

## Elimination of Homeless Children in the Kazakh SSR in 1946-1953

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### Abstract

*Based on the documentary sources of the State Archive of the Aktobe region, the difficulties that affected orphanages in the post-war period and the measures taken by local authorities to address these issues are the focus of this article. Migrating children around was part of the challenges. The number of orphanages in the Aktobe region in 1946-1948 decreased from 12 to 10. Reports on the supply of food, clothing, and household items are scarce, but still they have partially identified the acute need in some regional orphanages. The government tried to address the children homelessness and neglect issues by employing teenagers in enterprises and placing them in educational institutions. The living conditions of foster children in orphanages gradually began to improve by 1951-1952.*

**Keywords:** *The Kazakh SSR; the Great Patriotic War; an orphanage; orphans; homelessness*

### Introduction

Child homelessness, neglect, and social orphanhood remain among the most acute and unresolved challenges of the modern societies (Katolyk and Stulkiwska, 2020; Lialiuk, 2020). President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in his Message to the Kazakhstan citizens, on September 1, 2020, repeatedly paid special attention to the safety and security issues of children's rights and identified them as one of the priorities of state policy (Message of the head of state Kassym-Jomart Tokayev..., 2020). At present, the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan is making great efforts to close orphanages. An analysis of the annual reports of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in Kazakhstan from 2010 to 2018 revealed that the number of orphans and children left without parental care in children's institutions decreased by one and a half times, from 25491 to 5044 (Koreniuk, 2017: 63). According to the Annual Report of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Kazakhstan (2019) during 2012-2018, the number of residential institutions was reduced by 25% (from 188 in 2014 to 119 in 2018). However, despite implementing comprehensive measures to reduce the number of orphans, teenagers from the streets and disadvantaged families come to the internal affairs bodies and juvenile adaptation centers every day. Poverty, conflict, and adult abuse cause underage homelessness in Kazakhstan. The relevance of the study was explained by the fact that the experience of the Soviet and party authorities in eliminating child homelessness can be used in the development of state programmes and social projects aimed at preventing social orphanhood.

The collapse of the social orphans' protection system in the Kazakh society occurred as a result of numerous political processes: the colonisation of the Kazakh steppes by the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the revolution of 1917, three devastating wars, as well as mass terror and famine of the 1920s-1930s (Abdakimova et al., 2015: 174). A

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considerable number of orphans emerged in Kazakhstan as a result of the Great Patriotic War.

The elimination of child homelessness and neglect in the Kazakh SSR in the post-war years, which is of considerable interest to historical science, was not previously covered separately. The special studies on the given subject have not been conducted at the regional level and within the framework of Western Kazakhstan. The only notable studies on the subject are the PhD thesis by Sugralimova (2006), based on materials from 1920-1940, and Musakulova's (2005) history analysis of the children's charity establishment and development in Kazakhstan in the second half of the 19th – early 21st centuries. A significant number of studies are devoted to the elimination of child homelessness and neglect in the USSR in 1941-1945 when this issue was of colossal proportions. There are particularly significant studies of Russian historians, such as Varechina (2012), Blinova (2019), Slavko (2009; 2020), Zezina (2000), devoted to the elimination of homelessness and neglect in different regions of the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War and the post-war years. The role of orphanages in solving homelessness issues, and the living conditions of foster children, are considered in the studies of Ibrahimov (2011), Koreniuk (2017), Dynko (2008), Gavrysh (2018), Kozak (2019). Various social and socio-political aspects of the Great Patriotic War and the post-war years are reflected in the studies of Omarbekov (2003), Zhumashev, Akhmetov (2012). Changes in the social structure of the Kazakh SSR population and demographic issues were considered in the studies of Alekseyenko (1993), Yesimova (1999), Aman (2010). Generally, studying the living conditions of children after wars is quite common nowadays (Hyökki, 2019; Ellis, 2019). However, the materials in these studies are fragmentary, and the authors considered only particular aspects or the studies mostly overview.

This study aimed to cover the role of orphanages in eliminating child homelessness and neglect in the post-war period, and to analyse the features of the activities of children's institutions in Kazakhstan, using the Aktobe region as an example.

