

'A Human Treasure': Europe's Displaced Children Between Nationalism and Internationalism

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In 1948 the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide labelled 'forcibly transferring children of one group to another group' enacted 'with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such', a form of genocide. A year later, Vinita A. Lewis, a social worker with the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in Germany, insisted, 'The lost identity of individual children is *the* Social Problem of the day on the continent of Europe . . . Even if his future destiny lies in a country other than that of his origin, he [the displaced child] is entitled to the basic Human Right of full knowledge of his background and origin.' Children, it seems, enjoyed a 'human right' to a nationality after World War II. Where did this strikingly nationalist understanding of human rights come from? And what does post-war activism around displaced children reveal about the broader relationships between nationalism and internationalism in the process of post-war reconstruction?

Children were at the symbolic heart of efforts to reconstruct Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. International humanitarian organizations, government officials, and child welfare experts were particularly concerned about the fate of Europe's so-called 'lost children'—hundreds of thousands of children who were separated from their families or uprooted by bombings, military conscription, occupation, forced labour, deportation, and the death of their parents. Policy-makers considered the rehabilitation of these children to be essential to the biological, moral, and economic reconstruction of the nation. At the same time, however, refugee children were contested between states. And they stood at the centre of a host of new international humanitarian relief efforts that were animated by explicitly internationalist ideals.

The history of Europe's refugee children after World War II sheds light on how Europeans navigated the tensions between nationalism and internationalism that shaped the reconstruction of Europe. On the one hand, the end of the Second World War was accompanied by a wave of idealistic

internationalism that gained new moral force after the Second World War.¹ The practical outgrowth of this 'new internationalism' was an explosion of intergovernmental and non-governmental international organizations. A United Nations survey conducted in January 1951 counted 188 officially recognized international organizations, one-third of which were founded after 1945.² In the realm of child welfare, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA, 1943–47) and the International Refugee Organization (IRO, 1947–51) were at the forefront of efforts to rehabilitate and repatriate displaced children after the war.

None of the new post-war international institutions and conventions were premised on the death of the nation-state. But they did promise to usher in a new era of international cooperation and to uphold universal values that transcended state borders. The foot-soldiers of post-war relief efforts in Europe were themselves animated by this internationalist spirit. Susan Pettiss, an UNRRA social worker, recalled joining the organization with the hopeful conviction that 'the chaos immediately following the end of World War I with clogged roads, epidemics, widespread hunger could not be repeated. We would, this time, achieve a permanent peace and help establish a unified world.'³

The experiences of military conscription and occupation, population displacement, and deportation meanwhile created tens of thousands of transnational families, transforming matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody, adoption, and child welfare into central concerns of diplomats, military officials, and humanitarian workers. The family was internationalized to an unprecedented extent in Europe during the Second World War. But internationalism as an ideology stood on shakier ground.⁴ For beneath the surface of the lofty rhetoric adopted by United Nations' workers and

¹ On the rhetoric of individualism and human rights in post-war Europe, see Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: A Recent History of Human Rights*, chapter 1 (Cambridge Mass., 2010); Tony Judt, *Post war: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York, 2005), 564–5; Paul Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 1996); Mark Mazower, 'The Strange Triumph of Human Rights, 1933–1950,' *The Historical Journal* 47:2 (2004), 386–8; A. W. Brian Simpson, *Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention* (Oxford, 2001), 157–220; Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, 2002), 41–52.

² Iriye, *Global Community*, 40–52.

³ Susan T. Pettiss with Lynne Taylor, *After the Shooting Stopped: The Story of an UNRRA Welfare Worker in Germany, 1945–47* (Victoria, BC, 2004), 5–6.

⁴ On the relationship between internationalism and internationalization, see Martin Geyer and Johannes Paulmann, 'Introduction: The Mechanics of Internationalism', in *The*

officials, the liberation of Europe was an explosively nationalist moment. Reconstruction was understood as an explicitly nationalizing project, an effort to recover the national sovereignty and rehabilitate the national honour compromised by the Nazi occupation.

This project was brutally gendered. The sovereignty of the nation was symbolically located in women's bodies and in the bodies of children. Reconstructing national 'honour' meant purging and punishing collaborators of all kinds, but especially women who had (allegedly) enabled the national enemy to penetrate their bodies. In France, but also in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere in Europe, women suspected of consorting with occupying soldiers were publicly humiliated. French partisans and villagers shaved women's heads in spectacles of violent retribution, while in Czechoslovakia, local 'people's courts' charged so-called 'horizontal collaborators' with the newly invented crime of 'offending national honour'. Many Czech women were fined, interned, or even stripped of their citizenship and expelled for the offence of having relations with Bohemian German-speakers who had been their neighbours, business partners, classmates, and friends for decades before the Second World War.⁵

The project of reclaiming national sovereignty in liberated Europe was also linked directly to sovereignty over children. Like women, children were seen as a form of national 'property' that required protection from foreign invasion and appropriation. Repatriating and renationalizing 'stolen' children in Germany and Austria was linked to post-war justice and denazification, the defence of 'human rights' and the family, and the acquisition of the productive and reproductive labour necessary for reconstruction. But officials in both Eastern and Western Europe did not only demand the return of 'lost children' in the name of national sovereignty. They also invoked the more universalist values of European security and children's individual 'best interests'.

