April 2019
Volume: 16, **No**: 2, pp. 235 – 244
ISSN: 1741-8984
e-ISSN: 1741-8992
www.migrationletters.com

First Submitted: 11 December 2018 Accepted: 4 March 2019

DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v16i2.651

Repatriation of War Orphans in Bosnia: Narratives of Nationhood and Care in Refugee Crises

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Abstract

This study highlights the plight of children in state orphanages during conditions of war and its aftermath, in order to explore how state narratives trap children between contested notions of the best interests of the child, national belonging, and familial rights. This longitudinal study focuses on international media narratives covering a group of Bosnian orphans who were removed from the Bjelave orphanage in Sarajevo through a controversial German rescue mission in 1992. The orphans were provided temporary protection in Germany for five years but were repatriated to Bosnia in 1997 upon the Bosnian government's request. In Bosnia, they were reintroduced into the national orphanage system, and eventually to the care of international NGOs. Their plight shows that narratives of care, national belonging and family rights are fundamental tools used to sustain state identities in the process of repatriation of refugees, leaving no voice or choice to the resilient children in question.

Keywords: *Bosnia; war orphans; children; nationhood; refugees*.

Introduction

The devastating effects of the war in Syria has re-energized scholarly attention to the plight of children under the destructive circumstances of war (Macmillan, 2015; Bhutta et al, 2016). When 10-year old Yasmeen Qanou desperately pleaded for the rescue of 47 children who were hiding in an underground orphanage in Aleppo (Graham-Harrison, 2016), there was global reluctance to uphold what had previously been viewed as international responsibilities toward children (Wolff and Gebremeskel, 1999; Dooley, 2013). Pervasive lack of protections for minors is the latest embodiment of the capricious nature of international politics that has, in the past, engaged in self-glorifying interventionism to "save" select children only to repatriate them back to countries still devastated by war (McClenaghan, 2016).

This study highlights the plight of children who were in state orphanages during armed conflicts in order to explore how state narratives trap children between contested notions of the best interests of the child, national belonging, and familial rights. It presents a case study of Bosnian orphans who were evacuated from the Bjelave orphanage in Sarajevo through a controversial German rescue mission in 1992. The orphans were bussed out of the city under sniper fire, resulting in the tragic deaths of two children in the process. The remaining orphans were flown to Germany and provided temporary protection for five years. In 1997, when Germany was deporting large numbers of Bosnian refugees, the children were repatriated to Bosnia and reintroduced into the

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national orphanage system, and eventually to the care of international non-governmental organizations.

The plight of the Bosnian orphans shows that narratives of care, national belonging and family rights are fundamental tools used to sustain state identities in the process of repatriation of refugees, and they leave little voice or choice to the resilient children in question. The longitudinal analysis enables observation of trajectories of change where the orphans' representation in the media shifts in response to state narratives depending on the national and international interests that are at stake. In this case study, international news outlets cover various aspects of their ordeals over many years, with their predicaments reframed according to shifting national priorities, international dynamics, and varied public interest at different junctures. Thematic analysis of patterned meanings delineates how categories such as care, burden, belonging and survival of national culture are utilized to justify decisions about the fate of the orphans in respect to narratives of state identity and sovereignty.

Literature Review

Orphans in state institutions constitute a category of children who are under the guardianship of the state, straddling a specific aspect of state responsibility at the intersection of biopolitics and humanitarianism. If biopolitics is the "state's concern with the biological well-being of the population," orphanages represent sites of virtually total control, where the state finds a literal application of its role as guardian and it takes over institutional care of children whose parents are unwilling, unable, or unavailable to provide for them (Cherot, 2006). Children whose guardianship has become part of the state's welfare system represent the power of control and care that is vested with the state and its institutions. In times of war, these children are particularly victimized because when the state fails, it directly fails them given their dependence on state resources.

Orphans constitute the ultimate category of vulnerability and dependency, characterized as innocent victims in the eyes of the international community. Rights-based lenses justify humanitarian imperatives by third parties to relocate children to safety, leading to calls for their rescue from war zones (Macmillan, 2015). At such instances, biopolitical priorities of the intervening states tend to override the individual needs of the children or their wishes; the imperative to save lives supersedes familial or national rights. As Ababe (2009) argues, "policy interventions for orphans and other vulnerable children mirror globalized ideals of proper childhood that shape the discourses of care." At a time when parental rights of families and sovereign rights of the state are weakened due to conflict and war, narratives of urgency override international laws to suspend protections of family rights, leading, at times, to poorly-organized humanitarian interventions. These efforts, which are often widely publicized in a positive light by the intervening parties, often only meet the needs of a select number of children, utilize international laws to justify state positions, create alternatives that may not be sustainable in the long run and defy the best interests of the children or their parents (Dooley, 2013).