The methodological basis of the study was the documents from the State Archive of the Aktobe region, including resolutions and decisions of the party, survey and inspection reports related to the studied period. The various archival materials presented in this study on the history of orphanages and the life of orphans are mostly introduced into scientific circulation for the first time.

### **The Scale of Child Homelessness in the Post-War Years**

The Great Patriotic War led to a drastic increase in the country's homeless and neglected children. One of the causes of homelessness was the mass evacuation, during which many children lost their parents. Researcher N. Belskaya (2016) notes that the total number of evacuated children's institutions that arrived in the Kazakh SSR on April 28, 1942, was 125, with a total of 15136 children. In total, 129 orphanages and 15 Moscow boarding schools were evacuated to the republic during the war, along with 17400 children (Children of war, 2020). However, the percentage of the homeless and neglected children in the Kazakh SSR was not lower, including the repressed, orphaned children, and the children of the dead front-line soldiers. In addition, the consequences of the food crisis of 1946-1947 led to the fact that orphanages and distribution centres were now replenished with children abandoned by their parents (Gavrysh, 2018). Parents, unable to feed their children, frequently left them on the street. V. V. Blinova (2019) believes that the peak of homelessness and orphanhood in the



USSR occurred in 1945-1948, when up to 0.5 million children passed through the children's distribution centres. According to A. Zezina (2000), the reason for the increase could also be the raising of the age limit of adolescents up to 17 years for admission to distribution centres.

Active measures to eliminate homelessness and neglect of children, taken during the Great Patriotic War, continued in the post-war years. The departments against child homelessness and neglect (DACHN) were assigned with main tasks for carrying out activities, established in the union and autonomous republics by order of the NKVD of the USSR in 1943 (Zezina, 2000). In the structure of state institutions, that organised the protection and placement of orphans, there were juvenile police divisions, children's receiver-distributor centres, orphanages, labour educational colonies. In the juvenile divisions created at the city, district, and linear police departments, the child was detained for no more than 6 hours. After identifying the circumstances of homelessness and neglect, the child was sent to the parents, if there were any, and in their absence – to the children's receiver-distributor centres. Identified street children up to 15 years of age were placed in the receiver-distributor centres for no more than two weeks. After that, if the parents were not found, children under the age of 14 were sent to orphanages through the public education authorities (Slavko, 2020).

The role of orphanages in eliminating child homelessness and neglect was significant, since they housed most Soviet children left without parental care. In 1946, there were 12 orphanages in the Aktobe region, accommodating 1648 children (GAAO. F.13. OP.13. D. 186), by April 1, 1948, 10 orphanages were functioning, and the number of foster children decreased by 481 and amounted to 1167 people, there were 9 school type orphanages and 1 preschool type orphanage. One of the school orphanages was intended for girls, in 1948 there were 127 pupils (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 17. D. 168). Notably, after the end of the Great Patriotic War, the decline in the number of orphanages in the region was insignificant. Changes in the number of orphanages and orphans in the region can be traced according to the data in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The number of orphanages and orphans in the Aktobe region in the post-war years

| Name                      | 1946 | 1947 | 1948 | 1950 | 1951 | 1952 | 1953 |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Number of orphanages      | 12   | 10   | 10   | 11   | 11   | 10   | 9    |
| Number of foster children | 1648 | 1183 | 1167 | 1119 | 1179 | 1087 | 1064 |

Source: GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 20. D. 302.

