

ALL SAINTS, High Wycombe, Civic Service Address, 3rd August 2014

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In 1900, Ellen Kay, a Swedish educationalist and author, declared that the 20<sup>th</sup> Century would be the 'Century of the Child'.<sup>1</sup> In reality it was to be a century in which children all over the world would be drawn into two world wars, civil unrest, sectarian violence and acts of terrorism. In some cases, as in various countries in Africa, they would become pawns of both local war-lords and national armies. In others, like Spain (1936-39) and Argentina (1976-83), they simply disappeared because of the political persuasion of their parents. There seems to be no break in a circle of violence and war related trauma which research reveals spans three generations.<sup>2</sup>

Post-second world war children across Europe became 'invisible' and a veil was drawn over war child issues, as in the UK, where the words Civilian Evacuation were removed from common parlance in March 1946 as part of a national strategy. In others it was simply a question of burying heads in the sand and apportioning blame elsewhere. And, after all, they were only children who would grow out of it...wouldn't they? Unfortunately a misguided opinion still held by many.

At the end of World War II, an estimated 13 million European children were facing severe poverty, malnutrition and destitution. Children were homeless and stateless. Some were kidnapped or deported and identities were changed.

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<sup>1</sup> Children in Danger. Eva Simonsen. Children of World War II. Ed Kjersti Ericsson and Eva Simonsen. Berg 2005. p269

<sup>2</sup> Work carried out by Professor Singa Sandelin Benko and Dr Martin Parsons, 'Child in the Eye of the Storm' project. Universities of Helsinki and Reading.

Some children were psychologically, physically and sexually abused. Many lived off their wits by scavenging, prostitution or taking an active role in the post-war black market. And as late as 1950, UNESCO used the term 'War-Handicapped Children'<sup>3</sup> to describe this vast horde of children who were not only seen as requiring help, but also as a possible threat to the future stability of a peaceful post-war world.

It was estimated that immediately after World War Two around.....

53,000 children in Berlin were considered to be lost

49,000 were orphaned in Czechoslovakia; 60,000 in the Netherlands; 200,000 in Poland; 300,000 Yugoslavia

However, it is very difficult to define what a war child actually is...is it one who is directly involved in the fighting, one who is affected by the loss of home, family, culture etc. or one who is exposed to the ravages of war or civil unrest? In Norway and Denmark the word "war-child" means a child who has a German father, in Finland a child evacuated to Sweden, in the UK an evacuee, in parts of Africa an active combatant. Whatever the definition is, one thing that can be said for certain is that whatever the circumstance the child is the innocent, and often the invisible, victim. To paraphrase a statement made by Dr Peter Heindel the world's leading authority on war traumatised children... *It does not matter whether the children were on the side of the victors or the losers, they were, are, and sometimes remain the sufferers.*

Wars have been going on in History forever and little attention was paid to the suffering of these children until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Our research indicates that War Children suffer long term effects related to their experience. However, these are often shrouded in media generalisations, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Report on the European Situation: War Handicapped Children. UNESCO 1950.

actual consequences depend very much on the individuals themselves. What was considered to be a traumatic experience by one would not necessarily be defined that way by another. Some evacuees in the UK were treated in a much more loving and caring way by their hosts than they were by their own families and at the end of the war did not want to go home. Whereas Ann Parkinson (pseudonym) personalises the evacuation issue and describes the whole process as one of internal guilt.

*‘What you hope for is not to be treated cruelly and beaten, and made to feel even worse about yourself. Your ‘circumstances’ are already a deep dark, mystery and there is a tremendous guilt that you have done something dreadful to have been rejected by your parents’.*<sup>4</sup>

However, there are *common* long-term effects. Many of the children have suffered from guilt, they have found their lives harmed by experiences they witnessed or even participated in at the time. Many are very insecure resulting in multi-marriages or multi- relationships which, when it comes to making a commitment, they shy away from. Some like Dorothy Cherniko described her problems of making friends as *‘... the terrible longing to just belong to somebody’*. Others cannot relate to their own children.

Raelene Houlihan describes a situation which is often forgotten about, but one which must have affected, and still affects, many war children, and another which spans the generations. *‘I found I had to teach myself mothering, because you didn’t have any mother roles in the orphanage; you had no one to demonstrate love, or to teach you the basics about loving someone without placing yourself in a dangerous situation....’*

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<sup>4</sup> Orphans of the Empire. Alan Gill Vintage. 1998 p15

On a positive note, after taking our advice, one ex-evacuee who admitted to having such relationship problems, recently made contact with her son after more than 25 years of separation. She now has a new extended family, including 3 grandchildren she never knew she had.

Some who have married and have had families of their own have passed on their individual anxieties to their children, and in some cases their grandchildren. This 3-generational phase had also been noted in the work done with Finnish war children. Many have recalled how their stories about their war-time experiences (either good or bad) were largely ignored by family and friends.

