Johanna Fleischhauer

War Causes Traumatization in Children –
In the Past and Today

"I only learned to survive,
I never learned to live."
Hildegard Knef

This sentence expresses an experience typical of a generation whose childhood
and youth was dominated by economic crisis, a dictatorial regime, war and ex-
treme, sometimes life-threatening difficulties in post-war times. Basic needs of
children were barely – if ever – satisfied; all the more there were few chances to
digest experiences of extreme violence and death. In Germany after the Second
World War an "Unnotized Generation" grew up practising survival and adjust-
ment strategies with apparent success. Only recently a repressed suffering be-
hind this surface started to be discussed in public.2

One reason for this growing interest may be the advancing age of the affected
people: Starting at the 5th or 6th decade of life the memories and emo-
tions of childhood emerge more fre-
quent and an increasing importance
for the personal interpretation of life is
attached to them.

Another reason can be found in current sociopolitical structures and pro-
cesses containing political violence. They may reactivate emotions linked
with the old trauma. In this regard a new quality was reached by the attacks
of September 11th 2001, the following German involvement in military actions
worldwide and a mass media presenta-
tion of highly emotive character that has been evoking feelings of direct ex-
posure to mortal danger in many peo-
ple.

David Becker at the Free University
of Berlin underlines the connection be-
tween new events of political violence
and re-emerging trauma in affected
people.3 His experiences are derived from
the Institut of Mental Health and
Human Rights in Santiago de Chile
(ILAS) as well as from projects in Ger-
many and other European countries.
Though he focusses on the significance
of the special cultural and political con-
text he refers to a theoretical approach
that has helped to understand and sup-
port people affected by political vio-
ence under various circumstances.

His basic assumption is that the links
between psychological, sociocultural
and political processes are constitutive
in dealing with political trauma. Ac-

1 Originally: "Die unauffällige Generation", in: "Andere haben es noch viel schlimmer
gehabt", broadcasted by Westdeutscher Rundfunk 3, 10/3/’2002 in its program
"Lebenszeichen", that presents human case studies and extraordinary experiences.
2 In the program mentioned above the psychotherapists Irene Wielputz from
Cologne and Helga Spranger from Stade contribute to this discussion. Peter Hein,
physician and psychiatrist, describes in his book „Maikäfer fliegt“, 1994, Kösel Verlag,
how he discovered the significance of war-related traumata behind his clients' multiple
symptoms. Other interesting case studies are presented in; Hartmut Radebold,
„Abwesende Väter", Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
Informations about current publications and actions can be found at the internet
address: www.kriegskind.de.

3 Becker, David, Trauerprozesse und Trau-
merverarbeitung im interkulturellen Zusam-
menhang. Zeitschrift für Politische Psycho-

Correspondence: Johanna Fleischhauer,
Regenstraße 14a, D-45529 Hattingen,
Germany, Tel.: 02324/82462,
e-mail: j-fleischhauer@gmx.de.
La guerre traumatise des enfants – aujourd’hui comme hier

Résumé  L’article présente des expériences faites dans le contexte de la société allemande. Il s’agit des traumatismes subis par les enfants durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale – un sujet dont on n’a commencé à parler ouvertement que ces dernières années. Nous fondant sur certaines publications ainsi que sur la "théorie des traumatismes séquentiels" de Hans Keilson (repris par David Becker), nous sommes d’avis que les expériences traumatiques vécues par des enfants durant la dernière guerre ont encore des effets aujourd’hui. Un travail effectué à ce niveau pourrait permettre de prévenir des évolutions politiques destructrices et de gérer avec plus de prudence la peur de la guerre dont souffrent aujourd’hui certains enfants.

According to Becker these factors cannot be understood and cleared up separately, but only in combination taking into account their mutual influence and the source of traumatization. According to Bruno Bettelheim Becker calls this source “extreme situation”, leading to “extreme traumatization”. Understanding the patient’s suffering and the meaning he or she may ascribe to it requires the understanding of the extreme situation in all its main facets.