The number decrease of children's institutions was explained by the fact that in order to unload orphanages, children were returned to their parents, assigned to educational institutions, or employed. For example, in 1952, 121 foster children were sent to their parents, as of January 1, 1953, 134 more children with parents remained in orphanages, of which 71 children had parents in custody. In addition, two orphanages were liquidated in 1952 based on the Executive Committee of the Regional Council of Workers' Deputies and the sanction of the Ministry of Education of the Kazakh SSR: Khobdinsky and Oiyl. The Khobdinsk orphanage was merged with the Kurashaysk orphanage due to the unsuitability of the premises, and the Oiyl orphanage was liquidated due to the remoteness from the regional centre from the railway, which made it difficult to control the orphanage activity (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 21. D. 215). The national composition of the orphanages in the Aktobe region was heterogeneous. For example, in 1951, there were 380 Kazakhs, 298 Russians, 137 Ukrainians, 118 Germans, 82 Chechens, 11 Tatars, 11 Jews, 1 Gypsy, 7 Romanians, 2 Bulgarians, 12 Moldovans, 4 Poles, 13 Koreans, 3 Tajiks, and 7 others (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 20. D. 302.).

On February 14, 1946, the People's Commissar of Internal Affairs of the USSR adopted Directive No. 7 "On improving the work of the NKVD departments against child homelessness, neglect and crime". The directive envisaged strengthening the work of labour educational colonies and receiver-distributor centres, actively conducting raids and taking children from the streets, train stations, and markets (Slavko, 2020). In the annual report of the Oiy1 orphanage for 1946, it is noted that "for the last two years, no orphans were received from the local district, and the contingent of the orphanage consisted exclusively of children from children's receiver" (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 17. D. 168). The movement of homeless and neglected children can be traced based on data from the annual report of the Aktobe regional Department of Public Education on the work of orphanages for 1951, which are demonstrated in table 2.

**Table 2.** Table of the contingent movement in orphanages of the Aktobe region in 1951

| Names of orphanages | The number of children on January 1, 1951 | Arrived during the reporting year |                            |                           |                       | Through Public Education Authorities |
|---------------------|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
|                     |   | Arrived in total                  | Arrived from MVD receivers | From children's hospitals | From other orphanages |                                      |
| Yaysansk            | 120                                       | 32                                | 15                         | 1                         | 3                     | 7                                    |
| Jurunsk             | 71  | 32                                | 3                          | -                         | 27                    | 2                                    |
| Orphanage No. 2     | 131                                       | 41                                | 2                          | 16                        | 10                    | 13                                   |
| Chelkarsk           | 100                                       | 34                                | 26                         | -                         | 2                     | 6                                    |
| Oiy1                | 102                                       | 18                                | 10                         | 1                         | -                     | 7                                    |
| Hobdinsk            | 81  | 29                                | 1                          | -                         | 24                    | 4                                    |
| Kunzharsk           | 122                                       | 75                                | 39                         | 7                         | 23                    | 6                                    |
| Kurshasaysk         | 52  | 28                                | 23                         | -                         | -                     | 5                                    |
| Petropavlovsk       | 92  | 37                                | 24                         | -                         | 11                    | 2                                    |
| Orphanage No. 5     | 92  | 54                                | 17                         | 5                         | 23                    | 9                                    |
| Tamdinsk            | 216                                       | 35                                | 12                         | -                         | 18                    | 5                                    |
| TOTAL               | 1179                                      | 415                               | 172                        | 30                        | 147                   | 66                                   |

Source: GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 20. D. 302.

According to the data provided, as of January 1, 1951, there were 11 orphanages, of general and special types, with a total number of 1179 children in the region. During the year, 415 foster children were admitted, including 172 street children from the MVD children's receiver-distributor centre, 66 children were admitted through the region and district, 147 children from hospitals and other orphanages, and 1594 children in total (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 20. D. 302). The analysis of digital data allowed concluding that by 1951 the number of children in orphanages of the Aktobe region was not stable, the main source of replenishment was the MVD children's receiver-distributors.

