Book Review:

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

By Loring M. Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten

Review by Victor Bivell

The combination of children and war is unfortunate and very emotional. Among too many examples, this is also true of the Greek Civil War of 1946-49. Even today, 74 years after its finish, the children who were caught up in that war still engender intense public and private commentary and feelings around politics, refugee children, institutionalized childhoods, identity, assimilation, ethnic denial, ethnic cleansing, accusations of genocide, fairness, national forgiveness and government cruelty. This is the still-controversial world that the book Children of the Greek Civil War bravely ventures to explore. The authors, professor Loring Danforth and associate professor Riki Van Boeschoten, do an outstanding job. The book does several things that most other writings about the war fail to do, and it is some of these key steps forward in how we think about the war and the children that I would like to discuss here.

The Greek Civil War began as a Greek affair between the Greek Communist Party and the Greek Government, between the Greek far Left and far Right in the maelstrom of World War 2 politics and the Cold War between Communism and Capitalism, the West and Soviet Russia. But caught up, perhaps 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, the autonomy and the freedom that they desperately wanted but were continually denied by the Greek Government since its invasion and annexation of southern Macedonia during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13.

While a significant portion of the Macedonians deliberately stayed out of the war, enough Macedonians became involved to form a large part of the Greek Communist forces. This is one of the key explorations in Children of the Greek Civil War that so many other books ignore or fudge. Almost all Greek historians and many philhellene western authors either 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 honest, ethical and academic – they respect the self-identification of the Macedonians and refer to them, simply, as Macedonians, just as they refer to the Greeks, simply, as Greeks. This also frees them to discuss the role of the Macedonians in the war. This evenhandedness is evident throughout the book and in the way they discuss each issue.

Importantly, they also treat the children with equality. The war affected thousands of Greek children and thousands of Macedonian children. Emotional issues such as the war-time roles of their parents, separation from their parents and villages, Queen Frederica’s orphanages, the Communist Party’s evacuation program to Eastern bloc institutions, education and opportunity, the return to Greece, the return to family and for some to village life, lifetime banishment for many of the Macedonian children, and life in other countries, among other issues, are all handled sensitively as the authors explore how these issues affected both the Greek children and the Macedonian children.

Such writing is refreshing, and no doubt the equal respect given to the now adult and aged Macedonian refugee children was repaid with greater insights into their experiences.

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

An important part of this are the authoritative or at the least the best available statistics on the numbers of children who were taken into Queen Frederica's institutions, and the numbers of children taken to institutions in Communist countries in Eastern Europe. A complicating factor is that there were Greek and Macedonian children in both sets of institutions. There were Greek and Macedonian children evacuated by the Communists, and Greek and Macedonian children, described as orphans, in Queen Frederica's institutions.

However, on the Greek side, in many books and reports the children are described only as "Greek children", particularly in Greek Government and Greek nationalist statistics which do not recognize the ethnicity of the Macedonian children. Danforth and Van Boeschoten say:

> Official Greek discourse on the refugee children has been resolutely nationalist: the young refugees were first and foremost *Greek* children. Regardless of the fact that approximately half of them spoke Macedonian as their first language and that many of their families identified themselves as Macedonians and not Greeks, in official Greek discourse these young refugees were "children of Greece".

From Macedonian sources, which recognize both the Macedonian and the Greek children, there have been variations in the statistics for the number of children and for the proportion of Macedonian and Greek children.

So it is a step forward to get some clarity.

Danforth and Van Boeschoten say that due to the Civil War "Over 140,000 refugees left Greece and went into exile in Eastern Europe, many of them never to return (Close 1995, 219)." In an endnote they say "In 1950, 35 per cent of all refugees in Eastern Europe, except for Yugoslavia, were Macedonians (Kirijazovski 1989, 53-56), but this percentage increases to nearly 60 per cent, if the 30,000 Macedonian refugees living in Yugoslavia (Kofos 1964, 168) are included."

On the number of children who left Greece, after citing the varying sources, the authors say:

> Consequently, it is safe to conclude that the total number of refugee children in Eastern Europe, including Yugoslavia, was about 27,000. This does not mean, however, that all 27,000 had been part of the *formal evacuation program* of the Democratic Army. Since most of the 7,000 children living with their families in Yugoslavia had arrived there with their relatives long before

> the evacuation started, the number of children formally evacuated by the Democratic Army can be estimated at approximately 20,000.

