

OLENA BOCHAROVA

University of the National Education Commission in Kraków

ORCID – 0000-0001-8415-3925

CHILDHOOD IN THE FACE OF WAR: SYMBOLISM, SUFFERING AND HOPE AS EXAMPLED BY THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE*

Introduction: The ongoing armed conflict in Ukraine significantly impacts children, positioning them both as direct victims of violence and as symbolic representations of national resistance, hope, and future reconstruction.

Research Aim: The aim of this article is to analyze childhood experiences in Ukraine in the context of war, both in a literal and symbolic dimension, and to illustrate how children are perceived as victims of armed conflict while simultaneously serving as symbols of resistance, hope, and national reconstruction.

Evidence-based Facts: The study employs Galtung's theory of structural violence and Wessells' theory of child protection to analyze war-related child experiences. It draws data from official reports, including those from the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine, UNICEF, and humanitarian organizations. Findings show war disrupts education and reinforces the necessity for flexible educational approaches during crises. Children play a symbolic role in narratives of resistance.

Summary: The research underscores the severe impact of war on children, both physically and emotionally. It highlights the need for comprehensive programs to protect children's rights, support their development, and facilitate social reintegration post-conflict. The study also emphasizes the importance of education in minimizing war's psychological and social consequences.

Keywords: childhood, Ukraine, war, structural violence, childhood symbolism, resistance, hope

INTRODUCTION

The war in Ukraine, being an extreme crisis situation, results in consequences that destabilise the existing political, social and economic structures at both the state

* Suggested citation: Bocharova, O. (2025). Childhood in the Face of War: Symbolism, Suffering and Hope as Exemplified by the Conflict in Ukraine. *Lubelski Rocznik Pedagogiczny*, 44(3), 77–88. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/lrp.2025.44.3.77-88>

and global level. This conflict not only questions the foundations of the European security order, but also forces reflection on the durability of peace as a fundamental value for the Old Continent. Long-term peace considered to be the unquestionable foundation of the European order turns out to be a much more fragile phenomenon than previously thought. Researchers, analysing the approach of Western European societies to armed conflicts, point to the existence of a phenomenon called “healthy amnesia”. This phenomenon consists in conscious or subconscious distancing from conflicts taking place on the outskirts of Europe, including the war in the Balkans in the 1990s or the conflict in Syria. This mechanism, perceived by some as a way to protect the collective psyche from war trauma, in practice led to limited involvement in resolving crises. However, the war in Ukraine has provoked a different reaction from that observed in the case of peripheral conflicts. The geographic, cultural and historical proximity of Ukraine to Western Europe has significantly influenced the scale of political, social and institutional involvement. This breaking of the “dead mile law”, according to which compassion and engagement decrease with distance from the conflict, points to the existence of more complex mechanisms shaping social and political reactions. In the case of the war in Ukraine, this assumption is only partially confirmed (Razy, 2021–2022).

War, like other armed conflicts, particularly affects the most vulnerable social groups, including children. In the context of this war, childhood becomes a target both literally, through violence and direct military action, and symbolically, where children are used as propaganda tools or subjected to forced indoctrination in re-education camps. These phenomena trigger particularly strong emotional reactions in Western societies, where children have long been perceived as synonymous with innocence and hope for the future. The symbolic meaning of childhood makes the youngest particularly susceptible to instrumentalisation, both materially and politically. According to the latest data published on the Children of War portal for the period 2022–2024 (<https://childrenofwar.gov.ua/>), the scale of the tragedy is presented in alarming numbers: 595 children killed – according to data from the Prosecutor General’s Office, 1,716 children injured – according to data from the Prosecutor General’s Office, 1,936 children missing – according to data from the National Police of Ukraine, 19,546 children found – according to data from the National Information Bureau, 744,000 children deported – according to data from open sources provided by the Russian Federation and 200–300,000 according to data from Ukrainian sources; 388 children deported and/or forcibly displaced returned to Ukraine – according to data from the National Information Bureau, 35,513 children found – according to data from the National Police of Ukraine, 16 victims of sexual violence – according to data from the Prosecutor General’s Office. Each of these numbers reflects individual stories full of pain and loss. Children who are killed and injured are victims of direct war violence, while those who are deported or forcibly

displaced experience violations of their basic human rights. Missing children remain in uncertainty about their fate, while those who are found continue to struggle with the trauma of war.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

The aim of this article is to analyze childhood experiences in Ukraine in the context of war, both in a literal and symbolic dimension, and to illustrate how children are perceived as victims of armed conflict while simultaneously serving as symbols of resistance, hope, and national reconstruction. The research seeks to answer the following question: How does the war in Ukraine shape children's experiences, and what are the implications of their suffering and symbolic role in war narratives?

