

Witnesses of War – Children's Lives under the Nazis by Nicholas Stargardt.  
Jonathan Cape 2005.

Even though it has long since ceased to be the case – and perhaps it never was – there still exists a fantasy in the popular mind that children should be protected from the evils of war. In centuries past when the fate of nations could be decided on one fixed battlefield that might have been possible, but in today's wars that is no longer viable. In conflicts without frontlines children will always find themselves exposed to the worst horrors of warfare, and inevitably end up its victims.

Witnesses of War details the impact of the Second World War on the children of Europe. It considers the effect of Nazism on German school children and the indoctrination that occurred in the youth organisations to which they were compelled to affiliate. It looks at the way the Nazi genocide of the Jews of Europe in all its stages affected Jewish children, and it considers the parallels between those who became victims, either by accident or design.

Nicholas Stargardt has filled a huge gap in the chronicles of the 1930s and 1940s, for although there have been other books on the children of the Third Reich there has never been one quite like this.

The impact that the author details is chilling, and the suffering of German children in Allied bombings as well as that inflicted by Germans on Jewish youngsters makes for grim reading; this latter manifested itself in many ways, of which the most terrible were not necessarily the brutal murders that Nazi soldiers perpetrated on innocent Jewish boys and girls.

However, in all the gloom and darkness there are occasional rays of light, albeit of a very muted kind. Stargardt brings out the resilience of children in the worst circumstances, their ability to play against the worst backdrops, and also their speedy assimilation of the behaviour and attitudes of their parents.

This is a most valuable new addition to the corpus of Second World War literature and one that all students of the Shoah should read.

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