They estimate that about half of the 27,000 children were Macedonian. "Although the presence of Macedonian children among the refugee children in Eastern Europe is largely ignored by Greek sources, we estimate they made up nearly 50 per cent of the total number." In an endnote they say that compared to data on adults:

> Data on the ethnicity of refugee *children* are less precise. Macedonian children made up 51 per cent of all refugee children in Romania and 85 per cent in Yugoslavia (AM, file 997.1.76/ 281 and 997.12.3-4). There were no Macedonian-speaking children in Eastern Germany or Bulgaria, and the data from other countries have not been preserved. Combining these statistics with those from other sources on individual countries, we estimate the number of Macedonian-speaking children in Eastern Europe as a whole at 50 per cent. (Gritzonas 1998, 187; Lagani 1996, 66; Van Boeschoten 2003b).

That is approximately 13,500 each for Macedonian and for Greek children.

For the numbers of children in Queen Frederica's paidopoleis, the authors say "During the Civil War, the Queen's Fund, according to its own records, cared for approximately 18,000 children in the paidopoleis (Mela n.d., 55-57)."

Those numbers from both sides give a total of 45,000 children who were directly affected by the war 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.

However, due to the non-reporting of Macedonian children by the Greek Government, it is not possible to say how many Macedonian children were in the paidopoleis and the numbers and proportion of Macedonian and Greek among the 45,000 affected children.

The book also gives the names and locations of many of the institutions on both sides.

On the Communist side, "The Greek Communist Party was responsible for 20,000 children living in eighty homes throughout Eastern Europe." A map shows 39 children's homes:
- seven in Hungary – Hogyesz, Deg, Fehervarcsurgo and four around Balaton Lake;
- eight in Czechoslovakia – Budisov, Darkov, Hukvaldy, Klokocov, Sobotin, Nove Hrady, Unesov, and Karlovy Vary;
- four in Poland – Police, Szczecin, Zgorzelec, and Lqdek-Zdroj;
- seven in Romania – Oradea, Arad, Cluj, Tulghes, Roman, Calimanesti, and Sinaia;
- six in Bulgaria – Botevgrad, Karlovo, Gabrovo, Sliven, Stara Zagora, and Burgas;
- four in Yugoslavia – Brailovo, Valandovo, Bela Crkva, Bulkes;
- one in Germany – Dresden;
- one in Croatia – Crkvenica;
- and one in Slovenia – Stara Gora.

On the Government side, “Between 1947 and 1950, the Queen’s Fund was responsible for the operation of fifty-four paidopoleis throughout Greece. Twenty-three were located in Athens; eleven in Thessaloniki. Others were established in Florina, Kavala, Ioannina, Filippiada, Volos, Larissa, Lamia, Agrino, and Patras, as well as on the islands of Kerkira (Corfu), Syros, Tinos, Mytilini, and Rhodes. The paidopoleis occupied a variety of buildings: deserted army barracks, hospitals, boy scout camps, villas donated to the Queen’s Fund by wealthy Greeks, and even a casino on the island of Kerkira.” There were also Royal Technical Schools at Leros, Kos and Neapolis.

The discussion and analysis of these homes and institutions is wide-ranging and extensive, and includes their aims, management, operations and relative success or otherwise.

The difficult task of raising these children, and the difficulties faced by the children themselves, were not made easier by the fact that most were illiterate. “In the autumn of 1948, when the refugee children began their education in the children’s homes in Eastern Europe, EVOP [Greek Committee for Child Support] was faced with a formidable challenge: about 60 per cent of the refugee children were completely illiterate (L. Papadopoulos 1998, 39); the rest had received only the most basic elementary education. In addition, no textbooks and only a handful of trained teachers were available.” To compensate, some of the ‘mothers’ – young woman who led the children from their villages – plus older children and crippled partisans were taught basic teaching skills.

Conditions in Greece were little different. The authors say that by the end of the Civil War, there were 700,000 people displaced from their homes, half of these were children, and that the majority of the displaced were from the north of Greece. Over three quarters of the country’s 10,000 schools had been destroyed or badly damaged, and there was a shortage of 9,000 teachers. At the paidopoleis, living conditions “varied greatly. Initially conditions in some of the new paidopoleis were difficult. Children lived in tents, the food was poor, and there were shortages of sheets, blankets, and clothing.” But as the Queen’s Fund raised more money, “conditions improved greatly”.

Most importantly, the book includes the personal, emotional and social experiences of the Greek and Macedonian children, their education, their career and life outcomes; and how they handled and, all these years later, still handle their experiences and traumas.

There was, however, a crucial difference between the education of the refugee children and Queen Frederica’s children. The Macedonian children among the refugee children were allowed to be Macedonian, the Macedonian children in Queen Frederica’s paidopoleis were not. While the Macedonian refugee children were taught Greek, they were also taught Macedonian and allowed to express their Macedonian identity. Not so at the paidopoleis where for the Macedonian children the standard Greek Government policies of ethnic denial and assimilation were strictly continued.

