IS THERE SUCH A THING AS AN EASTERN EUROPEAN CHILDHOOD?

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Photo credit: Soviet poster showing a nursery with a factory in the background (1931). London School of Economics Library, CC0 1.0

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Is there such a thing as an Eastern European childhood?

The immediate answer to this question is simple: of course not. The idea of Eastern European history in the German sense, i.e. the entirety of Central European, East European, Russian and Eurasian history ("Osteuropäische Geschichte") as a coherent, continuous and clearly definable field has long been refuted.

There is no such thing as Eastern European history (despite the immense institutional backing it has received as an academic discipline, and despite all the professorships, handbooks and courses of study devoted to the subject), and therefore no such thing as a history of Eastern European childhood.

However, it is worthwhile considering this question in more detail, as it draws our attention to the important issue of how we think about the history of childhood. This field of research is booming, as almost every relevant introduction happily and rightly attests. Nevertheless, it is currently still finding its feet. One important question goes to the heart of the subject: Is there such a thing as a history of childhood (as a phenomenon that can be thought of in the singular)? If this were not the case and we decided to pluralize the topic, would we not risk losing it as a subject altogether? How do we deal with the collective singular of history of childhood, considering that empirical research has shown an almost overwhelming diversity in the treatment of young people? What roles do Eurocentrism as a habit of thought, practices of colonialism, Disneyfication, or the worldwide triumph of the kindergarten as an institution play in the interconnections and hierarchies of global childhoods? How can we structure this as a discipline? What priorities might we set? Remarkably enough, this brings us back to Eastern Europe, both as a separate entity and as part of Europe.

L: "I'm bored at home!" R: "I'm happy in the crèche!" (1931). London School of Economics Library, CC0 1.0

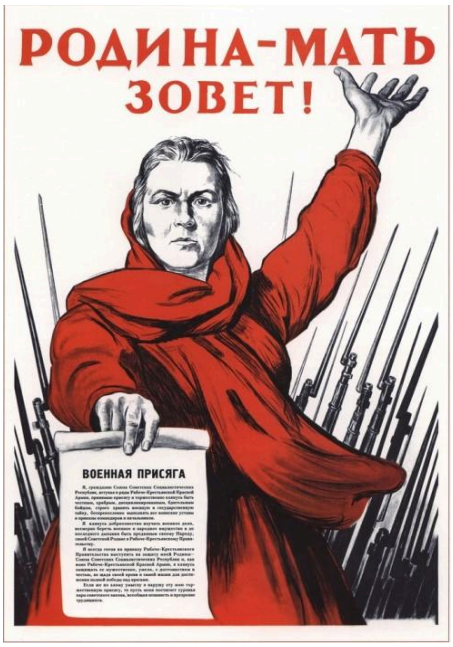
When 'the history of childhood' is mentioned as a single concept or a linear narrative, then people are usually referring to the history of an idea and a practice developed in Western and Central Europe. Its starting point is usually placed in the early modern period as part of a pedagogically determined world view, its peak belongs in the late 18th century with new ideas of innocence and purity, and its consolidation is told to have happened in the 19th century – at least for the social class that could afford the new idea of a 'protected childhood', i.e.

primarily the bourgeoisie. It was here that modern societies created a standard that was to be of great importance for many future concepts of childhood, as a role model or as a counter-model, and often as both.

'Childhood' is a function of social structures, a reflection of values and ideals, an instrument of political action. It is a social and cultural variable. The way in which we view childhood therefore depends on the historical context as well as on the research questions we ask. Studies of the history of childhood in recent decades have developed into specialist areas that demonstrate a clear academic interest but that have by no means exhausted the field of the history of childhood. After all, the history of childhood is not limited to certain discrete topics; children have always existed and continue to exist everywhere. Historians only need to find out how past societies dealt with this fact, and whether and how they have shaped childhoods.

Within the discipline of Eastern European history, the study of historical childhoods takes place in various areas, and these can be differentiated thematically and geographically. There are two areas of research that have become almost traditional, both of which are close to the history of childhood but which have grown from other roots and pose their own questions. The first is family history, which was and is of great importance for the region of South-Eastern Europe, and the second is the history of schools, which has long been given a great deal of space and consideration, especially in East-Central Europe. The history of childhood, on the other hand, in a narrower sense and as a discipline that deals with the social shaping of an anthropological constant, which poses questions about concepts, practices and images, has only begun to develop in the last few years.