For some, the last 75 years has been one of searching....either for a home, an education, a childhood or simply just searching for something intangible. A former evacuee received the following advice from her employer:

*You are the hardest working, most reliable, punctual girl I have ever had the pleasure to employ, but your insecurity stands in the way of promotion with this company. If you want my advice, girl, go out there and find out who you are and then come back and see me when you find yourself.<sup>5</sup>*

One woman once told me that she seems to have been locked into a mind-set of a 7 year old.

And what about the denigrating labels which still haunt the evacuees, to the extent that their confidence and self worth has been compromised throughout their lives. In spite of evidence to the contrary, we still read about the verminous condition of the evacuees, the fact that they were *all* bed-wetters, they *all* came from the slums, did not know what a knife and fork was used for, were generally ungrateful; most of which is totally untrue...but makes a good story.

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Gill op.cit p29

We hear little about the breakdown of family relationships, sibling rivalry both during and after the war, or the possible return from a loving, caring foster home to a domestic situation where abuse was the norm. Not to mention the children who spent their formative years overseas in a different culture, to return to post-war austerity Britain.

Few, if any, text books or media programmes mention war children in other countries and simply generalise their plight as being often innocent bystanders. Too little is written about the terrible sufferings of Russian children in the besieged Leningrad during 1941-43 where cannibalism, especially of children, was common, or the 14 year olds, of both genders, who were conscripted into the Wehrmacht in 1945 to save Berlin; many of whom were hanged from lamp-posts along the Unter den Linden for deserting their posts as the allies advanced.

It has been estimated that since **3600 BC** there have been

**14,531 wars** resulting in **3 billion deaths**

**Peace has prevailed for only 292 years – about 5% of that time**

**Currently....** there are around 30 armed conflicts taking place around the world notably in Israel, Palestine, Syria and Afghanistan.

All these war zones contain children and many of them are experiencing it first hand. Many children are indoctrinated at a very young age, and for them there seems to be no escape. What *is* new is the modern day exploitation of children in carrying out actual acts of warfare....a direct violation of Children's Rights...and a new assault rifle has been developed with few moving parts so that 6 year olds can maintain and fire it. This is not just an African problem as some people think.....At present 300,000 child soldiers are exploited in over 30 countries around the world.

In Oct 2010 the Independent on Sunday reported that a teenage boy with Down's syndrome who killed six and injured 34 in a suicide attack in Diyala was said to be an example of an ongoing al-Qa'ida strategy to recruit those with learning difficulties.

Unlike the war children of War World Two, who in the main were left very much to their own devices, the plight of the present day Child Soldiers has resulted in legislation aimed at protecting children, this has included the OPTIONAL PROTOCOL TO THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD in February 2002 and the FIGHTING BACK REPORT published by Save the Children significantly on the 11<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2005

But this pre-supposes of course that all countries will sign up to them.

Although 35 African States are known to be abiding by the minimum age of 18 for recruitment, there are still an estimated 100,000 children remaining in armed conflicts in Africa. The Liberian government and rebel forces alone have recruited c21,000 children, some as young as 6. Even the UK and USA were contravening the law by allowing under 18s in the front line and had to withdraw them hastily.

With the exception of the gun-carrying children, the problems being experienced by children in present war zones is almost exactly the same as those involved in the other major conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Many, including young recruits in World War One such as Valentine Strudwick who died at Ypres aged 14, are robbed of a childhood, miss out on their education, suffer from the lack of family relationships, feel guilty and are basically insecure.

Today, children in conflict zones are often shown in the newspapers and in news bulletins and the images are used to grasp our attention and attack our emotions. But I

would suggest that by using children in this way, the media is forcing us to pay attention to the situation as a whole rather than the plight of the individual child.

Although there does seem to be an increasing concern within society for the welfare of children in war-torn areas, the long-term effects, which are often the most debilitating, are still largely ignored despite evidence that these children are, and will be affected into the late 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

For some, wars have a defining conclusion.....1918/1945/1975 etc, but for many war children there is often no end to the long-term suffering.

Without guidance and support the continued physical, emotional and psychological mistreatment of war-children will remain an affront to the values of normal society for many years to come, and it is not inconceivable that someone will be standing on this spot in 2114 talking about the very same issues.

In **Mark 10:14-16** we read that Jesus said *Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them.*

Two thousand years later, Jesus' love is still the same. A few fortunate children get to experience the love of Christ in their daily lives. Most however, do not. Sadly, there are many young children in the world who do not know what real love is.

Let us not forget that children are the future, so if we are to break this cycle of abuse it is vital that War Children of whatever colour, creed or political persuasion should **not** be ignored, but instead be given a voice. As Christians we have a responsibility to ensure that they no longer remain the invisible victims.

Thankyou

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