

Encounters in the Rubble: American Interactions with German Children in Postwar Germany

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Abstract

German children and American military personnel came into contact in complex and diverse ways in the American occupation zone during the immediate postwar period (1945-1949). Placing German children at a central role in the study of this period allows for greater understanding of the lived experiences of the American occupation, as well as of the significance of transatlantic exchange on a personal and political level. Interactions between Americans and German children challenge the simplicity of narratives about the supposed “success” and “goodness” of the occupation, which have emerged strong in present-day collective memory in Germany and the United States. In addition, current considerations of the occupation also bring up the notion of the “benevolent GI,” for example through images of soldiers gifting goods to German children. This project questions the normalcy and accuracy of simplistic narratives about the occupation through the lens of exchanges between Americans and German children. Behind these everyday encounters lies the deeper context of a complex transition period. Additionally, Americans active in the occupation as well as German children deserve to be considered as historical actors with agency. Both sides documented these personal interactions in materials ranging from personal diaries to photographs. These encounters not only shaped personal experiences and memories of the postwar era, but fundamentally molded the face of the occupation.