

“We feel we must add our appeal”: Humanitarian Decision-Making in Three Appeals to the Government in Post-Second World War Britain¹

During the Second World War, as the Nazis occupied the countries of Europe, the children of these lands began to occupy the imaginations of contemporaries. As Tara Zahra argues, reports of the impact of this war on children “spawned dystopian fears of European civilization in disarray.”² This devastation of children became infused with ideas of the destruction of the future, and the youth came to represent people’s hopes and fears for what lay ahead.³ If the impacts of this war on children were extensive, so too were the efforts to rescue, rehabilitate, and recuperate them. One form of aid, which was also undertaken after the First World War, was recuperative holidays. These involved sending children abroad for short periods of time to restore their physical and psychological well-being. Though it varied depending on the scheme, children often spent time in reception centers before being placed with local foster families in the host country. Such schemes were organized, mostly independently of each other, by individuals, organizations, and governments throughout Europe. My research approaches an integrated, transnational,

- 1 Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945, The National Archives (TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 371/55521. Acknowledgment: I am very grateful to the editors of this volume for inviting me to participate in the conference “Children at War and Genocide,” and also for their constructive feedback on this piece. This research was funded by Trinity College Dublin and the Irish Research Council.
- 2 Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 4.
- 3 See: Zahra, *Lost Children*, 88–117; Rebecca Clifford, *Survivors: Children’s Lives after the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 38–58.

and comparative history of this phenomenon and the experiences of those who organized, facilitated, and participated in the schemes.⁴ While there has been a welcome move towards examining children's own voices and agency, which my broader research embraces and incorporates, it also seeks to provide a history of this phenomenon that situates it within postwar Europe and underscores the connections between the experiences of children and those of the adults around them.⁵ Recuperative holidays were not just the work of governments and professional bodies; they relied on the realization of the "admirable impulses," as one contemporary put it, of many amateurs and determined civilians.⁶ A key question that preoccupies my work is why people chose to undertake these kinds of initiatives and, in a time when need was abundant, how individuals determined to whom to devote their energy and attention.

In this period, there were schemes afoot throughout Europe to help children from all over the continent. Britain's most extensive recuperative holiday initiative, which had begun during the war and continued into the postwar years, involved the hosting of approximately 9,300 Dutch children.⁷ In examining how individuals and governments made humanitarian decisions, an interesting case study is Children of Europe Air Rescue, a voluntary organization established by Air Vice-Marshal H. V.

4 This is a short case study from my PhD project, "Little Guests': Transnational Humanitarian Hospitality for Europe's Children in the Aftermath of the Second World War," which is based on research in Britain, Ireland, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. Other work on this phenomenon includes: Bernd Haunfelder, *Kinderzüge in die Schweiz: Die Deutschlandhilfe des Schweizerischen Roten Kreuzes 1946–56* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2007); Cathy Molohan, *Germany and Ireland, 1945–1955: Two Nation's Friendship* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999); Anton Partl and Walter Pohl (eds.) *Verschickt in die Schweiz: Kriegskinder entdecken eine bessere Welt* (Wien: Böhlau, 2005); Isabella Matauschek, *Lokales Leid – Globale Herausforderung: die Verschickung österreichischer Kinder nach Dänemark und in die Niederlande im Anschluss an den Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2018); Jan Sintemaartensdijk, *De Bleekneusjes van 1945: De Uitzending van Nederlandse Kinderen naar het Buitenland* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2002).

5 On the state of the research field, see, for example: Sarah Maza, "The Kids Aren't All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood," *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1261–85; Laura Tisdall, "State of the Field: The Modern History of Childhood," *History* 107, no. 378 (2022): 949–64.

6 H. E. Brooks to F. H. Cleobury, November 14, 1945, TNA Home Office (HO) 213/783.

7 Netherlands Government "Children Committee," General Report for November 1944–October 1946, TNA Ministry of Health (MH) 102/1467. On the evacuation of Dutch children towards the end of the war, see: Ingrid de Zwart, "Coordinating Hunger: The Evacuation of Children During the Dutch Food Crisis, 1945," *War & Society* 35, no. 2 (2016): 132–49.

