

H I S T O I R E



Sous la direction de
Yves DENÉCHÈRE et David NIGET

Droits des enfants au XX^e siècle

Pour une histoire transnationale



PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE RENNES

Self-Motivated Humanitarianism? The Study of the Evacuation of Belgian and French Children to Switzerland (1941-1945)

Chelsea SAMBELLS

By mid-1940, as Western Europe fell to the invading German forces, and children began to acutely suffer under occupation, pressure mounted on governments and organizations to implement large-scale relief operations and transnational evacuations. Children, the most dependent and vulnerable population group exposed to war, possessed national and political significance because they represented the vitality of the future state. The country that saves its children simultaneously ensures the success and longevity of the nation. Not only did the devastation of the Second World War bring significant attention to the rights of the child, but also to the governments meant to protect them. However, these nations were not solely motivated to selfless humanitarian acts by the simple desire to "save the children" but often by less innocent incentives, which promoted their own national interests and advanced their own agendas.

From 1941 to 1945, the British, German and Swiss governments implemented an ambitious plan to evacuate 100,000 Belgian and French children from their war-torn countries and to send them to neutral Switzerland. The logistics of this largely unknown child evacuation involved attaining the consent of the German government, the participation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and its national branches, the approval of the Swiss government, the financial support of the British government, and the promise of provisions from Canada and the United States. By 1945, an estimated 60,000 children of predominantly French origin were successfully transferred to Switzerland for three-month periods of recuperation.

Research undertaken at state archives for British, German and Swiss wartime governments has uncovered that, although each nation justified its part of the evacuation on the basis of charitable concern for the well-being of these children, they were actually motivated by non-humanitarian purposes. For the British, this evacuation scheme was a favourable alternative to undermining the strict blockade against Europe, while

also strengthening ties with an important ally, the United States. For the Germans, this evacuation eliminated a large economic burden to feed these starving children, while also monitoring and preventing their ability to propagate anti-German sentiment. For the Swiss, this evacuation reaffirmed their national identity, while also limiting the burden of permanently-settled refugees.

This study will argue that, although the suffering of Belgian and French children was given as the reason behind the fierce British, German and Swiss intervention, the true motivations were politically and nationally dependent, as each government mobilized for its own self-preservation and to further its own agendas. Paradoxically, then, the effort to protect these children and to further their rights was completed without significant regard to the children themselves. And, despite the fact that these children were relegated to an ancillary role to the interests of the nation, they were, at the same time, the ones who benefitted the most from this humanitarian intervention.

The Evacuation of French and Belgian Children to Switzerland, 1941-1945

Children had no internationally recognized ICRC-monitored or enforced legal rights by 1939¹. Humanitarian intervention therefore relied solely upon the goodwill, interest and, perhaps most importantly, the available resources of governments and organizations, rather than upon any legal obligation. Evacuations, therefore, were a type of preventative measure to safeguard children, and, thereby, protect the future interests of the state. Many countries launched massive wartime evacuations. Britain's Operation Pied Piper and Germany's Kinderlandverschickung (KLV) resulted in the temporary migration of millions of children to camps, homes and other locations in the countryside. Other child evacuations, such as those of 70,000 Finnish and Danish children to Sweden, denote a type of European-wide acceptance and, arguably, an expectation that children were to be protected through evacuation measures.

The evacuation of Belgian and French children to Switzerland was unique due to its intended scope of 100,000 children, its focus on extending their health, and its collaboration between enemies. The overall goal was not to permanently save these children from death caused by war, but to temporarily extend their lives by maximizing their health through three months of recuperation in Swiss households and then, eventually, Swiss-run homes in Belgium, France and Switzerland. In order to accomplish

1. Neither the Third Geneva Convention (1929), nor the Tokyo Draft (1934) provided comprehensive protection of children, but only of civilians in certain scenarios. Even the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924) was not legally binding, but merely a tenet for participating countries to adopt.

