

Why was it a world war?

It is a little known fact that the uranium used in the atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 was extracted from the Shinkolobwe mine in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, then under Belgian rule. The local population employed, including children, was subjected to forced labour, in addition to exposure to high levels of radiation, leaving multiple sequelae that, as in Japan, persist in the territory. This fact allows us to trace a link between colonialism and war that transcends the temporal limits of World War II.



Work *The Martyrs of the Union Minière du Haut Katanga* by Tshibumba Kanda Matulu (Congo, 1947-ca. 1981). Tshibumba's painting depicts the killing of striking miners in Lubumbashi by order of the Belgian colonial government on 9 December 1941 and recreates the treatment of workers in mines such as Shinkolobwe. ©Brooklyn Museum (2010.1). Orphan work.

European imperial expansion, which began in the second half of the 19th century and was characterized by the establishment of colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, represents an essential element for understanding the globalization of warfare in the 20th century.

However, beyond considering colonies solely as theatres of military operations, it is essential to recognize that the colonized population, with a special focus on women and children, has been systematically excluded from the narratives addressing these conflicts. Their bodies and experiences were used to fuel imperial propaganda and perpetuate the stereotypes that sustained it, rendering their agencies and experiences invisible in the records of the period.



Postcard from French Indochina, 1936. Through photography, film and art, the aim was to constantly recreate Orientalism, a canon that facilitated the socialisation of stereotypical images of colonized societies. © Université Côte d'Azur (Fonds ASE-MI, PH09-11)



As described, Lieutenant Barr (USA) offers candy on Christmas Day 1942 to five "starving" children in Kanjiko, India. The image of needy children was an instrument of imperial narratives, being the major canon of the photographic record. ©National Archives (204965955).

At the end of the war, some 750 million people, equivalent to one-third of the world's population, resided in colonized territories. The British Empire had a quarter of the global population under its sovereignty and, in the words of historian Chima J. Korieh, "Britain was not at war, but its empire was".

Their participation in the conflict was diverse both in the rear and at the front, although always much more invisibilized. For example, it is estimated that around 450,000 African combatants were mobilized by the French army during the war. These soldiers faced discrimination throughout the war, culminating in de Gaulle's controversial decision to "whiten" the forces marching towards Paris in August 1944.



▲ **Memorial of the Thiaroye massacre, in Senegal, in memory of the events of December 1, 1944, when French gendarmes fired on demobilized Senegalese combatants demonstrating for the payment of their salaries. Some 35 tirailleurs were killed and 34 sentenced to prison. © Erica Kowal - Flickr**

Warfare in imperial settings exacerbated practices of violence that had endured throughout the colonial period. These included rigid racial hierarchies, coercive labour for the exploitation of natural and agricultural resources, the diversion of local supplies for the benefit of exports to imperial centres, as well as the mobilization of combatants.

The population of these territories was marginalized from humanitarian aid, but coalesced into strong local support networks, led mainly by women, although these networks have been insufficiently documented due to Eurocentric bias. The conclusion of the war in 1945 did not mark the end of the challenges for this population, which in many cases continued to fight, this time against metropolises that still today do not recognize their role in the conflict.



▲ **El Cuerpo Auxiliar Femenino (India) se creó en marzo de 1942, inspirado en el Servicio Auxiliar Femenino (Birmania). Al final de la IIGM, había reclutado a 11.500 mujeres que asumieron numerosas tareas de retaguardia. A la izquierda, la auxiliar del S.D Bhagvat del Women's Royal Indian Naval Service en Bombay en 1945 © Imperial War Museums (IND4427); a la derecha, mujeres indias en un curso de formación para la prevención de ataques aéreos en la Escuela de Formación Cusrow Baug, Bombay, 1942 © Imperial War Museums (IND1492)**

LIGHT BULB

In a world as interconnected as ours, the spread of war and the fragility of peace have a global impact.

2024, an object poem made using the assemblage technique, 8x24x16 cm.



ON THE OFFENSIVE

In this international war game, some attack and others are attacked, but it is always the same ones who suffer the consequences.

2024, an object poem made using the assemblage technique, 30x20x5 cm.



EXHIBITION IN THE GUERNICA PEACE MUSEUM



These are the sinews of war

The slogan “these are the sinews of war” accompanied a British propaganda campaign aimed at highlighting the role of the colonies in the WWII war effort. The growing demand for rubber, tin, cotton for textiles, sugar, hides, rice and many other resources led to a significant increase in the mobilization of local labour, especially women, and also children, who were subjected to extremely difficult working conditions and coercive recruitment practices.