Champion de Crespigny, an Australian senior Royal Air Force (RAF) officer who had commanded the British Air Headquarters in Iraq during the Second World War. He unsuccessfully stood for election as the Labour representative for Newark in 1945 and served as a regional commissioner for the Control Commission for Germany in Schleswig-Holstein in 1946 and 1947.⁸ De Crespigny shared his proposal at a meeting in the Albert Hall on November 26, 1945.⁹ This called for the “rescue of 10,000 children under seven from Central Europe irrespective of race, whose lives we can save by bringing them here for about six months, until conditions have sufficiently improved for their return,” though it quickly became apparent that the main targets were German children and the phrasing was a tactical attempt to avoid the likely objections to a scheme for German children.¹⁰ In his proposal, de Crespigny argued that the scheme “would be a spectacular and dramatic instance of international brotherhood, and the movement should grow into something really big in giving a lead to the world.”¹¹ He also suggested the public would welcome the scheme because the “constructive humanitarian work” would “come as a great moral relief to individuals who have been employed for so long on war time occupations.”¹² In particular, he argued that it would have a positive effect on members of the RAF, whom it was proposed would provide transport for the children and would welcome it as a “healing memory.”¹³ Although this scheme was rejected by the government and never came to pass, it still warrants examination and can provide insights into postwar humanitarian decision-making at different levels, from the individual to the international. This commentary will

8 Air Vice-Marshal H. V. Champion de Crespigny, *Air of Authority: A History of RAF Organisation*, last modified December 16, 2019, www.rafweb.org/Biographies/Champion.htm; *Montrose Standard*, May 22, 1946, 1.

9 De Crespigny to Chuter Ede (Home Secretary), December 5, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521. De Crespigny also sent an identical letter to the Prime Minister and others on the same date (TNA Prime Minister's Office [PREM] 8/221). In an earlier letter to the Prime Minister, he noted that it was Victor Gollancz who had invited him to speak at the Albert Hall meeting (De Crespigny to Prime Minister, letter, December 1, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221). Furthermore, in his address at the Albert Hall, a transcript of which can also be found in PREM 8/221, de Crespigny noted that he had developed this scheme with Dr. Karl König, and it had the early support of many groups, including the “Save the Children Association.”

10 De Crespigny to Prime Minister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221; File minutes, January 8, 1946 (the original note is dated 1945, though this must be a typing error), TNA FO 371/55521.

11 De Crespigny to Ede, December 5, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

12 De Crespigny to Prime Minister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221.

13 De Crespigny to Prime Minister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221.

introduce the scheme and some responses to it before moving on to a more in-depth examination of three letters that petitioned the government to support bringing German children to Britain.

The success of schemes like de Crespigny's depended on government approval and, in order to gain this and be successfully implemented thereafter, they would also need support from the general public.¹⁴ There were a number of possible motivations behind the specific desire to help Germany in this period, the explanations and implications of which extend beyond the example of recuperative holidays. Reflecting on de Crespigny's scheme, one Foreign Office official observed that it was "all part of the strange attraction which Germany continues to exercise on a section of the British public."¹⁵ While perceptions of the former enemy were hostile in the immediate aftermath of the war, by the autumn of 1945 this was beginning to change and public sympathy was increasingly expressed for the Germans due to overwhelming press reports of suffering (especially among the children) and, in particular, the sensationalist publications of Victor Gollancz which drew attention to civilian hunger and hardship in the British Zone.¹⁶ However, the official government response to this scheme was somewhat self-defensive, with assertions that Britain could not be accused of not "playing our full part in the relief of distress in Europe" on the basis that Dutch children and some Jewish children from German concentration camps had been welcomed in the country, plans were in place to accommodate groups of French children, and a system was being developed to bring over distressed relatives of those already in Britain. Furthermore, the Foreign Office indicated that due to "communal feeding arrangements," children in the British zone were "as well fed as children in many other countries in Europe."¹⁷ It was also noted that the practical obstacles were "formidable."¹⁸ Indeed, there is a sense that, to a certain extent, the fate of the German case was deter-

14 File minutes, January 8, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

15 File minutes, Troutbeck, January 11, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

16 Paul Betts, *Ruin and Renewal: Civilising Europe after the Second World War* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 112–24.

17 Letter from Chuter Ede to Air Vice-Marshal de Crespigny, March, 1, 1946; Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, PREM 8/221. On the introduction of meals for school children in the British Zone in February 1946, see: Johannes-Dieter Steinert, "British Humanitarian Assistance: Wartime Planning and Postwar Realities," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 3 (2008), 431.