this mission, numerous departments from all participating governments and all Red Cross branches, including the ICRC, needed to be involved. This was not an easy task, especially given the severity of the conflict and the acute lack of diplomacy. From the British and German perspectives, while children were indeed essential to the future vitality of the state, they were foreign and not essential to the Empire or the Reich, respectively. From the Swiss perspective, these children were just another population group begging for admission through the strictly controlled Swiss borders. Also, as children possessed no legal rights, the British, German and Swiss were not legally responsible to the international community for their actions, or inactions, towards children. Finally, humanitarian concern for these children, though an admissible and likely substantial reason for these governments' participation in this evacuation, must also be rigorously investigated as a justification. It is too simple to assign moral credit to those countries, including historically-condemned Nazi Germany, for their selfless actions in this event. Therefore, this evacuation, although laudable, cannot be entirely justified by the predictable reasons of national preservation, fear of post-war legal reprimand by the international community, or humanitarian concern to "save the children". It is for these reasons that the motivations of the governments—British, German and Swiss—must be examined.

The British Motivations

It was a long and arduous process for the British to support the evacuation of Belgian and French children to Switzerland. In August 1940, Churchill announced Britain's stringent blockade policy against occupied Europe, as he reckoned it was only a matter of time before Germany, which had overstretched itself, would collapse. In the meantime, however, the Belgians and French under occupation began to suffer as food grew scarce. Children, especially, experienced the hardships of war on an unprecedented scale. One health commission examined 15,000 boys and girls between the ages of three and eighteen in Brussels in autumn 1940. It was found that 38% of children over the age of fourteen were underweight and that 80% of all children were debilitated and always hungry². Although the Belgian government, exiled in London, lobbied consistently for a reversal of the strict blockade policy, desperate to help their starving citizens back home, the Allies were unyielding³.

2. BIGWOOD G. J., *Food and Health Conditions in Occupied Belgium*, Belgian Commission for the Study of Post-War Problems, Doc. S. 4/46, London, 4 December 1942, quoted in MACARDLE D., *Children of Europe. A Study of the Children of Liberated Countries: Their War-time Experiences, their Reactions and their Needs*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1949, p. 167-168.

3. The only exception was Greece, which received relief from April 1941 until the outbreak of its civil war in 1944.

However, Roosevelt persuaded the British government to send shipments of milk, vitamins and clothing to Marseille from February 1941 until May 1941⁴. British approval was based crucially on the fact that a distinction could be drawn between the unoccupied and occupied territories and that this action thereby did not infringe upon the strict blockade policy⁵. But this small concession actually reflected Britain's desire to appease the US, which was, at that time, still determinedly neutral. America possessed a massive amount of resources that, for the war-weary and depleted British forces, was an attractive future ally.

Belgian ministers were outspokenly exasperated that their pleas for relief for Belgian children were still rejected, prompting Anthony Eden, the Secretary of State, to propose a Belgian relief scheme to the War Cabinet in April 1942. At no point did the War Cabinet discuss the children themselves, or their health status. Instead, discussions centred on financial details and on whether such relief would actually pacify the Belgian ministers. This suggests that the issue of relieving children was not so much a pressing humanitarian issue as it was a political issue.

Although Eden's proposal was quickly rejected, different government departments in July 1942 began to propose the alternative evacuation of Belgian children to Switzerland⁶. It was rationalized that while similar small-scale evacuations were already occurring since 1941 (organised by small private Swiss charities), all future evacuations would increase significantly with the resources and support of the Allies. Moreover, such evacuations would not affect the blockade, as it was more a question of sending extra rations to Switzerland to maintain these needy children. The Americans were immediately consulted and, in September 1942, proposals suggested some 100,000 Belgian children could be absorbed into this scheme, including some from occupied France and Yugoslavia.

For the next year, the American and British began a series of exchanges that were terse, delayed and reticent to commit to action. This was partly due to Roosevelt's own strategic agenda to create the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). While it was actually a colossal failure due to poor financial management, Roosevelt believed it was a better instrument for international cooperation and American influence, in the post-war context, than any blockade concession. It was not until September 1943 that the Americans and British finally communicated

4. The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Foreign Office Papers (hereafter FO) 371/31889-0010, "Details of Negotiations between Britain and USA on Allowing Medical and Other Non-Military Supplies to Pass Through the Blockade to Unoccupied France. Part 3. France. French. Blockade of France", 16 August 1942, p. 3-4.

