

# “Bombs are falling from the sky and everything is being destroyed”

## HOW GERMAN CHILDREN IMAGINE THE SITUATION IN UKRAINE AND WHAT THEY WANT TO SEE IN A CHILDREN’S PROGRAMME ON THIS TOPIC

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**A study examined how German children are dealing with the information and images they are receiving about Ukraine, and how they would like a children’s programme to present this topic.**

March 10, 2022, 8.15 p.m.: 11-year-old Soleil actually wanted to watch *Germany’s Next Topmodel*, but what she got instead was a special programme on the war in Ukraine. She was shown the maternity hospital in Mariupol being attacked. Pregnant women and their (in some cases unborn) children were being killed or seriously injured. Soleil describes her experience as “a bit traumatising, [...] it was definitely very brutal. [...] Pregnant women were being crushed to death. They were carrying a woman. The baby in her tummy was dead. And she was actually also half-dying. Well, she was alive, but she was actually dying then and there.”

War is always connected with violence, injured and dead people, and unspeakable destruction. Journalists have a duty to report on this as truthfully as possible. At the same time, it is a fact that many children and younger adolescents come across images on television or the

internet that are difficult to process. The question is therefore: how do they deal with the information and images, and how do they want to see this topic presented in a programme that is explicitly made for children? The method used in the study described here was developed for a study in the first week of the Iraq war (Götz, 2003) and for the war in Syria (Götz & Holler, 2016), and adapted for the current situation.

### THE STUDY

From April to July 2022, 101 German pupils between the ages of 7 and 15<sup>1</sup> were asked about their knowledge of the current situation in Ukraine, and how they imagined it. The young people were asked to draw their

impressions of the events in Ukraine on paper and then to describe them. Then, in another picture, they drew and described how they would like to see this presented in media coverage on this topic. In the analysis, the pictures were clustered according to similarities, and prototypical features of the pictures were worked out. The sample for this qualitative study can by no means claim to be representative, but it shows how some children and adolescents understand the situation, and how they would like to see this presented in a children’s programme.

### HOW DO CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IMAGINE THE WAR IN UKRAINE?

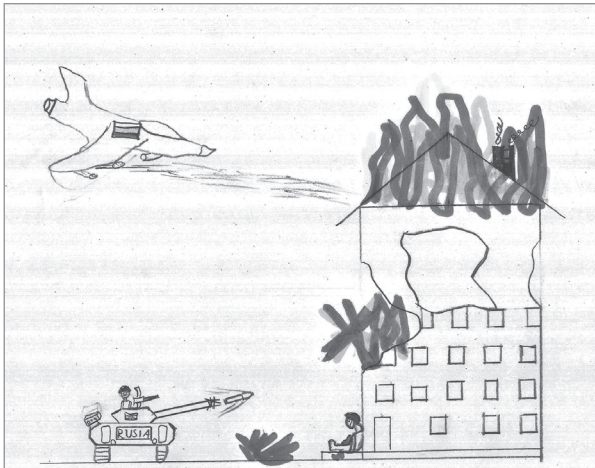
#### Portrayal of destruction

“Bombs are falling from the sky and everything is being destroyed” – this is how 12-year-old Tristan describes his drawing. “A house being bombarded. It is engulfed by flames! A girl is crying because her family have died in the fire. She managed to escape.” (Wanda, age 12, Ill. 1).

Most of the children and adolescents draw houses that have been destroyed (usually explicitly by



Ill. 1: Most of the children draw pictures of the destruction in Ukraine, like Wanda (age 12)



Ill. 2: Lorenz (age 11) draws a bleeding civilian being shot by a Russian soldier from a tank

bombs) and are on fire. They usually draw residential buildings, but sometimes also hospitals. The buildings are often directly under fire (from aeroplanes and tanks), or they are reduced to rubble. Often, there is a gaping hole in the houses, where a bomb has hit. The windows are shattered, and a fire is raging inside. Residents are fleeing their houses, calling for help from the building, or looking for loved-ones among the ruins. Often, the bombs hitting the house are large and round – and occasionally they are nuclear bombs.

