

(In)tolerable Hardships: the Swabian Children, Gendered Potentiality, and Child Abuse in Late Imperial Austria

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the 1890s, Social Democrats weaponized the migrations of the so-called Swabian Children (*Schwabenkinder*) in their efforts to secularize public education and child welfare. The discourse over these migrants was framed by two contemporary panics, each of which spoke to the desire to consecrate national space as a refuge for Austrian children: “white slavery” and child labour. Because it concerned girls not boys, campaigns against “white slavery” tended to focus on sexual violence, natalist logic, and vulnerability. By contrast, outrage over child labour often centered on the plight of boys, and thus excused some degree of hardship as inherent to the transition to manhood. Due to how it undermined masculinity while invoking the “sexual deviance” of homosexuality, even the faintest whispers of sexual violence were studiously avoided.

The *Schwabenkinder* were distinct from these other two phenomena because they were not so associated with either girls or boys. Reformers were thus faced with a choice. Some emphasized the mixed benefits of a summer labouring the fields for boys, arguing that these children's status as future workers justified permitting the migrations to continue under enhanced regulation. Others focused on the fate of girls who worked as household domestics, citing rumors of sexual violence to advocate strict prohibition. Reformers saw children through the lens of temporality, as “becomings” rather than beings, but the possible futures they saw were always gendered. This paper positions the *Schwabenkinder* as a subject for exploring conceptions of child agency at the genesis of international child saving and child labor reform.

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PUBLICATIONS

“On Sunlit Fields: the Swabian Children, Legal Personhood, and the Tyrolean Statthalterei’s Edict of 1867,” *German Studies Review*. In “Rural Kinetics: Migrations, Marginality, and Material Flows in Germanophone Europe,” ed. Patrick Anthony. (Feb 2024).

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