

# Scandinavian Children "Out-of-Place"?

## Historical Perspectives on Contested Repatriations of Scandinavian Children Born of War

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Scandinavia has a distinct history with regard to "children born of war" (CBOWs) – the umbrella term used for children born to foreign and/or enemy soldiers during conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Children seen as CBOWs may experience their parents' enemy stigma being projected onto themselves, which may lead to discrimination and secrecy around their paternity.<sup>2</sup> Documentation on the histories of these children thus tends to be scarce, and the field of CBOW studies is still fairly young.<sup>3</sup> Norwegian and Danish children born to German soldiers during World War II have in collaboration with scholars such as Kai Grieg, Ingvill Mochmann, Anette Warring and many others played a key role in challenging these silences in the Nordics since the late 1990s and in establishing CBOW studies as an interdisciplinary research area.<sup>4</sup> This field has expanded and diversified significantly since the early 2000s, but the region's CBOW histories remain an important area of study to understand the impact and long-term consequences the perceived sexual and national treason attributed to Norwegian and Danish women who had relationships with occupying German soldiers during World War II could have

- 1 Ingvill C Mochmann, "Children Born of War," *OBETS – Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 2008:2.
- 2 Sabine Lee, *Children Born of War in the Twentieth Century*, Manchester 2017; Saskia Mitreuter et al., "Questions of Identity in Children Born of War: Embarking on a Search for the Unknown Soldier Father," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 2019:11; Martina Koegeler-Abdi, "Family Secrecy: Experiences of Danish German Children Born of War, 1940–2019," *Journal of Family History* 2021:1.
- 3 Ingvill C Mochmann, "Children Born of War: A Decade of International and Interdisciplinary Research," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 2017:1.
- 4 Kai Grieg, *The War Children of the World*, Bergen 2001; Ingvill C Mochmann & Stein Ugelvik Larsen, "Children Born of War: The Life Course of Children Fathered by German Soldiers in Norway and Denmark during WWII – Some Empirical Results," *Historical Social Research* 2008:1; Anette Warring, *Tyskerpiger: Under besættelse og retsopgør*, Copenhagen 2017 (3rd ed.). See also *Born of War: Protecting Children of Sexual Violence Survivors in Conflict Zones*, Charli Carpenter (ed.), Boulder 2007 for further origins of CBOW studies in the emerging research on the children born of conflict related sexual violence in the Balkan wars.

on the affected families.<sup>5</sup> These relationships led to the birth of thousands of children framed derogatively as "German children".<sup>6</sup> Many Norwegian and Danish CBOWs experienced family secrecy and discrimination, some even facing forced adoptions, institutionalizations or other forms of relocation within the homelands of their mothers to hide their German paternity.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of the enemy stigma attached to these children did not stop at national borders. To date, we know of some 300 instances of transnational displacement and contested repatriations of Norwegian-German children who had either been transferred by the Nazi occupiers or left behind in Germany by their mothers during the war.<sup>8</sup> Based on my archival research, an estimated 30–40 Danish-German children shared this fate. The reluctance of the Norwegian government to request or support these children being repatriated from Germany after 1945 is well-documented, but the role of the Danish government and the interactions of international organizations with affected family members engaged in repatriation processes have not received the same degree of scholarly attention.<sup>9</sup> This paper contributes with new archive-based insights regarding these historical questions while also highlighting the contemporary relevance of these past controversies for Scandinavian children "out-of-place" beyond the World War II generation.

In recent years, we have seen another history concerning contested repatriations of displaced Scandinavian CBOWs unfold with regard to the children of foreign fighters and Scandinavian mothers joining the so-called Islamic State in Syria (ISIS). After the fall of ISIS in March 2019, Kurdish forces interned an estimated number of 200 Nordic citizens in detention camps in northern Syria alongside with thousands of other Western ISIS followers and their children.<sup>10</sup> Finland decided at an early stage to proactively

5 For an overview of recent developments in CBOW studies, see *Children Born of War: Past, Present and Future*, Sabine Lee, Heide Glaesmer & Barbara Stelzl-Marx (eds.), London 2021 and *Children and Youth at Risk in Times of Transition: International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Baard Herman Borge, Elke Kleinau & Ingvill Constanze Ødegaard (eds.), Berlin 2024.

