

Fearing the Memory of Father: The Impact of Biological Origins on the Life Course of Latvian ‘Third Reich’ Children Born of War

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Abstract. Based on an extensive review of scholarly works on WWII Children Born of War (CBOW) in Western Europe, in contrast to a content analysis of the interviews of 38 Latvian CBOW subjects, this proceeding argues that the primary stimulus driving the hiding and augmenting of CBOW memories in post-war Soviet-occupied Latvia differed from that in the West. It argues that, while there existed a fear of social reprisals in the West, a fear primarily focused on social discrimination and its impact on the well-being of CBOW and their families. In contrast, in Soviet-occupied Latvia there existed a mortal fear of institutional repressions, a fear primarily focused on individual and family survival. Moreover, utilizing examples and statements from said Latvian WWII CBOW subjects, as well as from academic literature on the Soviet Union and Soviet-occupied Latvia, this proceeding illustrates how a societal fear, and the resulting ‘silence,’ permeated all of society. Thus, this proceeding identifies that the practice of hiding and augmenting memoirs for fear of the Soviet regime was widespread in post-war Latvia, that Third Reich (TR) CBOW were just one cohort group trying to hide their past from the Soviet regime and that the resulting atmosphere of societal ‘silence’ may have been conducive to these ends. Finally, after having illustrated the fear which existed in society and among such CBOW, this proceeding shows how that fear in many cases came to dictate the life course of TR CBOW in Latvia.

Keywords: Children Born of War, fear, Latvia, memory, repressions, Soviet Union, totalitarianism

Introduction

Children born of war (CBOW) are those children born to a local parent and a member of a foreign military force (Lee 2017, 24). Such children and their families are often stigmatized for traits related to their biological origins. As a result of discrimination, CBOW often suffer from adverse effects, yet another important

source of such effects, especially the often-cited crises of identity, was the ways in which the caregivers of CBOW, and often the children themselves, attempt to avoid stigma by hiding ‘discreditable’ traits (Lee 2017, 7–8). In trying to better understand how the experiences of Latvian CBOW were unique to other such children in Europe, the research question of this study was ‘do the experiences of avoidance differ for CBOW in Latvia, in comparison to those in Western Europe?’ Thus, the goal of the current study was to look at acts and experiences of avoidance, as recounted by Latvian CBOW, and compare them to those documented by scholarly studies of Western European CBOW. In doing so, this proceeding argues that, while the ways in which such facts of the past were hidden from society, and often even from the child, may seem the same, and while their adverse effects may be similar, the primary stimulus behind these deceptions in Soviet-occupied Latvia fundamentally differs from the cases documented in post-war Western Europe. In essence, based on a content analysis of oral history interviews related to 38 Latvian CBOW subjects, 23 fathered by ‘Third Reich’ (TR) soldiers and 15 by Soviet (USSR) soldiers,¹ this proceeding argues that, while the primary stimulus in hiding the origins of CBOW in Western Europe was a fear of social stigma, and social reprisals, in Soviet-occupied Latvia the principal stimulus was a mortal fear of institutional stigma, and institutionalized reprisals.

Methodology

In attempting to answer the aforementioned research question, the study involved the coding of the interview transcripts of Latvian CBOW subjects and isolating those segments which recounted acts of avoidance, acts of silencing, acts of erasing and those of lying about the past. In utilizing such a content analysis approach, the study proceeded to look at the ways in which those subjects came to explain the cause(s) of those isolated instances of avoidance. Finally, the findings of the study were compared to the findings of scholarly studies of CBOW in Western Europe. The current study’s findings are illustrated with *in vivo* examples from said interviews and those instances are contextualised by referring to other studies of life under Soviet totalitarianism, in general, and of Soviet-occupied Latvia, specifically.

Results

1. CBOW avoidance, as observed in Western Europe

In the post-war atmosphere of Western Europe, TR CBOW and their mothers were often socially stigmatized; they frequently endured bullying and ostracization; they were often victimized and shunned by their local communities (Lee 2017, 64–67; 89–91). Ericsson and Simonsen (2006, 10) have labelled this

