# ‘WIR WOLLTEN DOCH WISSEN, WIE GROSS DIE GEFAHR WAR’: THE GERMAN WAR CHILD AS ICON AND AGENT IN BERLIN SCHOOL ESSAYS, 1946

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In recent years, the generation of German children born in the 1930s and 1940s have begun to speak publicly about their experiences during World War II, breaking their decades-long silence apparently for the first time. Publications such as Sabine Bode’s *Die vergessene Generation: Die Kriegskinder brechen ihr Schweigen* established a narrative of long-term trauma, repression of memory, and an opportunity for release in the new, empathetic, post-unification context. While their memories were afforded a privileged and prominent status, the *Kriegskinder* arguably became symbolic of German wartime victimhood. This article examines a collection of texts which pose a challenge to the portrayal of the former war children as icons of German suffering in post-unification discourse. The 1996 volume *‘Ich schlug meiner Mutter die brennenden Funken ab’: Berliner Schulaufsätze aus dem Jahr 1946*, compiled by Annett Gröschner, contains essays written in 1946 by schoolchildren living in East Berlin about their experiences in wartime and during post-war reconstruction. Using these essays, this article considers the young authors’ self-presentation as war children, accounts of their status as agents within the war, and the narrative agency they command in communicating their stories.

In den letzten Jahren haben Angehörige der deutschen Kriegskindergeneration ihr jahrzehntelanges Schweigen gebrochen, indem sie sich anscheinend zum ersten Mal öffentlich über ihre Erfahrungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg geäußert haben. Erzählt wird in vielen Veröffentlichungen, wie z.B. Sabine Bodes *Die vergessene Generation: Die Kriegskinder*

*brechen ihr Schweigen*, von langfristigen Traumata, von der Verdrängung der Erinnerung und der Chance, das Angestaute in der neuen, einfühlsameren Nachwendezeit zu thematisieren. Solchen Erinnerungen wurde ein privilegierter und prominenter Status gewährt, und aus den Kriegskindern wurde gleichzeitig ein Symbol für deutsche Kriegsopfer. Dieser Artikel untersucht eine Sammlung von Texten, die die übliche Schilderung der Kriegskinder als Ikonen deutschen Leidens im Nachwendediskurs in Frage stellen. Der von Annett Gröschner 1996 ausgewählte und eingeleitete Band *'Ich schlug meiner Mutter die brennenden Funken ab': Berliner Schulaufsätze aus dem Jahr 1946* enthält Aufsätze, die 1946 von Ostberliner Schulkindern über ihre Erfahrungen während des Krieges und der Wiederaufbauphase geschrieben wurden. Durch eine Analyse dieser Aufsätze betrachtet der vorliegende Artikel die Selbstdarstellung der jungen Schreibenden als Kriegskinder, ihre Selbstbeschreibung als Handelnde im Krieg, und ihre narrative Tätigkeit als Autoren ihrer Erlebnisse.

## INTRODUCTION

> 'Soviel Hitler war nie.' Mit dieser Formel leitet der Historiker Norbert Frei nicht nur seine scharfsinnigen Beobachtungen zum Umgang der Deutschen mit dem Dritten Reich ein, sondern bringt auch den Umstand auf den Punkt, dass momentan eine 'Flut von Filmen, Fernsehbildern und Erinnerungen uns, den Nachgeborenen' das Jahr 1945 näher denn je bringt. Blickt man auf den aktuellen Erinnerungsdiskurs, dann macht jedoch auch eine kleine Änderung des Satzes Sinn: Soviel *Kriegskindheit* war nie.'[1]

Reformulating historian Norbert Frei's comment on the sheer volume of material produced about the Third Reich in the 1990s and 2000s, the sociologist Michael Heinlein suggests that memories and representations of the former war children, those born in

Germany in the 1930s and early 1940s, are ubiquitous in contemporary cultural memory. Such accounts of the war 'from below' have indeed proliferated in the past two decades across a wide range of media and genres, as well as in political discourse.[2] As has now been well documented, this memory boom coincided with, and resulted from, the political shift which came with the end of the Cold War and German unification. Additional impetus was provided by the major anniversaries of the end of the Second World War in 1995 and 2005, as well as images of refugees fleeing Kosovo as a result of the war in the late 1990s, the first conflict in which the German armed forces had taken part since the end of World War II. The particular focus on the generation of war children can be attributed in part to the fact that this is the last surviving group to have lived through the conflict, and thus the last set of individuals who can provide eye-witness testimony.

