

Victoria M. Grieve, *Little Cold Warriors: American Childhood in the 1950s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 216 pp. ISBN 978-0190675684.

In *Little Cold Warriors: American Childhood in the 1950s*, Victoria Grieve dismantles a series of misconceptions about the role of children and the image of childhood during the early Cold War era. Using a series of case studies, from comic books to the Boy Scouts of America, Grieve argues that the Cold War “can no longer be adequately explained through the actions of politicians, diplomats, and generals” (5). We need a new history that considers the roles of average Americans, and especially those most often ignored: children. The subscript of the book positions it as a history of childhood in the 1950s, but Grieve is making a much broader argument about the role of childhood history within diplomatic, state, and political histories. Through a series of historiographical interventions, Grieve skillfully demonstrates how the history of childhood illuminates new understandings within each of these three fields.

Grieve’s study vacillates between understanding children as politicized agents and the multiple symbolic meanings of childhood deployed by bureaucratic messaging machines. With these two frameworks, Grieve uncovers the centrality of children to American Cold War diplomacy and posits the importance of cultural diplomacy to the field of diplomatic history, particularly with an eye towards youth culture. Central to this intervention is Grieve’s rewriting of the myth of childhood innocence in the postwar era. While children are typically perceived as victims of Cold War anxieties, most commonly exemplified through “duck and cover” drills in schools, Grieve rewrites this narrative restoring agency to Cold War children. They were not passive victims to war culture but, through state interventions, were politicized and mobilized to serve as “ambassadors, cultural diplomats, and representatives of the United States” (2).



At the heart of Grieve’s work is a paradox of the symbolic power of childhood. On one hand, state and civilian institutions depicted children as apolitical, in contrast to Soviet children who, according to these same institutions, were victims of “brainwashing and ideological indoctrination” (3). On the other hand, state and civilian institutions utilized children and the construction of childhood innocence as “political weapons” (7). American children were depicted as vulnerable and “potential victims of communist indoctrination or nuclear war” (7). Children’s innocence represented the nation’s innocence. Their innocence was at the very heart of what the United States was fighting to protect in the Cold War. The same institutions that constructed American children as apolitical used this image of innocence to promote the goals of the Cold War and mobilize children to be active agents in the fight.

Grieve deconstructs this paradox by looking at a wide variety of ways that children, and the image of childhood, became implicated in the Cold War. She begins, in her most compelling chapter, with a close reading of *The Lone Ranger* comic books. Grieve argues that these widely-read westerns taught children to understand the United States “as civilizer and savior, not conqueror or colonizer” (21). Children then reinforced these patriotic storylines by recreating them through play. Working through popular culture, the American state utilized propagandistic messaging that “prepared American children to fund, and fight, the Cold War” (50). The rest of the book centers around the state and civilian institutions that recruited children to be cultural ambassadors and diplomats. Grieve tackles the pervasiveness of international pen pal and art exchange programs, the Advertising Council’s “Crusade for Freedom” campaign which encouraged children to donate money and participate in patriotic stunts, presidential fitness tests, the creation of

international sister schools, and an examination of what was being taught in the classroom: atomic science and propagandistic patriotic history. Outside of the school, Grieve also examines the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America and dissects domestic and international advertising campaigns. In all of these interventions, children learned how to be citizens, how to be advocates for the nation, and perhaps most importantly, they learned “that they were ‘lucky’ to have been born in the United States” (3).

The majority of Grieve’s case studies examine top-down approaches to indoctrinating and mobilizing children, instead of trying to analyze children’s experiences from their own point of view. But this is not a limitation of the book, as others have argued since its publication.¹ Instead, the focus on institutional power allows her to make an intervention into the historiography of the growth of the postwar state. Grieve contributes to this history by detailing the pervasiveness of the state in the life of the average American child. Moreso, her study illuminates the inconspicuous nature of the state; how it subtly invaded every aspect of a child’s life while projecting and supporting an apolitical image of childhood. Not only does Grieve add to the scholarship around the growth of the postwar state, but she also offers strong evidence about the pernicious nature of the state apparatus.

After comprehensive case studies on the way children were implicated in the Cold War, Grieve closes the book with her most compelling argument, that these little cold warriors and their “youthful political action didn’t disappear between 1945 and 1960” (197). Instead, becoming cold warriors in the 1950s, catapulted this generation into the political turbulence of the 1960s as learned and activated politicized adults. Confronting politics incessantly during their formative years, baby boomers fueled both the New Left and the rise of conservatism. Grieve’s intervention here is an important one.

Not only does it offer a bridge between often segregated histories of the conformity of the 1950s and the political



mobilization of the 1960s, but it asserts the significance of childhood experience to politics. Despite what our national narratives might lead us to believe, nothing about childhood is apolitical. The fields of diplomatic and political history cannot underestimate the experience of childhood and the ways people first come to understand themselves both in relation to the nation and in relation to politics. It is common for children to be written off as non-historical actors or lacking historical agency, but as Grieve contends, to do so is to risk fundamentally misunderstanding their significance in the growth of the state, in American diplomacy tactics, and in the origins of our politics.

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¹ Gary Cross, “*Little Cold Warriors: American Childhood in the 1950s* Book Review,” *Social History*, July 3 2019, Vol.44 (3), p 380-381.