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Childhood at War: Growing Up during World War II

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Listening to the Young: Methods, Ethics, and Sources
- **Chapter 2** Homes on the Brink: Family Structures Under Strain
- **Chapter 3** Classrooms at the Front: Schooling, Evacuation, and Informal Learning
- **Chapter 4** Play Under Sirens: Games, Creativity, and Everyday Agency
- **Chapter 5** Rations and Resourcefulness: Food, Hunger, and the Black Market
- **Chapter 6** Work and Responsibility: Child Labor, Caregiving, and Civic Duty
- **Chapter 7** Nights of Fear: Air Raids, Bombing, and Shelter Life
- **Chapter 8** Children Under Occupation: Control, Collaboration, and Quiet Resistance
- **Chapter 9** Propaganda and Persuasion: Youth Movements and Civic Socialization
- **Chapter 10** Borders in Motion: Displacement, Evacuation, and Refuge
- **Chapter 11** Letters and Diaries: Private Voices in Public Catastrophe
- **Chapter 12** Siblings, Friends, and Fictive Kin: Networks of Care
- **Chapter 13** Girls at War, Boys at War: Gendered Paths to Survival
- **Chapter 14** Race, Empire, and Belonging: Colonial and Minority Childhoods
- **Chapter 15** Violence Witnessed: Harm, Silence, and Coping
- **Chapter 16** Captivity and Separation: Ghettos, Camps, and Prisoners of War Families
- **Chapter 17** Child Fighters and Couriers: Mobilization, Coercion, and Choice
- **Chapter 18** Health and Healing: Disease, Disability, and Care
- **Chapter 19** Cities Besieged, Villages Transformed: Urban–Rural Contrasts
- **Chapter 20** Faith, Ritual, and Moral Worlds: Religion and Meaning-Making
- **Chapter 21** On the Home Front: United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand
- **Chapter 22** The Soviet War Childhood: Siege, Evacuation, and Aftermath
- **Chapter 23** Axis Societies and Their Youth: Germany, Italy, and Japan
- **Chapter 24** Asia–Pacific Under Fire: China, Korea, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands
- **Chapter 25** Endings and Afterlives: Liberation, Return, and Rebuilding

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Introduction

This book begins with a simple conviction: that the experiences of children in wartime are not peripheral to history but central to it. Childhood at War: Growing Up during World War II gathers oral histories, diaries, letters, photographs, institutional records, and sociological studies to reconstruct the everyday worlds of the young across combatant and occupied societies. By foregrounding the voices of children—captured in the immediacy of notebooks, whispered decades later in interviews, or embedded in the statistics of relief agencies—we can better understand how war reorganized the most intimate spaces of life: the classroom, the kitchen table, the playground, the shelter, and the street.

The chapters that follow are organized around core domains of childhood—family, education, play, labor, health, belief, and belonging—while also tracing the specific geographies of the conflict. The approach is comparative by design. A siren in London, a ration line in Shanghai, a clandestine lesson in occupied Warsaw, an evacuation train in the Soviet Union—each scene is both local and globally entangled. Rather than ranking suffering, the book juxtaposes cases to reveal patterns and contrasts: how policy shapes possibility, how community networks blunt or sharpen risk, and how age, gender, class, race, and legal status mediate exposure to danger and access to care.

Methodologically, this is a study at the intersection of social history and sociology. Oral testimonies and diaries provide texture and perspective, yet they are read alongside school rosters, welfare files, court records, and health surveys that map broader structures. Memory is fallible, but it is also evidence: it shows what narrators felt was at stake and how meanings evolved over a lifetime. Throughout, the book weighs immediacy against hindsight, triangulating sources to avoid romanticizing resilience or flattening trauma into a single storyline. Translation choices, ethical protocols, and archival silences are made explicit so that readers can evaluate the evidentiary base.