18 Letter from Chuter Ede to Air Vice-Marshal de Crespigny, March 1, 1946; Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, PREM 8/221.

mined by its consideration alongside a number of other schemes for the relief of children in Europe.¹⁹ While practical considerations were certainly significant in determining the outcome, it is evident that political and moral issues also influenced the final Cabinet decision. It was felt that the proposal to have the RAF transport German children would have meant giving them priority over Allied children who, in other initiatives, were responsible for finding their own transport. This would, a memorandum by the Home Secretary concluded, create a “very bad impression” in every Allied country.²⁰ During their deliberations over the scheme, the Foreign Office was concerned enough about this issue that one official suggested it might be “wise to stipulate that only a certain percentage of the children should be Germans and Austrians.”²¹ This was not an unrealistic concern, as evident in the vitriol received from Czechoslovakia when reports of this proposal reached the press there.²²

Furthermore, the practical necessity of having adults of the same nationality accompany the children to overcome language barriers and generally look after them, was perceived as a much more significant problem in the case of German children than those of other nationalities. As the Home Secretary’s memorandum emphasized, the experience with the Dutch children had indicated that there would need to be a ratio of approximately five to one between children and adults, thus necessitating the transfer of approximately two thousand German adults with the children. In addition to concerns about the practicality of ensuring that no “political undesirables” made their way to Britain, officials were “doubtful” about “whether public opinion, which on the whole might welcome the reception of German children, would tolerate the reception of adults.”²³ Moreover, the Women’s Voluntary Service, “who had co-operated most willingly to help the Dutch children,” were not willing to assist in the provision of clothing or finding billets for German children.²⁴ However, some in government took a more favorable view. The German

19 Letter from Geoffrey de Freitas to McAllister, December 13, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221.

20 Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, 2, TNA PREM 8/221. See also: TNA Cabinet (CAB) 129/7/1.

21 File minutes, December 17, 1945, TNA FO 371/51260.

22 File: Czechoslovak press attacks against alleged invitation of German children to England, dated December 31, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

23 Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, 1–2, TNA PREM 8/221. See also: TNA CAB 129/7/1.

24 P. T. Hayman (HO) to R. W. Selby (FO), March 8, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

Department, for example, felt “there could be no more effective method of educating German children than bringing them up in British homes” and that “schemes of this kind are a concrete proof that we practice and really believe in what we preach.”²⁵

Often reflecting arguments made in the government’s considerations, the response of the British public to this scheme was divided along many lines, in particular between those who saw the German children as innocent victims and those who feared the consequences of their Nazi upbringing. The *Gloucester Citizen* published a letter from one man who responded to de Crespigny’s scheme with “reflective apprehension” and, suggesting that there would likely be significant “criticism and bias from many people,” stated that he himself, though a “lover of children and staunch defender of those ‘who of themselves cannot help themselves’” believed that charity such as this should begin at home.²⁶ A similar sentiment was expressed by an observer who suggested that while “on humanitarian grounds one would not wish to penalise children of any nationality,” more Dutch children and the youth of other Allied countries should be given a “chance” before German children.²⁷ One person, arguing that the children of former-occupied countries should come first, wrote that “whilst starvation amongst the young is a terrible thing, it should be German children who should have the dry crusts, and the Dutch and Belgians who should have butter and jam on their bread.”²⁸ Alternatively, some took the view that it would do “great succour” in light of the need to foster democratic organizations in Germany or emphasized that German children could not “in any circumstances be held responsible for what has happened in their country.”²⁹ Of course, these discussions extended beyond the specific case of de Crespigny’s scheme. One letter to the editor in 1946 asked if those who disapproved of helping German children wanted to bring them up to “believe the same doctrine of hatred as their fathers did before 1939?”³⁰

On the other hand, there were those who argued that there was “nothing to be gained by a sickening display of sentimentality and misplaced generosity” and reminded those who pitied the children “that the

25 File minutes, January 8, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521. One minister objected to this position in a handwritten note.

26 *Gloucester Citizen*, December 5, 1945, 4.

27 *Liverpool Daily Post*, December 4, 1945, 2.

28 *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 14, 1945, 8.

29 *Nottingham Journal*, December 12, 1945, 4; *Nottingham Journal*, December 4, 1945, 2.

30 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, December 3, 1946, 6.

