

“It is all about the restoration of the Grande Nation”

The repatriation of French-German occupation children

by Haris Huremagić

After the Second World War, Germany and Austria were occupied by Allied Forces. During that time at least 400 000 children were born to a foreign military father (“occupation children”) in Germany and 30 000 in Austria. In contrast to other Allied Forces, the French government obliged every parent to a “French” child to notify the French administration in the occupied areas of its birth. The aim was to move every “French” child to France. In the course of this practice the French administration began to take care of those children and to examine them. The child was taken to France in order to be adopted and raised by a French couple only if he/she fulfilled certain biological criteria. The child got a French name and all its documents were changed. An enormous amount of effort was spent to disperse any link to the original identity of the child.

Rainer Gries, a German historian teaching at the University of Vienna and at the Sigmund Freud Private University, was one of the first historians to get access to the French diplomatic archive in La Courneuve in order to research the phenomenon of repatriation of French German occupation children after 1945.

Haris Huremagić: You describe in [your book](#) the cases of repatriation of French-German occupation children, the so-called “enfants d’état”. Could you explain this phenomenon?

Rainer Gries: There are several issues here to discuss. The first is why the French are different and why are they not different to the other occupying forces. So, why are they different?

They are different from the other occupying forces, because they from the beginning clearly say: we want these children to be repatriated. It is all about the restoration of the Grande Nation. By “importing” those babies, they want to get rid of the demographic losses they had suffered in the First and Second World War.

HH: There is a difference between the French and German concept of nation. The German concept is shaped by Herder's romanticism, describing nation as a descent community, while the French one is a community of participation. How is this reflected in this issue?

RG: Yes, but in this case you can see that the French have not stuck to this open concept of nation, nation as a community of participation, that is the second thing – why they are not different. Their approach to nationality and science corresponds to the spirit of the time at that period. The result of this spirit of time had been eugenics. And the French selection processes in regard to occupation children were influenced by the idea of eugenics. The French military government in Germany recognized these children as French children in whose veins French blood flows, the father's blood and that was seen as ranked higher than the German mother's blood. In addition, they said: "we must begin a selection process, to see whether those children are really worthy to live as Frenchmen with us Frenchmen in the future." This ambivalence, that they wanted to banish Nazism, but at the same time they were applying similar ideas, was also recognized at that time.

HH: The fates of these children have been forgotten for a quite long time. Do you know whether some of these children have been asking for their identity?

RG: The adoptive parents know it, of course. But if the adoptive parents and the family are silent, then the child can fall into doubt only with reference to two facts: the German birthplace and the date of birth. If the family weathers out this irritation than there is no way that these children find out about their original identity since they have grown up as French citizens.

HH: Are there some cases of repatriation in Austria as well?

RG: At the moment there is no research into this topic. It is possible, but personally I think it is rather unlikely.

HH: Only once in 1955 the Minister of Justice of Baden-Württemberg directed an inquiry on the topic of those children to the French government and that's all.

RG: Yes. Both the Germans and the French knew that this was sort of a dangerous and legally not covert practice. That is why later before the Federal Republic of Germany got autonomy; all documents were evacuated to France with the help of the German authorities. Later both wanted to let this topic rest also for the sake of those children.

HH: Thank you for the interview!