

ACTIVITY PLAN

Dealing with the life stories of stolen children

**PARTICIPANTS' AGE/LEVEL**

15 to 19 years

**GROUP SIZE**

30 maximum

**TIME**

about 2.5 hours

**KEYWORDS**

crimes against humanity, identity, childhood, NS crimes, individual fates

**OVERVIEW**

To start with, participants get introduced to the historical context. Then, they work on the concept of identity. They deal with their own identities as well as with the concept on a meta level. The next step involves working in groups on the biographies of different stolen children. Participants read and learn about the children's fates with the help of representative objects. These objects are also part of the presentations that the participants then prepare.

**TIPS**

- Since the subject of the stolen children is not easy to process, it is important to give participants the freedom to express their opinions and feelings at any stage of the workshop, whenever they feel a need to do this. Create a safe space and provide emotional support (and try to sense when the topic might be too overwhelming for some of the participants).
- The times allotted for different stages of the workshop are only intended as suggestions. You can devote more time to certain aspects of the subject when you feel this is necessary.
- It is advisable to let the participants work actively as much as possible and to keep inputs from the facilitator as short as possible. However, since inputs are also an important way of providing information that is relevant to understanding the context, they should be delivered in an interactive way.
- If the group is diverse and the participants come from different countries, there might be greatly differing levels of knowledge about the time of

National Socialism. If circumstances allow, the “UPROOTED Learning Cards Set” and the accompanying activities (to be found on www.uprootedchildren.eu) can be used as a good way of preparing for this workshop. When time is short, we recommend a brief input on important events that took place during the time of National Socialism as well as key elements of the ideology itself.



BACKGROUND

World War II was the most tragic event in the history of the 20th century. Today, more than seventy years after the end of the conflict, it seems as if everything relating to this subject has been well researched, as if there are no blind spots in the historiography and memory cultures of Europe’s different cultural communities.

However, there are still stories that remain largely uninvestigated and receive little public attention. One reason for this could be that the voices of those involved are too weak to be heard and that they have too few supporters to gain any significant amount of attention. Some may not even know that they belong to a group of victims of National Socialism.

One example of such a forgotten story is that of the approximately 50,000 to 200,000 children who were abducted from parts of German-occupied Europe during World War II by order of the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler.

These were mainly children who, according to the racist ideology of the Führer Adolf Hitler, had good, i.e. so-called Aryan, blood and were Germanized in the German Reich. Mainly responsible for this mass organized abduction of children with blue eyes and blond hair was the Lebensborn organization, which ran children’s homes in Germany as well as in occupied countries and was supposed to contribute to the preservation of the “Nordic race”.

For the children concerned, the forcible separation from their families meant a break in their lives that they often never overcame. The youngest among them were 10 months old at the time of their abduction and therefore could not later remember their actual origins. In most cases, after passing through several of the Lebensborn homes, the children were taken in by German foster families who had proven loyal to the system. Some were even adopted. Documents that could have proven their real origins were falsified, and many of the foster parents also remained silent for a very long time. Often it was coincidences that made the children wonder about their origins. Only a few of the stolen children were able to return to their biological families after 1945. For those who succeeded, it did not necessarily mean a happy ending to a cruel story. They often no longer felt they belonged, and in most cases they did not even speak their native languages any more after they had been forcibly prevented from using them in the Lebensborn homes. For these children, this meant a renewed uprooting and the loss of a family.



PREPARING

The facilitators shall inform themselves about key elements and important aspects of the time of National Socialism that are important to help the participants understand the context of the life stories of the stolen children. They shall also familiarize themselves with the life stories the participants are going to be looking at, reading the biographies carefully beforehand and researching aspects of the subject that

are new to them. A deeper understanding of the time and the fates of the children is necessary in order to be able to convey the meaning of it to the participants. In addition, they need to prepare the materials listed below. For the presentation and debriefing phase, the facilitators need to prepare a presentation on Mentimeter.com (see Phase 5 for further details).

Recommended reading: T. Skonieczny (ed.), *Uprooted – (Hi)Stories of Stolen Children during World War II*, 2022: <https://uprootedchildren.eu/en/knowledge/articles/>



MATERIALS

life stories of the stolen children, to be found in English in the publication above, pp. 15-24 or in German in this one: <https://uprootedchildren.eu/de/knowledge/articles/>, pp. 15-24 (number of copies according to the number of groups and participants)

- objects and printed photos (according to the relevant list, see Attachment No. 1)
- paper
- different coloured pens and markers
- tape
- flipchart
- smartphones, internet



THE ACTIVITY STEP BY STEP

Phase 1:

Introduction (5 minutes)

Tell the participants what this workshop is going to be about and what they will learn.