environment in Western Europe as a “conspiracy of silence.” It was an atmosphere where, as they argued, there prevailed “a convergence of interests, private and public.” It was an atmosphere where, as they explained, nations and people were eager to silence taboo topics, such as fraternization, and where families and mothers of CBOW were eager to hide ‘discreditable traits’ for fear of social stigmatization. In this way, they argue that the interests of these parties converged and, consequently, CBOW families ‘conspired’ by bringing ‘silence’ into their homes. Yet, it must be noted that, when CBOW identities were hidden, families did not use only ‘silence,’ but also augmented memoirs with erasures and lies to conform to social norms (Brähler *et al.* 2012, 323; Larsen, Mochmann 2005; Lee 2017, 65; 68–69; Stelzl-Marx 2017, 347–348). Additionally, in this context, it should be noted that while studies of Western European TR CBOW often discuss how ‘discreditable’ traits were hidden from local communities for fear of social reprisals, few such studies ever note families hiding such traits from the post-war state. That is, Western European CBOW studies rarely discuss a fear of institutional reprisals² and practically never mention a mortal fear of the post-war state. Consequently, it may be said that in Western European nations WWII CBOW and their families had a fear that was primarily focused on social reprisals, and this fear caused them to hide and/or augment their memories in a way that would conform to social expectations.

2. General avoidance, as observed under the Soviet regime

In Latvia, the post-war environment was, however, fundamentally different; in Soviet-occupied Latvia there existed a widespread mortal fear of institutional repressions. During the mass deportation of 25 March 1949 alone, nearly 43,000 Latvian citizens were deported to Siberia (~2.28% of the population) (Bergmanis, Jansons, Zālīte 2005, 277). Moreover, in Soviet-occupied Latvia some 150,000 were repressed for political reasons (~7.5% of the population) and as many as 600 000 people (~30% of the population) were subject to other forms of regime-led harassments, such as being dismissed from jobs, being prohibited from attaining a higher education and/or from pursuing a career of their choice (Strods 2005, 217).

Figes (2007), as well as other scholars who have focused on the Soviet Union (for examples, see Bertaux *et al.* 2004; Duprat-Kushtanina 2013; Tumarkin 2011) have documented how average people augmented their life stories in an attempt to avoid Soviet institutionalized repressions. Figes (2007, 652) has detailed the augmentation or destruction of documents and photographs, the changing of places of residence to break ties with the past, the adoption of different names and biographies, the ways in which life stories were withheld from family members and, crucial for this study, how family histories were edited for the sake of children. Consequently, in this context, it should be recognized that a mortal fear of

the state and the ensuing mnemonic augmentations not only affected Latvian TR CBOW families, but also constituted a factor that permeated all of the society.

In fact, of both TR and USSR CBOW subjects in Latvia, 71%, or 27 respondents reported Soviet regime-led repressions targeted at their families (73.9% of the TR CBOW testimonies, and 66.6% of the USSR CBOW recounted how family members fell victim to, or escaped from Soviet state-orchestrated repressions, including murders). Furthermore, the vast majority of the subjects interviewed describe a broad societal 'silence.' That is, nearly all the interviewed subjects indicated that certain aspects of the past, such as the 1941 and 1949 mass deportations, for example, were not publicly discussed due to a societal fear of the Soviet regime. Furthermore, nearly all CBOW subjects recall that a fear of regime-led reprisals existed in their homes and often resulted in 'silence.' This environment can be better illustrated by the fact that the testimonies of USSR CBOW subjects also recount aspects of family 'silence,' usually surrounding different facets of family history, such as deportations, family history prior to the war, the service of family members in the *Waffen-SS* and their religious affiliation. One subject – the daughter of an NKVD officer and a Latvian school teacher – explained that her mother hid from her the fact that her extended family had been deported to Siberia (Female 6, 2018). "About repressions, it's strange but in our home, we never spoke of them. Most of it I learned much later", she explained. Another TR CBOW subject recalled: "One time he [grandfather] had drunk and was scolding the government and Stalin, and then Grandma was worried. We had neighbours and the wall was quite thin. Although that neighbour told everyone that she was deaf, she could hear very well. Then Grandma quieted him: 'don't speak, don't speak, you know where it will take you [Siberia]'" (Male 2, 2017). And, as one USSR CBOW subject (Female 18, 2018) described the atmosphere: "After the war you were not allowed to open your mouth. What you think, that is not known. Otherwise, you will be immediately sent to Siberia. You were not allowed to say anything. When we spoke about the governments, [we spoke] null. That was all endured quietly, that which we thought. I remember the silence. Especially [among] the farmers, who had not been caught and sent to Siberia, when everyone around them had been deported."