This article focuses on the place of 'lost children' (both displaced children and children of occupation) in the reconstruction of France and Czechoslovakia. The imagined link between reconstruction and sovereignty over children transcended boundaries between East and West, but East European

Mechanics of Internationalism: Culture, Society, and Politics from the 1840s to the First World War (Oxford, 2001), 1–25.

⁵ Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France* (New York, 2002); Perry Biddiscombe, 'The Anti-Fraternization Movement in the U.S. Occupation Zones of Germany and Austria, 1945–48,' *Journal of Social History* 34 (Spring 2001), 611–47; Benjamin Frommer, *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia* (New York, 2004); Heide Fehrenbach, *Race After Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany* (Princeton, 2007).

policy-makers were far more dependent than French authorities on the goodwill of the Allies and of international organizations such as the UNRRA and the IRO. But even United Nations workers who explicitly espoused internationalist ideals ultimately came to favour the renationalization and repatriation of displaced children from Eastern Europe. Like French and Czechoslovak policy-makers, they linked the repatriation of children uprooted by war to overarching values of justice, democratization, and human rights. In the campaign to reconstruct Europe's children after World War II, international organizations reinforced nationalist ideals and policies, and collectivist understandings of child welfare and pedagogy were translated into the individualist and universalist language of children's 'best interests'.

Displacement and demography

One of the most potent manifestations of post-war nationalism in Europe was the wave of populationism that swept the continent. Replacing the dead had particular meaning and urgency for European Jews after the Holocaust, but every European government sought to replenish its dead soldiers and civilians, recover its 'lost children', and secure the labour power needed for post-war reconstruction. These concerns encouraged pro-natalist social policies and an expansion of European welfare states, and ultimately generated spirited competition among European governments to claim refugee children and orphans as immigrants. In 1946, Pierre Pfmilin, representing the French Ministry of Public Health and Population, described displaced children as a valuable 'blood transfusion' who could replace dead soldiers and thereby counter a 'menace of extinction' that threatened the French nation:

During the war years Germany was an immense prison, where humans belonging to all of the nations of Europe rubbed shoulders. . . This mixing of humans without historical precedent has left human traces—children were born. A lot of children. A good number of them have French blood in their veins. . . From a demographic point of view the child is the ideal immigrant because he constitutes a human asset whose value is all the more certain since his assimilation is guaranteed. It is impossible to say the same of any adult immigrant.⁶

Pfmilin's view of displaced children as a potential demographic windfall reflected more than just perennial French anxieties about its low birth rate. In contrast to earlier pro-natalist movements in France, French authorities

⁶ Conférence de presse de M. Pierre Pfmilin, 5 April 1946, 80/AJ/75, AN.

also claimed displaced children in the name of restitution for the Nazi demographic war on occupied Europe. Just as post-war governments and individuals demanded the restitution of apartments, furniture, bank accounts, artwork, and factories that had been plundered by the Nazi regime, they also demanded the return of lost human capital. Post-war European governments and social welfare activists saw displaced children, in particular, as a precious form of national patrimony that had been 'stolen' by the Nazi regime and/or biologically weakened by hunger, bombings, deportations, and forced labour. In a report recommending the transfer of refugee children in Germany to France for adoption, one military official explained, 'By initiating massive deportations and inflicting a long captivity on adults, one of the goals pursued by the Nazis was to reduce natality in the states that they planned to destroy. . . . The Direction of Displaced Persons is now working to repair in part the damage inflicted on the Allies in this domain by Germany, by depriving Germany of the benefit of births that were due to the presence of millions of deportees on its territory.'⁷

The French government's decision to transform displaced children into French citizens was also shaped by the conviction that German overpopulation represented an inherent threat to French sovereignty and to European security. Demographers incessantly compared relative population losses in Europe after World War II, noting with dismay that the Nazis seemed to have triumphed in their demographic assault on Europe. Even worse, Germany's own population had actually grown by 7.5 per cent since 1939, with menacing implications, according to a 1946 report by the *Comité International pour l'Étude des Questions Européen*: 'The danger resulting from this state of affairs is extremely grave. It is all the greater since while the German population has grown from 67 to 72 million, German territory has been reduced by about one-fourth since 1945, due to the loss of Eastern Prussia and Silesia.'⁸ General Pierre Koenig, the military governor of the French occupied zone of Germany warned in March 1946, 'All of this part of Europe will find itself in an unstable situation, and a tendency toward expansion will naturally arise in Germany. Given that such an expansion is inevitable, it is necessary, beginning now, to plan it and direct it.' Koenig hoped to forestall another German campaign for

⁷ *Entrée en France des enfants nés en Allemagne*, undated, PDR 5/274, Archives des Affaires étrangères, Bureau des Archives de l'Occupation française en Allemagne et en Autriche (MAE-Colmar).

⁸ *Comité International pour l'Étude des Questions Européen*, 'Les Résultats de la Guerre de 1939 à 1945 en ce qui concerne la population de l'Allemagne et celles des pays alliés en Europe,' 13 April 1946, volume 105, Allemagne, Z-Europe, Archives des affaires étrangères, Paris (MAE).