“Extreme traumatization is never merely the destruction of an individual personality or merely a socio-political process; it always comprises both aspects.”

It is not caused by a single event but by a process that may last for a very long period or even a lifetime. In this process different sequences have to be distinguished.

This concept is derived from the extraordinary study “Sequential Traumatization in Children” by Hans Keilson. Keilson, a physician and psychiatrist, lives in the Netherlands. At the end of the Second World War and the defeat of the Nazis he was appointed member of a commission that decided on the future of the surviving Jewish orphans being hidden in Dutch families or elsewhere in the underground or – in small number – returning from Concentration Camps. Long and detailed interviews with every child were taken down and kept in files.

Twenty-five years later Keilson saw himself confronted with problems of the “Second Generation” that were related to their parents’ early traumatization and changes in their personality. This motivated him to re-analyse the post-war documents. Then he made contact with all the former war orphans he could find out either in the Netherlands or in Israel. So he realized many follow-up interviews permitting of a rich and well-founded analysis of long-term effects.

Keilson as well as Becker underline the relevance of sociogenetical and political factors to understand traumatizing experiences caused by political conditions and deal with their psychological representation. In the process of traumatization he defines three sequences:

- The starting phase with elements of “preluding" threat.
- Direct exposure to extreme violence and constant threat to life (in his study this comprises life in the underground or in the concentration camp).
- The “time after” (here: the post-war period with problems in social reintegration and unbound emotions of forlornness).

The traumatizing effects of the third sequence have been widely underestimated whereas many war orphans interviewed by Keilson as adults regarded it the worst time of all. They felt emotionally isolated while people around them wanted to forget the horrors of the past and go ahead in rebuilding their civil life.

A comparable study does not exist in Germany, but the texts cited before and many biographies and documents of Oral History reveal that during war and post-war times many adults could not mobilize enough strength to get aware of their children’s feelings, to console and reassure them in the context of extreme situations. This missing fulfillment of basic needs cannot but provoke serious consequences.

Keilson analyses in a highly differentiating way obstructions in the development of affected children according to their age at the starting point of the second sequence. So his study is of a great value to every professional who is concerned with the consequences of extreme, politically rooted violence in children.

To my opinion the attention for this topic should be intensified in therapy as well as in the public discourse.

One focus should be directed towards the children of the Second World War; their anxieties, suffering and disturbances should be named and acknowledged. (This does not at all intend to compare or even set it off against the victims of the Nazi regime. "Suffering is a subjective process and should never be abused for political attempts of justification or revenge.") But individuals having met empathy and acknowledgement while suffering will more likely pass it to others, in their private interactions as well as in a political context. The German psychiatrist Horst Eberhard Richter noted the "wave of empathy" towards suffering US-Americans after September 11th whereas voices of revenge were followed by irration and reserve in parts of the German population. Possibly traumatia of war – conscious or not – have an influence on current processes like this one.

What has been passed in the families since the World War(s) by talking about extreme experiences, by withholding them, by behaviour? May the oppres-

---


sion of these experiences turn into a base for politically goaded anxiety or aggression? Will it contribute to unnerve adults, so that they are not able to stand or understand children who are afraid of political violence now? What happens in children whose teacher tells them that something like the attack of 11/9 will soon hit all of us and who find no other trusted person within reach to give them a feeling of security and a realistic perspective?

So if we discuss the psychological effects of war in children our main topic are the children of to-day. What strengthens adults so that they can face precarious realities and, in the same time, remain open to children who need confidence and orientation? How can they maintain vitality, courage and chances for common enjoyment in their every-day-life with children? Recently a social pedagogue told about the following experience: Shortly after 11/9 she prepared a birthday party together with some children. Suddenly a child came to her, saying with a bright smile upon its face: "I am so happy to live so that I can celebrate this day with you!"

Pedagogical and therapeutic experts can support adults and children in developing inner strength and empathy. Peaceful conditions so that they may live and not only survive can only be preserved and built up by political power.

---