6 For more on the domestic histories, see Warring 2017 (1st ed. 1994); Arne Øland, *Horeunger Og Helligdage: Tyskerbørns Beretninger*, Copenhagen 2001; Kjersti Ericsson & Dag Ellingsen, "Life Stories of Norwegian War Children," in *Children of World War II: The Hidden Enemy Legacy*, Kjersti Ericsson & Eva Simonsen (eds.), Oxford 2005; Kjersti Ericsson & Eva Simonsen, "On the Border: The Contested Children of the Second World War," *Childhood* 2008:3.

7 Kjersti Ericsson & Eva Simonsen, "Introduction," in Ericsson & Simonsen 2005.

8 Kåre Olsen, "Under the Care of Lebensborn: Norwegian War Children and Their Mothers," in Ericsson & Simonsen 2005.

9 Lars Borgersrud, "Meant to be Deported," in Ericsson & Simonsen 2005.

10 Joana Cook & Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel* 2019:6, p. 36.

repatriate families to protect the children. Norway, Denmark and Sweden, on the other hand, delayed making a decision for nearly three years, citing either national security concerns regarding the children as future terrorist threats or politicians explicitly prioritized the punishment of the mothers above the children's right to return.<sup>11</sup> Even if they were few in numbers, the fate of these Scandinavian children "out-of-place" and the Nordic reluctance to accept responsibility for these children while in Syria quickly caught international attention. The UN, UNICEF, Save the Children and other organizations all called upon the governments of Norway, Denmark and Sweden to repatriate the children together with their mothers as the only way to safeguard the children's rights to physical safety, citizenship, well-being, family, etc.<sup>12</sup> This international pressure and these civil society initiatives constituted key factors in facilitating repatriations – especially the work of the newly founded NGO Repatriate the Children (RTC) operating in both Denmark and Sweden.<sup>13</sup> Their staff mediated behind the scenes between affected families and reluctant state officials, documented the children's citizenship and family ties while also advocating for their right to return with their mothers.<sup>14</sup>

The context and experiences of these two generations of displaced Scandinavian children differ starkly in physical, familial and legal terms when it comes to their displacement as well as in the stakes of their return. However, I argue that there is a conceptual similarity in the way that the respective children's CBOW status has shaped their repatriation processes. A key point of convergence between the two generations is that the governments in this region were reluctant to support the repatriation of children of German soldiers and ISIS foreign fighters despite their citizenship, then and now. This reluctance meant that international and civil society actors had to step in to advocate for the children's right to return in both of

11 Herbert Maack, "How Nordic Countries Are Handling the Question of Repatriating Islamic State Women," *Terrorism Monitor: In-depth Analysis of the War on Terror* 2021:12; Martina Koegeler-Abdi, "Liminal Children, Liminal Rights? Media Representations of Scandinavian Children Born of War after World War II and after the Fall of the Islamic State," in Herman Borge, Kleinau & Ødegaard 2024.

12 See, for example, Line Prasz, "Unicef har hjulpet 270 børn ud af syriske lejre: Vi er klar til at hjælpe danske børn," *Politiken*, 22/5 2019; Nilas Johnsen, "Mener Grunnloven og FN-konvensjoner pålegger Norge å hente hjem Syria-barna," *Verdens Gang* 20/11 2019; Nilas Johnsen, "UNICEF: UD tar feil om ansvaret for norske Syria-barn," *Verdens Gang* 30(10 2019; "Sommarhettan kan drabba barnen i IS-lägrret," *Aftonbladet* 13/6 2019.

13 See the websites *Repatriate the Children, Sweden*, <https://www.repatriatethechildren.org/> (7/2 2023); *Repatriate the Children, Denmark*, <https://repatriatethechildren.dk/> (18/3 2023).

14 Interview with Natascha Rée Mikkelsen, RTC Denmark (21/4 2023).

these contexts. In my analysis, I use these echoes as a point of departure to return to the contested repatriations after 1945 with new questions on how international relief staff, family members and governments negotiated the familial and national belonging of Scandinavian-German CBOWs in the absence of state initiatives.