A prominent and widely publicised contribution to discussions of the war children after the Wende was made by the journalist Sabine Bode, whose book *Die vergessene Generation: Die Kriegskinder brechen ihr Schweigen* (2004) argued strongly for recognition of the repressed trauma and suffering endured by the generation of former war children. After their decades-long silence, members of the 'Kriegskindergeneration' were now sharing their 'verschwiegenen Geschichten'[3] publicly, apparently for the first time. Texts such as Bode's establish a narrative of long-term trauma, repression of memory, and an opportunity for release in the new, empathetic, contemporary context. In this way the story of the war children's silence was framed by the wider discourse of taboo-breaking in post-unification Germany with regard to public acknowledgement of Germans as victims of the Second World War.[4]

Among the many memory texts of the past two decades, the collection *'Ich schlug meiner Mutter die brennenden Funken ab': Berliner Schulaufsätze aus dem Jahr 1946* stands out as a publication which offers *recent* memories of the conflict written by children who had

lived through the war just months before.[5] Compiled by the author and journalist Annett Gröschner in 1996, it contains a series of school essays written in 1946 in which children in East Berlin recall the war and describe post-war reconstruction. In this article I want to consider Gröschner's text within the context of recent discussions of the 'Kriegskindergeneration', focussing particularly on the tension between agency and instrumentalisation – the child as subject and as object – through a study of the way in which the figure of the war child was constructed by children themselves in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. The young authors' self-presentation as war children in their essays, and accounts of their status as agents within the war, can be seen to pose a challenge to the post-unification instrumentalisation of the war child as an icon of German suffering during World War II. This symbolic portrayal can be viewed as part of the 'the cultural myth of childhood innocence' which, as Nora Maguire has argued, is still alive and well in Germany today.[6]

## COLLECTING AND PUBLISHING THE WAR CHILDREN'S ESSAYS: 1946 AND 1996

In a striking parallel to the post-1990 discourse of breaking the war children's silence, the essays in Gröschner's collection had remained largely within the confines of archives until they were first published as a collection fifty years after they had been written.[7] Given the emphasis on authenticity in post-Wende discussions of representing the past, as well as the strong association between childhood and authenticity, it is unsurprising that the book should have been considered an 'authentisches Zeugnis'[8] and an 'authentisches Vermächtnis' (p. 7). The first edition appeared in 1996 in hardback and, in addition to typeset versions of the essays, it included reproductions of children's drawings, and photographs of the Prenzlauer Berg district. As well as the pupils' essays, there are pieces by teachers, a short drama written by schoolgirls, and accounts by three of the former war children whom Gröschner was able to

locate, and who had written essays in 1946. In its resemblance to a school book, the publication is presented almost as an artefact from the past. It is quarter-bound with black cloth, and its cover is made from rough, thick cardboard, on to which has been pasted a black-and-white photograph of a bombed-out street. The publisher's name is in small-print typescript, while the title *Ich schlug meiner Mutter die brennenden Funken ab* appears, without its subtitle, as though written in a child's handwriting. The published collection includes a selection of essays from a total of 1358 written by children from 47 schools in Prenzlauer Berg in 1946 (p. 9), most of whom had been born between 1931 and 1933 (p. 15). Spelling mistakes are retained and pupils' corrections are indicated by crossings out in the printed text, thus adding a further impression of immediacy to the essays. The texts give an account of the war from the children's perspectives, including the bombing campaign, the arrival of Soviet troops in Berlin, the liberation, as well as post-war reconstruction and the difficulties of life in the aftermath of war.

In her detailed introduction to the volume, Gröschner explains that the circumstances under which the essays were elicited, written, and collected remains unclear (pp. 9-11). She posits that the initiative came at the instigation of the local education authority following a successful exhibition of drawings by children in Reinickendorf in October 1945, entitled 'Kinder sehen den Krieg', which were the result of a locally held competition.[9] While this reflects a clear interest on the part of educators and administrators in gathering children's own accounts of what happened during the war, be it in written or graphic form, it does not appear to have been carried out in any large-scale or consistent way.[10] In addition, there seems not to have been an overt intention to help children process their experiences, but rather to secure children's views of the recent past and the present 'zur Anlage eines "Heimatkundlichen Archivs' of the Prenzlauer Berg district (p. 10). This stands in marked contrast to the emphasis in recent texts on the therapeutic function of the war children sharing

their stories. Sabine Bode, for example, asserts that the war children's stories need to be told, not only as a beneficial undertaking for individuals, but also, as she states, 'für die Identität und die Zukunft der Deutschen als Europäer'.[11] In 1945, with the emphasis on reconstruction and rehabilitation, it is perhaps hardly surprising that children's accounts were not elicited in order to heal their psychological wounds, though as Gröschner suggests, this may have been a result of the process. In addition, children's accounts of suffering were not necessarily any different from those of the wider population: everyone had experienced fear, suffering, injury, loss, violence, and death.

A first set of essays were written in January 1946, and a second between March and May 1946. In the published collection, Gröschner arranges the essays into four thematic chapters: 'Bombenangriffe' (pp. 39-83), 'Kampf um Berlin' (pp. 83-240), 'Der Krieg ist vorüber' (pp. 240-52), and 'Ein Jahr Wiederaufbau' (pp. 252-343). These headings correspond to the themed folders in which the essays are organised in the Landesarchiv in Berlin, and which may have been put together when the essays were first collected. They include such topics as 'Fliegeralarm', 'Die Russen kommen', 'Wiederaufbau/Unsere Wohnung' and 'Einst und Jetzt' (pp. 12-3). The effect of this structure is that the reader encounters a series of essays which focus on thematic content, rather than on the ages, schools, or backgrounds of the children. Thus the content, rather than the context, remains the organising factor.

