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## Book Review: *Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the Politics of Memory*

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*Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the Politics of Memory*

Loring M. Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten

Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012

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Reviewed by Victor Bivell

Pollitecon Publications

The combination of children and war is unfortunate and emotional. Today, 74 years after the end of the Greek Civil War of 1946–1949, the children who were caught up in that war still engender intense public and private commentary around refugee children, institutionalized childhoods, identity, assimilation, ethnic denial, ethnic cleansing, and accusations of genocide. This is the still-controversial world that the book *Children of the Greek Civil War*<sup>1</sup> bravely ventures to explore. The authors, Loring M. Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten, do an outstanding job. The book does several things that most writings about the war fail to do, and these can be seen as key steps forward in how we think about the war and the children it affected.

The Greek Civil War began as a Greek affair between the Greek Communist Party and the nationalist Greek Government in the maelstrom of World War II politics and the Cold War. But sucked up into this was a large portion of the ethnic Macedonian population of northern Greece. This was done by the Greek Communist Party, which promised Macedonians the recognition and ethnic freedom that they desperately wanted<sup>2</sup> but were continually denied by the Greek Government since its invasion and annexation of southern Macedonia during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913.<sup>3</sup>

Macedonian involvement is one of the key explorations that so many other books ignore or fudge. Almost all Greek historians and many philhellene authors ignore the role of the Macedonians, or use euphemisms such as “communists,” “slavo-communists,” “slavs,” or “slavo-Macedonians.” In contrast, Danforth and Van Boeschoten are ethical and academic, respecting the self-identification of the Macedonians and refer to them simply as Macedonians, just as they refer to the Greeks simply as Greeks. This evenhandedness is throughout the book.

The war affected thousands of Greek and Macedonian children. Emotional issues such as the war-time roles of their parents, separation from their families and villages, Queen Frederica’s orphanages, the Communist Party’s evacuation program to Eastern bloc institutions, the return to Greece for some, and lifetime banishment for many of the Macedonian children, are all handled sensitively as the authors explore how these issues affected both the Greek children and the Macedonian children. Another key step forward is the side-by-side discussion of the orphanages and educational institutions—the *paidopoleis*—set up by Queen Frederica and her government, and

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<sup>1</sup> Loring M. Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War: Refugees and the Politics of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

nationalist supporters and the institutions in Communist countries in Eastern Europe, that were organized as homes by the Greek Communist Party.

Another feature is the best available statistics on the numbers of children taken into Queen Frederica's institutions and into the institutions in Eastern Europe. A complicating factor is that there were Greek and Macedonian children evacuated by the Communists, and Greek and Macedonian children in Queen Frederica's institutions. Using the most credible data, Danforth and Van Boeschoten arrive at a total of 45,000 children who were directly affected in this way—7,000 living with relatives in Yugoslavia, approximately 20,000 evacuated by the Greek communists, and 18,000 housed by the Greek Government.<sup>4</sup>

The book gives the names and locations of many of the institutions. On the Communist side, there were eighty homes throughout Eastern Europe. On the Government side, the Queen's Fund operated fifty-four paidopoleis throughout Greece, and there were also three Royal Technical Schools. However, there was a crucial difference between the education of the refugee children and Queen Frederica's children. The Macedonian refugee children were taught both Greek and Macedonian and allowed to express their Macedonian identity. This was not so for the Macedonian children at the paidopoleis where the standard Greek Government policies of ethnic denial and assimilation were strictly continued. The authors say that although the paidopoleis were said to provide a home for orphans and abandoned children, "there is convincing evidence that the parents of many children who were evacuated to paidopoleis had not died, but were leftists who were in prison or living in exile."<sup>5</sup> These children and young adults, along with the other Greek and Macedonian children, lived a daily life very much focused on Greek and "militaristic nationalism that pervaded life in the paidopoleis."<sup>6</sup>

There was also reeducation. Begun by King Paul, the Royal Technical School of Leros housed young leftists, captured partisans held in jails and internment camps, fourteen- to twenty-year-old boys from the paidopoleis who were "the most difficult to deal with"<sup>7</sup> and, during the 1950s, juvenile delinquents and refugee children repatriated from Eastern Europe. "The goal of this 'bandits' children's home' was to 'reeducate,' 'rehabilitate,' and 'reform' young men who had supported the communist cause."<sup>8</sup> The word "bandits" is a common Greek nationalist euphemism for Macedonians. This focus on nationalist ideology meant that some Macedonian and perhaps some Greek children were held in the paidopoleis after the war had finished. Among the reasons for the delay was a concern about the ideology and "national beliefs"<sup>9</sup> of the parents. That the first group of children to be repatriated was sent to Florina<sup>10</sup> suggests that a significant number of them were Macedonian children.

For many readers, these actions by the Greek Government would be reminiscent of the Australian, United States, and Canadian Government programs and live-in schools that separated native children from their parents and sought to reduce the native in the child and give the child an Australian/American/Canadian identity. This is an area of Greek politics that needs far greater research.

Another strength is that the book openly discusses the Macedonian claims of genocide.<sup>11</sup> This is unheard of in Greek and pro-Greek literature, and seldom heard of even in more neutral literature. Given the strength of Greek Government and nationalist denials of genocide against the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 44–46.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 98; see also Tasoula Vervenioti, "Saved or Kidnapped? The Children of the Greek Civil War," Paper presented at the international conference, Domestic and International Aspects of the Greek Civil War, King's College, London, April 18–20, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Danforth and Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War*, 100.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 100–101.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 268–269.

