

“We still feel the war through the hearts and souls of occupation grandchildren”

An interview with Dr. Rainer Gries

by Haris Huremagić

Rainer Gries is a German historian teaching at the University of Vienna and at the Sigmund Freud Private University. He recently published a book together with the historian Silke Satjukow on occupation children in Germany after 1945.

Haris Huremagić: Mr. Gries, you write [in your book](#) that occupation children have contributed to the development of a new liberalism in the German post-war society. Is it possible to apply this theory also on children with immigrant background today?

Rainer Gries: Yes, that theory applies if members of society are constantly confronted with “foreignness” in their immediate vicinity. If for instance a little French occupation child from next door goes to the bakery shop like me and plays football like me and at some point he goes to school like me and he speaks like me and he is like me than, not all at once, but over time this “foreignness” turns into familiarity through the interaction of social groups. So that is the hope we have, that what is considered foreign at first sight becomes more familiar.

HH: Which role does different factors such as the economic situation play in this process? For instance the German post-war society was going through a period of economic boom.

RG: There are certain advantaging factors. So concerning occupation children in Germany, the economic development and prosperity of the Federal Republic has been an important factor to support these processes of interaction and integration. Contemporary foreign policy was also quite important. Since the mid-50ies and the 60ies, the nations of the occupation children’s fathers have become allies and friends. And so those children of enemies became children of friends or allies.

HH: You also state in your book that occupation children were used by the society for the removal of guilt. Does that and similar processes in society not require a wide-ranging discussion on that topic, which was not necessarily the case in Austria. Here this issue has never been discussed as broadly as in Germany. What is the reason for that? Could it be due to the fact, that Austria has seen itself as the first victim of the Nazi-regime until the 70ies or 80ies and just wanted to forget everything related to the Nazi-past?

RG: Opinions are divided if and to what extent this topic was discussed in Austria. We can state for Germany, that a wide public discourse took place when those children became visible by attending school. In the past we used to say that nothing really had been discussed in Germany back in the 50ies but if you look closer into the discourse of that time you can see that there was a discussion about the war as well as a rejection of guilt.

In Austria, it is true that there was a rejection of blame from the beginning and it could be, as you say, that this was the reason why discourse on certain war related topics, such as the one of occupation children were avoided but I'm not quite sure about that.

However, there is evidence that there had been discussions on occupation children, but rather in that way that situation of occupation children in Germany was discussed without referring to the situation in Austria. So it was represented as a Germany-only phenomenon.

HH: Currently you are working on a project called “Inheritance of Emotions” (“Gefühlserbschaften”). Could you briefly enlarge on that?

RG: "Inheritance of emotions" is a term by Freud, who wanted to say, that we carry the experiences of trauma of preceding generations in our souls. When we talk about occupation children who are about 65 to 70 years old today, then there is of course another generation, namely the children of those occupation children. So, there are two things: the traumata that they have experienced and those which they have inherited as a burden. They have been trying to cope with them until today and those traumata will accompany them until the end of their lives. They have not been able to cope with what they inherited from the first and second generations.

The first generation is formed by the grandparents of occupation children. They may have had a positive influence. But mostly they have accepted and reinforced the guilt, that society projected on the children in the family. It is often the grandparents who as moral authorities say that you, my daughter, and this child have brought shame on our family.

The mothers represent the second generation. In a way they are the incarnation of that

guilt.

Each of these two generations has imposed and transmitted their problems to the occupation children. That is why many occupation children have this idea that they have harmed the family and hence have to pay off this shame and guilt in the course of their lives.

We certainly have those sorts of transfer processes from grandparents and from the mother to the occupation children and these children are unable to resolve this burden during their lives. We can assume that those occupation children have passed those problems on to their children and these are now the occupation grandchildren. The question is whether they are able to solve this familial trauma under new moral aspects and new political aspects.

We still feel the war through the hearts and souls of occupation grandchildren. The collective psychological and socio-psychological climate changed since the 60s. Occupation children benefit from this development because it is now easier to live as an occupation child. But they still have to cope with the trauma of the previous generation, which they carry with them.

HH: A result might be to determine which conditions are optimal for such individual psychological processes to resolve cross-generational problems and traumata. This then could also be applied on the Balkans, where we have many unresolved cross-generational conflicts.

RG: Exactly! If we look precisely at the example of occupation children and in the future even at the fourth generation we could quite possibly generate an ideal solution how to resolve such cross-generational war traumata. But that's the future, because we have not yet looked into the fourth generation and that is what we are going to do.

HH: What can we learn out of these topics?

RG: We can learn that what is ostracized today probably becomes accepted in the future. This is not set in stone. There is hope for dynamics and interaction, which at the end leads to integration. But the question is, how many generations it will take for this interaction to lead to integration? And what conditions, in which generation are necessary? This is a whole new story. And we are still learning that occupation children with a foreign father are a kind of hope for Europe. They have links to more than one country and thus are automatically not only bulwarks, but bridges which we can build on.

HH: What a fabulous conclusion! Thank you for this interview!