### The Living Conditions in Orphanages of the Post-War Years

The living conditions of the Soviet orphanages in the post-war period merit particular attention. The resolutions and reports of the Aktobe Bureau of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan state that the majority of orphanages, children's homes and the children's receivers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were in poor condition. The state of orphanages was hampered, first of all, by the lack of household items, school supplies, and relevant personnel. The foster children were in dire need of bedding, linen, and warm clothing. To demonstrate the situation in different orphanages in Aktyubinsk in 1947-1948 the authors of the study provide the following examples: "in orphanages,



numerous tables and chairs are missing, resulting in children having to do homework standing on window sills or sitting on beds. The children's home is not sufficiently provided with hard and soft equipment, there are not enough toys, there are no musical instruments (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 18. D. 221). In younger groups of orphanage No. 2, two children sleep in one bed, there is no furniture and bedding" (GAAO. F. 14. OP. 2. D. 230). A similar situation took place in the orphanages of the districts. The children's uniforms were particularly poor, and there was a shortage of coats, leather shoes, hats, and overcoats. The archives of 1947 state: "in the Khobdinsk orphanage for 97 children there are 69 coats, in the Yaysan orphanage for 110 children there are 30 coats, in the Tamdinsk orphanage for 165 children there are 69 coats" (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 16. D. 16). For the winter period of 1948, children's homes in the Aktobe region required coats – 450 pieces, leather shoes – 600 pairs, hats – 760 pieces, felt boots – 705 pairs, cloth blankets – 540 pieces (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 18. D. 221). In 1950, 180 beds, 72 tables, 530 chairs, 18 closets, 310 bedside tables, and 12 sofas were missing in the region's orphanages (GAAO. F. 13. OP. 20. D. 303).

In general, the orphanages of the region were not fully and timely provided with necessary household items, clothing, bedding. For example, in the 1st quarter of 1948, to provide uniforms for orphanages and boarding schools in the region, 8 types of product were ordered, yet only three types were received: sewing products, knitwear, and shoes. In the early 1950s, the situation in orphanages gradually changed for the better, as some support was provided. For example, in 1952, for the winter period, orphanages No. 5, No. 2, and the Tamdinsk orphanage were provided with two shifts of outerwear and underwear (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 21. D. 214). Evidently, local authorities took the necessary measures to provide orphanages in the region, but many problems remained unresolved.

The issue of food supply to orphanages in the republic remained rather complicated. A typical situation is described in the reports for 1948: "the children's homes did not receive the necessary range of food products, especially there was not enough fat, meat, and sugar". For example, "The Oiyl orphanage did not always have wheat bread and sugar. There were occasions when trade organisations disrupted the supply of milk to children's institutions, issued substandard products, such as sour cream, vermicelli, flour, etc." (GAAO. F. 13. OP. 20. D. 303). Orphanages often did not receive enough white bread, often replaced products of one type with other inferior ones, for example, instead of rice and semolina, only wheat was given out. As a result, the children had a monotonous diet. The reports provide a few more facts: "in the first half of 1952, orphanages did not receive the norm of animal oil 2194 kg., sugar 2194 kg., pasta 1189 kg., eggs 49782 pcs., etc. (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 21. D. 215). In 1951, children at the Oiyl orphanage received food worth 7 rubles 84 kopecks instead of 8 rubles 20 kopecks" (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 21. D. 215). According to the report, it is evident that there were frequent violations in the supply of food to orphanages. The regional trade department often supplied orphanages not according to the current contingent, but according to the contingent of the previous month, as a result, the norm of children's nutrition decreased, often the number of new arrivals was not included in the supply plan.

Analysis of reports and materials from surveys of orphanages demonstrate the appalling sanitary condition of orphanages. The condition inspection of orphanages in the region in winter 1947 revealed the following deficiencies: "... the premises of Khobdinsk, Jurunsk, Petropavlovsk, Yaysan orphanages, and the MVD children's receiver centre are dirty, cold, children are not washed regularly, deodorant chambers do not work, there is a lousy

appearance of children, the bed linen is dirty” (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 16. D. 16). One of the reasons for this situation was crowding. The floor space of many orphanages, children’s receivers, and children’s homes did not correspond to the approved contingent of pupils. The examples from the reports of some orphanages in 1947 are as follows: “in February, an inspection revealed that 48 children were placed in the children’s reception centre of the Ministry of Internal Affairs on a living area of 35 square meters (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 16. D. 16). The contingent of foster children in the Petropavlovsk orphanage that amounted to 95 people was placed in 2 rooms: 50 boys in one room and 45 girls in the second” (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 17. D. 168). The crowding issue remained unresolved in 1951 since according to the accounting documents, the premises occupied by orphanages could accommodate no more than 920 people, and in fact, 1119 people were brought up in orphanages (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 20. D. 302). This crowding was explained by the fact that the buildings of most orphanages in the region were not suitable for housing and many of the buildings had not been repaired. To solve the crowding issues in orphanages local authorities proposed to expand the area by building schools. Thus, for example, the orphanage No. 2 in Aktyubinsk was provided with school building No. 14 (GAAO. F. 13. OP. 16. D. 220). However, many orphanages in the region continued to operate in cramped rooms and in severe shortage.