After 1945, most European governments wanted "their" displaced children to return.<sup>15</sup> Norway was here unique in that it had proactively prepared for and directly dealt with "war children" as a group of children to be removed after the war, an impossible task entrusted to a special "war child committee" in the summer of 1945.<sup>16</sup> Even if the committee's report was eventually shelved and the government accepted the presence of CBOWs, this process reflects Norway's active, state-initiated construction of "war children" as a problem. These constructions also had a transnational effect, as a Norwegian request for clarification brought the question of how to deal with children of German soldiers among the displaced to the attention of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).<sup>17</sup> UNRRA then sent out inquiries to all its European missions to learn how national governments handled children of "ex-enemy parents." However, there was no uniform response to the existence of CBOWs across post-war Europe. For example, France represented an opposite political approach by trying to absorb as many of the French-German CBOWs as possible to increase its population.<sup>18</sup> Other formerly occupied nations such as Denmark primarily resorted to silence concerning the existence of CBOWs, and some children also experienced local/communal support. Nevertheless, the affected children in all these contexts faced a distinct vulnerability of being stigmatized and of experiencing societal discrimination and family secrecy due to the parental enemy status, regardless of their particular government's approach.<sup>19</sup>

In the following, I focus on the question of why the United Nations agencies responsible for repatriations explicitly included part-German CBOWs under their mandate by defining them as Scandinavian children

15 Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families after World War II*, Cambridge 2011.

16 Eva Simonsen, "Into the Open – or Hidden Away? The Construction of War Children as a Social Category in Post-War Norway and Germany," *NORDEUROPAforum* 2006:2; Norges forskningsråd, *En hvitbok: Utvalgte offentlige dokumenter om krigsbarnsaken*, Oslo 1999.

17 "Children of United Nations Nationals and Ex-Enemy Parents" (1944-8), S-1450-0000-0277-00001, UNRRA European Region Record, WR 120/4, UN Archives and Records Management Section, <https://search.archives.un.org/s-1450-0000-0277-00001>.

18 Fabrice Virgili, "Enfants de Boches: The War Children of France," in Ericsson & Simonsen 2005.

19 See Ericsson & Simonsen 2005.

"out-of-place", against the wishes of the Norwegian and, as I show here, the Danish governments reluctant to repatriate "their" CBOWs. How did the main players in the repatriation process – staff at UNRRA and the International Refugee Organization (IRO) – look upon the Scandinavian cases they processed? What role did perceptions of CBOWs play in their view? How did they mediate between state and family interests, especially when faced with maternal abandonment and children's ambivalent national affiliations? And, finally, what could a better historical understanding of these past transnational decision processes regarding CBOW placements tell us about the recent stand-off between civil society and the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian governments when it comes to children's right to return from Syria?

### Perceptions of "CBOW" as a Lens for Historical Analysis

Children born of war are what one might call contested children, as they may easily fall outside the conventional purvey of children's rights and conceptions of childhood.<sup>20</sup> CBOW may experience limited recognition because as children they tend to be associated with the hostile actions of their fathers and the stigma of the sexual and national treason of their mothers.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, their claim to rights, if recognized, may also compete with the human rights claims of mothers, as their needs are not necessarily identical, and the children's vulnerability may derive through the mothers themselves as well.<sup>22</sup> There are thus different personal, familial and political layers that come together in constructing children as CBOWs in each given conflict. However, the impact that a CBOW status may have on a child's access to national acceptance and rights has been documented across a wide variety of conflicts and circumstances of conception: CBOWs born out of conflict-related sexual violence, forms of survival prostitution and consensual relations face similar forms of stigmatization.<sup>23</sup> The individual

20 Donna Seto, *No Place for a War Baby: The Global Politics of Children Born of Wartime Sexual Violence*, London 2013, p. 211.

21 See Ingvill C Mochmann, Sabine Lee & Barbara Stelzl-Marx, "The Children of the Occupations Born during the WWII and Beyond: An Overview," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 2009:3 or Ericsson & Simonsen 2005.

22 Charli Carpenter, *Forgetting Children Born of War: Setting the Human Rights Agenda in Bosnia and Beyond*, New York 2010; Rene Provost & Myriam Denov, "From Violence to Life: Children Born of War and Constructions of Victimhood," *International Law and Politics* 2020:1.