Lebensraum by encouraging the selective emigration of Germans to France. Not surprisingly, he identified children as the most assimilable (and therefore the most desirable) immigrants of all. 'On this subject it is worth noting that the ideal solution would not be to introduce young people in France who are already formed—or rather deformed—but children, even babies, who are easily assimilable. For example, in Germany there are thousands of children of French origins, born during the years of war. This emigration should be organized in the very near future, while Germany is still under the effect of a moral crisis in consequence of the defeat.'⁹

The decision to make French citizens out of children of Germans seems counterintuitive, to say the least. But the imperative to reconstruct French national sovereignty after World War II did not only entail protecting borders from military invasion. It also meant control over the nation's population. In a memo to the Commissaire du Plan, which was responsible for economic planning in post-war France, Raymond Bousquet suggested that France required 1,400,000 to 1,500,000 immigrants in order to meet its future labour needs. The problem, as he saw it, was that introducing such a large number of foreigners into the French population threatened to leave it 'invaded, peacefully or not, by a growing number of foreigners. All national character will disappear'. Bousquet therefore insisted on the need to carefully to select immigrants who would easily assimilate. Germans, he believed, ranked among the most desirable candidates: 'Aside from our interest in compensating for the Latin contribution to our population. . . with a Nordic contribution, this immigration will have the advantage of absorbing, at least to a certain degree, the overpopulation of Germany which represents a perpetual menace to France.' Like Koenig, he suggested that the French government should target displaced children in particular. 'The immigration of young German orphans, currently refugees in Denmark, would be particularly precious from a demographic perspective.'¹⁰

The fraternization of French prisoners-of-war and occupation soldiers with German women in the French occupation zone of Germany created a particularly seductive opportunity to augment the French population at German expense. In May of 1946, one French newspaper wildly estimated that 300,000 occupation children had already been born to French men and

⁹ *Problème démographique allemand*, 10 March 1946, volume 105, Allemagne, Z-Europe, MAE.

¹⁰ Raymond Bousquet à Monsieur le commissaire du plan, 80/AJ/75, AN. On demography in post-war France, see Paul-André Rosenthal, *L'Intelligence démographique: Sciences et politique de populations en France (1930–1960)* (Paris, 2003).

German women. While dismissing such projections as ‘pure fantasy’, Henri Fesquet, writing in *Le Monde* in August 1946, agreed that occupation children were promising candidates for French citizenship. But French officials would have to act fast to claim these children, before the Germans beat them to it. ‘In spite of their racist theories, they [the Germans] don’t ignore that the cross-breeding of French and Germans sometimes produces excellent results’, Fousquet warned. ‘It is advisable to remove these half-French children who we would like to form in our image from German influence as soon as possible.’¹¹

French occupation authorities soon devised and implemented a plan to ‘repatriate’ all children born to French-German couples in wartime and occupied Germany. In a confidential memo in 1946, French Ambassador to Baden Jacques Tarbé de Saint-Hardouin outlined the plan to Georges Bidault, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Leaving the children in Germany, he reasoned ‘would allow Germany to benefit from a demographic growth that it doesn’t deserve and would go against our principle . . . of reducing the German population. These children of unknown parents represent a human treasure that a country with low population density cannot ignore.’¹² By August 1946, French occupation authorities had established infant’s homes in the French Zone of Occupation in Tübingen, Bad Durkheim, and Unterhausen.¹³ After several months of physical and moral ‘rehabilitation’, the babies were transferred to France and handed over to the Assistance Publique. They were issued new French ‘certificates of origins’ to replace their German birth certificates. These certificates erased all record of the children’s origins and birthplace. The infants were then given new French names and then placed in French adoptive families.¹⁴ Quick adoption, Pierre Pfmilin hoped, would guarantee the assimilation of the occupation children, and meet the growing demand for children in France. ‘The large majority of little immigrants will have a family without delay, a French family that will make them into true French citizens . . . That is doubtlessly the best way to resolve the problem of assimilation’, he maintained.¹⁵

¹¹ Henri Fesquet, ‘Les enfants nés en Allemagne pendant la guerre,’ *Le Monde*, August 8, 1946, PDR 5/238, MAE-Colmar.

¹² Recherche en Allemagne des enfants ressortissants des nations unies, 16 February 1946, PDR 5/284, MAE-Colmar.

¹³ Rapport du Service Sociale du 28 avril au 26 mai 1945, Stuttgart, 26 May 1945, PDR 5/284, MAE-Colmar.

¹⁴ Note relative au rapatriement des enfants française né en Allemagne, 5 August 1946, PDR 5/238, MAE-Colmar.

¹⁵ Conférence de presse de M. Pierre Pfmilin, 5 April 1946, 80/AJ/75, AN.