Several themes recur. Education did not simply pause; it moved, shrank, improvised, and sometimes radicalized. Family life absorbed shock after shock as fathers were conscripted, mothers entered new forms of work, and siblings assumed adult responsibilities. Children learned to navigate curfews, checkpoints, and propaganda—sometimes internalizing state messages, sometimes subverting them with jokes, drawings, and small acts of refusal. Hunger and scarcity demanded creativity; informal economies flourished; care work expanded. Play persisted, not as denial, but as a means to rehearse danger, process loss, and claim moments of normalcy.

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The book also tracks the layered harms of violence—direct, indirect, and structural—and the uneven pathways to recovery. Some wounds were visible; others rippled through sleep, attention, trust, and speech. Institutions mattered: clinics, schools, faith communities, youth groups, and aid agencies could nurture or neglect. The long-term psychological and social effects of wartime childhood are traced into adolescence and adulthood: educational attainment, health trajectories, civic participation, and the transmission of memory within families. Resilience appears here not as a personal trait alone but as a relationship between individuals and the resources their societies provided—or withheld.

Geographically, the study moves from besieged cities to altered villages, from home fronts distant from battlefields to territories under occupation. It follows children across borders as evacuees, refugees, internees, and adoptees, attending to the particularities of colonial subjects and minority populations whose stories have too often been marginalized. The aim is neither to universalize nor to fragment, but to hold in view a connected history of young people living through war in Europe, Asia, the Pacific, and beyond.

Finally, this is a book for multiple audiences. For historians, it offers a source-based synthesis that widens the archive of World War II to include children's perspectives as evidence rather than illustration. For educators, it provides case studies, concepts, and classroom-ready insights that invite critical empathy without sensationalism. For readers more broadly, it is an invitation to listen with care to those who were asked to grow up too quickly, and to consider how the policies and solidarities of adults shaped children's chances. If we take childhood seriously as a category of analysis, we come closer to understanding both the costs of war and the possibilities of repair.

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CHAPTER ONE: Listening to the Young: Methods, Ethics, and Sources

Understanding childhood during World War II demands a careful approach to historical inquiry, one that prioritizes the voices and experiences of children themselves. This isn't always straightforward, as children's perspectives have historically been marginalized or viewed through the lens of adult interpretation. For decades, research about children often meant research *on* children, with adults acting as proxies and assuming children were too immature to articulate their own worlds. However, a shift has occurred, recognizing children as active agents and valuable sources of information. Our methods, therefore, must reflect this commitment to listening.

The primary method for this book involves a blend of oral histories, personal diaries, and a critical examination of sociological and institutional records. Each source type presents its own strengths and limitations, and by triangulating these diverse perspectives, we aim to construct a nuanced and empathetic understanding of wartime childhood. This approach moves beyond simply adding children as another demographic to the historical canvas; it seeks to repaint that canvas altogether, prioritizing children's experiences to gain a fresh understanding of the war.

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Oral histories are a cornerstone of this endeavor, offering direct access to the memories of those who lived through the war as children. These interviews, often conducted decades after the events, provide rich, first-hand accounts of daily life, emotional impacts, and coping strategies. The act of recounting one's childhood wartime experiences can be a profound process, allowing individuals to reflect on the meaning they attribute to these events across their lifespan. Researchers employ techniques like free association narrative interviews to allow participants to set their early experiences within the context of their entire life story, exploring the psychological repercussions and coping mechanisms.

However, working with oral histories, especially from older adults recalling their childhoods, presents inherent challenges. Memory is not a perfect recording device; it is fluid, reconstructive, and can be influenced by subsequent life experiences and overarching societal narratives. Metanarratives, which are often morally-weighted frameworks, can subtly shape how individuals recall and present their stories. Interviewers must be skilled in asking thoughtful, on-the-spot follow-up questions, attuned to the subtleties of communication, to delve beneath these broader narratives and access more visceral, variegated childhood memories.

The ethical landscape of conducting research with individuals who experienced

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childhood trauma, particularly those affected by war, is complex and paramount. The well-being of the participants must always be the top priority, ensuring that research does not inflict further harm on already vulnerable individuals. This necessitates meticulous adherence to ethical guidelines, emphasizing respect for minors, children's rights, and the potential for research outcomes to contribute positively to services for these children. Key ethical principles include informed consent, harm prevention, and reciprocity.