### Portrayal of violence

“In my picture there’s a tank that has shot dead a Ukrainian civilian and is now setting a house on fire. A modern Russian fighter jet has come to help. A Russian soldier is standing up in the tank, firing with a machine gun.” (Lorenz, age 11, Ill. 2).

The child respondents frequently draw warfare with no human presence (such as aeroplanes releasing bombs or unmanned missiles), but scenes are also depicted in which the violence is carried out face-to-face. Often, it is not Ukrainian soldiers but civilians who are under fire, whether this is from guns or heavier weaponry, e.g. tank gunfire. Some pupils draw the fallout from these attacks: the bodies of Ukrain-

ian civilians or people who have been (sometimes seriously) injured. The children rarely imagine the fighting between soldiers as one opponent on another, or in scenes of close combat (in contrast to the study on the Iraq war, cf. Götz, 2003). Whereas the Ukrainian soldiers predominantly fight from

hiding positions – coming out of ruins or bunkers to defend themselves with guns –, the Russian armed forces tend to fight more offensively with a large array of war machines. The soldiers are always men.

### Portrayal of the Russian military

“Russian soldiers are attacking a hospital. A group of soldiers is throwing Ukrainians out of the window. A Russian fighter plane is there too.” (Miriam, age 11). “You can see a dead woman and her child, who is crying. A tank shooting the child dead, and burning houses.” (Martina, age 11)

The young people increasingly use national flags to label the Russian or Ukrainian “side”, with the Ukrainian “side” mostly represented as the party under attack and the Russian “side” as the aggressor. The perceived superiority of the Russian military is illustrated by the much higher number of soldiers, the arsenal of guns they bring with them, and the larger array of war machinery. Along with military planes, the most frequently depicted war machine of the Russian military is the tank. Depictions of weapons include, above all, bombs, but also grenades, rockets and guns. How dangerous the children imagine the Russian military to be is reflected in their drawings of fighting against the Ukrainian people.

### Portrayal of the Ukrainian civilians

“There is war in Ukraine and the people have to flee. They can only hope that their homes won’t be completely destroyed. They can only watch as everything they own is destroyed.” (Diane, age 13)

Many of the children portray the situation of Ukrainian civilians, increasingly depicting women and children; families together with their fathers are an exception. Civilians are unarmed and often without shelter. There are drawings of people calling for help or searching for family members, people who are crying or with sad expressions on their faces, and people (in the moment of) fleeing. Refugees are drawn holding suitcases, bags and their pets, on the train or on the border with neighbouring countries. Sometimes there are also scenes depicting fathers taking leave of their families because they have to stay in Ukraine and fight for their country.

### Portrayal of peace symbols

Flags are repeatedly integrated into drawings of peace symbols and proclamations of solidarity. These usually go hand in hand with hopes for peace and calls for the war to be over soon.

### Portrayal of Putin

Vladimir Putin features much less often than the Russian military in the children’s drawings. They draw him laughing (wickedly) (Ill. 3), giving orders from a distance, or denying the war. In a few cases, he is associated with the threat of nuclear war. Wishful fantasies of Putin dying also feature.

### Individual representations

Only in rare cases did children decide on a less explicitly violent symbolic representation of the war in the form of maps. There were also some sporadic cases of children drawing fantasies of NATO intervention, other nations

providing Ukraine with military support, and the victory of the Ukrainian armed forces. The same is true for other representations of political, economic and commercial action (attempts at mediation, Nord Stream, sanctions, the stock market prices, etc.). Likewise, there are very few drawings of people helping on the ground, e.g. paramedics or emergency services.

### WHAT WOULD CHILDREN LIKE TO SEE IN A CHILDREN'S PROGRAMME ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE?

Regarding coverage on the war in Ukraine, most of the young people would like to have a programme that provides them with knowledge. Here, what is most important to them is to know about the situation of those who stayed in their homes, as well as the causes and background to the war. In addition, the young people place great value on the programme being suitable for children and hopeful for the future. It should adopt a clear position and speak out against the war.