French policy-makers and social workers justified the adoption scheme by depicting German mothers as immoral or negligent. They contrasted the sad future faced by occupation children in post-war Germany to the happier prospects they would enjoy as French citizens. German mothers, argued French social workers, typically 'abandon the child out of a lack of maternal sentiment or out of loyalty to their true family that would be compromised by the presence of a bastard child'.¹⁶ A 1946 French military report noted that the number of occupation children was increasing, due to 'the promiscuity of German women'. These women abandoned their children out of 'disappointment in the refusal of the presumed father to marry her, desire to make a new life with a German man who is not inclined to welcome the child of a stranger', or 'fear of the possible return of a German husband'. French authorities rarely mentioned the severe economic distress of many single mothers as a factor that contributed to abandonment. They instead depicted the adoption programme as a humanitarian gesture to rescue unwanted children from neglectful mothers.¹⁷

But in spite of high hopes, the adoption scheme produced meagre rewards for France. It turned out that most German women were reluctant to abandon their babies to the French state. French authorities, meanwhile, rejected almost one-half of the abandoned babies for eugenic reasons, generating accusations of French racism among local Germans. Children of French colonial soldiers were explicitly excluded from adoption in France unless they had white skin.¹⁸ By 1949 the French military's Child Search division had identified 14,357 illegitimate children with French or allied fathers. Of this number, however, only 484 had actually been repatriated to France for adoption.¹⁹

Even as the adoption scheme failed to augment the French population, it reflected the perceived centrality of children to post-war reconstruction of France. It also reflected the interlocking nationalist and universalist logics of reconstruction. French officials rhetorically justified their claims on occupation children in humanitarian terms, and in the name of maintaining European peace and security. But they clearly pursued children from

¹⁶ Rapport du Service Sociale du 28 avril au 26 mai 1945, 26 May 1945, PDR 5/284, MAE-Colmar.

¹⁷ Activités, prévisions et besoins de la Section 'Enfance' de la Division PDR, 30 December 1946, PDR 5/242, MAE-Colmar.

¹⁸ Recherche et rapatriement d'enfants nés en Allemagne de père français, 6 June 1946, Folder 5/370, MAE-Colmar.

¹⁹ Compte rendu d'activité du service recherches enfants depuis sa création 1949, PDR 5/285, MAE-Colmar.

Germany for more self-interested reasons, namely, to enhance the French nation's biological and economic power. The adoption scheme also reflects the extent to which the re-establishment of national sovereignty was linked to national homogeneity in post-war Europe, as assumption that would profoundly shape the politics of migration in the post-war era. Within this framework, refugee children came to be seen as 'most valuable immigrants' by virtue of their perceived ability to assimilate.

The children of Lidice

The campaign to claim displaced children as lost 'national property' was even more politically and emotionally charged in liberated Eastern Europe. When the Nazis overran Eastern Europe during the Second World War, they deliberately attempted to enrich their demographic power through the forcible Germanization of Slavic children deemed to possess valuable German 'blood'. The Nazi regime's use of the term 're-Germanization' to describe these policies was no empty euphemism. It was a product of the long-standing battle for the souls of nationally ambiguous children in bilingual regions of Eastern Europe. During and after the Second World War, Nazi officials had justified Germanization policies as a form of restitution for alleged losses to the German population through interwar Czechification, Polonization, and Slovenization.²⁰

Actual efforts to forcibly Germanize children in Eastern Europe met with determined resistance and only spotty success. After the war, however, East Europeans remembered the forcible Germanization of children as one of the Nazi regime's greatest crimes. Stories of children from Eastern Europe who had been 'stolen' or 'kidnapped' for Germanization circulated widely among relief workers and Western journalists, as well as within Eastern Europe. In 1951 the American journalist Dorothy Macardle reported that during the Nazi occupation, 'Children were taken from orphanages, from streets and parks, and even from their homes. It was the sturdy, fair-haired boys and girls who were lost, as a rule . . . The German motives were obscure, and appalling rumors and conjectures added to the torment of parents whose children had disappeared.'²¹

Meanwhile, the number of children reportedly kidnapped for Germanization by the Nazis was wildly exaggerated by Polish, Yugoslav, and

²⁰ On the history of nationalist claims on children in Eastern Europe before 1945, Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–48* (Ithaca, 2008).

²¹ Dorothy Macardle, *Children of Europe* (Boston, 1951), 54–6.

Czechoslovak officials.²² The Polish government and Red Cross declared that at least 200,000 Polish children had fallen victim to Nazi Germanization during the Second World War. Historian Isabel Heinemann has more credibly estimated that around 20,000 children were kidnapped from Poland, and up to 50,000 from all of Europe.²³ But precise numbers are difficult to come by, as they depend both on the definition of 'kidnapping' and the definition of 'Germanization' in a context in which national loyalties were ambiguous and bilingualism was commonplace. Many East Europeans voluntarily applied for German citizenship, and others abandoned their children to German families and institutions while working as forced or voluntary labourers in Germany or living in displaced persons' camps after the war. In any event, East European officials in the 1940s would have made no distinction between the forced removal of a child from his or her parents, and an orphaned or abandoned Slavic child placed with a German family for adoption. According to the nationalist logic of the time, children could be 'kidnapped' not only from their parents, but from the national collective.

The orphaned children of Lidice were Europe's most famous and celebrated lost children immediately after World War II. Their recovery from occupied Germany, like the repatriation and adoption of French-German children, came to represent a broader project of reconstruction and restitution after World War II. And while the French government relied primarily on its own military authorities to repatriate occupation children to France, Czech officials depended on international organizations such as UNRRA and the IRO to recover their lost human patrimony.