Poverty, neglect, and constant crowding in orphanages have increased the number of escapes and various types of violations among foster children. During 1951, 11 foster children escaped from the regional orphanages, including 4 from the Chelkar orphanage, 1 from the Kunzhar orphanage, 5 from the Kurashasay orphanage, and 1 from the Petropavlovsk orphanage (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 20. D. 302). In 1952, 34 foster children escaped, 25 of which were returned to children’s institutions. 7 foster children from Chelkarsk and Kurashaysk orphanages were sent to a labour children’s colony. These were mostly teenagers who committed several escapes, thefts, and rough treatment of caregivers and teachers (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 21. D. 215). Since the beginning of 1946, foster children who systematically violated the regime and rules in children’s institutions were sent to special regime colonies (Slavko, 2020). An example of an emergency was the murder of an 11-year-old child named A. Begimbayev in the orphanage on April 28, 1947. A commission consisting of a police officer and a doctor identified that the boy was strangled by the foster children because he wanted to inform the director of the orphanage about their intention to escape from the institution (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 16. D. 16). Considering the above, the authors of this study can conclude that the poor living conditions, acute shortage, poor organisation of education, and callous attitude of educators to orphans caused negative impact on children’s psychological state, rapid maturation, as well as an increase in criminal violations among children in orphanages.

The state of medical care for children in orphanages required a particular attention of the state. One of the health authorities’ deficiencies was the untimely detection of infectious diseases, which led to the rapid spread of tuberculosis, skin and venereal diseases among children. For example, in 1950, only urban orphanages No. 2 and No. 5, in the Tamdinsk and Yaysansk detected the tuberculosis and properly examined the children. Other orphanages did not have the opportunity to do the same due to the lack of specialist doctors (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 21. D. 215). The report on the health state of the region for 1951 revealed that all orphanages were staffed by medical workers, and both a doctor and a nurse were assigned to each orphanage. However, the analysis revealed that assigned doctors were rarely in orphanages, insulators were not organised in all orphanages (GAAO. F. 13. OP. 20. D. 303).



The above data indicate a weak organisation of medical care for children, serious sanitary and epidemiological violations, which required immediate solutions. However, the system of child health protection in the post-war period generally depended on the development of health care in the country.

### **Labour Education Among Street Children**

Labour education among street children played an important role in the system of a holistic pedagogical process. It included the development of children's work skills and creative abilities, professional training that would help them adapt to adult life. In all orphanages, foster children were taught self-service skills. Children were on duty in the kitchen and dining room, helped in washing small things, cleaning rooms, repairing the furniture, fixing door jambs, and in the summer, worked on the subsidiary farms. Labour training workshops were organised in all orphanages. In 1951, a total of 10 sewing shops provided training for 321 children, 2 carpenters trained 27 children, 6 shoemakers trained 126 children. In total, 474 foster children were trained in the workshops in 1951 (GAAO. F. 13. OP. 20. D. 303). In 1952, 63 coats, 400 shirts, 400 trousers, 400 underwear were sewn by the efforts of children's homes, 100 pairs of felt boots and 200 pairs of boots were repaired (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 21. D. 215). All components of labour education, on the one hand, improved the living conditions of orphanages, on the other hand, taught children to adapt to the surrounding life, helped to develop a stable work orientation.