#### What would children and adolescents like to know?

In response to the question of what they would like to see in a children's programme on the war, many children draw and describe the desire to learn more about the **background** and **causes** of the war, and the **prospects** for the situation in the future. The respondents emphasise here that a programme on the war in the Ukraine should "clearly explain why exactly a war has broken out between Russia and Ukraine, and what this means for the future" (Ida, age 14). A few would also like an explanation of the role of Russian citizens, "because many people don't know why Russia is doing this, and many also blame Russian citizens" (Lorenz, age 11). Sometimes they ask questions such as "What happened

between Russia and Ukraine before the war?" (Amina, age 12).

Most of the pupils would like a children's programme on the war to provide them with information on the **current situation on the ground**. They often want to know how those who have stayed in Ukraine are doing – especially children. Some of them very clearly envisage "interviews with reporters on site" (Annika, age 14), where reporters ask people how they are. 10-year-old Christina, for example, drew a picture of a presenter of the Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation (BR) asking children still living in Ukraine how they are doing.

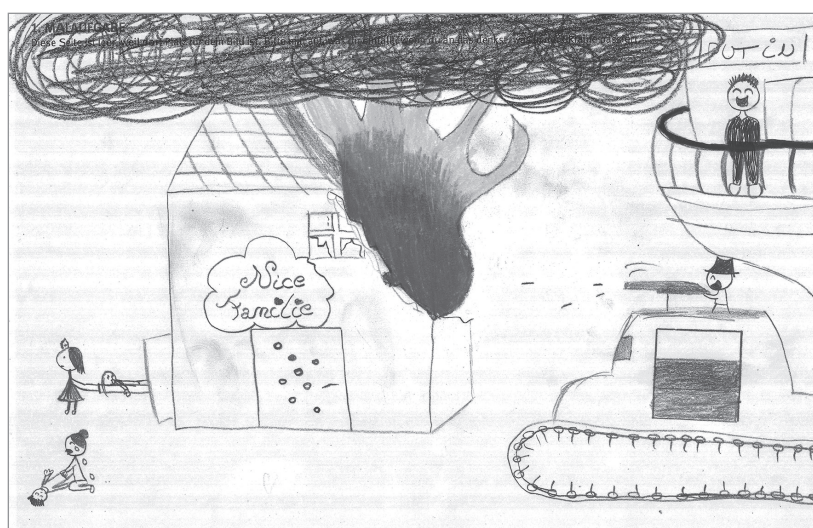
It is mainly girls who want children's media to show **support for those affected** both in Germany and on site in Ukraine. They believe it should be explained "how we can help people in Ukraine or from Ukraine" (Emma, age 14), and the ways in which they are already being helped. Andrea (age 12) drew an appeal for donations which she wanted to be shown in a programme, and she then wanted to see "Ukrainian people receiving gifts and donations". Another repeated call for information was the request for **insight into Vladimir Putin**, particularly with regard to his intentions: "What does Putin want from

Ukraine?" (Amina, age 12) and "Why has Putin started this war?" (Nathalie, age 12). A few pupils would also like to know how dangerous Putin is. A children's programme ought, in their opinion, to address the question of "everything Putin might destroy, and how powerful he is" (Ewa, age 12). Others would like to know how Putin became the immoral person he is today.

#### How the war should be reported

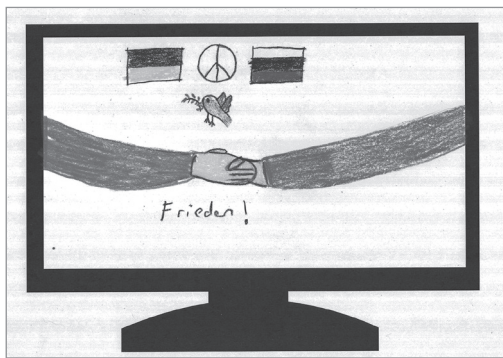
When children draw and describe how the war should be reported, they mainly say they would like a **reporting that is appropriate for children**. Although a few violent scenes were drawn, most of the pupils suggest scenes in the media should not "show any dead or seriously injured people" (Tilda, age 11). The young people want to see hopeful and positive stories. They believe stories should "not frighten us children, and should tell us that everything is going to be fine" (Jonas, age 12) so that "we don't feel afraid and don't have our heads full of nothing but the war" (Amani, age 11).

