

CHILDREN OF THE GREEK CIVIL WAR OF THE 1940S IN COUNTRIES OF THE SOVIET BLOC: PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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SOTIRIS I. KOTSOPOULOS

Introduction

During the Greek civil war in the years 1948 and 1949 from the northern provinces of the country about 25.000 children were transferred by the Greek Communist Party (KKE) to countries of the Soviet bloc. The Communist Party explained that this was an act of saving the children from the horrors of war. The Greek Government accused the Communist Party that it was merely attempting to set up a future army of devoted followers who in due course would return to Greece to try once again to take over the country. At the same time in Greece under the auspices of Queen Frederica a Royal Fund was raised in order to establish children's villages across the country in order to protect children from war zones from being abducted by the communists. About 20.000 children were placed in the children's villages. Most of them returned to their families at the end of the war in 1950. With regard to those sent to communist countries the Greek Communist Party (KKE) contented that they were removed from their country with the consent of their parents, and that in any case most parents were already enlisted with the guerrilla army.

The children were placed in specially set up children's homes in Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland and Asian provinces of the Soviet Union. These homes were run jointly by the authorities of the host country and the 'Committee for the Aid of the Child' under the authority of the Greek Communist Party. The children grew up in the former communist countries and in due course most became citizens of them. To Greece were allowed to return in 1982 those who wanted to, provided they were of Greek national origin. Those of Slavic-Macedonian origin - nearly 50% of the total number of evacuated children - were not free to return.

The present study raised the question whether there were immediate and long term psychological consequences related to removing these children from their homes and sending them to the countries of the former Soviet Bloc. A sequence of adverse life experiences probably affected these children such as: war conditions in their villages, extreme violence of the civil conflict, the collapse of the family and the breakup of the family ties, the hazardous and long trip out of the country and life in total institutions (children's homes) for a number of years.

The study is based on reference books most of them in Greek. These are: The proceedings of a congress which

was held in Hungary in 2003 published under the title «Παιδομάζωμα» ή «Παιδοσώσιμο» edited by Ελένη Λαγάνη και Μαρία Μποντίλα (2012), Children of the Greek Civil War των Loring Danforth και Riki Van Boeschoten (2012), «Πολύχρονος να ζεις μεγάλη Στάλιν» της Μαρίας Μποντίλα (2004), Γκριτζώνας Κ. Τα Παιδιά του Εμφυλίου Πολέμου (1998), και Τσιτζιλώνης Χ. (επιμ) Τα Παιδιά του Εμφυλίου και της Πολιτικής Προσφυγιάς (2011).

Life under civil war

Life under the conditions of the civil war was extremely painful particularly in areas which were claimed by both the guerrillas and the government army. Under the shadow of the regular army operated also right wing irregulars (e.g. Bourantades in Evros) who terrorized peasants. The communist guerrillas were not less harsh. Famine was also a serious problem in the villages isolated by war and blockade. Bombing by the Greek Air Force of villages under the control of guerrillas made life for families more hazardous.

Destruction of family life and uprooting

Civil war brings conflict in the community and disruption within the family particularly when one member sides with one and the other with the other warring faction. The conflict is often mortal. The member of the family that perishes first is the father. The mother may follow next in which case the family ceases to exist and the children may become homeless if there is no extended family to provide shelter and support. The unprotected child is left at the mercy of the warring factions.

Psychological trauma

The child who suddenly loses his family or who is removed from his parents, experiences break up of important attachment ties (affectionate bonds). This is a unique experience for many children who suddenly become uprooted and destitute. The separation from relatives with crying and the hasty move out of the country remained a painful memory to most of them. In the journey towards the countries of the Soviet bloc the children found themselves among a crowd of unknown people none of whom was able to pay attention to their distress. Siblings were holding hands of each other in case they were lost but in vain since they were separated in any case according to age. And thus in semi chaotic conditions were moved by trucks and trains to Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Hungary, East Germany, and by boat to Poland and

* Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, University of Calgary, Canada

and Asiatic areas of the Soviet Union. When they reached their final destination they were exhausted, sick, hungry, dirty and with lice and psychologically traumatized.