Ironically, while "rescuing" orphans from a war zone may be an international priority at the outset, repatriating and reuniting them with their states of origin and national culture become major concerns during post-conflict reconstruction. Historically, repatriation of orphans to states of their origin has been an accepted international practice, one that perpetuates notions of "children as national property" (Zahra, 2009). For example, war orphans were returned to Japan after many years following WWII, and Britain returned Vietnamese asylum-seeking minors to Vietnam after they spent their formative years in refugee camps (Tamanoi, 2006; Richards, 2013; Itoh, 2010). International efforts to advocate the best interests of children have accented the significance of the culture and state of origin of the child, rendering repatriation primacy.

As part of "return to normal" narratives in the state of origin, repatriating children raises confidence that the conflict has ended and the state has regained sufficient sovereignty and competence to resume their care. States of origin often make national claims to these children in order to return them "home to family and nation," even if such claims have no validity in the current lives of the children (Zahra, 2009). Therefore, orphans are repatriated, under the assumption that they will be better off with their ethnic and national kin even when they may have no family left to support them (Hasanovic et al, 2006) or have families suffering from being "rooted in the system of nation-states at war" (Tamanoi, 2006). Repatriation is reified as evidence of the cultural viability, sovereignty and national competence of the state of origin and of its new national identity.

In many ways, the problems of post-conflict reconstruction are symbolized in the challenges facing orphans upon return (Richards, 2013; Dooley, 2013). After initial celebrations, there is a long period of invisibility as they are left to the care of their states of origin, for better (which confirms the benefits of repatriation) or worse (which suggests home-state institutional failure). A significant lack of resources and political will in post-war settings often opens the children to further intervention by international NGOs that substitute for state services or promote international adoptions as a way to provide care for such children.

Between difficulties of survival in war zones, troubles of resettlement in a host country, and threats upon return, children face many challenges (Dooley, 2013). Children are particularly vulnerable during relocation and repatriation. Studies show that risk of deportation looms large for children who have lived outside of their country for most of their lives. In many cases, they have no—or limited—memories associated with their country of origin, little sense of linguistic and cultural commonality with their home country, and few in whom they can trust their care especially following war (Efird, 2006). State orphanages often lack resources and capabilities to provide suitable care. It is not uncommon for children to feel depressed or develop anxiety or fears, or, in some cases, even to commit suicide in order to halt their repatriation (Dooley, 2013; Keilson and Sarphatie, 1992). With little control over decisions that can so deeply affect their lives, children become pawns of discourses on culture and nationality in a post-conflict setting, "in serious danger that they will be consumed in these cultural battles, their voices left unheard" (Tamanoi, 2006). Children typically do not get a choice, even though their own strengths have enabled them to survive and adjust to their new surroundings throughout their rescue and repatriation processes.

The long-term narratives that surround the rescue and repatriation of orphans in particular represent some of the most salient themes in international relations: humanitarian intervention, political authority and sovereignty, national belonging and identification. This study contributes a longitudinal analysis of the state narratives associated with the dynamics outlined above and shows how narratives of care justify contradictory decisions made on behalf of children over time. The longitudinal approach adopted here showcases how host and home states' interests can overlap in a thematic dialogue that sustains the best interests of the states and their national reputations under the guise of looking to secure the best interests of the children. Ultimately, parental notions of nationality commodify children into cultural artefacts, extracted from and returned at will to a nation, through the use of care narratives under conditions of war and its aftermath.

Methodology

The case of the Bosnian orphans provides a longitudinal thematic analysis of myriad topical media reports, starting with their evacuation to Germany in August 1992. Tracing spikes in international media coverage and significant content over the course of the next 20 years, the relevant material was narrowed down to 82 news articles in the Globalnewsstream databases

representing persistent narrative frames about the Bosnian orphans. Research emphasized the varied human interest news articles about the Bosnian orphans appearing between 1999 and 2015 in German, Bosnian, and broader Balkan media networks. Targeted research based on the identities of the children revealed a collection of about a dozen news articles, television news programs, and social media interviews pertaining to their personal circumstances, including a German television program celebrating the twentieth anniversary of their repatriation in 2017.