German children of 1914 were the Nazi thugs of 1939.”³¹ Another common argument was that there were many children in Britain who would benefit from the goodwill of those who sought to help German children.³² For many who opposed de Crespigny’s scheme, a particular lesson was to be learned from the experience of the Scandinavian countries. They reminded people that in 1918, Norway had taken in starving German children who then returned as part of the invading army in 1940.³³ Lord Mountevans argued this point in the House of Lords in December 1945:

I happened to be in Norway during the invasion and I saw a sight I shall never forget. One realized that the Germans had local knowledge and I saw mountain homes and valley homes set on fire. I saw fathers, grandfathers and great grandfathers bringing out little Norwegian children, babes in arms, who stared wide-eyed with terror and amazement at these Germans whom they [had] been told about and who had been brought up in that sun-kissed land. That is the way they repaid the kindness of a country which had not been at war for at least a hundred years. These youngsters forgot the hardships and humiliation of post-war Germany after 1918; when they returned surely it should not have been as murderers.³⁴

Stories about this betrayal had been widely circulated at the time of the invasion and emerged again during debates about postwar humanitarian decision-making.³⁵ One letter to the editor asserted that if those asking for homes for German children asked “people to take in as guests the destitute and starving Poles, Czechs, Yugoslavs, and Austrians or Hungarians, most folks (myself included) would be most willing to help in such humane work, but to take in and nourish vipers into our homes as the

31 *Western Morning News*, December 17, 1946, 4. See also: *Eastbourne Gazette*, October 10, 1945, 15.

32 *Western Morning News*, December 17, 1946, 4; *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 14, 1945, 8.

33 See for example: *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 21, 1945, 8; *Nottingham Journal*, December 21, 1945, 2; *Linlithgowshire Gazette*, August 5, 1949, 4. See also: Steinert, “British Humanitarian Assistance,” 432–33.

34 Lord Mountevans speaking on the Situation in Central Europe, House of Lords (HL) Deb 05 Dec. 1945, Vol. 138 cc 341–98.

35 See for example: *The Scotsman*, April 30, 1940, 4; *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, April 27, 1940, 1; *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, April 27, 1940, 4; *Western Morning News*, April 30, 1940, 5.

Norwegians did, NO.”³⁶ Nonetheless, many were willing and eager to help alleviate the suffering of German children.

An Analysis of Three Individual Letters to the Government

Before it was denied government approval, de Crespigny's scheme was considered at an interdepartmental meeting, which was convened “owing to public pressure” on January 11, 1946.³⁷ Despite its ultimate failure to secure government support, de Crespigny's scheme provides insights into postwar humanitarian decision-making and the emotional mood in certain sections of society. While contemporaries noted that there were approximately five hundred offers of hospitality for German children in response to the scheme, this research has not yet discovered a consolidated collection of letters or offers of hospitality, and it is not entirely clear whether these were sent to the organizers of the scheme, to the government, or to both.³⁸ Those appeals from the general public that do turn up are usually embedded in files created by government ministries. While these sources are not voluminous and are often only discovered through the serendipity of the research process, they can be invaluable in answering and inspiring research questions. This commentary will examine the three appeals that appear in one Foreign Office file regarding offers of hospitality to German children, the rest of which concerns the consideration of the de Crespigny scheme and various documents relating to this theme.³⁹ The people who wrote these letters do not appear again in this research project. While it may be possible to trace them and their family trees, particularly given the availability of resources such as Findmypast and Ancestry.com, their personal histories are not the subject of this history. This source commentary cannot claim to be representative of anything other than the written word of these three people in postwar Britain but also endeavors not to see them simply as anecdotes

36 *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 14, 1945, 8.

37 See: Telegram from Foreign Office to Prague, January 7, 1946; Draft meeting report on “German Children”; and other files in TNA FO 371/55521. This scheme and its consideration is examined in more depth in my PhD thesis.

38 Memorandum by the Home Secretary on Scheme to Bring German Children to this Country, February 7, 1946, 1, TNA CAB 129/7/1. It was noted in the Home Secretary's memorandum that approximately five hundred offers of hospitality had been received. Furthermore, the Home Secretary received enough letters from M.P.s enclosing letters in which constituents asked to participate in this scheme that they devised a standard reply (File minutes, February 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/58103).

39 See: TNA FO 371/55521.

or soundbites in constructing an argument.⁴⁰ It will analyze the three letters in depth by examining how each approaches the task. At the same time, it will search for insights into the rationalizations they provide for their desire to help German children, many of which reflect (and may have been inspired by) the lines of debate and discussion examined in the previous section.