On the morning of 21 May 1942 Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich had been attacked in Prague by Czech partisans, and died a few days later. In retaliation, on 10 June 1942, German soldiers rounded up all of the men in the small village of Lidice and shot them into a mass grave. The village was burnt and razed to the ground. Meanwhile, the town's women and children were shaken out of bed at 3 a.m. and dragged to a high school in Kladno. Nine children were selected for Germanization, and the rest of the women and children sent on to concentration camps. Nazi officials brought these children to an SS Lebensborn home in Puschkau, near Poznan, for Germanization and adoption. Hana Spotová, two years old at the time, was one of the children selected for Germanization. She received a new identity as Hanna Spott. After a brief stay in Puschkau, Hana was adopted by a German woman named Klara Warner. Warner later testified that Lebensborn officials told her that Hanna

²² Memo from M. Thudicum to Sir Arthur Rucker, 31 January 1949, 43/AJ/600, AN.

²³ Isabel Heinemann, *'Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut': Die Rasse und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen, 2003), 508–9.

was a German orphan whose parents had been killed in an aerial bombardment. But she soon heard disturbing rumours about the child's origins:

When I picked up the child, a kindergarten teacher said, 'What a pity that the child is leaving, she was the prettiest here and learned to speak such nice German.' I was naturally surprised and asked, what do you mean, where is the child from? 'Don't you know? These are Czech children whose parents were killed', answered the kindergarten teacher. At the urging of my husband I later wrote to the regional home for Posen and asked for information about the origins of the child. But the only response I received is that the child is racially flawless . . . I had Hanna Spott in my care until March 1944. One day an NSV sister came and took her away without any explanation.²⁴

Spotová was among the lucky few, as she lived to return to Czechoslovakia. Only 17 out of 105 children from Lidice ultimately survived the ordeal—82 were gassed in Chelmno shortly after the 1942 massacre.²⁵ But immediately after the war, the fate of Lidice's 105 missing children remained a mystery. Czech government officials, the Red Cross, UNRRA, the press, and a broader international public still hoped that the children remained hidden and that they would be recovered for the Czech nation.

The hunt for the Lost Children of Lidice became a public spectacle that dramatized the post-war campaign for justice and restitution. A radio address on 8 January 1946 rallied all Czech citizens for the search, asking that they immediately report any clues or sightings of the 105 missing children to their local national council.²⁶ In liberated Berlin, meanwhile, German anti-fascists circulated flyers and posters with the names and pictures of the missing Lidice children. The posters appealed, 'There can be no town hall in Germany, no police officer, no office, no church, no newspaper, no radio station, no political party, no union, no rally, no home, no family, which does not cry out, "What happened to the children from Lidice?"'²⁷ The Czechoslovak Ministry of Interior, meanwhile, published a booklet entitled *Kidnapped Czech Children* that same year, listing 890 missing Czech children altogether, including 93 children of Lidice.²⁸ By the time that the Ministry of Social

²⁴ Protokoll der Frau Klara Werner, Ministerstvo ochranu práce a sociální péče-repatriace (MPSP-R), Carton 849, Národní archiv, Prague (NA).

²⁵ Jolana Macková and Ivan Ulrych, *Osudy lidických dětí* (Lidice, 2003).

²⁶ Ohledně pátrání po lidických dětech, Carton 849, MPSP-R, NA.

²⁷ An alle Frauen, an alle Familien in Deutschland, Wo Sind die Kinder von Lidice?, Carton 849, MPSP-R, NA.

²⁸ *Pohřešované československé děti* (Prague, 1946), Carton 846, MPSP-R, NA.

Welfare ended its search for deported children, in January of 1949, only 740 children had been located and 629 repatriated.²⁹

Across Europe, the search for a relatively small number of children assumed extraordinary symbolic significance. The Czechoslovak press continuously denounced and publicized the villainy of German civilians and allied authorities, who allegedly deliberately hindered the return of Czechoslovak children to their homeland. 'Kidnapped children are enslaved by Germans', reported *Svobodné noviny* in March 1947. Two years after the defeat of Nazi Germany, the newspaper claimed, many deported Czech youth continued to labour for German employers, unaware of the possibility of returning home. According to *Svobodné noviny*, these forced labourers 'receive only small amounts of food and have no possibility of contact with the outside world. The majority were deported to Germany in their tender youth.'³⁰

As the Communist party gained in power and influence in post-war Czechoslovakia, Czechoslovak newspapers and officials joined Polish and Yugoslav authorities in denouncing American military authorities and the IRO, accusing them of conspiring against the return of the nation's 'stolen' children. *Národní osvobození* reported in October 1947 that 13-year-old Hana Š. from Lidice was living with German foster parents who refused to relinquish her. When the conflict continued with no foreseeable resolution, Czech repatriation officials decided they had no choice but to take matters into their own hands. 'Our people decided to abduct the girl. And so Hanička finally returned to the Czech land of her birth. This solution was dramatic, but what a tragedy! In 1947 Czechs must kidnap Czech children from German families, who were stolen in 1942 from Lidice! This abduction was made necessary by the American authorities, who guard the children kidnapped during the war by the Nazis,' accused the paper.³¹

Real-life family reunions were major media events. When seven-year-old Hana Spotová finally returned to Czechoslovakia on 2 April 1947, her train was greeted at the Wilson Train Station in Prague by 'an unusually excited and tense crowd of simple men and women, among whom mingled the khaki uniforms of the employees and representatives of UNRRA and our soldiers', reported the newspaper *Obrana lidu*. This festive crowd joined film-makers, photo-journalists, and newspaper reporters, who 'feverishly prepared to

²⁹ 'Po stopách zavlčených dětí,' *Lidové noviny*, 13 January 1949. Carton 409, Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí-výstřížkový archiv (MZV-VA), NA.