Several children would like children's media to **adopt a clear position**. They would like to see clear statements



Ill. 3: In Alice's (age 12) picture, Putin (top right-hand corner) is watching over the battle scene, laughing





Ill. 4: Sophie (age 12) would like her children's programme to show the warring parties making peace

against the war, for peace, and for "people helping each other" (Henri, age 11). Furthermore, they ask for an emphasis on Putin's wrongdoing, "because I think he will still get a lot of money, even though he is doing nothing good at all" (Naima, age 7).

A few children emphasise that they would like **truthful reporting**. They would like to see "the true background" (Adrian, age 11) to the war and "no fake news" (Tomasz, age 13). When children and adolescents talk about the **format**, they prefer news and information programmes with presenters, edited by public service broadcasters.

### What children wish to see

Some of the respondents used the questions to draw what they would like to see on television: "I would like to finally see peace again." (Tanja, age 11) Frequently, flags are used in connection with peace symbols or gestures of reconciliation as can be seen in the pictures of Sophie (Ill. 4) and Ivana. "This picture shows Ukraine and Russia shaking hands and reconciling." (Ivana, age 11)

### Interrelations

How children imagine the situation in Ukraine, and how they would like to see this presented in children's media, is very individual. Nonetheless, some recurring interrelations did emerge be-

tween what some children drew and what they would like to see.

Children who drew destroyed houses were often interested in how the people on the ground were doing. Children who depicted civilians calling for help wanted to see a children's programme with an unequivocal appeal for peace. Children who drew civilians under fire wanted to learn about the causes

and background to the war. Children who drew people (in the moment of) fleeing wanted to see reports about how to help people from Ukraine. Children who drew dead people wanted to see reporting suitable for children.

### Adopting a position and not scaring viewers

When thinking about the current situation in Ukraine, most of the children and adolescents had exceedingly violent images in their heads, images of Russian superior war machinery leaving a trail of destruction and causing flight and grief. Some of the images are very similar to those directed at adults. These images have a deep impact on children, and their sympathy lies with those who have remained in Ukraine. The question they are mostly concerned with is "How are the people who are still living in Ukraine?" (Christina, age 10). Another issue that some would like to know more about is how to help those affected here in Germany and on the ground in Ukraine. Many express their sense of justice by adopting a clear anti-war, pro-peace position in their drawings. They expect the same from the media directed at them. In this respect, some children would like to see an unequivocal appeal "for people to help each other and not go to war with another". The majority of those who commented on how the war should be reported said they wanted

reporting appropriate for children. Here, they were thinking of a younger audience (e.g. younger siblings) but also in terms of protecting themselves. Many pupils very specifically express their desire for "age-appropriate" coverage without any depictions of violence (Roman, age 14). It should "not be brutal" (Kai, age 11) or "show any dead or seriously injured people" (Tilda, age 11). Some believe the war coverage should not scare children. They would therefore like to see more positive and hopeful news reports. Others believe positive and hopeful news reports would offer a break from the ubiquitous, predominantly negative news, and would prevent their worries spiralling out of control. Worries about the threat of nuclear war or a Third World War already feature in possible future scenarios, and some children would like to be informed about this. 12-year-old Jonas is of the opinion that a programme about the war in Ukraine "should make clear how serious it is, but not frighten us children, and should tell us that everything is going to be fine, because this is often forgotten". ■

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Average age: 11.5 years

### REFERENCES

- Maya Götz (2007). "We're against it!" Children in Germany and their perception of the war in Iraq. *TelevIZion*, 17(E), 24-33.
- Maya Götz & Holler, Andrea (2017). How children and adolescents understand the topic of refugees. *TelevIZion*, 30(E), 34-40.

### THE AUTHOR

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