## WAR CHILDREN'S AGENCY

One of the most striking aspects of the collection is the extent to which the children articulate their own part in the events of the war. They view themselves as 'social actors', to use Nicholas Stargardt's term.[12] Stargardt raises the question of children's agency in World War II, and comments on the danger of portraying children as 'the objects rather than the subjects

of history'. He argues that 'most children were still able to engage with their environment and lived the war in a network of social relationships'.[13] Similarly, Heinlein suggests an important distinction between children as objects and agents within memory culture: children can be viewed 'zum einen als *Gegenstand* bzw. Objekt der Erinnerung, zum anderen aber auch als *aktive Akteure* des Erinnerns'.[14] Moreover, children can be viewed not only as active agents within memory culture, but also as having been agents within the historical reality in which they found themselves. Indeed, historians of childhood have increasingly pointed to the importance of distinguishing between childhood as a concept and children as individuals.[15] In a broader sense, the way we think and write about childhood colours our views of *children*. As Richard Flynn writes, 'our tendency to view childhood as an idea or ideal makes it difficult for us to see childhood as lived experience'.[16] This kind of approach to conceptualisations of childhood points to a tension between the way children and childhood can be instrumentalised, invested with a symbolic burden to suit the needs of the present moment, and the 'lived experience' of real children. The 1946 essays offer a glimpse of the latter: a picture of children's experiences of war and their lives in its immediate aftermath.

In his foreword to the collection, Bernt Roder, director of the Prenzlauer Berg Museum, commends the 'topographische Genauigkeit der Beschreibung konkreter Personen, Orte und Begebenheiten' within the essays (p. 7). While this serves to confirm the impression of authenticity in the essays, it also points to the spatial agency expressed by the children.[17] In view of the sporadic nature of school attendance in the latter years of the war, the children frequently depict themselves in the home, in the streets, or in the air raid shelters. These 'adult' spaces are negotiated by children and create an impression of them as intrepid and adventurous. The title of the collection, 'Ich schlug meiner Mutter die brennenden Funken ab', already signals the child's agency. Indeed, significantly, the authors of the essays rarely

figure themselves as passive victims; rather, they talk about their attempts to survive, to escape the bombs and the street fighting, and their navigation of the rapidly changing Berlin streets to find shelter and safety. Rather than articulating their own feelings, they frequently observe the sadness or fear of smaller children, often siblings, in a way that distances them from those emotions. One child comments: 'Ein Kind birgt laut aufschluchzend das Gesicht im Schoße der Mutter. Sein Wimmern bleibt in der Luft hängen' (p. 77); another writes: 'Die kleinen Kinder schlangen die Ärmchen um die Hälse der Mütter und verbargen ihre angstvollen Gesichter in den Mänteln der Mütter, und diese wieder strichen mit zitternden Händen über die Köpfe der Kinder' (p. 70). Observations such as these construct the authors as more self-possessed in contrast to other children in their midst. This is also the case in the way children's curiosity is signalled. Like Ursula T., who comments 'Ich bin neugierig und stelle mich vor die Kellertür' (p. 65), children articulate their desire to know what was going on during the bombing. For example, Hedi R. writes 'Mit starrer Spannung lauschten wir alle, was der Drahtfunk nun sagen würde. Das Geplimper machte uns nervös. "Nun sagt doch schon, was los ist", wollten wir am liebsten rufen. Wir wollten doch wissen, wie groß die Gefahr war' (p. 69).

Strikingly, the authors' experiences of the bombing raids are constructed as a collective experience. Using 'wir', they refer to their siblings, their family, their neighbours, and the population of Berlin. Loni H., for example, is at pains to stress that although she and her family suffered in the air raid attacks, they were not alone in this: 'Ich kann es garnicht beschreiben, wie es im Keller war, ich hatte noch nie Angst, aber da mußte jeder Angst bekommen' (p. 57). When she returns to the family's flat, she finds the remnants of the cake she had been baking: 'Als ich in die Küche kam, stand mein Kuchenteig noch auf dem Tisch, bunt umschmückt und mit Glasscherben gespickt. Ich war sehr traurig darüber. Aber wenn es weiter nichts ist, die anderen Leute haben alles verloren' (p. 57). At the same time, children

write of having experienced a strong sense of relief when other families, and not their own, were the victims of the bombs. As Ilona J. writes, 'Wie war ich glücklich, dass ich noch ein Heim hatte und nicht, wie andere Leute, vor einem Nichts stand' (p. 53), or in the words of Lothar S., 'Die Bombe hat ein Nachtbarhaus getroffen. "Gott sei Dank, daß es nicht bei uns war", denkt ein jeder' (p. 61). The children's sense of the destructive power of war, and their place in it, is very clear.