23 Ingvill Mochmann & Sabine Lee, "The Human Rights of Children Born of War: Case Analyses of Past and Present Conflicts," *Historical Social Research* 2010:3, p. 284; Barbara

experiences of these children may vary significantly, but there is a common risk that the children's relation to "enemy fathers" and "distrusted mothers" will constitute them as a distinct problematic category.<sup>24</sup>

The recurrence of these perceptions also offers an analytical vantage point. For example, as I have shown elsewhere, Scandinavian media has represented both children of German soldiers after 1945 and children of ISIS foreign fighters after 2019 in CBOW-specific terms, which serves as a case in point of how children from entirely different generations and kinds of conflicts can be "children born of war."<sup>25</sup> In this paper, I apply the recurring terms of children's construction as CBOWs – their relation to enemy fathers and distrusted mothers – as a lens for historical analysis.

CBOW histories can be difficult to study as the politicized context of the children's birth and the parental stigma often lead to a lack of documentation; however, the fate of Norwegian and Danish "German children" has received increasing scholarly attention since the early 2000s.<sup>26</sup> Children born to Norwegian women and German soldiers were on all levels of society constructed as a problem category and as not truly Norwegian. They were (temporarily) denied citizenship and cast as German, not Norwegian; the state framed them as a burden on public finances; their mothers were constructed as loose and as traitors while the children themselves were either seen as mentally defective and/or a fifth column who would pose a future biological/cultural threat to the nation.<sup>27</sup> Denmark, on the other hand, did not publicly question the citizenship or mental health of its CBOWs but constructed the children as German outsiders and an unfair burden on the welfare system by rendering them invisible through various secrecy practices.<sup>28</sup> The differences between the Norwegian and Danish approaches exemplify how the various political contexts have different effects. At the same time, however, the respective treatment that the children experienced in both contexts was specifically tied to their CBOW status and relation to

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Stelzl-Marx, "Soviet Children of Occupation in Austria: The Historical, Political and Social Background and Its Consequences," *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire* 2015:2, p. 278.

24 Sabine Lee & Heide Glaesmer, "Children Born of War: A Critical Appraisal of the Terminology," in Lee, Glaesmer & Stelzl-Marx 2021, p. 27.

25 Koegeler-Abdi 2024, pp. 260–264.

26 In addition to literature cited above, see Dag Ellingsen, *En registerbasert undersøkelse: Oslo-Kongsvinger*, Statistisk sentralbyrå, rapport 19, Oslo 2004 and Ingvill C Mochmann & Arne Øland, "Der lange Schatten des Zweiten Weltkriegs. Kinder deutscher Wehrmachtssoldaten und einheimischer Frauen in Dänemark," *Historical Social Research* 2009:34:3.

27 Ericsson & Ellingsen 2005, p. 93.

28 See Øland 2001 and Koegeler-Abdi 2021.

enemy parents. Identifying and contextualizing these constructions offers an analytical approach that may help create new perspectives on CBOW histories, within and beyond the borders of the nation. The following analysis traces how CBOW perceptions informed the placement negotiations for Norwegian and Danish children "out-of-place" in post-WWII Germany between IRO welfare officers, family members and state officials.

## Methodology

My archival analysis works primarily with UNRRA and IRO policy directives, reports and welfare board meeting protocols on cases of unaccompanied children. I combine here two distinct archives that complement each other: A personal collection of documents created by the Danish welfare officer Røler Almind in the British zone in Germany between 1947 and 1951, and the available correspondence and case files on displaced Scandinavian children held at the Arolsen Archives.<sup>29</sup> Almind's collection is of particular interest by being personal. Among the documents he chose to pass on, there are documents specifically addressing internal controversies over whether Scandinavian CBOWs should even be included under the IRO's mandate as well as correspondence reflecting upon how the IRO viewed the Norwegian and Danish authorities in action. His collection thus offers us deeper insights into why the Scandinavian CBOW cases were so important to the leadership of these organizations and controversial among the staff. The Arolsen Archives, on the other hand, represent a vast collection of all files generated by the International Tracing Bureau (ITS), in collaboration with the IRO, with rich material on the history of DP camps, national groups, IRO registration processes and even for traces of individual DP agency.<sup>30</sup> A search for Scandinavian national affiliations in the "Kindersuchdienst" branch of the archive yielded 270 Norwegian, 32 Danish, 5 Finnish and 1

29 Almind was a teacher and worked as a welfare officer for the IRO with cases of unaccompanied children in the British occupied zone in Germany. See Per I Hensen, *Mit Liv Med Askovgården 1943–2012: En Social Organisation i Danmark*, Copenhagen 2015. It is unclear exactly when Almind began his position in the field. His private collection is held by the Saxo Institute library (University of Copenhagen) and contains some UNRRA reports prior to 1947. However, it is likely that these were just passed on for information. References to his work as a welfare officer in North Rhine Westphalia and Niedersachsen pertain only to the IRO. See "Child Welfare Report" and "Zonal Conference on Child Search and Child Welfare," 19 November 1948; Folder "I.R.O. Unaccompanied Children Reports, 1945 – 1947", Almind's Collection, 7.