³⁰ 'Zavlčené děti musí otročit Němcům,' *Svobodné noviny*, 16 March 1947, Carton 409, MZV-VA, NA.

³¹ 'Neuvěřitelná případ,' *Národní osvobození*, 12 October 1947, Carton 409, MZV-VA, NA.

capture the extraordinary moment of reunion of parents with their children who had been robbed from them for years by the barbarous German regime, and who were cold-heartedly and consciously detained by German civilians even after the war'.³²

Tales of Germanized children even inspired a popular children's story by the Czech writer Zdeňka Bezděková. *They Called Me Leni* (*Říkali mi Leni*) was first published in 1948 and later translated into English, German, Dutch, Slovene, Swedish, Japanese, Ukrainian, Slovak, and Sorbian. It was eventually reprinted eight times in Czech (most recently in 2001), and followed by a sequel. In the preface Bezděková wrote that she had been inspired by newspaper reports about real-life stolen children: 'In 1947 I read a newspaper report about a little Czech girl who returned to her home country after having lived for many years with a German family. . . I pondered over her sad fate and the fate of all these stolen children, and I decided to write this story.'³³

Leni Friwald, the heroine, was born Alena Sýkorová. In 1946, Alena was living in Herrstadt, Germany with a Nazi family, completely unaware of her origins. But she had a vague sense that she didn't belong. Bit by bit, clues about her past life return to Leni in her dreams. She overhears her adoptive mother and grandmother fighting behind closed doors. A vindictive German classmate calls her a 'foreign Czech bastard'. Eventually she discovers a suitcase from home, locked in the attic, in which she finds clues about her past—a peasant doll, a white hat, a pair of stockings with the initials AS embroidered into them. Finally recalling her true origins, Leni runs away to a local UNRRA office, where she declares 'I have a mother in Czechoslovakia!' With the help of a friendly teacher and an UNRRA social worker, Leni's mother is located, and she returns to her native family, language, and nation. But the story ends on a sad note, as Leni acknowledges what has been lost in exile: 'For the first time, I felt love. But I couldn't say anything. I didn't know how to say Mummy in Czech.'³⁴

'Every child needs a strong sense of national identity'

Leni's story highlights both the symbolic place of lost children in the process of post-war reconstruction, and the important role of international organizations such as UNRRA in the hunt for Lost Children from Eastern Europe. For post-war UNRRA and IRO social workers, tracing children uprooted by

³² 'Návrat uloupených dětí do vlast,' *Obrana lidu*, 3 April 1947, Carton 409, MZV-VA, NA.

³³ Zdeňka Bezděková, *They Called me Leni*, trans. Stuart R. Amor (New York, 1973), 6. Most recent Czech edition: *Říkali mi Leni* (Prague, 2001).

³⁴ Bezděková, *They Called me Leni*, 82.

the Nazi war machine became central to their own goals of promoting democratization and human rights in post-war Europe. United Nations' social workers claimed, at least officially, to stand above nationalist concerns. In an expression of their individualist ethic, they pledged to uphold the 'best interests of the child' as the guiding principle of child welfare. The 'best interests' principle was itself intended to mark the repudiation of Nazi racial hierarchies. Focusing on the best interests of individual children implied a rejection of other possible criteria for making social welfare decisions, such as the goal of creating a master race. But the meaning of these 'best interests' was far from transparent. Based on the belief that children's psychological rehabilitation depended on the cultivation of a firm national identity, UNRRA and IRO social workers, as well as European governments, ultimately came to define the individual 'best interests' of displaced children and adults in distinctly nationalist terms. In the words of UNRRA child welfare worker Susan Pettiss,

At first I couldn't understand why the Army and UNRRA almost immediately set up different camps for Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Western Europeans, etc. Imbued with the idealistic sense of 'one world' I felt disillusioned when that unity didn't materialize right away. I soon realized, however, that for both psychological and practical reasons, national grouping was best during the insecure and traumatic times in the lives of the displaced.³⁵

A central mission of UNRRA's 'Child Search Teams' was to comb the German countryside in search of children like Leni. Simply identifying these children required tremendous detective work. The nationalities of many East European children were ambiguous, since displaced children often came from bilingual regions, where blurry lines between so-called *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) and Poles, Czechs, and Yugoslavs had become blurrier during the Second World War.³⁶ To complicate matters, Nazi officials systematically changed the names and destroyed the records of children designated for Germanization. Many young children had no memory at all of their native languages or families of origin. In 1947, Jean Henshaw described Polish and Yugoslav children in the Children's Centre in Prien who had 'renounced their country, language, and culture and vehemently claimed they were Germans'.³⁷

³⁵ Pettiss, *After the Shooting Stopped*, 62.

³⁶ See for example File 10, Report, S-0437-0013, United Nations Archive (UN); W. C. Huyssoon, 'Who is this Child', S-0437-0013, UN.

³⁷ Report on International Children's Centre, Prien, 28 April 1947, S-0437-0012, UN.