The first and most succinct letter came from Mr. C. D. M., who wrote to his local Member of Parliament, Arthur Moyle. The others, from Mrs. Winifred L. and Mr. and Mrs. Eric and Stella S., were addressed to the Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin.⁴¹ Both men were part of Clement Attlee's postwar Labour government.⁴² Although Winifred's letter was dated March 4, 1946, after the de Crespigny scheme had already been scrapped, the others date from around the time it was announced in the winter of 1945. Where C. D.'s letter is quite short and to the point, the others are more emphatic and detailed. It is difficult to ascertain much about C. D. short of his address, though Eric and Stella state that they are "ordinary working class people, and are Socialists, because we are Christians." On the other hand, Winifred's letter comes from a manor in Somerset, and she opens by declaring that she is a "staunch Conservative." While C. D. explicitly stated that he (and his wife) had offered to take in a German boy, Eric and Stella simply stressed their hope that Bevin would give "all the pleas for help," with particular reference to a scheme for bringing over German children, his "most sympathetic attention." Winifred, on the other hand, offered to take in up to thirty children herself.⁴³

Each of the writers sent their letters with a clear purpose and this is evident in the format of their petitions.⁴⁴ C. D. used negative feedback to spur his local M. P.:

40 On this idea, see: Julia Laite, "The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age," *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 4 (2020): 963–89.

41 C. D. M. to Arthur Moyle M. P., letter, December 15, 1945; Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945; Letter from Winifred L. to Ernest Bevin, March 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521. The letter writers' surnames have been omitted from this work to maintain their privacy. The file also contains a letter from a member of the public enquiring about the possibility of taking in the child of an acquaintance in Germany, though this has not been included here because the intended recipient of aid was known to the offeror.

42 For an overview of postwar Britain, see relevant chapters in: Dan Todman, *Britain's War: A New World, 1942–1947* (London: Penguin, 2020).

43 C. D. M. to Arthur Moyle M. P., letter, December 15, 1945; Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945; Winifred L. to Ernest Bevin, letter, March 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

44 This research cannot yet confirm if the organizers of this scheme explicitly encouraged the public to reach out to politicians or supplied them with any guidelines for

I am rather perturbed with the attitude of the government to the German children. It seems to run counter to the oft expressed concern for the brotherhood of man and international fellowship. The matter so concerns me that I have offered to have a little German boy in my home for a period if transport can be found to bring him over.⁴⁵

Eric and Stella, for their part, heaped praise on Bevin and also called the scheme “an opportunity to exercise charity in its true sense, and to sow seeds of international understanding which is so necessary for international peace.” Interestingly, they also compelled him at various points to consider his own and the British nation’s “responsibility”:

You have shown since you became Foreign Secretary a deep understanding of the problems facing the world, and a courage and outspokenness one does not normally expect in the “diplomatic” world. It is because of this that we feel you will understand that Christian charity demands that we cannot stand aside when there is so much misery needing help. Surely the British nation bears some responsibility for the chaos because of the mass bombing carried out in our name. This has dislocated transport and made housing a far greater problem than it is in Britain, and that is bad enough.⁴⁶

Such *allusions* to British responsibility, which were strongly denied by the government, were also evident in de Crespigny’s proposal, in which he argued:

During the war this Service has been employed in disrupting central Europe with the object of destroying resistance. If we have to look back upon the tragic loss of life which we have not done everything in our power to mitigate, the crews who staffed our bombers will undoubtedly feel responsibility. To be employed now on humanitarian

doing so. However, there is an indication that they may have in a report about a Save Europe Now meeting in December 1945 which “urged the people to take German children into their homes for part of the winter.” During this meeting, Wing-Commander E. R. Millington commented on the “question of sending food to Europe” noting that “the Minister for Food was probably frightened that the people would not support the Government if it sent food to Europe” and that “the people must tell the Government that it under-estimated the people’s political good sense and moral goodwill.” (*The Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 7, 1945, 5).