The Hungarian physician Messaros Santor who was asked to examine 111 children on April 1948 observed «... These children presented images of terrible war misery. They were dressed in rags. They were scratching wounds in arms and face». Others reported that approximately only 10% were in good condition and that most presented with «psychological trauma» - obviously posttraumatic stress disorder. Similar observations were recorded in Czechoslovakia. «The psychological problems continued 4-5 years before they subsided» according to a foster mother in one of the children's home. The experience of having lost their family became more painful when it became clear that the loss was permanent.

The host countries that suddenly were asked to take care of a large number of children made a substantial effort to provide adequate living facilities, in hygienic environment, good food and medical care for the multiple health problems presented by these children. As grownup these individuals now express gratitude for the countries that took care of them at the moment they needed it the most.

Children's homes: Total institutions

The children were placed in 'children's homes' that functioned under uniform conditions in all host countries. These homes were total institution as described by Erving Goffman in the book *Asylums* (1961). The children lived, attended school and played in total isolation from the surrounding communities. When the Czechoslovakian authorities advised mixing with the community at large the Greek Communist Part advised that the operation of the homes ought to be kept confidential. Even the parents of the children had no access to their children. Correspondence was strictly censored.

The role of the absent mothers was undertaken by women refugees from Northern Greece who had followed the retreating guerrillas. They became mother substitute and many children became attached to them and as adults remember them fondly. The children also developed strong ties with one another and became "adelphoi" (brothers). As adults these children meet regularly at the host country in gatherings of friendship and love.

The daily program

The daily life was ruled by a strict program. Discipline was emphasized. Good teachers taught the children the Greek language and how to become good communists. The children were told that one day would return to Greece to free the country from the "royalist-fascist" regime and to create a new country. These is some evidence from the Czechoslovakian archives that physical punishment was applied to some children hard to discipline.

In a community of children's homes at Radebeul near Dresden the conditions of training of the adolescents were particularly intensive in communist indoctrination. It included military training in preparation to liberate Greece (Stefan Troebst

see Λαγάνη & Μποντίλα 2012).

Having grown up and having learned the language of the host country the adolescents were directed to technical schools not of their choice and subsequently were placed in industrial jobs. At the same time they gradually moved out of the children's home. The political changes at the same time weakened the control of the Greek Communist Party had on them.

Are there psychological effects on these former captive children?

No study exists on the immediate and long term psychological impact of removing these children from their parents and homes and raising them in children's homes in the former communist countries (total institutions). The circumstantial evidence provided by the present report suggests that probably most children suffered posttraumatic stress disorder which lasted for years.

Long term consequences have also not been reported. Some observations however may be made emerging from the memories told by former captive children.

- Some adults now have expressed sorrow for having lost their childhood. "Who is going to give me back my childhood?"

- At reunion with parents, grownup children remained cold and were unable to relate with them. The parents themselves were also unable to respond to their children who had grown up in totally different environment. Some children wanted to return to their former residence communist countries, but this was not allowed by the Greek government. Subsequently they immigrated to western countries.

- Return to Greek villages left many years earlier was particularly painful.

- Individuals of Slavic-Macedonian origin settled either in the State of Skopje or in western countries (Australia, Canada). They have formed an international net demanding the right of return to 'Macedonia of the Aegean'.

- A mother, former captive child in the system of children's homes, dreaded the possibility of her own daughter losing her, the mother, and having to live alone. Preferable is even death than living as she did in her childhood.

- Some former children from the Eastern European countries now pensioners return to Greece in order to die in the country of their origin. Some bring with them a young child, a grandchild or a nephew to raise in Greece obviously living the phantasy of growing up not as captive child in a foreign country.

Conclusions

The psychological consequences of this immense social - psychosocial experiment on individuals concerned could not be assessed at this late date. There is no doubt however that posttraumatic stress disorder was a serious problem for several children. As adults most of these children it appears to have settled in the countries where they were first placed. Some, whose testimony is recorded, report various adjustments difficulties which reflect the experience of having lived

destitute and without parents.

The organizers of the transfer of children to former Soviet block countries have not, to this date, adequately explained their motives and decision to stage this operation. They

just repeat the original explanation that they were saving the children from the horrors of the civil war. It appears this is an inadequate explanation for a grandiose project which obviously failed to reach its objectives.

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