CHAPTER 1

Placing the Child in Twentieth-Century History: Contexts and Framework*

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Of the happy childhood that is our gift,
Joyful song, loudly chime!
Thanks to you, great Stalin
For our miraculous time!

Eulogy by Pioneer Valia Shevchenko, December 1936

In the Ukraine ragged homeless boys came and beat on the train doors and begged, many of them hanging onto the train in hopes of getting to somewhere where there might be food. [..] Miss Daunt says bitterly that there are no girls in Leningrad. She exaggerates, but she has cause to speak bitterly, as she lives down a street where there is a sailors’ club and she sees girls, who she thinks cannot be more than twelve, accosting sailors there.

Diary of British diplomat Reader Bullard, 13 June 1933

The Germans have robbed us in the worst way: they took our children to Germany. Many boys and girls of twelve and thirteen have been deported to Germany to be Germanized and put to work. Many other children have been torn away from their mothers and taken God knows where. The fascists have inflicted a serious wound on our nation. We shall not recover from it for a long time to come.

Soviet Ukrainian film director Aleksandr Dovzhenko, 'Notebooks', 28 November 1943

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Across Eastern Europe and Russia in the first half of the twentieth century, conflict and violence arising out of foreign and civil wars, occupation, revolutions, ethnic restructuring and racial persecution caused countless millions of children to be uprooted and displaced from their homes. States of the region implementing visions of radical social change regarded ‘their’ children not just as national property to be preserved and protected, but as a means of securing a better future. Children in these states became objects and instruments of extensive programmes of social engineering, which often also entailed their forcible displacement. For these children, ideals of a ‘happy childhood’ under benign state tutelage (as proclaimed in the Soviet Pioneer’s eulogy to Stalin quoted above) all too often contrasted with the hardships of homelessness and life on the street (as noted in Bullard’s diary) or the harsh realities of state institutions. Children ‘out of place’ became the focus of ever greater anxiety and alarm on the part of adults, who viewed them as both a symbolic injury and physical loss to the nation (as Dovzhenko lamented with regard to the Nazis’ theft of national children). But children ‘out of place’ were also seen as instigators of social disorder and emblems of degeneration. Children were in danger and they were dangerous. States therefore acted to reclaim and replace their displaced children, and their interventions frequently subjected the children to yet further upheaval and hardship.

In this volume we address multiple forms of child displacement and replacement as both state practice and social experience, and examine these practices and experiences in relation to questions of ideology, spatiality, mobility, identity and selfhood. We hope that the case studies will demonstrate the value and relevance of this framework for deepening our understanding not only of childhood and population displacement in the last century, but also the forces that shape children’s lives, the factors that impel and constrain human mobility, and the sources and nature of state power and social experience in the contemporary world.

In this introductory chapter I start by outlining briefly the main aims of the book, its thematic scope and its principal sources. In the next three sections I consider in more detail our core themes, highlighting their interconnections and establishing the historical, conceptual and methodological contexts of the subsequent case studies. Here I discuss, firstly, the interrelations among modern statehood, population displacement and normative notions of childhood and the place of children; secondly, the possibilities and challenges of a new history of childhood that seeks to elucidate not only adult ideologies and interventions but also children’s realities; and, thirdly, the role of space and time in structuring official discourses of childhood, the experiences of children and our own scholarly perspectives.