Once identified, UN Child Search Officers typically sought to remove allied children from German families as quickly as possible. But even when the children were orphans, UNRRA workers typically sought to repatriate them to their national homeland. The children sometimes had to be removed from their foster-parents by force. In one such case, Child Care Consultant Eileen Davidson noted in her daily log for 19 October 1946: ‘Conference with Polish Repatriation Officer re two adolescent Polish children who have been for two years with a superior German family and are asking permission to remain. They are orphans and have no family to return to. Permission refused. Children to be repatriated. Picked up both children at Ansbach much against their will.’³⁸

Custody battles over displaced children generated sharp tensions between UNRRA, British and American military authorities, East European governments, family members, displaced persons themselves, and local German foster-parents. In the name of the ‘best interests of the children’, British and American military authorities often preferred to leave the children in German homes, insisting that the children would be emotionally scarred by removal from their German foster-parents.³⁹ It is likely that Allied military authorities also objected to the repatriation of East European children for more pragmatic reasons—in order to smooth relations between military authorities and local Germans, and ultimately out of anti-communist sympathies. UNRRA and IRO child welfare officers, however, consistently favoured removing displaced children from German homes and repatriating them to Eastern Europe.

In 1948, Eileen Davidson, then Deputy Chief of the IRO’s Child Search Section, wrote a memo arguing that this policy represented the ‘best interests of the child’ from a psychological, moral, and political perspective. Her argument rested largely on the conviction that German society had not yet been purged of Nazi racism; the possibility of true integration for East European children in post-war Germany was therefore slim, in her view. She cited the case of ‘two Polish children whose father had been in the SS and who were known as Volksdeutsche. The older girl worked long hours in the kitchen . . . She said that she always was told that she was a “dumb Pole”’.⁴⁰

³⁸ Daily Log of October 19th, 21st, from District Child Search Officer Eileen Davidson, S- 0437-0014, UN.

³⁹ On British and American military policies toward repatriation, see Provisional order no. 75 and the British Zone Policy, 9 November 1948, 43/AJ/599, AN; Removal of Children from German Care, 30 June 1947, S-0437-0017, UN.

⁴⁰ Eileen Davidson, Removal from German families of Allied Children, 21 February 1948, 7, 43/AJ/599, AN.

East European children left in German foster-families, she concluded, would surely suffer permanent psychological damage, even if they were loved and well cared for. 'Far from securing the best interests of the child [she wrote], one has run the danger with the passage of years of contributing to the development of a warped and twisted personality, a misfit with roots neither here nor in his home country.'⁴¹

Davidson's position was typical of UN social workers, and reflects the extent to which nationalist ideals were appropriated by new international institutions after World War II. Her insistence that national ambiguity would lead to the development of 'warped and twisted personalities' strongly echoed the concerns of earlier nationalists and educational reformers in Habsburg Central Europe, who had also insisted that bilingual education threatened to deform children's intellectual and moral character.⁴² Davidson's memo also reflects how humanitarian workers defined ideals such as democratization, justice, and the individual psychological 'best interests of the child' so as to privilege the 'renationalization' of displaced children. Children, in this view, required a stable national identity in order to thrive as healthy individuals.

In policy terms, this meant that UNRRA and the IRO generally respected the demands made by East European governments for the repatriation of children. Officially, only representatives of an orphan's country of origins were legally entitled to approve decisions about the child's adoption, resettlement, or repatriation.⁴³ In addition, unaccompanied East European children could not legally be adopted by foster-parents of a different nationality, in accordance with domestic laws in Poland, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. The UN did not simply respect these national 'rights' to children out of deference to Eastern European nationalists. In a 1948 memo one IRO official elaborated, 'Every child's future is too important to be decided by a representative of a foreign nation . . . There can be no doubt that in order for things to run smoothly, the guardian must be of the same nationality as the child. If such a line is followed, nobody will be able to reproach the IRO for its desire to assimilate, denationalize children or to develop cosmopolitans.'⁴⁴ Jean Henshaw boasted of the UNRRA Children's Centre in Prien, 'One of our major tasks has been a program for renationalizing children. Where we have

⁴¹ Davidson, *Removal from German Families*, 14.

⁴² Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*, chapter 1.

⁴³ Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, *Displaced Orphan Children in Europe*, 13 November 1946, 43/AJ/45, AN.

⁴⁴ Comments on the guardianship problem of unaccompanied children, 5 March 1948, 43/AJ/926, AN.

had adequate DP staff from the children's home country. . . we have had outstanding success in awaking the spirit of national pride and feeling.⁴⁵

These views also shaped the pedagogy of rehabilitation within UNRRA and IRO camps and children's homes. In many explicitly internationalist projects to rehabilitate displaced children, young refugees were organized in separate national houses in order to cultivate national pride. In the Pestalozzi Village in Trogen, Switzerland in 1950, 132 orphans were housed in eight distinctive national houses, each appropriately 'decorated and furnished in national style'.⁴⁶ Each house had its own school where children were given lessons in their mother tongue with textbooks from their native lands. A teacher in the children's village boasted, 'It is really amazing to observe with what toughness and vitality even the smallest group preserves its national character if soundly organized. In each of these small colonies the very best elements of national culture come to the fore, the colourful variety of literary and musical talent, folklore, jest, and humour.'⁴⁷ The cultivation of each child's national identity was essential to his or her individual psychological well-being, according to Thérèse Brosse, writing for UNESCO:

In the course of our visits to the children's communities, we saw indeed how much the children need a country of their own if they are to be psychologically normal and to feel 'like other people' . . . Their youthful independence is not strong enough for them to become world citizens immediately without first being a citizen of a smaller community . . . The all-important requirement for children who have been moved from one country to another: to settle the child and provide him with a country of his own and a language and culture which that implies.⁴⁸

The argument that children constituted a form of national, collective property had been born in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century and strengthened by the experience of Nazi occupation and persecution. After the Second World War, international humanitarian organizations and post-war governments launched a campaign to renationalize and repatriate displaced children in order to right the wrongs of Nazi Germanization policies. In the name of a radical break with the fascist past, they insisted that the material and

⁴⁵ Report on International Children's Centre, Prien, 28 April 1947, S-0437-0012, UN.