Significantly, the children also articulate a sense of their own agency in rebuilding Germany after the war. As one author comments, 'Alle Deutschen, vor allem aber wir, die Jugend, haben es uns zur Aufgabe gemacht, für ein neues, freies Deutschland zu arbeiten' (pp. 34 and 235). Such statements shed light on children's concept of their own status as 'agents of future promise',[18] as the individuals on whose shoulders the responsibility of rebuilding Germany would rest. This agency is expressed as a collective endeavour. As Edelgard L. comments in a long and detailed essay about the final days of the war, 'Zwar sind die Aufräumungsarbeiten noch nicht beendet, aber wir hoffen, daß wir recht bald dieses alles überwunden haben, und einer friedensmäßigen Lebensweise entgegensehen dürfen' (p. 104). This sense of agency is bound up with a sense of optimism about the future, albeit a fairly indeterminate one expressed elsewhere in formulaic language. As Gisela K. comments, 'In dieser Zeit hatten wir nur die eine Hoffnung gehabt, dass dieser schreckliche und verderbenbringende Krieg doch endlich bald ein Ende haben werde. Nun ist es soweit. Wir alle schaffen jetzt mit frischem Mut für eine bessere und hoffnungsvollere Zukunft' (p. 58).

## NARRATIVE AGENCY

In addition to a sense of personal agency, as social actors on the stage of war, we find evidence here of children as *narrative* agents, writing their experiences in their own words. This makes for a striking contrast to the many recent accounts of children in World War II

which view this period from a much greater distance. The children undoubtedly had a certain degree of narrative freedom and choice in writing their accounts. Rather than answering specific questions posed by interviewers or psychologists, they had a degree of autonomy over the language and content of the essays. Phrases such as 'Näheres will ich in diesem Bericht schildern' (p. 66) and 'Es wäre noch viel mehr zu schreiben' (p. 216) are generic essay phrases, but also hint at the authors' awareness of their narrative agency. Inge S., for example, observes:

> Ich könnte viele schwere Angriffe schildern, wo wir uns im Keller duckten und kaum zu atmen wagten. Doch dies würde zu weit gehen und ich denke auch nicht gern an diese Zeit zurück. Einen Tag werde ich aber nie aus meinem Gedächtnis streichen können. Das war der 18. März 1945 (p. 75).

When the air raid siren sounded, Inge was unable to get home. She took shelter in an unfamiliar cellar and only just made it out alive. It is this memory in particular that Inge chooses to describe in her essay.

The children use a wide range of narrative strategies to describe the war (pp. 35-6), including poetic and rhetorical devices. Hedi R. makes a concerted effort to describe the experience of a bombing raid using onomatopoeia and suspense: 'Bum, krach – nun mußte es gleich kommen – auf unser Haus – nun – nein, noch nicht, aber nun – O, Gott – und da Rummbums – rumkrach und klirr – nun stürzte unser Haus auf uns nieder' (p. 71). Similarly, Barbara S. begins her essay: 'Hui-hui-sss-ttt-bum. Erstaunt hob ich den Kopf. Was ist denn das? Huihuihui; ein Knall folgte. Ich ließ den Besen fallen und rannte an das Fenster' (p. 167). Gröschner begs the reader's indulgence for the children's sometimes melodramatic or inelegant use of metaphor, and reads the children's attempts to describe the indescribable as 'der Versuch, die eigenen Erlebnisse schriftlich zu bewältigen, was weit über eine Aufsatzübung hinausging' (p. 36). The essays are evidence of the children's attempts to

communicate what it was like – what the experience of total war looked and sounded like: what it *felt* like. At the same time, the children often adopt a disquietingly matter-of-fact tone when describing atrocities or scenes of devastation. Hans Joachim S., for example, describes what he saw on 2 May 1945 when the ceasefire was declared: 'von der Wichertstr. bis zum S-Bahnhof Schönhauser Allee lagen meiner vorsichtigen Schätzung zufolge ungefähr 200 gefallene und 500 verwundete deutsche Soldaten' (p. 158). Norbert O. describes his own narrow escape, when a boy from a neighbouring house was killed:

> Hannes war tot. Die Granate hatte ihm den Kopf vom Rumpf gerissen. Wäre ich nun sofort zu ihm gegangen, hätte es mich wohl auch erwischt, und ich läge ebenso dort mit zerissenen Gliedern. Nach einigen Stunden eroberten die Russen den umkämpften Häuserblock (p. 107).

Similarly, Wilma D., whose mother was killed by an artillery shell, recalls her loss: 'Meine Mutti ~~fiel~~ stand mit 7 Frauen auf dem Hof, als die Granate einschlug. Meiner Mutti wurden die Beine abgerissen. Meine liebe Mutti wurde am 30. April 1945 beerdigt. Das war mein Erlebnis während des Beschusses' (p. 164).