The authors say “Although Queen Frederica announced that the paidopoleis were founded to provide a home for “orphans and abandoned children” (Mela n.d., 12), 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 (Vervenioti 1993, 3).” In addition,

“older children, particularly boys up to the age of twenty, who may well have been captured partisans, were also cared for (Vervenioti 2001, 14).” These children and young adults, along with the other Greek and Macedonian children, lived a daily life very much focused on Greek nationalism and “militaristic nationalism that pervaded life in the paidopoleis”.

There was also reeducation. In 1947 King Paul began establishing a number of educational institutions, “the most important of which were the three technical schools on the islands of Crete, Kos and Leros. These royal technical schools were supported financially by the Queen’s Fund and were so closely associated with the system of paidopoleis administered by it that they were often referred to informally as paidopoleis themselves.”

“Young leftists, including many captured partisans, were sent to Leros from jails and internment camps where they had been imprisoned, as were boys from paidopoleis between the ages of fourteen and twenty who had been “the most difficult to deal with” there. During the 1950s, juvenile delinquents and refugee children who had been repatriated from Eastern Europe were also sent to the Royal Technical School of Leros.”

“The goal of this “bandits’ children’s home” was to “reeducate,” “rehabilitate,” and “reform” young men who had supported the communist cause.” The word ‘bandits’ is a common Greek nationalist euphemism for Macedonians.

The authors say:

> The Royal Technical School of Leros was housed in old abandoned Italian naval and air force barracks. In 1949, at the end of the Civil War, thirteen hundred young men were being trained there as carpenters, bricklayers, house painters, tailors, and electricians. This school was run differently from the paidopoleis operated by the Queen’s Fund. It was staffed by specially chosen officers of the Greek Army, and life there was more militarized and discipline much stricter than it was at the paidopoleis.

This focus on nationalist ideology meant some Macedonian and perhaps some Greek children were held in the paidopoleis after the war had finished.

> On October 18, 1949, just two days after the Greek Communist Party declared “a temporary end” to the Civil War, the Executive Committee of the Queen’s Fund decided that the children living in the paidopoleis should be repatriated to their villages. Although the Minister of Welfare advocated their immediate repatriation, the process did not begin until the summer of 1950.

Among the reasons for the delay was a:

> close association of humanitarian and ideological concerns. The committee stated that “the appropriate prerequisite” for the children’s repatriation was “the healthy national beliefs of their

> parents and the safety of their place of residence" (Vervenioti 1999, 6). Children would remain in the paidopoleis if both their parents had died, had not yet been repatriated to their villages from government-controlled territory, had supported the communist cause, were in prison, or were in exile in Eastern Europe. The Executive Committee of the Queen's Fund explicitly stated that children whose parents were partisans should be treated as "orphans" and required to remain under the protection of the Queen's Fund in order to be saved from "anti-national" propaganda (Mela n.d., 87; Vervenioti 2001, 18).

It would be interesting to know how many of the children whose repatriation was delayed were Macedonian and how many were Greek. That the first group of children to be repatriated were sent to Florina suggests that a significant number of them were Macedonian children. This first repatriation was by army truck on 3 June 1950.

The holding back of children for ostensibly political reasons conveniently avoids the issue and role of ethnicity in this process. The Communists had drawn Macedonians into the war by promising them the ethnic recognition and ethnic freedom that the Greek Government had not and would not provide. The Greek Government was aware of this, and ethnicity is part of the "national beliefs" it was concerned about.

In so far as the Greek Government failed to recognize Macedonian ethnicity, sought to keep the Macedonian children separate from their parents, sought to deny the ethnicity of the Macedonian children, sought to "re-educate" these children and to replace their Macedonian identity with a Greek identity, the government's paidopoleis and its actions are reminiscent of similar policies and educational institutions of the Australian, US and Canadian Governments. Each of these countries had programs and live-in schools that separated native children from their parents, that sought to reduce the native in the child and to give the child an Australian/ American/ Canadian identity. This is an area of Greek politics that needs far greater research.

It also brings us to a key weakness in the book. Its discussion of genocide is both a strength – a key step forward – of the book and also its main weakness.

Its strength is that it openly discusses the Macedonian claims of genocide. This is unheard of in the Greek and pro-Greek literature, and seldom heard of even in more neutral literature. Given the strength of Greek Government and Greek nationalist denials of genocide against the Macedonians, this truth to power by the authors shows the most admirable form of academic courage that should be, but is often far from, typical among many academics and writers on the war.

Some of the book's criticisms of 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 (United Nations 1948a. 29)."

This and other claims were investigated by the United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans (UNSCOB), which found that it was not correct. There were a range of responses by parents. UNSCOB said there was "some evidence that children were taken from some villages without the consent of their parents", but there was also "considerable evidence" that many children, particularly from Macedonian areas of western Macedonia "were taken with the consent of their parents". The group for the Florina region found "A fairly large number of parents, and especially guerrilla sympathizers, favored the departure of their children, but there was lively opposition from the majority of parents [who] fearing the possible consequences of their refusal enrolled their children unwillingly." There were also parents who "were very much opposed to letting their children go" and some who had "fled their villages to prevent their children from being taken away".