45 C. D. M. to Arthur Moyle M. P., letter, December 15, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

46 Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

and constructive work would be welcomed by the whole Service and would be a healing memory.⁴⁷

This is an interesting notion, though a representative from the Air Ministry emphasized that “the RAF did not feel that any ‘conscience salving’ was needed for those very necessary operations of war!”⁴⁸ Another example of this comes from a December 1945 meeting organized by Victor Gollancz’s Save Europe Now to encourage people to welcome German children into their homes. Here Wing-Commander E. R. Millington, M. P., remarked that he was “determined to do all he possibly could to assist the German people to throw off the bitterness of a defeated nation, and to enable German children to grow up in a free, clean, and democratic atmosphere.” He said: “For every life I have taken in bombing raids I feel a moral obligation to save ten or more lives.”⁴⁹ Moreover, there is evidence of the language of Allied moral responsibility emerging during the war. For example, in his appeal to the British people to lobby for food and navicerts for children during the blockade of occupied Europe, Howard Kershner asserted: “Until we make the effort, however, we are not blameless, and must bear a considerable part of the responsibility for the loss of a generation of children.”⁵⁰ There was also public opposition—spearheaded by the likes of Gollancz—to the bombing of Germany at the end of the war, which may have fed into the expressions of moral responsibility and the need to make up for wartime actions that recur in humanitarian rationalizations in this period.⁵¹ Further to this, as Paul Betts argues, “British views of the Germans” were distinct because they turned postwar “criticism on themselves as occupiers, to the extent that they saw the proper treatment of Germans in the British Zone as an instance and test of British

47 J. M. Troutbeck to Eric and Stella S., letter, January 9, 1946; Draft report of meeting on “German Children,” TNA FO 371/55521; De Crespigny to McAllister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221. It is not possible to know in which format or how much detail Eric and Stella read or heard about de Crespigny’s proposal and therefore to make a confident link between their points and his language. See also: De Crespigny to McAllister, December 5, 1945, TNA PREM 8/221.

48 Draft report of meeting on “German Children” at Parliamentary Under Secretary of State’s room at the Home Office on January 11, 1946, TNA Board of Trade (BT) 64/1501.

49 *Chelmsford (Essex) Chronicle*, December 7, 1945, 5.

50 Howard Kershner, *One Humanity: A Plea for Our Friends and Allies in Europe* (New York: Putnam, 1943), 27.

51 See: Francis Graham-Dixon, *The Allied Occupation of Germany: The Refugee Crisis, Denazification and the Path to Reconstruction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 7–10.

civilisation.”⁵² However, while he argues that “even if this moral crusade was often motivated by Christian principles, it was the care of the bodies (not souls) that spurred calls for action,” this was not always true of recuperative holiday initiatives.⁵³

In their letter, Eric and Stella underscored the limits of their potential impact, writing: “There is so little that, we, as individuals, can do in the matter but you are in a powerful position, and with your opportunity goes grave responsibility for the future.” Like Eric and Stella, Winifred introduced herself and piled praise on the Minister in her petition to Bevin, whom she encouraged to “go on being Brave” because England is “looking to you,” signing off as “your sincere and respectful admirer”:

As a staunch Conservative I would in the future vote Labour, if I knew you were going to hold a post in, or lead the Government. This feeling is held about you pretty generally by all parties through the country, I believe. Yet it was not held about Churchill although he brought us through 1940, 41 and 42. So you see it is rather terrific. We look to you to bring us through the next struggle, for whether Britain wills it or not, she must either get off the map or [...] ⁵⁴

She was writing in March 1946, when de Crespigny’s scheme had already been rejected. However, while she echoed Eric and Stella in underscoring the limits of her capacity to influence, she determined to do what she could, regardless of the feasibility of her plan:

That is why I am going to beg to be allowed to take German children into my home, temporarily, from our Zone until this threat of starvation is over. I believe many people would do this if an appeal were made through the country, say through the Quakers or some other Relief Society operating in Germany. For instance, I might be able to take thirty children, helped with a few mugs and camp beds, providing the Government were prepared to allow ration cards for the children, even if these were restricted to certain foods. I think this gesture could be made to the starving Germans without offending the Dutch or any of our allies. I know only too well that taking German children is not even touching the fringe of the food problem BUT WE MUST DO

52 Betts, *Ruin and Renewal*, 123.

53 Betts, *Ruin and Renewal*, 123.

54 Winifred L. to Ernest Bevin, letter, March 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

SOMETHING NOT TO LET THESE PEOPLE STARVE. We owe it to our humanity, prestige and self-interest.⁵⁵

It should also be noted that the writers are all steeped in the reality of postwar Britain and acknowledge this, assuring the recipients of their awareness of the other factors at play in such decisions.⁵⁶ Where C. D. noted that he and his wife would try to make do on their own ration cards, Eric and Stella stressed that if such a scheme were approved, the German children “could be fed and clothed entirely by the [host] families concerned from their own rations, and so would be no liability on the rest of the community.” Though Winifred did not offer to feed the children from her rations, she showed sensitivity to both the limitations of government resources and the controversy associated with humanitarian aid for Germany when the children of former Allied and liberated countries were also in considerable need. She also stressed that if an “open brave talk were [sic] given over the wireless and the position explained, people here would accept bread rationing” to prevent starvation in Germany. This underscores her sense of urgency.