In order to discover and categorize component themes, the most salient content conveyed through media accounts were categorized to illustrate general patterns, with an emphasis on patterns of narrative reorganization (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis enables us to decipher the presence of certain categories through which state actions are narrated, providing insights as to the shifts central to narrative construction. Narrative analysis studies the way actors construct meaning through telling stories, illuminating how state actors represent policy options to themselves, to their constituencies, and to the international community. Longitudinal analysis of media representations demonstrated here shows how a particular "event" with certain characters and context can evolve over time, with themes that are arranged and rearranged as justifying narratives for state actions.

"Saving" the Bosnian Orphans

Orphanages were the primary type of institutional care in former Yugoslavia for children whose parents were deceased, unable, or unwilling to provide for their care. When the Bosnian war began in 1992, Bjelave orphanage, a Yugoslav government orphanage that hosted about 200 children, found itself in the midst of a siege by Bosnian Serbian forces who controlled all access to Sarajevo for the next three years. Orphanage administrators fled soon after the siege began, leaving their wards to fend for themselves, with no heat in the winter, at times no running water or food. Journalists began reporting that the children made makeshift beds and organized themselves into scavenging groups, where they stole, pillaged and plundered to survive (Hadzovic, 2012).

When their situation attracted international attention, there were humanitarian calls to evacuate and resettle the children abroad. Yet, it proved very difficult for United Nations (UN)-affiliated personnel to negotiate safe passage for the children through "Sniper Valley" (Barber, 2012), encouraging outside governments to take matters in their own hands to remove vulnerable groups of people from the city. Two German parliamentarians—Juergen Angelbeck and Karsten Knolle from the German state of Saxony-Anhalt—advocated a plan to evacuate the orphanage using school buses (Burns, 1992). As it turned out, the effort was neither well-coordinated with the UN nor well-negotiated with the Bosnian Serb forces. The evacuation convoy came under attack and two children were killed, several others were wounded and a smaller number of the children were evacuated than intended. Serbian forces also stopped the convoy to remove nine additional children, whom they argued were ethnically "Serbian" (Barber, 1992). The rescue prioritized local politicians' sense of urgency to "save the children," which, ironically, resulted in two deaths. Many contemporaneous observers identified the risk that the evacuation would entail, noted the lack of coordination between the German government and the UN peacekeepers in the area, and concluded that a botched rescue attempt would probably hinder any such efforts in the future (Cowell, 1997).

Even though the country came under intense criticism for mishandling the evacuation, teddy-bear clutching toddlers hugging their German female caregivers became a newsworthy symbol of German hospitality and humanitarian response. The mission was televised in Germany, with images of local parliamentarians hunkered down in combat gear in the region. The plane carrying the rescued orphans was met by television crews, and televised images showed German caregivers embracing shell-shocked children in tee-shirts and diapers. The politicians quickly argued that these

children would have eventually died in the siege had they not been rescued (Bosnian Orphans, 1992). The shelling of the Bosnian funeral ceremony for the two deceased orphans heightened the moral arguments in favor of the intervention by German government, giving the German politicians authority to speak for the children and their war-torn society, "rendering them passive objects of a Western gaze which seeks to confirm its own agency" (Burman, 1994).

Germany as a Care-giving State

Once the children were "safe," international media proceeded to display the hospitality and care associated with German national identity and local state institutions in its coverage. News articles focused on the care given to the children to showcase the values and the superior capacity of the caring state, which continued to render criticisms of the war-torn state for abandoning its children. The Bosnian orphans were placed in group homes (*Kinderheim*), with caregivers of Bosnian and German origin. German media underscored how this was a major upgrade for the children who no longer had to deal with the institutionalized environment of the orphanage in Sarajevo (Collcutt, 1997). The children were encouraged to learn German and news reports regularly chronicled how well they thrived, how much they enjoyed German television and food, and loved their caregivers (Die Kinder, 2017). Media accounts contrasted their healthy disposition in Germany with their prior circumstances in the Bosnian orphanage under siege. German caregivers discussed how traumatized the children were upon arrival—perhaps understandably, the children were reportedly most scared of buses—but how they became socially well-adjusted over time (Wilkinson, 1997). German articles indicated how fortunate they were to be alive and under the loving care of the family homes in Germany (Bosnian Kids, 1996). The care-deficit in Bosnia was emphasized to amplify the care-surplus in Germany, inhibiting criticism of overall German foreign policy in Bosnia.