3. CBOW avoidance, as observed in Soviet-occupied Latvia

This societal experience of mortal fear, and the resulting societal 'silence', is a factor that should be kept in mind when exploring the experiences of Latvian CBOW, TR and Soviet. In this context, while the evaluation of social stigma and social discrimination of CBOW in occupied Latvia is beyond the scope of this proceeding, the reader should be reminded of the common idiom "you don't throw stones if you live in a glass house". Consequently, this societal fear and the resulting 'silence' may account for why reports of social stigmatization are

practically non-existent in Latvian CBOW testimonies, USSR and TR (see Gruziņš 2022).³ Moreover, the testimonies of TR CBOW subjects show that this general atmosphere of ‘silence’ was utilized by families to conceal the child’s origins. In other words, even if some TR CBOW testimonies do not recall overt acts of concealment, such as lies in the public sphere, they do show the use of this societal ‘silence’ to conceal origins. As one subject put it: “It cannot be said that I was branded [a TR CBOW], as also no one asked me [about my father]. No one ever asked me; I was never asked by anyone – ‘where is your father?’ or something like that. Nobody ever asked me that” (Female 22, 2018). Another TR CBOW recalled: “They didn’t know and also no one ever asked. If I can remember now, then I remember that no one asked me; not about my father or about anything. The war was over, everyone was happy to have survived” (Male 11, 2018).

While it can be said that, in this environment, 100% of the Latvian USSR CBOW subjects recall that their origins were broadly known by their local communities, on the other hand, it is much harder to distinguish how many TR CBOW were, in fact, successfully hidden from society and/or the state. Nevertheless, it is observed that most TR CBOW subjects recount very direct attempts made by the family to conceal their origins from the Soviet regime. Examples include grandparents registered as parents, mothers’ first husbands registered as fathers, fake names on birth certificates, stepfathers posing and being registered as the real fathers, families relocating from place to place to avoid the authorities and the changing of CBOW birth dates on documents. Furthermore, it should be noted that, for fear of being targeted by the Soviet regime, these TR ‘children,’ as they progressed into adulthood, often continued to hide the truths of their origins, some from their closest friends and even spouses. Additionally, as a direct result of a fear of being exposed to the regime, some TR CBOW in Latvia recount how they avoided traveling abroad, refrained from taking up certain vocations and joining the Communist Party. As one TR CBOW subject, who was invited to join the Party, noted: “It’s better not to worm one’s way into such things. It’s better to keep quiet and not tell [anything about] what you, yourself, really don’t know” (Male 16, 2018). Another TR CBOW subject illustrated the fear that had kept him from sharing the story of his origins for the vast majority of his life: “Just try and open your mouth, you could get put in that same building where the windows point to the East [the KGB house]” (Male 3, 2018).

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be argued that, in order to understand the experiences of Latvian TR CBOW, and their experiences concerning avoidance, it is essential to recognize how different the post-war environment in Soviet-occupied Latvia was from that in the West; in order to understand how and why CBOW

origins and memoirs were hidden in post-war Latvia, it is essential to recognize the different nature and acuteness of the fear that existed. In Soviet-occupied Latvia, the impetus to hide facts about TR CBOW originated from a fear that stemmed primarily, not from society as can be said for the West, but from the Soviet regime. Moreover, at least until the death of Stalin, it was a fear that focused not only on the well-being of TR CBOW and their families, as can be said for the West, but on their survival. Thus, it can be concluded that this mortal fear of the regime led Latvian CBOW to hide and/or augment their memories in a way that would conform to the expectations of that regime. It was primarily a fear of regime-led reprisals, not those apportioned by society, that often came to dictate the life course and memory of Latvian CBOW.

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NOTES

- 1 LOM: Museum of the Occupation of Latvia Audiovisual Material Archive. CBOW interview collection (LOM 2300/3237–3239; 3250–3253; 3288–3290; 3350e; 3351e; 3352e; 3353e; 3354e; 3355e.; 3356e; 3357e; 3358e; 3359e; 3360e; 3361e; 3362e; 3363e; 3364e; 3365e; 3366e; 3368e; 3369e; 3370e; 3371e; 3372e; 3373e; 3374e; 3375e; 3376e; 3381e; 3387e; 3388e; 3389e; 3390e; 3391e; 3392e; 3394e; 3396e; 3405e; 3406e; 3407e). Interviews recorded by Oskars Gruziņš and Aivars Reinholds 2016–2019 in accordance with European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 642571.
- 2 Nonetheless, it is true that some Western European nations did, to varying degrees, institutionally discriminate against TR CBOW and/or their families. Arguably, the Western European nation that carried out the harshest policies of this type was Norway (see Borgersrud 2005).
- 3 None of the USSR CBOW recall experiences of social discrimination, while two TR CBOW recall mild harassment (name calling) and another two experienced physical bullying by their peers.

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