5. TNA, Cabinet Papers 66/18/29, Anthony Eden, "Blockade Policy: Milk for Children in Vichy France", 28 August 1941.

6. TNA, FO371/32566-0002, "Belgian Relief Scheme: child evacuation programme considered after Cabinet rejects plan to supply dried milk to children throughout Europe; copy of telegram to Washington", 13 July 1943, p. 7.

successfully about the evacuations. And, since tuberculosis had infected a third of all Belgian children under 18 (around three quarters of a million by September 1943), it was fortunate that the Allies could come to an agreement, however delayed⁷.

The British encouraged the evacuations of Belgian and French children to Switzerland as a direct result of successive failures to provide humanitarian assistance to these occupied territories. But it was not humanitarian concern that outright motivated the British to act. Instead, from the British perspective, these evacuations were born out of political necessity in order to cushion the Allies' refusal to modify the blockade, but were ultimately delayed as a direct result of Roosevelt's own hidden agenda. Evacuating Belgian children was a positive alternative to rejecting Belgian ministers' requests, and also appeased the powerful American ally. As the British exploited the evacuations to further their political interests, the children themselves, their experiences and their suffering became ancillary and disregarded. Children, therefore, became subordinate to the concept of the evacuation, and their rights, although promoted, were indistinct and secondary to the interests of the nation.

The German Motivations

Any incentive to evacuate starving children from German-occupied territory, however crucial from a humanitarian standpoint, had to align with the policies of the larger Nazi regime and also, in some way, provide immediate benefit to the occupying forces. German occupation policy in Western Europe generally endeavoured to maintain and modify the pre-war structures to support the requirements of the new occupying authorities, while exploiting the industrial assets and resources. The evacuation of Belgian children had a number of positive benefits for the occupying authorities, but the grounds for the refusal to continue the Belgian evacuations in February 1942 actually denote the true motivations of the German administration⁸.

One of the immediate, positive benefits of removing starving Belgian children from German control was to lighten the burden of the hopeless food situation in Belgium. Immediately after occupation, German authorities called for a conversion of 200,000 acres of pasture to produce food for human consumption in an effort to make Belgium self-sustaining without requiring imports from the Reich⁹. However, the 1941 harvest year was poor, acutely impacting the already-delicate food situation, and it was not

7. "Tuberculosis in Belgium", *The Tablet*, 4 September 1943.

8. The evacuations of Belgian children were not fully terminated until late 1942.

9. WARMBRUNN W., *The German Occupation of Belgium 1940-1944*, New York, Peter Lang, 1993, p. 215.

until the last harvest year of occupation that dependence on grain imports finally ceased¹⁰. The evacuation of children, therefore, was favourable as it removed thousands of hungry mouths. Children, in essence, held sheer economic value. As German authorities wished to extract the maximum of both human and material resources to serve the German war effort, removing the economic burden of children granted an immediate benefit to the dire food situation.

Although these evacuations presented numerous other advantages, such as reducing high rates of juvenile delinquency or pacifying local dissent among starved and overworked parents, the Nazis affirmed that children possessed significant political, and thus, propagandistic value. For example, interdepartmental documents from late 1941 claimed that these evacuations were inherently political¹¹. Additionally, the children themselves had the ability to act as propaganda. One administrator cautioned that Belgian children returning from Switzerland would negatively influence the Belgian people, as the Swiss would have indoctrinated them with a "reichsfeindliche Haltung"¹². This, it was argued, was a direct result of the Swiss attitude that Germany was ultimately the sole culprit for the miserable conditions of the children¹³. And, as affirmed by the Reich's Propaganda Ministry in June 1942, these children (and their propagandistic worth) would be better monitored and protected within the larger evacuations to the Reich than through a smaller scale operation to Switzerland¹⁴.

Although evacuations from Belgium to the Reich territories continued throughout the war, this belief that children, as tools of propaganda, were not only influenced but could also influence others, was central to all discussions about Belgian children. Children in this sense were not simply passive victims of war, but also actively capable of negatively influencing civilians (with their suspected anti-German attitudes adopted during their Swiss holiday) and, thereby, upsetting peace and order. While this belief in the power of children supports overall Nazi ideology, exemplified by the creation and success of the Hitler Youth, it also paradoxically grants children a type of agency. Children themselves, more than the evacuations, become important. Although this does not permit children any legal rights, the belief in the children's capacity to negatively influence others is acknowledged, respected and even prevented by the German occupation authorities. Children, therefore, became central to the evacuations, and their propagandistic ability to influence others, although controllable, according to the occupation authorities, was worthy of Germany's immediate attention.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

