

## Unaccompanied Minors Crossing Borders: A Historical Overview of the Second World War

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### Abstract

Recently, the increase in the number of unaccompanied children crossing borders has caught the attention of the public, policy makers, and pundits in receiving countries. Unaccompanied children can be particularly vulnerable as they lack the protection and care of an adult, necessitating the international authorities to find alternative ways of protecting them. But infant forced migration is not a new phenomenon. This growing visibility as actors of their own migration has led to social scientists recognizing the importance of focusing on the historical experiences of refugee children in education, socialization, integration, and assimilation. One historical example can be found in the aftermath of The Spanish Civil War. In 1939, about half a million refugees crossed the French border. Many of them were unaccompanied children who in an act of bold action based on solidarity, found refuge abroad. Some examples of hosting countries were: France (20,000 children); England (4,000); and, the former Soviet Union (3,000). In the same decade, there were other examples, such as the 70,000 children from Finland sent to other Nordic countries, or the ethnic Germans in Central Europe and the *Kindertransport* to England that saved 10,000 Jewish children from the Holocaust. These historical examples framed within global refugee crises caused by the violence of different wars will serve as case studies for analysing the practical, legal, humanitarian and political challenges which had to be assumed not only by the countries of origin and the host nations but by many others, because these were problems demanding global solutions, like the problem we are experiencing today.

**Keywords:** unaccompanied minors, child migration, transnational migration, refugees in the Second World War.

## Introduction

Minors travelling alone, seeking refuge in foreign countries are currently causing concern and attracting particular attention due to the exponential increase in the numbers managing to reach Europe. According to UNICEF figures in November 2015, the number of unaccompanied minors was twice that of the previous year. They can be seen all along the escape route, children and adolescents in a situation of extreme vulnerability. At European Union level, this phenomenon has given rise to various solidarity initiatives together with the creation and implementation of new and urgent reception policies. The challenges which these irregular journeys pose in terms of child protection have been generating intense debate and reveal legislative loopholes, humanitarian and ethical lacunas which have left governments all over the world in an extremely uncomfortable position.

However, the emigration of unaccompanied children is not a new phenomenon, and many examples can be found throughout history. In Europe, particularly during the turbulent 20th century, the mass displacement of children was fairly common due to armed conflicts, military occupations, ethnic cleansing and religious or political persecution. These population movements meant that the international organizations, associations and national governments responsible for the care and protection of displaced persons faced challenges which they had never previously encountered.

## Refugee Children from the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War took place between 1936 and 1939 and was the first sign of the profound political crisis affecting Europe which would shortly afterwards lead to the outbreak of the Second World War. As in all situations of war, the first to suffer the consequences of the violence were children. Thousands of families were divided, their homes destroyed, and hunger, shortages, disease and the calamity of war itself led to very high death rates among children.

With the aim of protecting minors, the Republican Government launched an awareness-raising campaign, both nationally and internationally, using the motto: "Help the children of Spain." The appeal employed harrowing photographs of women and children killed by violent acts of war together with captions in French and English, such as: "*If you tolerate this, your children will be next.*" in reference to the urgent need for prompt collective action on an international level. Thanks to this campaign the cry for help was heard and many organisations from different countries decided to take action, firstly by offering humanitarian aid and then in 1937 by

opening their countries' doors to child refugees. A number of countries responded, including the United Kingdom, Belgium, Mexico and the Soviet Union. Alted (2003) confirms that the result was the exodus of thirty-three thousand children, organised in groups bound for different countries. Not all of these were orphans; many still possessed at least one parent or family connections in Spain, who accepted the evacuation proposal because they thought the separation would not be for long - only for the duration of the war, which was thought to be going to end soon. During the evacuations the children were looked after by humanitarian organizations of recognised international prestige such as the Quakers or the Red Cross. From the time of their departure until they were settled in new homes outside Spain, the minors travelled under the care of schoolteachers or other attendants responsible for their protection.

After the war, the new government showed great interest in recovering those children living alone abroad, and launched intense tracing and repatriation campaigns. There were even some attempts well before the war was over, but the end of the conflict was the real catalyst of the mass repatriations to Spain. It is estimated that over twenty thousand children returned upon the termination of hostilities in 1939, although there were cases in which the absence of diplomatic relations caused their exile to be extended indefinitely (e.g. three thousand refugees in the USSR and four hundred in Mexico, whose fate would be very different from that of the other evacuees, as they were unable to return). When they finally made it back to Spain many years later, diplomatic relations having been restored, they were stigmatized as belonging to "red" families. As a result, these refugees were not only afflicted by the war and the loss of parents but also by discrimination and social rejection long after the war was over.

In 1939, very soon after the Spanish Civil War had ended, there arose in Europe another ambitious international solidarity movement with the aim of protecting minors and safeguarding them from the violence erupting in their home country. This involved the evacuation of almost eighty thousand children from Finland.

### **The Finnish War Children**

Between 1939 and 1944 Finland suffered a succession of invasions by the Soviet Union. Although the country lost a great deal of territory, total occupation was avoided. These events were seen by the Finns as great injustices and caused a good deal of hostility, leading to a war in which the civil population found itself trapped. During this time seventy thousand Finnish children under the age of ten were sent by official organizations to other northern countries for the duration of the war. They travelled without their families, accompanied by guardians who saw them to the

border. Once in Sweden (a neutral country) they were taken in by humanitarian organizations providing medical care, food and warm clothing; then they were provisionally lodged in children's camps while their documentation was prepared so that they could stay temporarily in Sweden or emigrate to Norway or Denmark. Subsequently, they were placed with local families or sent to children's refugee camps, depending on their age and state of health.