30 Henning Borggräfe, "Exploring Pathways of (Forced) Migration, Resettlement Structures, and Displaced Persons' Agency: Document Holdings and Research Potentials of the Arolsen Archives," *Historical Social Research* 2020:4.

Swedish case file.<sup>31</sup> These files contain family histories and correspondence with relatives, state officials and welfare workers. Within the scope of this paper, I focus on as-of-yet unexplored cases of Danish CBOWs under IRO care in these individual files.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to archival material, I supplement the written sources with three interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the situation for affected families during the repatriation controversies.<sup>33</sup> For the post 1945 generation, I was able to talk to one of the Danish children repatriated from Germany during this period. The personal references to family members are anonymized to protect identities in this and all other case files. For the current generation of repatriated Scandinavian CBOW from Syria, documentation is not publicly available and returned children live under protected identities. In this context, I draw on two interviews with the founders of RTC Denmark and Sweden as one of the few available sources on family's experiences and active roles during contemporary repatriations of displaced Scandinavian CBOW.

Different forms of mediation – through archives, organizations and memories – shape my source material, which represents an empirical limitation but also an analytical resource for my study. Scandinavian CBOWs are only visible as children in the repatriation process through their embodiment – they are, physically, in Germany in 1945 and in Syria in 2019. We mostly see them through the eyes of others (or, as in the rare case of the interview, through an adult CBOW's memory mediation). The IRO material does not record their voices due to age. As an IRO welfare officer noted in his file on a displaced Danish child under "Desired destination," he was "too young to have desires."<sup>34</sup> When it comes to contemporary cases of Scandinavian CBOW in Syria, media coverage has focused heavily on the children's suffering in Kurdish camps, but the children's voices are also absent – partially due to age but now also due to the necessity of hiding their identity. For the recent repatriations from Syria, we can as of now only access information about these children, their family members and the repatriation processes through NGO documentation and interviews.

31 Arolsen Archives (AA). All cited individual case files can be found under 6.3.2.1, Akten von namentlich identifizierten Kindern/6.3.2 Fallbezogene Akten des Kindersuchdienstes 1947–1951.

32 These files are organized by names and birth dates. To protect the identity of the former children, in accordance with the Swedish ethical review authority requirements, I use code names (marked using \*) in this paper for references to files of individual children. The author may share the code list upon request pending ethical approval.

33 Interview with Peter\*, August 2022, Copenhagen; Interview with Beatrice Eriksson (18/8 2023); Interview with Natascha Rée Mikkelsen (21/4 2023).

34 AA, case file Jochen\*, A.E.F. D.P. Registration Record, Reg. No. G09899430.

For the purposes of my historical analysis, however, the mediated nature of the source material is also an advantage. It enables me to trace how specific CBOW conceptions have materialized and for which actors and for which purposes they constructed or reconstructed the child's national and familial belonging.

### Scandinavian-German Children among the Displaced

The scale of disruption and displacement of families across post-war Europe was massive. The temporary relief organization UNRRA managed to repatriate the majority of the 10 million displaced persons (DPs) between 1945 and 1947. Its successor, the IRO, then focused on relocating the "last million" until 1952.<sup>35</sup> UNRRA's work represented a brief interlude between World War II and the emerging Cold War order, and its officers on the ground enjoyed a high degree of discretion in deciding who were eligible for their services and the allocations of funds.<sup>36</sup> The criteria for eligibility were standardized in mid-1946 and were eventually relaxed during the IRO mandate in the late 1940s. Nevertheless, the assessment of the acting officers remained important as to which kinds of displaced children were classified as eligible.<sup>37</sup> The primary task of the organization was to facilitate family reunifications, but this was not an easy task in a context rife with ethno-national tensions concerning to whom displaced or lost children truly belonged.<sup>38</sup> The IRO could also suggest resettlements to other nations and, in the case of unaccompanied displaced children, foster care or adoptions to resolve difficult cases where repatriations were contested or if the child's nationality was in doubt.<sup>39</sup> The often unclear alignment of civic and ethnic national affiliations posed a distinct challenge to welfare workers who had to decide a child's citizenship and what they deemed to be in its best interest so that they could issue a repatriation request to the "correct" national government.<sup>40</sup> In the cases of displaced Norwegian-German children, however, UNRRA and the IRO staff faced yet another challenge – a home government that showed little interest in seeing these children return.

