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Emigration or repatriation after displacement: The problem of uprooted Ukrainian children under the IRO care in the aftermath of World War II

After the battles of World War II had ceased, displaced unaccompanied children from many countries became a matter of care and attention for the relief officers of United National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and the International Refugee Organization (IRO). Both humanitarian organizations emphasized the fact that the principle objective of their work was to help displaced children to return to their home countries and reunite with their families. This paper focuses on the IRO settlement plans developed for the unaccompanied children of presumably Ukrainian origin, particularly those originated in Western Ukraine, the territory that was transferred from Poland to the Soviet Union after 1945. The Soviet Union assumed that these children were the Soviet citizens and required their repatriation. Researching into the IRO and International Tracing Service reports and children's files, the paper shows that the welfare officers and Western military authorities gradually switched from planning repatriation to arranging emigration, international adoption or settlement in Germany for Ukrainian children. It suggests that this was the case even when such a plan provisioned that the children would lose a chance to join their parents. Already from early 1946, Anglo-American military authorities were reluctant to repatriate unaccompanied Ukrainian children to the Soviet Union and by 1948 this reluctance transformed into a political position. Examining the welfare officers' arguments this paper indicates that emigration and settlement in Germany were framed into the child's best interests concept. Also, it becomes apparent that children played an active role in deciding on their future as the welfare officers took into consideration their preferences. The case study such as that of Ukrainian unaccompanied children helps us to understand better post-war migration planning for East European children on the eve of the Cold War.

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