While texts such as the 2009 collection *Kriegskinder: Erinnerungen einer Generation* seek to answer the question 'Was passierte damals in den Köpfen der Kinder?',[19] the 1946 essays have a much greater claim if not to that nebulous term 'authenticity', then at least to a greater proximity to the events they are recounting. The essays offer a 'Froschperspektive' on the war, providing the kind of 'gefühlte Geschichte' which has come to be so highly prized in recent cultural representations of the German past.[20] Writing in the early 1980s, Marcel Reich-Ranicki observed that while much was known about the facts of the Third Reich, many feared that they were 'überinformiert und trotzdem unwissend'.[21] The facts had been well documented, but not the *feelings*. The school essays offer just such an account of how it was 'auf der anderen, auf der niederen Ebene, auf der die Weltgeschichte erlitten wird'.[22]

Such claims to authenticity are, however, problematic. One must bear in mind the constraints of the writing process, and the manner in which essays were selected and preserved. The assignment invited children's comments on the war – one essay cites the fact that they were asked to write about the 'Kampfzeit um Berlin' (p. 9) –, thus already structuring the content at least in some small way. The context in which they were written is also important to consider. The historian Hugh Cunningham observes, in his discussion of the difficulty of accessing historical information about children's lives in their own words, that 'children themselves have sometimes left behind written materials, but too often what they write in their diaries tells us more about the genre of diary writing and the desires and expectations of adult readers than about the experience of being a child'.[23] Thus the essays do not necessarily represent the *private* thoughts and feelings of children, not least because the essays were part of an assignment for public consumption – not just their teachers' eyes, but the eyes of public officials: 'die Schülerinnen und Schüler wußten, daß ihre Aufsätze […] für eine Verwendung außerhalb des schulischen Zusammenhangs bestimmt waren' (p. 27). Perhaps anticipating their audience, did the children write what they thought they ought to as much as, or more than, what they wanted to? The essays were the result of a 'Hausaufsatz' assignment which, as Gröschner observes, meant teachers could not influence the writing of the essays (p. 29). Yet this freedom from supervision pertained only to the writing process itself, not to the preparation time or correcting of the essays. In addition, Gröschner identifies three essays in particular which clearly exhibit a parent's influence, and which can be identified by the fact that the children are siblings and provide an almost identical description of the destruction of their house in March 1945 (pp. 30-1). Only one of the essays acknowledges that it was written 'unter Mithilfe der Mutter' (pp. 31 and 64).

Gröschner also reflects on the effects which the idiom of essay writing may have had (pp. 32-5). This forces us to consider how the children's tools of expression might have been

shaped by their experiences, knowledge, and wider reading, and by the genre of the assignment. An answer to this can be found, perhaps, in the number of essays which end with a statement to the effect that the author will never forget this experience as long as they live. The repetition of this phrase begins to feel rather formulaic after a while: 'Das werden wir nie vergessen' (p. 48); 'Aber diese Nacht werde ich niemals vergessen' (p. 62); 'Diese Tage werden wir nie vergessen!' (p. 186). It suggests the presence, at some point, of a writing frame or some kind of pedagogical influence or expectation. Only occasionally is there a suggestion of perhaps a subversion of this model, such as Inge O.'s comment 'Von dem Tage an ging es uns dann langsam besser und jetzt habe ich manchmal den ganzen Krieg schon wieder vergessen' (p. 239), which Gröschner reads as unrepresentative of the essays as a whole (p. 11). Only occasionally do we find something more obviously harrowing, such as Vera B.'s final comment, 'Ich werde diese Schreckensnacht nie vergessen, denn das schaurige Bild unseres brennenden Hauses taucht immer wieder vor meinen Augen auf' (p. 42). Strikingly, in the post-Wende context, the frequency with which the children declare that they will remember the war for their whole life chimes with the words of one *Kriegskind*, recalling her childhood from the vantage point of old age: 'Wer einmal Kriegskind ist, der bleibt es sein Leben lang'.[24]

The political framing of the essays is another important aspect to consider. The process by which the essays were selected for inclusion in the collection, which remains unclear, may also have played a role in shaping the kinds of response we ultimately find. Gröschner highlights the striking discrepancy between the use of Nazi language in essays by teachers and those of pupils (p. 31). While the teachers' essays are coloured by National Socialist lexis and expressions, those by the children are devoid of such 'Nazijargon', which is surprising given that the pupils had been educated and socialised entirely under Nazism (p. 15). Gröschner posits that essays which exhibited this kind of language might simply have

been deemed inappropriate and therefore not been included in the archived collection, thus pointing to the constructedness of the corpus. Significant too are the conditions and politics of the period during which the essays were written. This is alluded to in Roder's foreword to the 1996 volume, and argued persuasively by Benita Blessing in her discussion of education in the Soviet occupation zone. Blessing suggests that essays from the period display the influence of early post-war socialist teaching, and that children's memories of the war were being shaped by the 'interpretative framework' provided by the education system. In this way children learned to interpret their experiences of the war in line with the demands of Soviet post-war ideology.[25] This is evident, for example, in children's descriptions of the Soviet entry into Berlin:

> Sie sprachen das die Russen uns erschiesen, oder auf andere weise uns schänden. […] Denn Hitler wollte Rußland vernichten? Was er aber nicht geschafft hat. Denn Rußland war Hitler überlegen, Hitler wollte die ganze Welt regieren. Aber der Siegreiche Stalin hat den Nazismus vernichtet (p. 250).