35 David Nasaw, *The Last Million: Europe's Displaced Persons from World War to Cold War*, New York 2020.

36 Jessica Reinisch, "Auntie UNRRA' at the Crossroads," *Past and Present* 2013:28.

37 Kim Salomon, *Refugees in the Cold War: Toward a New International Refugee Regime in the Early Postwar Era*, Lund 1991, p. 58.

38 Zahra 2011, pp. 242–244.

39 "Unaccompanied Children, Search, Care, Repatriation, Resettlement or Other Final Establishment. Unaccompanied Children Policy," 26/7 1948, Almind's Collection.

40 Lynne Taylor, *In the Children's Best Interests: Unaccompanied Children in American-Occupied Germany, 1945–1952*, Toronto 2017.

Lars Borgersrud's extensive research on Norwegian-German CBOW histories has documented how the placement of the so-called "Hohenhorst children" became an international controversy after liberation in the summer of 1945.<sup>41</sup> When Allied soldiers discovered 35 Norwegian-German children in a former Lebensborn home in Germany, UNRRA was caught off-guard when Norway refused to take them. Upon Allied pressure, Norway officially agreed to take the former Lebensborn children back, but behind the scenes, Norway appears to have struck a deal as the children were then suddenly sent to Sweden for adoption.<sup>42</sup> At first glance, this adoption initiative reflects the strong coordination and connection between Sweden and Norway after WWII in relation to child welfare matters. However, Borgersrud highlights that these children could only be adopted through a deliberate act of de-nationalization, as this allowed the Swedish authorities to present these children as stateless.<sup>43</sup> Their papers were "lost" in transport, and Erik Petersson, secretary of the Swedish foreigner commission, advertised the adoption initiative to the Swedish public in a *Dagens Nyheter* article from September 4, 1945, as children "found" in concentration camps and needing Swedish parents.<sup>44</sup> This framing insinuates that children of German soldiers would have not been acceptable for placement in Sweden either. The children were then quickly adopted without much vetting, but the entire process broke both Norwegian and Swedish adoption laws and put Sweden off from adopting any further Norwegian CBOWs – as Oslo had hoped it would.<sup>45</sup>

The cases of the Hohenhorst children were only the beginning. The Norwegian government successfully delayed dealing with repatriation requests for two years, but in 1947, international pressure and the changing political landscape forced the government to open up for repatriations. Some 50 Norwegian children out of the estimated 200–300 displaced children returned, but they were often brutally removed from foster families and only a few were reunited with their mothers. Most ended up in orphanages.<sup>46</sup> The Norwegian government arguably still had no real interest in actively repatriating "German children". For example, internal IRO correspondence about Norwegian Lebensborn cases at the time shows that the Norwegian Ministry of Justice may have officially requested all Norwegian children

41 Lars Borgersrud, *Staten og krigsbarna: En historisk undersøkelse av statsmyndighetens behandling av krigsbarna i de første etterkrigsårene*, Oslo 2004.

42 Borgersrud 2004, pp. 83–93 and 179.

43 Borgersrud 2004, p. 128.

44 Borgersrud 2004, p. 83.

45 Borgersrud 2004, pp. 108–112.

46 Olsen 2005, pp. 29–31.

back, but IRO staff knew that Norway preferred local adoptions if possible.<sup>47</sup> If children were to return, Norwegian mothers had to pay for repatriations from Germany, and the government outsourced the organization of the entire repatriation process to the Norwegian Red Cross.<sup>48</sup>