One difficulty with interpreting letters such as these is that it is impossible to truly know where the genuine belief of the writer lies and where it is substituted for by their expectations of what the recipient needs to hear. Though this research has not yet encountered any specific instructions from de Crespigny or others to petition the government about this matter, there are a number of common themes and strategies evident in these letters. In each case, there is a sense of urgency and conscious rationalization. Whereas C. D.’s letter, which is quite short, explains that he is willing to take in a German child “in the name of humanity” and international fellowship, there is a lot more to unpack in the others. Eric and Stella’s letter is rooted in various interpretations of moral, national, and Christian responsibility. In addition to a sense of having, as British citizens, responsibility for the situation in Germany, they also go into detail on their interpretation of their Christian duty:

We are ordinary working class people, and are Socialists, because we are Christians. Believing, like yourself, in the universal brotherhood of the human race, we appeal to you to use your utmost influence in the support of essential Christian principles. We have, of course, no love

⁵⁵ Winifred L. to Ernest Bevin, letter, March 4, 1946, TNA FO 371/55521.

⁵⁶ See: Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

of Fascism, but we know from very many reports, that even in Germany, there was much opposition to the Nazi regime and ideals, especially among the Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike. It is these brave people—who have suffered much for their Faith—who must be helped in every way to rebuild their country on Christian principles. You know as well, if not better than, we do, what the alternative is if Christianity is not the main force in a country.⁵⁷

Their need to rationalize their desire to help Germans and underscore that they were no supporters of fascism is a reminder of the divided opinions surrounding initiatives on behalf of Germany in this period. A final point, which is evident in the letters from Eric and Stella and Winifred, is the impact of emerging Cold War tensions on humanitarian decision-making at the individual level. This is quite explicitly indicated by the latter, who references the “next struggle” and states that “with a strongly Sovietised Germany and an increasingly communistic Holland, it will take all that a Bevin can do to keep England sitting pretty.” She also references a “good letter in *The Times*” on March 2, 1946. It is very likely that she is referring to a letter from A. G. Dickens at Keble College, Oxford, in which he argues that feeding the British Zone in Germany depends on more than “mere humanitarian considerations” and asks: “Is it not our obvious interest to create bastions of western democracy in Continental Europe? But whereas Fascism and Communism both thrive on hunger, democracy by its very nature cannot do so.”⁵⁸ The influence of this letter on her thinking is clearly reflected in Winifred’s letter to Bevin, where she talks of a “gesture” to Germany, writing in capital letters: “WE MUST DO SOMETHING NOT TO LET THESE PEOPLE STARVE. We owe it to our humanity, prestige and self-interest.” At the end of her letter, she asked Bevin to “tell one of your over-worked Secretaries to let me know to whom to apply for permission to take children.”

Eric and Stella’s reference to the Cold War is more subtle and open to interpretation, with allusions to Bevin’s undoubted knowledge of the “alternative” “if Christianity is not the main force in a country” and his “grave responsibility for the future.” These references, especially when considered alongside other sources, underscore the extent to which emerging Cold War anxieties were a factor in humanitarian decision-making in

57 Eric and Stella S. to Ernest Bevin, letter, December 4, 1945, TNA FO 371/55521.

58 A. G. Dickens, letter to the editor, *The Times*, March 2, 1946 (letter dated February 28), 5.

this period. Such fears continued to be apparent both in responses to recuperative holidays and to other forms of humanitarianism, particularly in the case of a divided Germany where people feared the political repercussions of widespread hunger and epidemics for the potential spread of communism.⁵⁹ However, even beyond the de Crespigny scheme and the specific case of German children, there were those who believed in the potential of showing children the benefits of democracy by taking them into their homes. For example, a report regarding the stay of Austrian children in Cheltenham in 1948 noted that:

Their three months' stay with the people of this great country will do more than merely mend mind and body. It will help strengthen a vital bond of friendship between the nations and instil into the minds of our little guests a lasting antidote to the slow poison of Communism being cunningly injected into children in almost every country in the world.⁶⁰

The broader research project that this source commentary stems from explores these issues in more detail, examining the entangled nature of the various recuperative holiday schemes in Britain and a number of other European countries, while also undertaking a more detailed comparative analysis.