Macedonians, this truth-to-power by the authors shows the most admirable form of academic courage that is far from typical among many academics and writers on the war.

The book's criticisms of the claims of genocide by both sides are valid. On the Greek side, the government at the time claimed to the United Nations that the Greek Communist Party was planning to "commit 'the crime of genocide' by abducting thousands of children from villages across northern Greece."<sup>12</sup> This and other claims were investigated by the United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans (UNSCOB), which found that it was not correct. "In August 1948, the U.S. State Department reported that there was 'inadequate evidence... that any substantial number of children were forcibly taken' by the guerrillas."<sup>13</sup> On the Macedonian side, the authors dispute claims of genocide against the Greek Government. "Macedonian nationalist discourse on ethnic cleansing and genocide is contradicted by the historical record, which clearly shows that the Greek Army did not specifically target Macedonian villages with the aim of driving their inhabitants out of Greek territory."<sup>14</sup> They conclude that "the evacuation of children from their villages in 1948, therefore, clearly does not meet the criteria for genocide laid down in the UN Convention."<sup>15</sup>

It is a huge step forward to see the competing claims of genocide analyzed at all, let alone analyzed together and in light of the Genocide Convention. And as far as the authors' analysis of these claims, they are correct. It would be difficult to prove that the act of evacuation was genocidal in intent. However, from the Macedonian point-of-view, a criticism is that this analysis does not go far enough; it is incomplete. There are at least two aspects of the Greek Government's behavior that Macedonians can argue were genocidal in intent, in particular under Article II (e) of the Genocide Convention—"Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."<sup>16</sup>

The first relates to several aspects of the paidopoleis. Among others: the failure of the paidopoleis to recognize the Macedonian ethnicity of the Macedonian children; the taking as "orphans and abandoned"<sup>17</sup> children whose parents had not died but were leftists in prison or in exile; the strong Greek nationalist lifestyle and curriculum that sort to, among other things, reeducate the Macedonian children and replace their Macedonian identity with a Greek identity; the treatment of the children and young adults who had been "the most difficult to deal with;"<sup>18</sup> the delayed return to their families and villages of some of the Macedonian children and young adults due to the "close association of humanitarian and ideological concerns."<sup>19</sup>

Another issue not discussed in this book is that during the 1950s, several thousand "orphans,"<sup>20</sup> at least some of them from the Civil War, were adopted out to American families. There is a need for information on how many of these were from the paidopoleis or communist families, how many were Macedonian children, and whether any were not actual orphans but were adopted out to keep them separate from parents deemed to not have "healthy national beliefs;"<sup>21</sup> that is, a Greek identity.

The second aspect of the Greek Government's actions that need further investigation is the banishment of many thousands of the Macedonian children. This prohibition for them to return to Greece and their families and villages was based on race. The relevant Greek Ministerial

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 58; Lawrence S. Wittner, *American Intervention in Greece, 1943–1949* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) as cited in Danforth and Boeschoten, 162, 366.

<sup>14</sup> Danforth and Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War*, 258.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (New York, 1948). Hereafter "UN Genocide Convention."

<sup>17</sup> Danforth and Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>20</sup> Howard Fischer, "International Adoption of Greek 'Orphans,'" *Hektoen International*, Fall 2022, <https://hekint.org/2022/10/24/international-adoption-of-greek-orphans/>.

<sup>21</sup> Danforth and Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War*, 103.

Decree is Law 106841 of 1982—“free to return to Greece are all Greeks by genus, who during the Civil War of 1946–1949 and because of it have fled abroad as political refugees, in spite that the Greek citizenship has been taken away from them.”<sup>22</sup> The copy of the Decree published by the “Official Gazzettier Of The Government Of The Republic Of Greece,”<sup>23</sup> as reproduced in the 1994 Human Rights Watch report “Denying Ethnic Identity: The Macedonians of Greece,” has the phrase “by genus”<sup>24</sup> underlined. Affected Macedonians say the phrase “all Greeks by genus”<sup>25</sup> was used and continues to be used to discriminate against the ethnic Macedonians. While the Greek children were allowed to return, many of the Macedonian children were not.

That exile was an act of the Greek Government, Macedonians can argue that in so far as banishment was intended to deliberately separate the children from their families, it was, and still is, an act of genocide. For example, in this case, does forcible transfer include enforced separation; and does “another group”<sup>26</sup> include any group except a Macedonian group in Greece? All of these actions and possible actions by the Greek Government need to be investigated to see if they meet the conditions for “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”<sup>27</sup> The legal and ethical debates in this case need to be had.

No doubt there may be relevant legal precedents. For example, the authors point out that the Nazis had a large program under which they abducted children from Eastern Europe with “desirable racial characteristics”<sup>28</sup> who underwent forced “Germanization,”<sup>29</sup> and were placed in state boarding schools or adopted out to German families where they were raised without knowledge of their origins. The “worthless”<sup>30</sup> children were sent to concentration camps. At the Nuremberg trials, the “officers responsible for this program were convicted of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.”<sup>31</sup> In this extreme example, clarity is needed on what specific crimes the individual convictions relate to before any connections can be made with the Greek program. The authors themselves do not draw a connection between the Germanization program and the Greek paidopoleis. Nor do they draw connections with the live-in institutions for native children in Australia, USA, and Canada. The purpose of their mention here is simply to note the existence of possible relevant precedents and to highlight that much more research and legal work needs to be done in regard to the Greek Civil War.

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<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, “Denying Ethnic Identity: The Macedonians of Greece” (Human Rights Watch: New York, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> UN Genocide Convention.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Danforth and Van Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War*, 29.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*