Obtaining informed consent from those who were children during the war, even as adults, requires careful consideration. It means clearly explaining the research's purpose, methods, and potential uses in terms that are easily understood, giving participants the opportunity to decide whether to participate without coercion. For minor participants, written consent from parents and verbal consent from the child is generally required, with the child’s decision being paramount. Researchers must be transparent about potential risks and costs, and establish systems for referral if participants experience emotional or psychological distress during the interview process. Building rapport is also crucial to mitigate fears and stigma.

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Diaries and letters offer an immediate, unfiltered glimpse into the wartime experiences of children, capturing their thoughts and feelings as events unfolded. Unlike retrospective oral histories, these sources provide a contemporaneous record, reflecting what the authors considered important enough to document at the time. From the anxieties and loneliness to moments of unexpected joy, these personal writings reveal the psychological states of children grappling with unprecedented circumstances. The very act of inscription could also foster a sense of connection with absent loved ones.

The historical significance of children's diaries is immense, as they offer unique insights into daily life, often detailing mundane yet crucial aspects like food, clothing, and family dynamics that official records might overlook. For instance, the diaries of Kindertransport refugees vividly illustrate how children processed trauma, maintained their identity, and built resilience while displaced. However, the survival of these diaries is often a matter of chance, and they represent only a small fraction of the millions of children who endured the war. Furthermore, some diaries, like Anne Frank's, were later rewritten with an audience in mind, adding a layer of editorial intent that historians must consider.

Beyond personal narratives, institutional records and sociological studies provide essential contextual data, allowing us to move from individual experiences to broader patterns and structures. These sources include school rosters, welfare files, court records, health surveys, and the extensive documentation from aid organizations. The Arolsen Archives, for example, holds over 64,000 child tracing files, documenting the fates of tens of thousands of children left to fend for themselves after the war, including interviews, questionnaires, and medical records. These records often contain

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factual information alongside poignant details of children's hopes and dreams.

Sociological studies, both contemporary to the war and conducted in its aftermath, offer frameworks for understanding the collective impact of conflict on children. These studies might track the long-term psychological and social effects of wartime childhood, examining areas like educational attainment, health trajectories, and civic participation. They help to identify how factors such as age, gender, class, race, and legal status mediated children's exposure to danger and their access to care. By combining the intimate detail of personal stories with the broader scope of sociological data, we can avoid generalizing individual experiences while also recognizing common threads of resilience and vulnerability.

Another valuable source comes from organizations like the War Childhood Museum, which actively collects oral histories and objects from children who have experienced war. Their methodological approach, often trauma-oriented, focuses on eliciting memories and understanding the intergenerational effects of war trauma. Such initiatives not only preserve crucial historical evidence but also contribute to public understanding and empathy. These collections often feature activity plans based on personal objects, stories, and diary excerpts, enabling educators to engage with children's wartime experiences in a tangible way.

The interdisciplinary nature of this research is a distinct advantage. By combining insights from social history, psychology, and sociology, we can approach the complex subject of childhood at war from multiple angles. For instance, the collaboration between oral historians and cognitive psychologists has proven beneficial in understanding how autobiographical memories are formed and retrieved, helping to navigate the challenge of metanarratives in oral testimonies. This cross-disciplinary dialogue enriches the analysis, offering a more comprehensive understanding of both the immediate and long-term impacts of war on the young.

Ultimately, the goal is to listen carefully to the young, both those who wrote in their diaries in the midst of conflict and those who shared their memories years later. This involves an ongoing process of critically evaluating sources, acknowledging the inherent biases and limitations of each, and always prioritizing the ethical responsibility to the individuals whose lives are at the heart of this historical inquiry. By doing so, we hope to illuminate the profound and often overlooked experiences of children during World War II, contributing to a more complete and humane understanding of this pivotal period in human history.

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