This kind of statement encapsulates the rapid about-turn in ideology with which children had to contend. The essays sometimes include an acknowledgement of the improved situation under the Soviet occupation forces: 'Als die rote Armee dann kam, kriegten wir wieder eine Wohnung' (p. 62). Other observations appear a little more artless: 'Als wir merkten, daß die Russen nicht schlecht waren, zogen wir in unsere Wohnung wieder' (p. 112). Liane H. expresses gratitude to the Soviets for the Germans' deliverance from tyranny:

> Jetzt, […] während ich die ganze Sache niederschreibe, danke ich noch einmal Generalissimus S t a l i n und der Roten Armee für unsere Befreiung vom Nazitum. Wenn auch die Russen die Frauen schändeten und den Leuten Vieles fortnahmen, so dürfen wir nie vergessen, wie unsere Soldaten in Rußland hausten und daß an dem

> ganzen Elend allein, Hitler und seine Konsorten schuld daran sind und daß das, was die Russen taten, als Kriegsrecht gilt (p. 217).

This is a particularly fervent example, though Liane's allusion to the rape of German women by Soviet soldiers is a striking comment on the tensions between private and official experiences of the liberation.

Gröschner's view of the essays as it emerges from the introduction, resulting perhaps in part from the 1996 context, is that: 'es ist der Blick der aufgrund ihres Alters unschuldig Ausgelieferten, die keine Strategie der Verteidigung ausarbeiten konnten' (p. 11). Yet arguably this kind of exculpatory discourse *was* already going on, albeit within a different framework. In this way, the essays reveal the shifting political landscape and the influence of a new order. The image of the innocent, suffering child, which we so often find pressed into the service of victimhood narratives in the post-war period, was already becoming part of the anti-Fascist founding narrative of the German Democratic Republic in this earlier occupational period. The authors had been stripped of the rhetoric with which they began growing up, only to have it replaced with a new political discourse.

## ADAPTING THE SCHOOL ESSAYS: ULLI LUST'S COMIC STRIP

While recent memory texts are often received as 'authentic', despite the potentially problematic nature of such a designation, the pupils' essays carry a further sense of being unmediated, rather than simply retrospective. They speak *from* the past rather than about it. It is this apparent immediacy which has caught the creative attention of adapters in different media. For example, a collection of Nuremberg school essays about life in the Third Reich, was adapted by its editor, Hannes Heer, into a play which premiered in March 1981.[26] The Prenzlauer Berg essays have also been adapted into a new medium, namely a comic strip created by the Austrian graphic artist Ulli Lust. Lust came across Gröschner's collection at a

local literary festival and was captivated by the children's perspectives, and their pragmatic, unheroic, and touching accounts. She created a comic-strip narrative composed of selected essays, entitled *Schulaufsätze von Berliner Kindern über das Jahr 1945*, which appeared in a special issue of the magazine *Stripburger* in 2003.[27]

Comics and graphic novels provide a singular way to explore and portray historical events and narratives, particularly dark heritage and difficult history. The treatment of World War II in such texts is well established, most famously in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991) which engages with the Holocaust through a familial and postmemory lens.[28] More recently a number of German-language comics and graphic novels have explored recent history from the perspective of civilians and perpetrators, adapting literary texts and individuals' accounts of the past.[29]

Essays and comics are both genres which can be considered closely associated with childhood: essays are the training ground in which children learn to write and to think; comics are a medium with which children are entertained. Yet both forms also provide vehicles for adult ideas and communication: the critical essay and the graphic novel. It is this tension inherent in the genre or medium which means they can tell complicated stories for adults which remind them what it was like to be a child. Both the comic and writing by children have traditionally been viewed as trivial, enjoying a critical reappraisal in recent decades. The graphic novel has been increasingly recognised as an important narrative form, and this has happened concurrent with historians' increasing interest in oral history and accounts of the past from below, particularly from children's perspectives.