The Red Cross official Roal Ekholt in Hamburg became a key player in the CBOW repatriations, seeking out mothers in Norway and acting as an extended foreign ministry in relation to the IRO in Germany.<sup>49</sup> In my reading, I see this outsourcing of responsibility to the Norwegian Red Cross not just as a logistical but also as a strategic choice due to the children's CBOW status. The Norwegian Red Cross had just excelled in the nearly impossible task of maintaining operations during the Nazi occupation of Norway while still coming out as one of the most respected national institutions despite collaborating with all sides.<sup>50</sup> They could thus fulfil the unpopular task of returning CBOWs in a way that the government could not. However, just as the Norwegian Red Cross had shown little compassion for the female Norwegian volunteers having worked for the German Red Cross during the war, it appears as if they also had little concern for the need for discretion regarding Norwegian women with "German children".<sup>51</sup> For example, a 1947 IRO case history documents the changing positions of a Norwegian mother who initially hoped to have her child adopted in Germany but later opened up to "take the child back if requested." The mother's two conflicting letters indicate she was likely aware of the double stigma attached to either choice, leaving her child behind versus bringing a "German child" home to a hostile Norwegian environment. She leaves the decision, "if requested," to others, but neither the child nor she herself would have escaped the consequences of being outed as a fraternizer through the repatriation. In the end, the Norwegian Red Cross requested the repatriation irrespective of the mother's hesitation.<sup>52</sup>

To date, research on *displaced* Scandinavian CBOWs has focused on the cases of Norwegian-German children who had come to Germany through the Lebensborn system.<sup>53</sup> Kåre Olsen has in detail traced the fate of Leb-

47 "Norwegian Lebensborn Children" from Yovonne de Jong to all Child Welfare Officers, 9/3 1948, ref. IRO/1049/CWS, in "UNRRA and IRO Miscellaneous", AA.

48 Borgersrud 2004, pp. 232–235.

49 Borgersrud 2004, p. 238.

50 Gaute Lund Rønnebu, *Mellom Solferino og Berlin: Norges Røde Kors under andre verdenskrig*, PhD thesis UiT 2021, pp. 279–280.

51 Lund Rønnebu 2021, pp. 266–269.

52 Case file Harald\*, Minutes of the P.C.I.R.O. Child Welfare Board, 23-10/1947, pp. 5–6, AA.

53 The Nazi Lebensborn program was a racially selective maternal care system designed to support offspring from SS officers and unwed mothers. The program extended its

ensborn children whose Norwegian mothers had agreed to give them up for adoption in Norway, which is what they assumed. Lebensborn, however, also secretly sent these children to German families.<sup>54</sup> In addition to these adoption cases, not typically stolen children but nevertheless children transferred without any maternal consent, Norwegian and Danish mothers had also left children behind with paternal relatives or foster parents in Germany on their own. This is a history we have much less knowledge of. The individual IRO case files record here some glimpses of pregnant Norwegian and Danish women who had travelled to Germany, either with partners or to join them there, to give birth. I focus in this paper on the cases of the Danish-German children who, in the present files, were all displaced due to maternal abandonment. This, I argue, was hardly a choice but a direct consequence of the maternal stigma, not just due to illegitimacy but specifically as the child was seen as a CBOW. In a few instances, the case files even offer documentation of how mothers attempted to explain their choice if they actively wanted to reclaim their child after the war. The validity of this claim was assessed by the IRO, not national governments. This was one of the ways, I argue, in which the organization had become the arbiter over how the looming shadows of enemy fathers and the perceptions of the distrusted mothers would decide citizenship and familial affiliations for Scandinavian-German children.

### Hiding "Enemy Fathers": IRO Perspectives on Nordic CBOWs

The fate of the few hundred displaced Norwegian- and Danish-German children born of war would have seemed like a minor concern amid the large-scale post-war displacements after 1945. Faced with so many groups of children in need and nations eagerly wanting "their" children back, the IRO could just have sidelined CBOW repatriations that Scandinavian governments had no interest in.<sup>55</sup> This raises the intriguing question of why

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reach to part-German children born to women deemed "racially worthy" in occupied territories in Northern and Western Europe during WWII while also supporting the (forced) transfer of presumed part-German children from occupied territories in Eastern Europe. See Ericsson & Simonsen 2005.