The greatest focus within this field is geographical and – unsurprisingly, given the Russia-centric nature of Eastern European history, as defined in the German system – lies in Russia and the Soviet Union. For Russian history of childhood in the 19th century, the area of most fascination seems, somewhat exaggeratedly, to revolve around the question of how concepts associated with a Western, middle-class childhood were adapted in Russia. In contrast, the analysis of Soviet childhoods focuses more on what was different: Early Soviet pedagogy and childhood culture are of particular interest as counter-concepts to the bourgeois childhood. Stalinist and late-Soviet childhoods are then viewed primarily from the perspective of the politicization of childhood. These questions are also applied to research into childhoods in other socialist countries. “Socialist childhoods” thus forms an important temporally, geographically and politically defined area of historical childhood research. The concept is extended further by the area of “post-socialist childhoods”, which is primarily understood as a kind of collective memory.



“Mother Homeland Calls”, a well-known Soviet propaganda poster from the early days of the German-Soviet War starting in Juni 1941. The text held in the right hand is the oath of allegiance to the Red Army, the presence of the latter is indicated by the rifle butts and bayonets in the background. Free access - no reuse

If the focus is on violence and displacement as transformative events, not only on an individual level, but as a general driving force in the history of childhood, then the adoption of Timothy Snyder's concept of bloodlands

Bloodlands

"Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin" is the title of an influential book by the American historian Timothy Snyder (1969–) that has been widely discussed in academic circles. It was first published in 2010 and has since been translated and published in numerous editions. The term "Bloodlands" refers to a region that today corresponds to the Baltic states, large parts of Poland, Belarus, parts of Ukraine and western Russia (including today's Kaliningrad Oblast or the northern part of historical East Prussia) and was particularly affected by the extermination policy and mass murder of broad parts of the population by Nazi Germany on the one hand and the Soviet Union under Stalin on the other. The mass crimes perpetrated by both regimes are constitutive for the spatial concept of the "Bloodlands" and are described by Snyder as a spatially and temporally coherent event complex. Various aspects of the work are the subject of controversy to this day – including the geographical determination of the Bloodlands, their coherence and acceptability as a closed area of investigation, and not least the comparison and – in the oppinion of some critics – equation of National Socialist and Stalinist crimes.

(that is, the tormented lands that lay between Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany) and a focus on Eastern Europe initially seem obvious. Nevertheless, research that takes a more Anglo-American concept of Central Europe as its starting point, or sees the whole of Europe as the unit of investigation, has proven to be particularly fruitful.

However, the most important, most self-evident and therefore also most problematic geographical unit for studying the history of childhood is the nation state. This is partly due to the fact that modern childhoods were and continue to be predominantly thought of as a national resource. The idea of children as a national resource that must be especially protected and can be stolen is reflected not only in state infrastructure and international law, but recently also in the most horrific war crimes. Even seemingly innocent children's cultures, which often include elements of idyll and nostalgia, are tied to national narratives strikingly often and remain effective within nationally defined target groups. Aside from the significance of such empirical findings, however, the history of childhood often simply ties in with the nation as a traditional historiographical unit. Transnational, regional and global perspectives that take interdependencies into account must still be considered an exception in the history of childhood.

To return to the question posed at the outset: No, there is no such thing as an Eastern European childhood. But the findings – particularly within the discipline of Russian and

Eastern European history – that have emerged from reflecting on regional and historical concepts can and should be applied to the history of childhood, since the results of this work would be fruitful. Moving forward, historical research must take into account overlapping and changing areas of interest, and must consider geographical, political, religious, social, ethnic and political groupings, while at the same time analyzing the various discourses and narratives of childhood and generally acknowledging the inevitable diversity of the experience of childhood. It is quite possible that it will be the diversity, complexity and rapid change – in many cases also the demise – of the various social units within which childhood took place that will ultimately emerge as the distinguishing feature of childhood in Eastern Europe in recent history. However, if it does, it should be as the result of extensive research, and should not be an unquestioned assumption.

English translation: William Connor ↗, Gwen Clayton ↗

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