It is interesting to note that though each of these letters petitions the government to support schemes for bringing German children to Britain, none of them mention the needs of children specifically. As was evident in the government deliberations over this scheme, initiatives on behalf of children were less controversial than those that might involve German adults. In this sense, aiding the children could serve as a less contentious way to show goodwill to Germany, alleviate one's moral qualms about Allied bombing, fulfill one's Christian duty, or play a part in securing democracy and peace in an uncertain future. While there were other schemes for bringing children from liberated or Allied countries to Britain, in addition to other means by which one could do their part to alleviate postwar suffering in Europe, those who sought to help Germany often had clear reasons for wanting to do so and had to go to greater lengths to explain this desire. Furthermore, offers to take in children (and humanitarianism in general) could entail a level of conditionality. In his

59 *Manchester Guardian*, May 16, 1946, 6; *Sevenoaks Chronicle & Kentish Advertiser*, April 4, 1947, 6.

60 *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic*, October 23, 1948, 4.

letter, C. D. notes that he and his wife “have offered to have a little German boy” in their home. It is unclear from the letter whether they would be willing to take in a girl, an older child, or a child of another nationality. On the other hand, there were some people who expressed a willingness to take in children from anywhere but Germany. While it can be explained in part by the abundance of need in postwar Europe and the necessity of making decisions, this pattern of conditional humanitarianism aligns with a broader trend of selectivity in such contexts. For example, Zahra notes that couples offering to adopt displaced children in this period “were disappointed upon discovering that blonde three-year-old girls were in short supply.”⁶¹

In seeking to write an integrated history of recuperative holidays from multiple perspectives, my PhD research has devised various questions that relate to the different groups and stages involved in the schemes. A key argument is that the so-called humanitarian impulse is actually a series of decisions based on practicalities, (pre)dispositions, prejudices, and past experiences. It is evident from these letters (and other sources) that humanitarian decision-making often had as much to do with the needs of the individuals providing aid as those receiving it. This can also provide insights into issues regarding other schemes that were occurring simultaneously and competing for attention and support at various levels of state and society. If factors such as the anticipation of potential negative futures or the need to ease one’s postwar conscience formed part of the desire to aid German children, rather than an explicitly pro-German sentiment, it follows that a lack of attention given to children (or even adults) of other nationalities and backgrounds may not always have been the result of prejudices against those groups. A lack of priority assigned to them might also be the result of a hierarchy determined as much by the givers’ own needs as those of the recipients of aid. Moreover, there were many who opposed schemes for German children not necessarily due to anti-German sentiment but from a desire to prioritize children from Allied or liberated countries. The possibility that individuals were simply responding to the initiatives and news they were aware of should not be discounted either. In each of these letters, there is a sense that the writers were responding to specific schemes or news stories they had read (or heard) about, and it is not possible to determine for certain what, if anything, they knew about other initiatives (such as the one for Dutch children) or the needs of other groups (such as child survivors of concentration camps).

⁶¹ Zahra, *Lost Children*, 9.

Finally, it is clear that sources such as these cannot speak for the population as a whole. Indeed, even where they display shared objectives and use similar discursive strategies, there are distinct differences between them. What we know of these writers is what they put in a letter to compel someone in a position of power to act. We cannot claim to know them from these letters, let alone say with certainty that they maintained the positions they set out here for more than the moments they took to write and send them, or how closely they held their expressed beliefs. What we can infer is that they believed in the importance of offering hospitality to German children strongly enough at the time of writing to follow through the steps of rationalizing their opinions and sending their letters. Julia Laite argues that “when a phenomenon can only be fully explained by examining the small stories that defined it, or were defined by it, then those stories become significant, in and of themselves.”⁶² This is certainly true in the case of individuals, such as the authors of the three letters examined here, actively participating in civil society and advocating for what they, for their own reasons—at least some of which we can identify—believe is right.

62 Laite, “The Emmet’s Inch,” 974–75.