EVIDENCE-BASED REVIEW

Childhood has been an important area of interest in anthropological research for many years, which is reflected in the classic works of authors – Arnold van Gennep in *Les rites de passage* (1909), Margaret Mead in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* (1932), etc. (de Suremain & Bonnet, 2014). Early childhood research was dominated by an approach focused on the observation and analysis of adult discourses, which treated children more as objects than research subjects (Razy & Rodet, 2011). Such a perspective limited the possibilities of understanding the role of children as active participants in social life. It was not until the development of Childhood Studies in the 1990s that a significant change occurred in this respect. In the new research paradigm, the concept of the “child voice” began to play a central role, which allowed researchers to consider in more depth the interactions between social structures and children's actions. This approach significantly enriched analyses of childhood, taking into account children's agency in social and cultural processes (Pache & Ossipow, 2012).

The development of Childhood Studies has coincided with an intensification of public and political interest in the role of children as subjects of rights. The research of Bluebond-Langner and Korbin (2007) clearly points to the child as a central actor in the areas of human rights, education, and protection from violence. This perspective emphasises the need to include children in debates on key social and political challenges. However, as anthropologists note, childhood should be analysed in relation to adults and other children, and research in this area must take into account the local cultural and social contexts that condition children's experiences in different environments (Pache & Ossipow, 2012).

Concepts of childhood have undergone significant changes in different historical periods, reflecting the prevailing values and social norms of the time. Children have been seen, among other things, as “children of the family”, “children of Christianity”, or “children of the nation” (Bonnet et al., 2012). The contemporary model, referred to as the “UN child”, emphasises the view of children as “subjects of rights” and increasingly integrates diverse historical and cultural understandings of childhood, seeking to establish a global norm (de Suremain & Bonnet, 2014). However, implementing this universalist approach in practice is often difficult, especially in crisis situations such as the war in Ukraine. Such contexts highlight tensions between universalist assumptions and specific local realities that require more flexible and culturally sensitive solutions.

Children in armed conflicts play complex roles that go beyond the traditional perception of childhood as a period of innocence and protection. War redefines childhood, influencing the way societies, media, and politics shape narratives about children. In the case of Ukraine, violence against children includes both direct acts of aggression, such as bombing or psychological violence, and structural violence, manifested in limited access to education, health care, and safe shelter. Galtung’s (1969) concept of structural violence allows for a theoretical grasp of these phenomena, defining structural violence as a form of violence rooted in social, political, and economic systems that prevent individuals from fulfilling their basic needs. In the context of children, structural violence manifests itself in the destruction of infrastructure and protective mechanisms that should ensure their development and safety. This is not a direct result of individual actions, but rather the effect of systems that limit access to resources such as education, healthcare, and social protection. Examples of such actions include the bombing of the children’s hospital in Mariupol in 2022 (Skarżyński, 2022) and the Ohmatdyt children’s hospital in Kyiv in 2024 (Łomanowski, 2024). These incidents demonstrate how facilities designed to support and protect children become military targets. These attacks not only deprive children of access to basic services, but also increase their sense of threat and uncertainty, which negatively impact their mental health and emotional development.

Galtung’s (1965) concept of structural violence provides analytical tools for understanding the mechanisms of using children as propaganda tools during armed conflicts. The displacement of children and their re-education in Russian camps are an example of systemic actions that redefine childhood, transforming it from a period of protection into an element of war strategy. The symbolism of children in this context plays a significant role, becoming a powerful propaganda tool. Their suffering provokes reactions from the international community and, at the same time, is used to legitimise war and political actions. According to Daria Gerasimchuk, Ukrainian Commissioner for Children’s Rights, the number of children abducted by Russian occupation forces from Ukrainian territories is between

200,000 and 300,000. Official data includes only 1,500 children whose identity is known to Ukrainian authorities and their whereabouts have been established. So far, only 386 children have been brought back (Semeniuk, 2023).

The analysis conducted by Ukrainian child rights authorities (including the Commissioner for Children's Rights of Ukraine), complemented by findings from the Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale University, the Belarus-Russia deportation report (2023), the Children of War portal (2024), and research by Semeniuk (2023), indicates several scenarios of deportation of Ukrainian children, which include:

1. Separation of children from their parents during filtration operations in the occupied territories.
2. Removing children from institutional care facilities such as orphanages.
3. Taking children away from their biological families by depriving parents of parental rights under fabricated pretexts.
4. Forcing parents to sign consent to take their children to "health resort" camps from which they do not return home (Semeniuk, 2023).