Phase 2:

Input & discussion on the time of National Socialism (20 minutes)

Give an input on important events of the time of World War II and key elements of the ideology of National Socialism. Use a question-and-answer format, so that participants are not in the role of passive listeners but also get the chance to share their own knowledge. If the group is made up of participants from different school systems, they might have differing levels of knowledge, so it's important to use this input to balance out the levels of knowledge within the group. Please let your participants know that this is just a brief introduction to the topic and that there is much more to know about it. You can also give them advice about good sources of further information. They should be aware that you have just selected certain elements that are important for understanding the stories of the stolen children and their background.

If you have more time at your disposal, it is a good idea to use the "UPROOTED Learning Cards Set" activities (to be found on www.uprootedchildren.eu) as an introduction to this topic.

Phase 3:**The concept of identity (30 minutes)**

This is an important step towards identifying with the life stories of the stolen children and developing empathy for their fate.

Ask your participants to draw a flower with petals and leaves and attribute to each petal a concept that they consider important to their identity. These can include gender, nationality or religion, and also less obvious characteristics such as hobbies, interests, voluntary work, sexual identity, occupation or marital status, for example. In the first round, participants work individually and design a “private flower” that is not shared with others. In the second round, they are asked to create a “public flower” to be shared with one other member of the group from another country. Following this, you collect the public flowers (they are anonymous) and read out some of the items that are mentioned. Ask the participants to stand up if they agree that these items are also important to their identity, even though they might not have written them in their own flower. If they don’t agree, they remain seated. You might then ask these questions:

- How did it feel to stand up or to remain seated? Was it easy or difficult?
- Were you being honest or did you just stand up because other people did, for example, or did you remain seated because you were shy/embarrassed?
- Why is it easy to talk about some things and not about others?
- Why are certain aspects of our identity important and others not?
- Who defines your identity?
- Can you choose all parts of your identity?
- Who and what influences your identity?

Phase 4:**Group work (45 minutes)**

Ask your participants to form small groups (3–6 per group, depending on the total number of participants). If the seminar is international, it is advisable to mix participants from different countries. If they are from the same country, ask them to form groups with people they do not know so well.

Each group receives a short biography of a stolen child. You can use the following biography, available in German and English (see Materials):

- Barbara from Łódź (Poland)
- Ingrid from Rogaška Slatina (Czech Republic)
- Czesław from Rogoźno (Poland)
- Marie from Lidice (Czech Republic)
- Aleksander from Alnova (Ukraine)

Depending on the biographies used, 3–4 objects are listed which should be handed out to the groups along with one or two photos and the texts themselves. You can use the objects suggested on the list, but feel free to change or add some; they are just ideas. Ask the groups to do the following tasks/answer the following questions (a print-friendly version can be found in the Attachment No. 3):

1. Read the short biography you have been given and make sure that you understand everything. If you have any questions, ask other members of your group or the facilitator.
2. Which events in the person’s life do you find particularly remarkable or can you possibly identify with? Mark these passages in the text and discuss them among yourselves.

**OPTIONAL ACTIVITY (45 MINUTES):**

In order to dig deeper into the topic of what a loss of family origins might mean for one's own identity and later personal development in life, you can ask the participants to read the poem by Pauline McLeod that deals with the traumatizing separation of Australian Aboriginal children from their families. The poem can be found in Attachment No. 2.

On the basis of the poem, participants can discuss in small groups how people are affected by being forcibly separated from their families. While doing this, they should consider the following aspects: personal, relationships, economic, law and justice, health, spiritual, cultural.

The results of the group work can then be discussed by all the participants. You can give further information by presenting the facts of the card "**Being/Feeling Uprooted – Effects and Consequences**" from the "**UPROOTED Learning Cards Set**".

Further information on the subject of how children were affected by being forcibly separated from their families: <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/stolen-generations/stolen-generations-effects-and-consequences>

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Project: Uprooted – (Hi)Stories of Stolen Children during World War II, www.uprootedchildren.eu

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