The intense news coverage triggered numerous citizens in Germany and the United States to offer to adopt the orphans, but the German government declared that the orphans were under temporary protection and would not be up for adoption (Bosnian Orphans, 1992). Bosnian refugees in Germany were provided Temporary Protection Status to remain in Germany until conditions were conducive to their return (Koser and Black, 1999). Bosnian orphans were offered the same temporary protection as other refugees, which meant that repatriation was the end goal of their rescue. In other instances, domestic opponents of immigration had argued that such temporary protection was a "back door" to permanent refugee status (Leuninger, 1996). The German government's emphasis on temporariness of the orphans' protection made it a priority to repatriate the children as soon as the conditions shifted in Bosnia to show that Germany would not endure the burdens of the Bosnian war indefinitely, an apparent public concern (Beirens et al, 2016). The promise of repatriation also underscored that the German government was not a party to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and would repatriate children whose ethnic composition they assumed reflected the ethnic makeup of the country. The orphans, many of whom were actually ethnically Roma, would have no say over their fate in Germany or Bosnia, their destiny left to a foreign power's assessment of the safety of a war-torn country.

Contested Claims of Belonging

Following the Dayton Accords, the Bosnian government began to request the return of the children evacuated from Bosnian territory. Now that hostilities had ended, the new federated government regarded it as a point of national objective to repatriate all the displaced children back under its care. Their return was a matter of pride for Bosnia to show that conditions had improved

and that Bosnia could take care of its own people, including its war orphans (Leuninger, 1996). In practice, return and repatriation proved quite problematic in Bosnia due to ethnic cleansing, newly drawn decentralized federal boundaries and changes in the majority/minority ratios of many towns and villages. The Bosnian government guaranteed that the orphans would be placed in the rebuilt orphanages in Sarajevo, and argued that the best interests of the children required repatriation to their homeland and national culture. "These children belong to Bosnia," stated the director of the newly rebuilt orphanage, "this is the best place for them" (Cowell, 1997).

In Germany, many doubted that the Bosnian national claim to the war orphans was timely (Eggleston, 1996). By that point, the children had spent five years in Germany. Infants at evacuation, they did not remember much of Bosnia or the Bosnian language. Local media accounts indicated that they seemed to be quite happy in the group-house setting in Germany (Wilkinson, 1997). German social workers voiced concerns about the quality of institutional care in post-war Bosnia (Bosnian Kids, 1996). Many questioned the viability of taking children out of the intimate home environment in Germany to return them to orphanages in Bosnia, where the children would be deprived of the educational opportunities and life standards they had in the German system (Cowell, 1997). News coverage emphasized that most of the children did not wish to go back because they were not sure what would happen to them (Collcutt, 1997). German authorities were especially concerned that only a fraction of the children had any living relatives by the end of the war.

The German government and local authorities remained divided on whether Bosnia was safe for orphan-returns. While the timing of such requests coincided with a growing desire in Germany to deport Bosnian refugees, there was local opposition to the orphans' repatriation due to their perceived vulnerability. By German law, local German provinces and their interior ministries were responsible for repatriation (Leuninger, 1996). Many provinces disagreed with the German government's assessment that Bosnia was "safe for returns" once the Dayton Agreement was in place and the fighting had ceased (Eggleston, 1997). In fact, temporary protections were locally extended for a number of refugees on the basis that most of those who fled multiethnic areas would not be able to safely return. While other returns were halted, the policy to rapidly repatriate a handful of five-year-olds triggered much outrage. "If the country isn't safe for the adults, then why are we returning children to Bosnia?" demanded local newspapers (Bosnian Kids, 1996). These concerns were countered by those who argued keeping the orphans in Germany against the wishes of the Bosnian government would amount to child abduction.

Repatriation and Invisibility

Bosnian government pressures and the German government's desire for refugee returns eventually prevailed and the war orphans were flown back to Sarajevo in April 1997 and greeted with much fanfare. There were bureaucrats in buses to pick them up, an official televised ceremony that welcomed their return "back home," with government officials leading children wearing puffy German coats to a rebuilt orphanage sporting the flag of their country.

After a much-celebrated return to the reconstructed orphanage, however, media interest waned. This was not surprising, given the large number of war orphans with which Bosnia had to contend. The orphanage system itself reflected the general problems of a divided country with a conflated and ethnically split bureaucracy. Lack of funding and political will, and a fire that soon ravaged the reconstructed orphanage, necessitated further international aid (Hadzovic, 2012). The repatriated orphans were eventually transferred to other care arrangements such as the SOS village near Sarajevo, where an international donor organization funded a community village for children to be

housed with local care-givers. The Bjelave orphanage was formally closed on April 19, 2016 as part of a transition to familial care for orphans in the country.