Such actions not only violate children's fundamental rights, but also lead to their systematic use as part of a propaganda narrative. Showing children's suffering serves, on the one hand, to build an image of victims requiring protection, and on the other hand, to legitimise political actions in the international arena. These phenomena highlight how structural violence against children fits into a broad war strategy, generating long-term social and psychological consequences.

The report *Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-education & Adoption of Ukraine's Children* (Better Care Network, 2023), prepared by the Humanitarian Research Laboratory at Yale University as part of the Conflict Observatory project, supported by the U.S. Department of State, reveals the existence of an extensive network of facilities managed by Russia. These facilities were used to re-educate thousands of Ukrainian children, who were systematically subjected to ideological indoctrination. According to the report, the children were taught Russian history, state symbols, including the national anthem, and the content conveyed contained a distorted interpretation of the war in Ukraine. Children who demonstrated particularly strong patriotic attitudes were subjected to torture and psychological pressure.

Another document, *Belarus' Collaboration with Russia in the Systematic Deportation of Ukraine's Children* (Relief Web, 2023), details cooperation between Russia and Belarus in the forced resettlement of Ukrainian children. The report indicates the involvement of the Belarusian authorities, including Alexander Lukashenko, and Belarusian and Russian special services. According to the report, at least 2,442 Ukrainian children aged 6 to 17, including children from socially vulnerable groups, were transported from 17 Ukrainian cities to at least 13 centres in Belarus. The document provides details on the number of children relocated, the transport

routes and the organisation of the deportation process, and also identifies key persons responsible for implementing these activities.

The phenomenon of forced resettlement and re-education of children also has long-term psychological effects. Children affected by this procedure experience chronic stress, anxiety and difficulties adapting to new living conditions, such as internal displacement. Emotional problems are particularly pronounced. According to the results of research conducted by psychologists from the Głosem Dzieci Foundation [Children's Voice], 83% of children have difficulties understanding their own emotions, and 72% feel anxiety related to the war. Another 67% struggle with adaptation difficulties as internal refugees, while 63% have problems in relationships with peers, resulting from language barriers, among other things. In the study group, 54% of children experienced panic attacks, 56% suffered from separation from their parents, 63% self-harmed, and 52% had suicidal thoughts (Semeniuk, 2023). These data reveal the deep and multidimensional effects of structural violence against children resulting from warfare and deliberate actions of the occupiers aimed at destroying the national and social identity of the youngest.

As a result of an intensive investigation conducted by the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, individuals in Russia who illegally adopted Ukrainian orphans taken from the occupied territories of Ukraine were identified. The process of returning children to their homeland is extremely complicated, time-consuming and requires the involvement of both state structures and international organisations.

The war, through the systematic destruction of educational infrastructure and the transformation of schools into military shelters, significantly prevents children from continuing their education. According to the UNICEF report (2023), more than 5 million Ukrainian children have lost access to regular education. This state of affairs leads not only to the inhibition of their intellectual development, but also to social and economic marginalisation. Although 1.9 million children use online education and 1.3 million participate in the hybrid model, these are only temporary solutions that do not replace a fully-fledged educational system. As Galtung (1965) points out, such alternative forms of learning, although necessary in times of crisis, do not eliminate fundamental educational inequalities, especially those affecting children from the poorest and most peripheral regions.

Analysing children's experiences in armed conflict highlights the long-term and multidimensional consequences of structural violence and their symbolic exploitation. Galtung's (1965) theoretical framework allows for a deeper understanding of these phenomena, viewing children as both direct victims of war and elements of broader social, political, and symbolic processes. Acts of violence against children, such as abduction, forced adoption, and identity erasure, have far-reaching consequences that encompass both individual and collective dimensions.

As Razy and Rodet (2011) note, taking children away from their families, stigmatising them with death or violence, and destroying their national identity are forms of destruction that include physical, emotional, and symbolic aspects. These actions by aggressors, aimed at undermining the foundations of children's individual and social integrity, reveal the dramatic reality of armed conflicts, in which the youngest become particularly vulnerable victims of structures of violence. The impact of armed conflict on children – both born and unborn – is one of the most tragic aspects of war. A specific group in this context is formed by children born of war (CBOW), whose situation is closely linked to the dynamics of the conflict, its consequences and specific cultural and social conditions (Mochmann, 2017). This term refers to children whose one parent is a member of a foreign army or peacekeeping force and the other a local citizen – regardless of the geographical context, duration of the conflict, type of military operations or circumstances of conception. These children may be the fruit of sexual violence or consensual relationships (Mochmann & Lee, 2010).