In 1945, when the Second World War came to an end, the committee responsible for the evacuation began the process of repatriation and the majority of the children managed to return during the years 1945 - 1947. However, not all made it back to their homeland. Korpi-Tommola (2008) estimates that fifteen thousand never returned, for a variety of reasons. The principal motive was the destruction of their homes and loss of family members, which led them to stay abroad for good. This is a fairly common phenomenon, which can also be observed in the case of the children affected by the Spanish Civil War.

### **Ethical and Moral Debates about Children**

In post-war Europe and in the international context of the Cold War, child refugees became a source of embarrassment and conflict for both their home and their host countries. The political debates were linked to the question of legal responsibilities and then there was the great logistical and moral dilemma of what to do with them. Governments all over Europe concurred that the family, besides being the single central pillar of social stability, was an essential, indivisible nucleus which should be preserved where possible and reassembled where it had been dismantled. Action taken on the basis of these tenets laid the foundations of the post-war European imagination in terms of traditional ideas about the family, democracy and human rights. Zahra (2015) argues that the reconstruction of families quickly became synonymous with the survival of European civilization itself and demonstrates that the "best interests" of children were defined in nationalist terms. Given that children represented a country's future, they must be brought back at all costs. They were the "treasure", and represented the future of the nation. Consequently, operations were set in motion to intervene directly, without precedent. It was generally established that where the identity of the parents was unknown or there existed no blood relatives, the solution would be international adoption by the host country, and the first precedents for this procedure were duly established. The rest were to be repatriated to their homelands as soon as possible, and in effect the attempt was made to reconstruct the families concerned by returning the children to their mother countries. However, family reunification at international level was a far from simple

matter, as it involved questions like nationality and the jurisdiction of the State. In this regard, the interactions of the different governments and organizations, the reconciliation processes, the policies and practices for the care of the minors and their transfer between state jurisdictions set new precedents for future guidelines to be followed in cases of child refugee protection. As a consequence of all this, in November 1959 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, re-establishing the preservation of the family as the top priority for ensuring children's psychological welfare. This recognition represented the first broad international consensus on the fundamental principles affecting minors.

### **The Effects of Child Evacuation**

Analysing the subject from today's perspective, it could be said that the mass evacuations of children caused greater psychological damage to them than the war itself. Separation from the family and the feeling of being abandoned constitute the worst traumas a child can undergo and are wounds which are carried for life. Those children suffered highly traumatic experiences related to the violence of the war, the post-war era and their own exile. Most had faced persecution, witnessed death at first-hand and were obliged to deal with adult life prematurely, learning to look after themselves. They found themselves caught up in a war which was not theirs, and which not only robbed them of their childhoods but also forced them to grow up with brutal suddenness, given that they had to leave everything behind and go to another country without their parents, to settle in places where in many cases they were not accepted into society due to their foreign origins.

The suffering of exile and its impact on children's lives are questions which have not been examined until now. The traumas involved - often the children were victims of social dislocation and rejection; further, they suffered from a sense of loss and lack of identity, being frequently obliged to omit or supply false biographical details in order to survive and adapt to their new environment - have frequently been considered taboo subjects even within the families themselves. Recently the first articles have appeared, and this subject represents a new trend in the study of refugees which still offers much to explore. This field, far from being limited and closed, opens new paths for researchers from a wide variety of disciplines: psychologists, humanists, sociologists, political scientists and lawyers.

## Conclusion

Children, together with other vulnerable groups, are the quintessential victims of all wars. The study of the historical facts concerning the subject of children in Contemporary Europe forced to become refugees as a consequence of local armed conflicts could serve as a contrasting element in the building of a European Union which needs to strengthen and socialize the values of tolerance and mutual understanding.

In this chapter, the Second World War serves as the scenario for the events that took place simultaneously in more than one national context. This chapter draws parallels with similar cases concerning the supranational protection of infants during war time and underscores that a great deal of what we know about unaccompanied migrant children today derives from what we have learned from the past. By studying historical examples of children from war-torn countries being evacuated abroad to protect them from armed conflict – the children of Spain and Finland, both groups chronologically situated in the era before and during the Second World War - we can verify the inefficiency of such initiatives from a historical perspective. Those who travelled alone to distant countries did so because their parents or guardians hoped to protect them from the violence of war and give them a better future. In theory, they were the lucky ones, fortunate to be removed from danger; but over time it has been demonstrated that despite good intentions the psychological damage that had been inflicted was greater than that arising from the war itself.

Knowledge of the historical debates concerning children and the analysis of how their departure and return were managed may foster critical and reflective teaching about Europe's past problems and contribute to the process of European cultural and political integration. First of all, the cessation of war in Europe was indispensable for putting a stop to this kind of child emigration, and secondly it required a joint effort and cooperation on a global level, in which third countries showed their solidarity by opening their doors to refugees.

In civil society and political discourse, the lessons which can be learned from the examples discussed in this article concerning the way in which different European countries handle crises involving refugee children may help political actors and citizens to establish a more intense intellectual and emotional connection with the aims of European integration.

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