In her imaginative retelling of the children's accounts, Lust brings a new perspective to bear on the original texts. As was the case with the 1996 publication of the essays, an impression of the child's authorship is provided by the handwriting used in the narrative boxes. Where a word is crossed out, and where a forgotten word is inserted, the authenticity

of the texts is further signalled, pointing back to the original essays. In particular, the emphasis on the sights and sounds of war are brought into even sharper focus. The children's accounts and vivid descriptions of the fighting are re-presented within the new format, and their descriptions of the sounds of war are rendered as pictorial texts (see Figure 1).[30] The panels contain images drawn straight from the children's own accounts and depict these in an unsensationalising way: soldiers, bombs, shrapnel, grenades, shooting, burning buildings, the terror of the air raid shelter, dead and mutilated bodies. The aforementioned account by Norbert O. of the death of another boy during a grenade attack is depicted in arresting detail. The presence of onomatopoeic sound images, such as 'boom', 'ratatata', and 'woouum', which are probably best known from American action comics and pop art, are striking here in relating the sounds of war which the children try to describe. Children often appear in the panels, or the panels depict directly the children's point of view. Thus the format enables the reader to see not only these images, but also the children's reactions to, and views of, the events. Just as the essays in Gröschner's collection offer the child's perspective and voice, the comic restages that voice, but at the same time shows us the child seeing and being seen. In this way the children's agency – particularly their spatial agency – which is so prominent in an analysis of the essays, is written (and drawn) into Lust's adaptation of them.

The adaptation also gestures back towards children's own illustrations of the experience of war, both alongside the essays and in other collections, albeit in a more stylised form. At a historical moment when former war children, recalling their childhood after unification, are looking back, the comic reasserts the voices of children writing in 1946 with their eyes firmly focussed on the future. This is, perhaps, part of the fascination of these texts and their role as an inspiration to contemporary writers and artists. Indeed, Lust's interest in, and adaptation of, the essays can also be read as part of a wider fascination with the child's voice and the child's perspective on war and dictatorship. Furthermore, it is part of a

widespread demand for accounts of the past which speak of what it was like to be there. The lapse of time between the composition of the essays and their publication in Gröschner's collection provokes a discussion of 'forgotten' voices from the past which belong to members of a generation whose memories and stories will soon be lost.

Figure 1. A page from 'School Essays of Berlin Kids About the Year 1945', in *The Mammoth Book of Best War Comics*, an English adaptation of Ulli Lust's *Schulaufsätze von Berliner Kindern über das Jahr 1945* (2003). Reproduced by kind permission of Ulli Lust.

## CONCLUSION

As a publication, Gröschner's 1996 collection 'rediscovers' the children's essays in the 1990s and places them in the public domain for the first time. In this way, it confirms a narrative about the long-term silence and repressed trauma of the former war children which has been used, in part, as a symbol of German victimhood more broadly in recent years. The 1946

essays offer a representation of the figure of the war child constructed by children themselves, and provide an invaluable insight into children's attitudes towards their own identity as 'war children' in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. They are written at a time when accounts would not yet be coloured by post-war, and post-wall, discussions about the ethics and politics of memory. Nevertheless, as I have suggested, the essays offer anything but a straightforward 'Froschperspektive', nor one which is de-politicised or free of adult influence. The war children who emerge from Gröschner's collection are tenacious, curious, and resilient. At the same time, perhaps the reason we see them as such is precisely because these are the ones who have written essays deemed worthy of inclusion in the archival collection. The children's voices are seen as representative; they both reinforce and challenge narratives of the past depending on how they are framed, read, and interpreted. They challenge the myth of innocence through their assertion of agency, albeit one that, in narrative terms at least is shown to be constrained by context. The agency expressed in the children's accounts, as well as the narrative agency embodied in the writing of their experiences, however constrained, however imperfect, can act as a counter to the kind of symbolic usage we have seen in recent years.

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1 Michael Heinlein, *Die Erfindung der Erinnerung: Deutsche Kriegskindheiten im Gedächtnis der Gegenwart*, Bielefeld 2010, p. 9. Heinlein is quoting from Norbert Frei, *1945 und wir: Das Dritte Reich im Bewusstsein der Deutschen*, Munich 2005, p. 7.

2 The former war children's public profile was raised by such initiatives as the first Internationaler Kriegskinder-Kongress at the Goethe Universität in Frankfurt am Main in 2005. Television series broadcast stories and images of the war children, particularly Guido Knopp's many programmes on World War II. High-profile films, as well as autobiographical and fictional texts, have depicted both the direct impact of the war on children, and its effect

on their lives after the fighting ceased. See also recent historical studies, most notably Nicholas Stargardt's *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis*, London 2005.

3 Bode, *Die vergessene Generation: Die Kriegskinder brechen ihr Schweigen*, Munich 2009, p. 29.

4 There is a significant body of critical literature on this subject. See, for example, Helmut Schmitz (ed.), *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present*, Amsterdam; New York 2007; Caroline Schaumann, *Memory Matters: Generational Responses to Germany's Nazi Past in Recent Women's Literature*, Berlin 2008; Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger, *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic*, Rochester, NY 2009.