▲ **“The Empire’s Strength Campaign, His Majesty’s Stationery Office”, 1939.** © Imperial War Museums (Art.IWM PST 15778/ Art.IWM PST 15891)



▲ **Workers in a Mumbai textile factory (1941-1943).** 35% of India’s vast cotton textile production, some 5,000,000,000,000 yards per year, was used for war material for the Allies. 1941-1943. © Library of Congress (LC-USE6-D-008634)

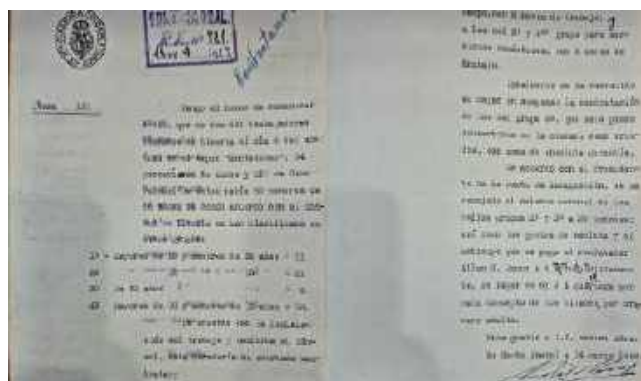
As a result, food crises were triggered in these territories, where production systems had been transformed during the colonial period to serve the interests of the metropolis rather than local needs. A notable example of this problem was the devastating famine that struck the Bengal region (India) in 1943. The export of food to the battlefronts, together with the increase in troops stationed in the region and the invasion of Burma, caused a humanitarian crisis that claimed the lives of between two and three million people, with a particularly devastating impact on the child population. This crisis generated internal migration and family breakdown, with significant rates of child abandonment and orphanhood, which in turn led to high rates of labour and sexual exploitation of these vulnerable segments.



▲ **In the first image, a group of refugees leaving Bengal, January 1942** © Imperial War Museums (JAR1240); **in the second, a report on acts of disobedience and sabotage in the region in August 1942.** © National Archives. **The war policy applied in these territories and its consequences, which highlight the negligence of Winston Churchill, play a crucial role in understanding the protests that eventually led to independence in 1947.**

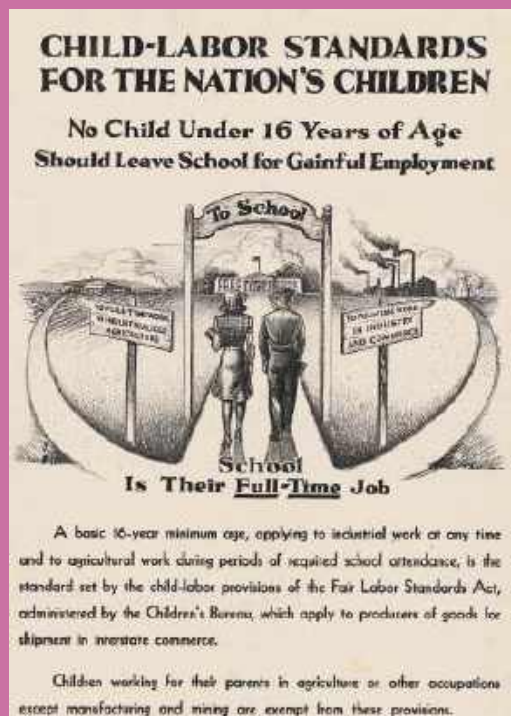
Child exploitation was not an exception in times of crisis, but a constant feature of imperial systems. Despite propaganda depicting schools and hospitals, intended in reality for a minority, the colonial administration employed the entire population in plantations, mines and industries.

However, there is a limited photographic record of this reality due to biased portrayals of the supposed "civilizing" work in these territories and the growing protection of children's rights in Europe. This concealed the racialized conception of childhood in the colonies, which was deprived of the rights of children in the metropolis because of their colonized status.



Report of the Colonial Curatorship of Spanish Guinea. Child labour was standardised in all colonial contexts, including Spanish. General Administration Archives (81/7720, General Government correspondence, 1929).

Regimes of child servitude in British Hong Kong and French Indochina, involving the coercive adoption, primarily of girls, have been documented since the 19th century and persisted until the end of the war. In the context of colonization in Africa, child labour was also widely prevalent until decolonization, the practice being justified through racial archetypes and alleged local custom. In short, war resources relied on the exploitation of men, women and children, at a high human and social cost.