The history of armed conflicts shows that children classified as such have appeared in almost every such event. Their social and psychological situation, however, varies depending on cultural and political conditions and the acceptance of their origin by society (Zlyvkov et al., 2023). Children conceived as a result of sexual violence are in a particularly difficult situation. Although they have not directly experienced an act of violence, the consequences of this experience affect them throughout their lives. They become victims of stigmatisation, discrimination and rejection, both in their families and in the communities in which they grow up. Their designation as “children of the enemy” (Razy, 2021–2022) highlights their perception as symbols of violence and aggression. The presence of these children reminds communities of war traumas, which often leads to their marginalisation.

Mothers of children born in such circumstances struggle with particularly difficult emotions, as their offspring are a constant reminder of the brutal events they were the victims of. These children are often referred to as “silent identities” (Baldi & MacKenzie, 2007) or “hidden population” (Lee, 2017), indicating their social invisibility. This status results from both social indifference to their situation and the deliberate concealment of their existence by mothers who fear social ostracism and stigmatisation. In the context of Ukraine, where motherhood is deeply rooted in national identity and symbolised by the figure of Berehynia – the mythological protector of the home and the nation – forced motherhood resulting from violence disrupts this narrative, undermining the foundations of the family. This phenomenon becomes a source of long-term tensions and traumas for both the mother and the child (Razy, 2021–2022). In traditional narratives, the birth of a child often symbolises hope and continuity of life, but in such cases it becomes a source of destruction, reinforcing the sense of loss and social disintegration.

SUMMARY

War – like other armed conflicts – highlights the importance of children as symbols of hope, future and national identity. Children, both those directly affected by war and those who have left their homes in search of safety, experience conflict in different ways. For many of them, escape is a means of saving their lives, but it also involves leaving home, friends and their previous lifestyle. Their experiences are marked by both war trauma and the challenges associated with the process of integration in new environments. As Rosen (2005) points out, changing the environment has a significant impact on the formation of children’s identity and the process of socialisation, which has long-term consequences for their well-being.

Moreover, war fundamentally changes the way children perceive reality. Scenes in which children recreate war situations in play show how armed conflict permeates their everyday lives. Playing war “for real” becomes a mechanism for taming chaos and uncertainty, while challenging the traditional perception of childhood as a time of carefreeness and innocence. Research conducted by Gura and Roma (2024) on the nature of preschool children’s play in the conditions of war in Ukraine reveals that its content is dominated by scenarios inspired by war realities. The most frequently played situations include air raid alarms, organising shelters, staying in shelters, fighting against occupiers, protecting loved ones, helping victims, and working at checkpoints. The choice of toys reflects the same war realities. Among the preferred items, military toys dominate. Boys choose toy weapons, military equipment, military robots, military construction vehicles, and figures of soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Girls, on the other hand, prefer mascots and dolls. The results of these studies emphasise that armed conflict has a profound impact on the play of preschool children, reflecting their everyday experiences and the surrounding reality.

Media messages often use narratives about children to evoke sympathy and social mobilisation. The dominant model of childhood in Western discourses, which sees this period of life as a time of protection, dependence, and innocence, turns out to be non-universal. The stories of children experiencing war show that childhood is a multidimensional construct, shaped by diverse cultural, social and political realities. In Ukraine, childhood is deeply rooted in national identity, and children gain a special role in war narratives, functioning simultaneously as victims of the conflict and symbols of resistance and hope. Images of children as the “future of the nation” play a key role in war narratives, arousing emotions and engaging society in solidarity actions (Razy, 2021–2022).

Examples of children reciting patriotic poems, singing national anthems, or supporting the morale of adults emphasise that their role goes beyond passively enduring suffering – they become active participants in symbolic resistance to the aggressor. A recording of seven-year-old Amelka Anisowicz singing the song *Let It Go* [*Mam tę moc*] from the film *Frozen* in a Kiev bunker became one of the

most moving symbols of the war in Ukraine. The footage quickly spread across the world media, causing emotion and global solidarity with Ukraine. In March 2022, Amelka arrived safely in Poland with her grandmother and brother. During the “Together for Ukraine” concert at the Atlas Arena in Łódź, she sang the Ukrainian national anthem, becoming a living symbol of the connection between childhood and the future of the nation (Nowak, 2022). Her performance showed not only individual determination, but also the steadfastness of the entire Ukrainian society.