⁴⁶ Thérèse Brosse, *Homeless Children: Report on the Proceedings of the Conference* (Paris, 1950), 24.

⁴⁷ W. R. Corti, 'A Few Thoughts on the Children's Village,' *News Bulletin of the Pestalozzi Children's Village*, May 1948, 9, 43/AJ/599, AN.

⁴⁸ Brosse, *War-Handicapped Children*, 21-2.

psychological 'best interests' of individual children should guide post-war social work. Simultaneously, however, they defined those 'best interests' in distinctly nationalist terms.

This focus on children as national patrimony was not limited to Eastern Europe after World War II, however. Contrary to histories of nationalism, of World War II, and of reconstruction that posit radical differences between Eastern and Western Europe, the history of Europe's lost children reveals a set of shared challenges and assumptions in post-war Europe. In both France and Czechoslovakia, the 'repatriation' of children was linked to the reconstruction of national sovereignty and of the nation's biological and economic strength. Both French and Czechoslovak authorities demanded the return of 'lost children' in the name of restitution for a Nazi demographic assault on Europe. They claimed displaced children as part of an ostensible effort to prevent future outbreaks of German imperialism, and to guarantee the peace and security of Europe. Finally, both linked the security of Europe to the creation of homogenous nation-states. While post-war policy-makers across Europe were intent on increasing their war-battered populations after the war, they did not wish to do so at the expense of national homogeneity. In Czechoslovakia, this meant focusing on the repatriation of Czech lost children while expelling three million Germans (including, initially many children of German-Czech marriages).⁴⁹ In France, this entailed transforming occupation and refugee children into French citizens because of their perceived capacity to assimilate.

There were also key differences between the French and East European cases, however. As an Allied power, the French government could freely determine policies toward both 'lost children' and occupation children in its own occupation zones. Czechoslovak, Polish, and Yugoslav officials were by contrast constrained by Allied military authorities, representatives of international organizations (namely UNRRA and the IRO), and local German welfare authorities. In addition, the onset of the Cold War dramatically transformed the political stakes of international custody disputes. The campaign to repatriate East European 'lost children', initially imagined as a conflict between Germans and East Europeans, was translated into a battle between East and West. Many displaced youth, like adults from Eastern Europe, themselves refused to return home, whether due to political or religious loyalties or a desire for better social and economic opportunities. While representatives

⁴⁹ See Frommer, 'Expulsion or Integration: Unmixing Interethnic Marriage in Post-war Czechoslovakia,' *East European Politics and Societies* 14:2 (March 2000), 381–410; Tara Zahra, *Lost Children: Displacement and the Family in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming), chapter 6.

of UNRRA and the IRO continued to insist that it was in children's best interests to return to Eastern Europe after the consolidation of communist power, American and British authorities increasingly blocked the repatriation of East European youth out of explicit anti-communist sentiments. Aleta Brownlee, the Chief of UNRRA and IRO's child welfare division in the American zone of Austria recalled that as Cold War divisions hardened, 'United Nations worked against each other, ex-enemies became friends, West was set upon East, the Catholic Church against communism'. The preponderance of displaced children in Austria were of Slavic nations, and at least one high-ranking representative of an occupying power stated the position that 'there are too many Slavs anyway'.⁵⁰

In 1951, Hannah Arendt famously observed that the refugee camps of interwar France had exposed the limits of the universal ideal of 'human rights'. Ultimately, such rights were nothing but empty promises to displaced persons who lacked national citizenship. 'The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of human beings as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human', she maintained.⁵¹ After World War II, humanitarian activists and international organizations responded to the perceived failures of the interwar system of minority protection and child protection. They proudly proclaimed a new era of democracy, human rights, and internationalism in Europe. Through their efforts to rehabilitate Europe's displaced children, however, UNRRA and IRO workers ultimately anchored long-standing nationalist ideals at the heart of new international regimes of refugee relief and rehabilitation. Post-war European policy-makers, meanwhile, attempted to manage post-war population displacement to their own advantage in the name of biological and economic reconstruction. Arendt's insight, it seems, applied to the post-war world of the displaced persons camp, the children's home, and the orphanage, as well as to the interwar refugee camp. Reconstructing Europe after Nazi occupation required affirming a form of national sovereignty that was located as much in the control of children's futures as in the control of state borders.

⁵⁰ Aleta Brownlee, UNRRA Mission to Austria. Child Welfare in the Displaced Persons Camps, 6, Programme, Box 5, Aleta Brownlee Papers, Hoover Archive (HA), Stanford University.

⁵¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1951), 299.