5 See also Hannes Heer (ed.), *Als ich 9 Jahre alt war, kam der Krieg: Schüleraufsätze 1946*, Cologne 1980.

6 Nora Maguire, *Childness and the Writing of the German Past*, Oxford 2014, p. 168.

7 Bernt Roder, 'Foreword', in *'Ich schlug meiner Mutter die brennenden Funken ab': Berliner Schulaufsätze aus dem Jahr 1946*, ed. Prenzlauer Berg Museum des Kulturamtes Berlin Prenzlauer Berg mit Unterstützung des Landesarchivs Berlin, selected and with an introduction by Annett Gröschner, Berlin 1996, pp. 7-8 (p. 7). Further references to the collection will be given in the main body of the text. In quotations from the children's essays the original spelling and punctuation have been retained. A second, paperback edition, which contains an abridged selection from the 1996 publication and a revised introduction by Gröschner, was published in 2001. The original copies of the essays, as well as documentation relating to the collection, are held in the Landesarchiv in Berlin.

8 http://www.kontextverlag.de/groeschner.schulaufsaetze.html (accessed 1 September 2015).

9 Photographs of the exhibition and the children's artwork are available to view online: www.europeana.eu (accessed 1 September 2015).

10 See Beate Müller's article in the present volume. A collection of 80,000 essays written by children in the 1950s about a range of topics including their experiences during the war is held in the Roeßler-Archiv at the FernUniversität in Hagen. For a discussion of this source, see Nicholas Stargardt, 'A German Trauma? The Experience of the Second World War in Germany', in *Enduring Trauma Through the Life Cycle*, ed. Eileen McGinley and Arturo Varchevker, London 2013, pp. 173-93.

11 Bode, *Die vergessene Generation*, p. 29.

12 Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939–45*, London 2015, p. xxiii.

13 Stargardt, *Witnesses of War*, p. 10. The essays in Gröschner's collection form part of Stargardt's analysis.

14 Heinlein, *Die Erfindung der Erinnerung*, p. 16.

15 See especially Stargardt, *Witnesses of War*, and Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*, Harlow 2005. To reduce children to innocent, passive victims is to deny their agency. A key part of the strategy adopted by the charity War Child is to challenge this idea, https://www.warchild.org.uk/about/our-approach (accessed 10 September 2015).

16 Richard Flynn, '"Infant Sight": Romanticism, Childhood, and Postmodern Poetry', in *Literature and the Child: Romantic Continuations, Postmodern Contestations*, ed. James Holt McGavran, Iowa City 1999, pp. 105-30 (p. 105).

17 A term used in cultural geography. See Elizabeth A. Gagen, 'Landscapes of Childhood and Youth', in *A Companion to Cultural Georgraphy*, ed. James Duncan, Nuala Johnson, and Richard Schein, Malden, MA 2004, pp. 404-20.

18 See the research project 'Agents of Future Promise', http://childrenofthefuture.leeds.ac.uk (accessed 10 September 2015).

19 Claudia Schreiner and Katja Wildermuth, 'Foreword', in *Kriegskinder: Erinnerungen einer Generation*, ed. Yury and Sonya Winterberg, Berlin 2009, pp. 7-9 (p. 7).

20 Harald Welzer, 'Im Gedächtniswohnzimmer : Warum sind Bücher über die eigene Familiengeschichte so erfolgreich? 'Ein Zeit-Gespräch mit dem Sozialpsychologen Harald Welzer über das private Erinnern', *Die Zeit*, 25 March 2004, pp. 43–6 (p. 43).

21 Marcel Reich-Ranicki, 'Foreword', in *Meine Schulzeit im Dritten Reich: Erinnerungen deutscher Schriftsteller*, ed. Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Cologne 1982, p. 9.

22 *Ibid*.

23 Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*, p. 2.

24 Schreiner and Wildermuth, 'Foreword', p. 7.

25 Benita Blessing, 'The Antifascist Narrative: Memory Lessons in the Schools of the Soviet Occupation Zone, 1945-1949', in *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, ed. James Marten, New York 2002, pp. 172-83 (p. 173).

26 See http://www.hannesheer.de/theater/als-ich-neun-jahre-alt-war (accessed 10 September 2015).

27 Email correspondence with Ulli Lust. The adaptation was also published as 'School Essays of Berlin Kids About the Year 1945' in the *Mammoth Book of Best War Comics*, ed. David Kendall, London 2007, pp. 497-510. The comic also appears under the title *Schulaufsätze von Berliner Kindern aus dem Jahr 1945*.

28 Marianne Hirsch, 'Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory', *Discourse*, 15.2, Special Issue: The Emotions, Gender, and the Politics of Subjectivity (1992), 3-29.

29 See for example Isabel Kreitz's adaptation of Uwe Timm's novelle *Die Entdeckung der Currywurst* and the forthcoming graphic novel *Großväterland* which explores German perspectives on World War II based on memories of eye-witnesses. See www.grossvaeterland.de (accessed 6 May 2016).

30 Thomas E. Wartenberg, 'Wordy Pictures: Theorizing the Relationship between Image and Text in Comics', in *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach*, ed. Aaron Meskin, Roy T. Cook, Oxford 2012, pp. 87-104. I am grateful to Karin Kukkonen for her suggested reading on comic book theory.