Combining children’s culture with the reality of war reinforces the emotional message about the courage and strength of the nation in the face of crisis. Children, as heroes of war narratives, are presented not only as victims of violence, but also as carriers of universal values, such as courage, perseverance and hope for a better future. In this way, their presence in the media and at public events engages the audience on an emotional level, enabling identification with the victims of war. The story of Amelka and other children in similar situations shows how war transforms childhood, giving it a new, symbolic meaning. In this context, children become carriers of collective memory and symbols of resistance and hope for the reconstruction of society. Narratives about children in war realities become a universal language of solidarity and support that mobilises international public opinion.

CONCLUSION

Analysing war from a childhood perspective reveals not only the unique experiences of children but also the mechanisms of destruction and hope inherent in armed conflicts. Understanding these complex aspects contributes to designing effective protection and support strategies that can be adapted to future humanitarian crises. The symbolic role of children – as victims, witnesses, and symbols of resilience – sheds light on universal phenomena related to war and peace. The research findings highlight several critical implications:

Prevention of forced displacement and recruitment: There is an urgent need for international and local initiatives aimed at creating safe environments for children, reducing the risk of exploitation for military or propaganda purposes (Semiuniuk, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

Psychological support and social reintegration: Programs providing trauma-informed care, counselling, and community integration must be prioritised to address the emotional and social needs of affected children (Wessells, 2006).

Strengthening crisis-adapted education: Ensuring continuity of education through remote learning, hybrid models, and flexible curricula is essential to minimise developmental and social setbacks (Bocharova & Melnik, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

Monitoring and accountability: Systematic documentation and monitoring of violations of children's rights are necessary to inform policy decisions and hold perpetrators accountable (Better Care Network, 2023; Commissioner for Human Rights of Ukraine, 2024).

These strategies, aligned with Wessells' (2006) framework for child protection in armed conflicts, have already been partially implemented in Ukraine. They offer valuable models for responding to similar challenges in future humanitarian crises.

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DZIECIŃSTWO W OBLICZU WOJNY: SYMBOLIKA, CIERPIENIE I NADZIEJA NA PRZYKŁADZIE KONFLIKTU NA UKRAINIE

Wprowadzenie: Trwający konflikt zbrojny na Ukrainie wywiera znaczący wpływ na dzieci, czyniąc je zarówno bezpośrednimi ofiarami przemocy, jak i symbolami narodowego oporu, nadziei oraz przyszłej odbudowy. W kontekście trwającej wojny dzieciństwo przestaje być okresem ochrony i beztrioski, a staje się kategorią społeczną i polityczną, poddaną procesom instrumentalizacji i narracjom wojennym.

Cel badań: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza doświadczeń dzieci na Ukrainie w kontekście konfliktu zbrojnego, zarówno w wymiarze dosłownym, jak i symbolicznym. Artykuł przedstawia, w jaki sposób dzieci są postrzegane jako ofiary wojny, jednocześnie uwzględniając ich rolę jako symboli oporu, nadziei i odbudowy państwowości.

Stan wiedzy: Analiza opiera się na teorii przemocy strukturalnej Galtunga oraz teorii ochrony dzieci Wessellsa, które umożliwiają kompleksowe ujęcie doświadczeń dzieci w warunkach konfliktu zbrojnego. W artykule zostały wykorzystane dane pochodzące z oficjalnych raportów Prokuratury Generalnej Ukrainy, UNICEF oraz organizacji humanitarnych zajmujących się ochroną praw dzieci i monitorowaniem skutków wojny.

Podsumowanie: Wyniki analizy ukazują wielowymiarowe konsekwencje wojny dla dzieci na Ukrainie, obejmujące zarówno aspekty fizyczne i psychiczne, jak i społeczno-polityczne. Wojna odbiera najmłodszym poczucie bezpieczeństwa, destabilizuje ich codzienność i wpływa na kształtowanie tożsamości w warunkach kryzysu. Autor podkreśla konieczność wdrażania kompleksowych programów ochrony praw dzieci, wspierania ich rozwoju oraz opracowania skutecznych strategii społecznej reintegracji w okresie powojennym. Szczególną rolę przypisuje edukacji, która nie tylko stanowi fundament odbudowy indywidualnej i zbiorowej, ale także jest kluczowym narzędziem minimalizowania długofalowych skutków wojny.

Słowa kluczowe: dzieciństwo, Ukraina, wojna, przemoc strukturalna, symbolika dzieciństwa, opór, nadzieja