WWII poster recalling the prohibition of work for children under 16 years of age. During the war, numerous campaigns emphasized the need to educate and protect children and to prohibit their employment - following the indications of the International Labour Organization. However, this prohibition contrasts with the permissiveness of that organization regarding the failure to establish a minimum working age in the colonies. © National Archives (514051).



Landmines

Arpillera, Linda Adams, 2015
Conflict Textiles Collection

Here Linda depicts a curious child bent over "butterfly" mines, a type used during the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. Antipersonnel landmines can lie dormant for years. Designed to maim rather than kill, they cause horrific injuries.





HUNGER III

Food crises have been and continue to be a key weapon of war.

2024, an object poem made using the assemblage technique, 24x36x42 cm.

THE WAR TRADE

Wars are a very lucrative business for some, but leave only poverty, sadness and desolation behind.

2022, an object poem made using the assemblage technique, 30x10x20 cm.



THE ANGUISH

The anguish, the fear of losing their parents and close relatives, a pressure cooker that is the lifeblood of many children.

2022, an object poem made using the assemblage technique, 120x34x20 cm.

Wars that neither begin nor end

For colonized populations, World War II came after violent processes of occupation and colonization. At the end of the conflict, a part of the society that had been instrumentalized in the war, disenfranchised for decades and impoverished, started decolonization processes that sometimes triggered new military conflicts and generalized revolts in the region. The war did not abandon their people; rather, it inspired them to take the lead in the struggle for their emancipation, which represented the culmination of a long genealogy of resistance against occupation. While peace was being built in Europe, the colonial powers responded to these aspirations in the East, India, Indochina, Indonesia and Africa with violence and war crimes.



Refugees from the Algerian war (1954-1962) at Mission Schoenholzer for women and children, 1957. This conflict involved the displacement of two million people, especially children © Archives du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge (V-P-MA-N-00005-14)

One of the regions severely affected by these conflicts was Indochina (Vietnam), which experienced two consecutive wars between 1946 and 1975. The first against France, followed by a civil war that was part of the Cold War, with the intervention of the United States. The estimated human cost amounted to three million people, with hundreds of thousands displaced and wounded. During that period, many children, some of whom were orphans, had a variety of experiences, whether as students, combatants, workers or displaced persons, both in the rear and on the front lines.



In the first picture, a group of children in a school in the so-called city of orphans in 1952, under the protection of the International Committee of the Red Cross © Archives du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge (V-P-INDO-N-00013-06). In the second, food distribution in a Than-son-Nhut transit camp in 1954 © Archives du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge (V-P-INDO-N-00013-06)

The story of the Amerasian children, also known as "Dust Children" or "Bụi đời" (in English and Vietnamese respectively), is one of the most well-documented of the conflict. These are approximately 100,000 children born to Vietnamese mothers and American fathers, the results of sexual abuse or stable relationships, who were rejected by both societies and grew up on the streets or in orphanages. In 1988, the United States finally recognized them and allowed the creation of visas, which led to more than 20,000 of them moving to the United States.



▲
Drawing "Waking to school at night" (Đi học đêm)
 by Phi Tiến Sơn, 12 years (1971). ©British Library (SU 216(2)).

The Indochina/Vietnam war is one of the various war experiences that emerged in the colonies after World War II, coinciding with the creation of a new world order and the emergence of the "Third World" as a space to be occupied. The Algerian war (1954-1962), the Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952-1960), the Angolan war (1961-1975-2002), the partition of Pakistan and India after independence (1945-1947), as well as that of Palestine (1947-1948), the Indonesian revolution against the Netherlands (1945-1949) and a long etcetera, exemplify the violent realities that marked the path of the colonies towards emancipation and the management of the post-colonial political-social reality. Millions of lives lost, hundreds of thousands of displaced persons, and civil conflicts, along with structural impoverishment, represent the high human cost of colonialism and its end. The scars and legacies of these experiences persist in the Global South, pending reparative policies and recognition of spoliation, crimes, ecological disasters and inequality.



▲
Propaganda posters of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) Angola experienced a long war of independence between 1962 and 1975 against Portugal and another civil war continued until 2002, also being representative conflicts of the Cold War, with high international involvement. © Hoover Library Archives (Poster A03 and A08)

DEATH

Deaths – always terrible and inhumanes – are the first consequence of war.