11. Bundesarchiv (hereafter BAArch), R55/1226, p. 9.

12. Translated as "anti-German attitude", *ibid.*, p. 35.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Swiss Motivations

Switzerland's long history as a neutral and well-situated sanctuary for refugees has fostered a unique national identity committed to global humanitarianism. This dedicated sense of moral duty was not neglected during the World Wars, and Switzerland welcomed many international relief organizations, such as the ICRC, to operate within its borders. However, Swiss humanitarianism was challenged by stringent wartime refugee policies, ultimately creating a dichotomy between its national tradition of charitable achievements, and its political actions during the reality of war. While humanitarianism was the catalyst for helping Europe's war children, inflexible Swiss refugee policies dictated the limitations of its altruistic efforts.

The evacuations of children from southern, unoccupied France to Switzerland began in 1940 by a small organization called the Swiss Coalition for Relief to Child War Victims, whereby Swiss families hosted these children for three-month durations¹⁵. Children from southern France were a popular choice to host, as both language and culture were conveniently shared between these regions. The organization was so overwhelmed by families offering to host that the Swiss Red Cross joined the operations in 1941. It was also around this time that the Belgian context had grown so grim that, with some coordinated effort and diplomatic finesse, evacuations of war-stricken children from German-occupied Belgium began. Unlike the previous evacuations, Belgian children came directly from German hands, from a country under forcible rule, denoting determined, humanitarian intention on behalf of the Swiss hosts. At least 3,200 Belgian children had benefitted from this scheme by February 1942¹⁶. And, although evacuations of French children (from both zones) discontinued with the occupation of southern France in November 1942 and resumed in December 1944 until 1945, an estimated 56,031 French children were admitted under this particular evacuation scheme, and a further 17,550 permanently granted asylum¹⁷.

This laudable intervention was not without fault. These evacuations excluded Jewish children, and in August 1942, thousands of children whose parents had been deported were abandoned in unoccupied France. Although Swiss networks in France requested that some 500 Jewish children be hosted in Switzerland and the US, Federal Councillor Pilet-Gollaz vetoed both plans. Instead, another organization was established for refugee

15. Founded as "Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kriegsgeschädigte Kinder".

16. Swiss Federal Archives (hereafter CH-BAR), J2.151969/7104, file 374, VAN DONGEN C., *Le home suisse pour enfants belges*, École centrale de service social, 1945.

17. CH-BAR, E2001D 1968/74 16, file 1, Hospitalisation en Suisse d'enfants français, 1943-1945.

children, the majority being Jewish, and the Swiss Red Cross donated some 400,000 francs in 1943¹⁸.

Post-war scholars have severely condemned Swiss refugee policy as anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi and definitely not neutral. Many Swiss immigration policies have reflected this fear of being overrun by foreigners. After the First World War, the government reduced its intake of foreigners from 10.4% to 5.2% between 1920 and 1941¹⁹. As Switzerland was viewed as a neutral haven in the midst of a highly politicized Europe, political refugees, such as Jews, flocked to its borders. In 1938, growing concern about becoming a transit country caused them to introduce the infamous J-stamp for German passports²⁰. Switzerland even closed its borders in August 1942, amid public protest. Although some asylum-seekers were admitted after the border closing, it was not until July 1944 that Jewish refugees were welcomed²¹.

It is impossible to review Swiss refugee policies without acknowledging the anti-Semitism prevalent within its history. Despite this, thousands of foreign children were charitably hosted within Swiss households throughout the war. The Swiss were motivated to help these foreign children as it aligned with their humanitarian national narrative, buoyed their international identity, and exercised their diplomatic networks. Although the three-month duration was an admissible alternative to permanently settling thousands of refugees, and thus burdening the country's economy and resources, it is still unclear whether this temporary stay provided true rest and relaxation, or merely prolonged the agony of young children and, moreover, left them doubly abandoned, both upon departure from their homeland and upon departure from their new Swiss families. But perhaps any help is better than no help, regardless of the duration. From the Swiss perspective, children were worthy of their efforts, so long as the hosted children did not overburden the nation. Alleviating children's suffering, therefore, was central to these evacuations, but their occurrence was only successful due to political convenience.