Of the two dozen orphans who returned, one of the children who grew up in the SOS village became a teen ballerina touted by the Bosnian media as an emblem of repatriation success. Yet, various interviews trace her struggles, especially with being discriminated as an ethnic Roma by her Bosnian peers upon her return to Sarajevo (Children of Sarajevo, 2018). It is unclear what happened to many of the others. In the Bosnian media, their individual stories were soon overtaken by the ancillary stories of loss, reconstruction and infighting that characterized a divided nation seeking to recover.

In 2017, upon the twentieth anniversary of the children's repatriation, a German television crew revisited Sarajevo to reunite four of the orphans, now young adults, with their German caregivers. The widely publicized program showed well-acclimated Bosnians watching earlier footage of themselves being rescued from Sarajevo and playing in a playground in Germany. They exchanged words of gratitude with their former caregivers, who were proud of how well the children turned out. Symbolic of the "donor-media complex" where the positive outcomes of international interventions are underscored to show how "right" the decisions both to rescue and to repatriate had been (Ababe, 2009; Dooley, 2013), the program celebrated German hospitality and Bosnian reconstruction, where the children fared well because they were rescued by outsiders who eventually returned them their own culture and kin. German media celebrated their nation's ability to provide care in a narrative that book-ended the orphans' life stories with the interspersed appearances of loving German caregivers with twenty invisible years in between.

Ironically, on the twentieth anniversary of the return of the Bosnian Orphans, Bosnian national imagination was focused on another set of orphans—"The Bjelave Children" who were evacuated by the Italian government from the same orphanage during the war but were never repatriated. As "entrusted minors" in Italy, they were made available for adoption (Fantoni 2015) and their files remain sealed in spite of Bosnian government protests. Since the early 2000s, Bosnian news media has periodically highlighted the efforts of Bosnian parents who were refused access to their evacuated children's whereabouts in Italy (Fantoni 2015), lamenting the tragedy of Bosnian children who grew up "carrying the weight of not knowing about their past, their origins, and the reasons for being separated from their biological families" (Corritore, 2018). In the meantime, the Bosnian orphans repatriated by Germany remained unclaimed by any parents or living relatives upon their return. The prominence of the "lost children" in the national media in contrast to the invisibility of repatriated children from the same orphanage shows the importance of cultural imperatives that simply prioritize getting the children back inside national borders, but do not provide the resources necessary for the children to thrive in the aftermath of their return.

Conclusion

The international community treats the repatriation of orphans as proof that conditions in war-torn countries have improved. Conventional wisdom suggests that orphan repatriation signifies the "success" of international efforts, as host states have shouldered the burdens of their care while home states recovered their sovereignty and stability. International media accounts command the caring nature of states that keep the children biologically "safe" until they are able to return home. Media narratives emphasize the "luck" of orphans who, in spite of failing home institutions, benefit from the care of host state institutions perceived as superior to that of orphanages back home. Humanitarian workers remain apprehensive that children may have a hard time readjusting to institutionalized settings upon their return to post-conflict societies, yet embrace repatriation with

its perceived benefits of growing up within one's own culture and national identity—even when post-conflict societies and institutions are different than those which the children previously knew.

During their "rescue" and "return," state and non-state actors continue to subject children to their competing priorities and visions. Many pre-war legal systems prohibit adoptions, and many of the children in state orphanages may not qualify for resettlement programs for unaccompanied minors because they have some extended relatives on record (Hainey, 2016). Repatriation brings with it a number of unsponsored orphans, who upon return, have no living relatives willing or able to undertake their care. The socioeconomic hierarchies that placed children in the state orphanages before the war are simply exacerbated under the destructive conditions of war and uncertain conditions of reconstruction upon their return.

The "child-saving" imperatives that compel reckless rescues and trigger untimely returns speak to the dynamics of international politics that override the best interests of orphans, who are unable to influence the conditions of their displacement or return. Under conditions of war and repatriation the children still demonstrate remarkable resilience, adapting to shifting conditions and reasserting their agency through their own individualized stories. Children do not get a say over what happens to them, yet they show exceptional competency in surviving against state and familial structures that fail or work against them. Yet, when conditions change in their countries of origin, they find themselves in the midst of cultural wars over their national identity, child-ghosts of the past or the future. Under such pressures, displaced children continue to develop their own survival strategies and understandings of family, ethnicity, race, nationality and citizenship in the face of pressure from states pursuing their own agendas (Tamanoi, 2006). They tell of a world where "saviors" and "villains" are often the same, and the politics that saves their lives is often indistinguishable from the politics that almost destroys them.

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