2024, an object poem made using the assemblage technique, 16x50x40 cm.



WHEN WILL IT BE MY TURN?

These past and present wars prompt us to wonder: Will it be my turn one day? And if so, when?

2022, an object poem made using the assemblage technique, 30x5 cm.



TARGETS? PEOPLE

People have always been the targets of the absurdities of war, being forever changed by the horror they experience.

2022, an object poem made using the assemblage technique, 80x70 cm.

Conclusions

After the official end of World War II, the societies involved had to take up the challenge of building peace. The surviving population, combatants and millions of displaced persons, mostly women and children, some of them orphans, were torn between the longing to return home and the determination to start anew in places far away from the trauma and their countries of origin. UNRRA and later the IRO (International Refugee Organization) assumed responsibility for the relief and repatriation of millions of Europeans in a context of devastation, facing diplomatic tensions and a general shortage of resources.

Humanitarian activities played a crucial role in post-war recovery, while awareness of the rights of children and civilians was strengthened through agreements and treaties, such as the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949). Our reflection, however, is to critically consider the Pax Europea concept and the enormous relevance of the children's experiences we have shared today.



▲
A group of repatriated women with children born in concentration camps (Belgium, 1945). © Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (A108894)

The story of the European peace must not overlook the fact that in the post-WWII period more conflicts were unleashed worldwide than in any previous period. Many of these conflicts involved European countries, whether in the context of the Cold War or in the process of decolonization. For this reason, this exhibition seeks not only to capture the history of children in conflict from a global perspective, but also to highlight the values of solidarity and protection as crucial elements of advocacy and learning.

Since the beginning of this century, according to Save The Children, one in six children worldwide, approximately 449 million children, have been living in war zones. Moreover, in the last twenty years, according to UNICEF, thirty million have been forcibly displaced, becoming victims of trafficking and facing the consequences of being deprived of access to education.

▶
Boy with bicycle in front of the Sturmgeschütz III Column passing through the village of Eeklo (Belgium), in May of 1944. © Bundesarchiv (Bild 1011-297-1733-13/ photographer: Bernhard Kurth)



Every day we are confronted with images in the media documenting the destruction caused by wars, the plight of refugees and the persistent perpetration of crimes. Their testimonial value is undeniable, however, it is essential to question how overexposure contributes to the normalization of these situations and also to ask ourselves about the agency of the protagonists in consenting.

The iconic photograph of the Napalm bombing in the context of the Vietnam War depicting a nine-year-old girl, Kim Phuc Phan Thi, whose identity became known over the years, is a case in point. The snapshot, which won the Pulitzer Prize, showed Kim Phuc in the centre of the scene, naked, running away, while numerous photographers portrayed her without, apparently, rendering any help. Years later, the protagonist said: "I just wanted to get away from that picture... I wanted to forget it ever happened, but they wanted everyone to remember it". Nevertheless, according to The New York Times, the image had a high impact on US public opinion, stoking anti-war sentiment.

Two contrasting realities about the same image raise a debate between information and the right to privacy. Similarly, Holocaust survivors have criticized the massive use of images showing naked corpses or moments of liberation from the camps.

With this reality in mind, this exhibition has immersed itself in a profound ethical reflection on the use of images captured in situations of conflict and vulnerability, especially those involving minors and colonial contexts. Therefore, non-offensive material has been carefully selected to avoid showing identifiable faces or perpetuating racial stereotypes, while adding a critical context to their reproduction.



Another outstanding example is the photograph entitled "Mother with her children", captured by the journalist Dorothea Lange. In 1936, Florence Owens Thompson, standing in the centre of the image with her children, became the visual symbol of poverty and hardship during the Great Depression. This snapshot, due to its lack of consent and wide circulation, had a devastating impact on the life of the subject and her family, who, years later, expressed their unease about the situation. © Library of Congress (201776289) © Library of Congress (201776289)



Portrait of Avram (5 years old) and Emanuel Rosenthal (2 years old) in the Kovno ghetto (1944). Deported during the "Children's Action" of March 1944, they did not survive. In this case we know the context of the photograph, which was taken at the request of their uncle, recovered by him after the war and donated to the © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Shraga Wainer, 06546) © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Shraga Wainer, 06546)

REMEMCHILD
(Remembering childhood in European Wartimes)



EUROM
EUROPEAN
OBSERVATORY
ON MEMORIES

