity during the Germanization process. (2020, p. 36).

Author stress out that this premeditated barbarity crimes were given a legal framework by the German state. The results of the research included in this monography, which illustrate the scale and forms of violence against children, show the enormity of the crime. Solid research on archival resources by authors and authors of individual texts deserve that the results reach a wide audience. They prove that it was a crime not only to take life in concentration camps, but no less dramatic were the Germanization measures against Polish children and youth in Gdańsk and the pacification of the Zamość region. Many Polish children and youngsters were also the victims of medical experiments, were forced to work beyond their capability. Were also witnesses of death and cruel crimes (p. 262). Educational policy and penalties for participating in illegal education are also forms of violence against children and young people. Although some of these crimes are more or less known, the documents presented by the authors are very touching.

Noteworthy are the undocumented fates of Polish children deported to work in Germany and of those born in Germany when their parents were there, and they were doing slave labor there. Not all of them were lucky enough to find protection after the war in the transition camp in Munich, where apart from providing medical and living care, were able to attend the scouting, what Małgorzata Michel writes about (pp. 257 onwards).

The cruelty of these crimes without punishment was special. It concerned not only the physical sphere, life, and health, but very strongly hurt emotions. The emotional and psychological wounds lasted much longer, for many years, and even for the life of the victims. Each war carries in itself not only physical and material destruction but first of all left consequences moral and spiritual debris. Each of the crimes of war affects children as they are the main hostages of particular interests underlying armed conflicts.

The content of this monography is very important. Its title is telling a lot. It indicates the scale of the crimes committed on children, sometimes unaware of what they are participating in, not understanding what is happening. The content of individual texts creates a multidimensional map of suffering for the youngest victims of the war.

After reading these texts, I am constantly wondering why people do not learn from history. Why children continue to fall victim to hostilities. Nowadays wars are fought far away from us, from Poland, but this should not blunt our sensitivity to the fate of children – victims of wars.

Contents of the book, texts of 16 authors from universities and museums, are not only a reminder of the fate of Polish children - victims of German and Soviet crimes. It is a source of reflection on children's rights, their right to life and health, to education, play, and development in a safe and clean environment.

Publishing this monography in English makes it possible to spread the knowledge about the fate of Polish children during World War II among a wide range of English-speaking readers. It also fosters reflection on the long-term consequences of wars and on the paradox of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a “The Century of a Child” proclaimed by Ellen Key.

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