Self-Motivated Humanitarianism

As this largely unknown child evacuation occurred in the midst of a massive European war, where resources and transportation were strained and diplomacy was at an all-time low, its occurrence is astonishing. However, the British, German and Swiss governments intervened on behalf of the

18. INDEPENDENT COMMISSION OF EXPERTS SWITZERLAND-THE SECOND WORLD WAR, *Switzerland and Refugees in the Nazi Era*, Bern, Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland-The Second World War, 1999, p. 247.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

20. *Idem.*

21. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

children in Belgium and France to fulfil their own political, propagandistic or national agendas, without much regard for the children themselves. Unlike other national wartime evacuations, it was not the children's role as the source of the future vitality of the nation, which caused these governments to act; it was the immediate diplomatic crisis that dictated their actions. Also, as children had no actual legal rights, any humanitarian intervention by these governments, however delayed, self-motivated or poorly executed, was unusual. Children were victims whose survival depended entirely upon the wartime assistance fashionable at the time, indicating that children's value was assigned to them by their saviours. Fortunately, these evacuations alleviated the short-term suffering of Belgian and French, but also contributed to the larger perception of children in war, as such transnational evacuations raised children above other civilian casualties of war. As children received preferential treatment, this ultimately promoted their rights, adding a further precedent to both children's wartime experiences, and the responsibilities of governments. Therefore, the self-motivated humanitarianism, however uncharitable or unfeeling, also paradoxically benefitted children and advanced their rights, redefining their worth and value in a very unpredictable manner.



Sous la direction de
Yves DENÉCHÈRE et David NIGET

Droits des enfants au XX^e siècle Pour une histoire transnationale



DE la première déclaration des droits de l'enfant à Genève (1923-1924) à la Convention internationale des droits de l'enfant de 1989, l'histoire des droits des enfants n'a pas encore fait l'objet de travaux d'envergure. De ce fait, les enjeux contemporains de la sollicitude mondiale à l'égard des enfants, dont les nombreux échecs dans sa réalisation pratique témoignent, ne sont pas éclairés par l'analyse des apories historiques de leur constitution.

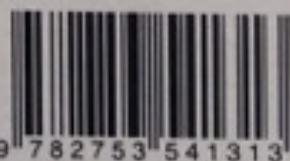
Cet ouvrage propose des pistes pour étudier comment se sont articulés, dans l'espace transnational, mobilisations, savoirs, normes et dispositifs institutionnels au nom de l'édification des droits des enfants. La question des archives est déterminante; la nouveauté du champ historiographique invite en effet à la diversification et au décloisonnement, qu'il s'agisse du statut des producteurs, des lieux de conservation, ou de la nature des documents. L'histoire des droits des enfants croise différents champs : le droit et la justice, les politiques sociales, l'éducation et les loisirs, la santé publique et l'intervention humanitaire, etc. Dans ce volume, il s'agit, d'une part, d'examiner les pratiques sociales et la fabrique d'un espace de la cause des enfants, et, d'autre part, de restituer l'expérience historique des acteurs, et singulièrement le rôle des enfants eux-mêmes dans la constitution de leurs droits. On s'interroge notamment sur la tension, qui, au long du XX^e siècle, a travaillé le champ des droits des enfants, entre l'essor des impératifs de gestion des risques visant à protéger l'enfant vulnérable et le développement des droits personnels du sujet juvénile, au nom d'une volonté politique d'émancipation.

Yves Denéchère et David Niget sont enseignants-chercheurs en histoire contemporaine à l'université d'Angers et mènent des recherches sur les enfants et les jeunes au sein de l'UMR CERHIO. Ils proposent ici la publication des actes d'un colloque international tenu à Angers en 2014 qui a permis de définir des directions de recherche sur la dimension transnationale de l'histoire des droits des enfants.

En couverture : Atila (Atila Biro dit), *Le cirque*, 1971.
Huile sur toile, 97 × 195 cm. Collection particulière.

Presses
PUR Universitaires
de Rennes

Publié avec le soutien de
l'université d'Angers



9 782753 541313

ISBN 978-2-7555-4131-3

www.pur-editions.fr

16 €