Patronage assistance to orphanages was provided by various public and state institutions – Komsomol organisations, trade unions, industrial enterprises, and local authorities. For example, the Aktobe Ferroalloy Plant provided assistance to orphanage No. 5 in the form of gifts on holidays, roof repairs, and construction materials. The regional orphanages were patronised by Aktobe enterprises, 8 industrial cartels, the Regional Committee of the Union of Teachers, and in rural areas – collective farms (GAAO. F. 13. OP. 14. D. 9). In the summer, the collective farms helped to carry out recreational activities. For example, the Yaysan orphanage annually organised a camp near the collective farm “Steppe”. Kurashaysk and Petropavlovsk orphanages sent children to the pioneer camps of coal miners, orphanage No. 5 – to the camps of the ferroalloy plant, other orphanages organised camps locally (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 21. D. 215).

State measures for training and employment were of great importance in improving discipline and preparing foster children for work. February 21, 1947 The Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR issues an order on the transfer of all 16 – 17-year-olds from receiver-distributor centres and children's labour educational colonies to factory training schools (Slavko, 2020). The Main Directorate of Labour Reserves under the SNK of the USSR recruited children from 14 years old to the Factory training schools, craft, and railway schools. Other children over the age of 14 were sent by the Sovnarkom to work in agriculture and industry (Varechina, 2012). The data on the report of the Aktobe region for 1947 demonstrates that it was planned to employ 215 overgrown children, of which 142 pupils were employed, 57 pupils of the region were sent to the agricultural school of labour reserves, and 16 high school students remained in orphanages to continue their studies (GAAO. F. 13-P. Op. 16. D. 16). Data on the children employment in orphanages for 1948-1949 are very scarce and not presented in this study. In 1950, 98 people were employed from orphanages in the region for study and production. In 1951, 236 overgrown children were brought up in orphanages, which were

required to be assigned to production or to educational institutions, of which 75 people were employed: 46 boys and 29 girls. According to the plan, in 1952, 211 pupils were to be employed, of which 192 teenagers were assigned to production. As of September 1, 1952, 37 more foster children were transferred to educational institutions, vocational schools of the region and cities of the USSR (GAAO. F. 13. OP. 20. D. 303). The implementation of these measures by the state authorities was aimed not only at solving the problem of homelessness in the country, but also at the reduction of the shortage of labour resources in the post-war years. Notably, the information of the second half of the 1940s in the city and in the region is episodic, so the authors of this study cannot fully cover the children employment in orphanages in the post-war years. The subject requires further investigation.

## Conclusions

To conclude, having analysed the role of orphanages in alleviation of child homelessness and neglect in the Aktobe region in 1946-1953 based on surveys of orphanages from the GAAO funds, the authors of the study note the following.

Orphanages played a major role in solving the child homelessness and neglect issues, which peaked in 1947-1949. Orphanages were replenished by the juvenile police divisions and children's receiver-distributor centres, activities of which significantly reduced the number of street children. Orphanages vacated place for newly arrived street children by sending teenagers over the age of 14 to production and vocational schools. Nevertheless, the number of street children in need of assistance and accommodation remained consistently high. In the post-war conditions, the state tried to improve the lives of children left without parental care. The Government has taken appropriate measures to solve domestic, housing, health care, and employment issues. The Soviet government allocated funds for the maintenance of orphanages, helped with the repair of premises, and improved educational work. But even despite all those measures, archives of those years demonstrate the difficult living conditions in orphanages. Life in cramped, cold, unsuitable rooms, with a lack of the most basic things, affected the health and psyche of children. Poor organisation of medical services led to the spread of diseases, and the lack of proper nutrition led to the exhaustion of children.

The activities of orphanages were regularly monitored, and the results of inspections are reflected in reports and acts. The children experienced severe shortages of food, warm clothing, bedding, and equipment. The food problem was solved by subsidiary farms organised at orphanages. The USSR government, with the help of the state, local, and Komsomol organisations, to some extent managed to cope with the hardships of the post-war period. Despite the existing issues, the foster children had an accommodation and received an education. The scale of child homelessness and neglect in the republic, as well as in the whole country, was significantly minimised due to the activities of orphanages. Orphanages were still the best alternative to the street for children of the post-war period.

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