The authors say:

> Largely as a result of the work done by UNSCOB, many high-ranking Western diplomats and politicians remained unconvinced of the plausibility of the Greek government's claim that large numbers of children had been abducted against their parents' will... In April 1948, the head of the American Mission for Aid to Greece, Dwight Griswold, informed the US State Department of the mission's belief that "relatively few children have been kidnapped by the guerrillas"... In August 1948, the US State Department reported that there was "inadequate evidence... that any substantial number of children were forcibly taken" by the guerrillas (Wittner 1982, 162, 366, n. 70).

On the Macedonian side, the authors dispute claims of genocide against the Greek Government leveled by, among others, the Association of Refugee Children from Aegean Macedonia.

> For example, 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. It is also contradicted by common sense: Macedonian refugee children were not driven out of Greece by the Greek Government; they were evacuated by the Communist Party, which had promised the Macedonians of northern Greece equal rights after the war and guaranteed their education in the Macedonian language. Finally, this discourse is contradicted by the life stories of the refugee children themselves, who recount in great detail the terrible consequences of the war that led them to flee the country.

In addition, the authors are implicitly critical of the use by some of the refugees of the biblical terms "exodus" and "Golgotha".

In this context, the authors are correct to look at the individual acts of the Greek Government. But in defence of the Macedonian claims, the affected Macedonians also look at the much longer context of anti-Macedonian acts since before the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, including genocide during the Balkan Wars and cultural genocide before and after the wars. For them, the view is not of individual acts but of ongoing and continuous behavior by Greek political forces.

The authors also dispute the claims of genocide by the Greek nationalist organization the Pan-Macedonian Association and are quite clear about the Greek and Macedonian positions:

> While the Pan-Macedonian Association claims that the *paidomazoma* was an act of genocide carried out by the Greek Communist Party against the Greek nation, the Association of Macedonian Refugee Children claims that it was an act of genocide carried out by the Greek Government against the Macedonian nation. These two opposing claims are directly related to the issue of the national identity of the refugee children who were evacuated to Eastern Europe. For this reason they are also closely linked to the Macedonian conflict more generally. Both in the discourse of the Association of Refugee Children from Aegean Macedonia and in the discourse of the Pan-Macedonian Association, the definition of the *paidomazoma* as an act of genocide is factually wrong.

The authors 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. Nor does it meet the essential criterion that inspired this legal instrument: there must be a deliberate *intention to physically* destroy a national group."

It is a huge step forward to see the competing claims of genocide analyzed at all, let alone analyzed together, let alone analyzed in the light of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Genocide Convention).

And as far as the authors analyze these claims, they are correct. It would be difficult indeed 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".

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" 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";
- 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".

Another issue – which is not discussed in this book – is that during the 1950s several thousand 'orphans', at least some of them from the Civil War, were adopted out to American families. There is a need for information and statistics 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", ie 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 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." The copy of the Decree published by the "OFFICIAL GAZZETTIER OF THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GREECE", as reproduced in the 1994 Human Rights Watch report Denying Ethnic Identity: The Macedonians of Greece, has the phrase "by genus" underlined. Affected Macedonians say the phrase "all Greeks by genus" has been 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.

Many of the Macedonian children who were not allowed to return settled in Eastern Europe, USA, Canada and Australia. The authors say the fundamental fact that distinguishes the experiences of these Macedonian refugee children from their Greek counterparts is that they were transformed "from temporary refugees into permanent exiles". That exile was an act of the Greek Government. Macedonians can argue that in so far as that 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" 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". The legal and ethical debates in this case need to be had.

No doubt there may be relevant legal precedents. For example, in the context of 'The Evacuation of Children during War in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s', the authors point out that the Nazis had a large program under which they abducted children from Eastern Europe with "desirable racial characteristics" who underwent forced "Germanization", and were placed in state boarding schools or adopted out to German families where they were raised without knowledge of their origins. The "worthless" 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". In this extreme example, clarity is needed on what specific crimes the individual convictions related 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.

Whether, ultimately, the behavior of the Greek Government towards the Macedonian children is or is not found to be genocide, the lifelong banishment of so many Macedonian children remains without doubt an act of ethnic cleansing. It is also, without doubt, an extraordinary act of lifelong cruelty by the Greek Government. One that continues to this day.

As there is so much more that can be said about this excellent book, I will conclude by saying that Children of the Greek Civil War is among the essential books that needs to be read by everyone with an interest in the war or its many issues.

References

Loring M. Danforth and Riki Van Boeschoten*, Children of the Greek Civil War, Refugees and the Politics of Memory*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2012.

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