- 54 Kåre Olsen, *Vater: Deutscher: Das Schicksal der Norwegischen Lebensbornkinder und ihrer Mütter von 1940 bis Heute*, Frankfurt 2002, pp. 320–349.
- 55 See, among others, Olga Gnydiuk, "Defining the 'Best Interests' of Children During the Post-1945 Transformations in Europe," *Journal of Modern European History* 2021:3; Jannis Panagiotidis, "'Not the Concern of the Organization?' The IRO and the Overseas Resettlement of Ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II," *Historical Social Research* 2020:4; Pawel Sękowski, "The Care and Assistance Provided for Polish

UNRRA and then the IRO included part-German Nordic children in their mandate when they should only have repatriated "non-German" unaccompanied children with no ties to "war criminals, quislings, and traitors".<sup>56</sup> In theory, illegitimate children born to Scandinavian mothers held their citizenship, and as many lived with foster families or relatives, they were not technically displaced or would at least not have been a high priority. In practice, UNRRA decided to include CBOW in their mandate specifically because they were ethnically part-German and could be re-nationalized as Nordic children to foil or even reverse the legacy of Nazi Germanization policies. At a welfare conference in 1946, UNRRA defined the repatriation of the sub-group of "hidden children" among its unaccompanied minors as its most pressing concern. The UNRRA definition of "hidden children" referred to all children "wanted by the Germans to increase their population".<sup>57</sup> This explicitly included Norwegian Lebensborn children hidden by German foster families but also "illegitimate, abandoned children," such as the Danish-German CBOWs in the cases discussed here.<sup>58</sup>

The shift from UNRRA to the IRO in 1947 brought displaced Scandinavian CBOW into view. UNRRA had only focused on resolving cases of displaced people, but the IRO as an organization also started to look for new eligible refugees and displaced children living in orphanages or with German foster families.<sup>59</sup> This meant that after 1947, more and more Scandinavian CBOW privately left behind in Germany came to the attention of the organization – both when the IRO re-registered the cases of 700 000 DPs when taking over operations from UNRRA and through active searches in German society.<sup>60</sup> Almind's collection of policy directives and placement records concerning abandoned illegitimate children in the IRO zonal placement statistics (from 1948 to 1951) show that the existence of Danish and Norwegian children among his caseload remained a concern for the organization until the very end.<sup>61</sup> UNRRA and the IRO wanted to

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Child Refugees in Barcelona in the Immediate Post-WWII Period," *Prace Historyczne* 2019:3; Jayne Persian, "Displaced Persons and the Politics of International Categorisation(s)," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 2012:4.

56 "International Refugee Organization, Unaccompanied Children – Policy 1948-1951", "Eligibility Directive" issued in June 1947 (FI/3, 25/6 1947), p. 4, Almind's Collection.

57 Report on "'Hidden Children' – Investigation and Interviewing," in file 6.46 "Child Welfare Conference, Spenge, 13 and 14 June 1946"; folder "UNRRA – Unaccompanied Children Reports 1945-47," p. 1, Almind's Collection.

58 Report on "'Hidden Children'", pp. 4-5, Almind's Collection.

59 Salomon 1991, p. 240.

60 Borggräfe 2020, p. 50.

61 Monthly statistics under "I.R.O. Zonal Statistical Reports on Child Welfare 1948/1951"; folder "I.R.O. Zonal Statistical Reports on Child Welfare", Almind's Collection.

repatriate these children as far as possible, while the military government and German foster families pushed for more flexibility in local placements.<sup>62</sup> Over time, IRO directives increasingly accepted the possibility of permanent placements of abandoned, illegitimate children in German foster homes, especially if they were related by blood.<sup>63</sup> Welfare officers had begun to doubt the top-down IRO priority to at all costs secure the children's best interests through repatriation and citizenship in their maternal home countries.<sup>64</sup> The documents Almind *chose* to leave behind in his collection show that the removal of hidden or abandoned, illegitimate, ethnically part-German children had also been controversial within the organization itself, specifically due to their CBOW status.

For example, a "Memorandum on Child Search" from 1947 provocatively likens the IRO's ethno-national goal to reverse Germanization through repatriation as akin to Hitler's own eugenic policies, rationalized by the notion that "Germans are bad".<sup>65</sup> The child search officer further questions the assumption that "every parent will be overjoyed to be reunited with his child. We know that this will not be a fact in the case of the abandoned, illegitimate child but one of great embarrassment".<sup>66</sup> The author argues it would be better for the children if they in such cases stayed in well-integrated German families, while the anonymous commentary by another colleague in June 1947 takes this reasoning even a step further.<sup>67</sup> The commentary states that within the IRO, "There remains even now in some quarters a tendency to rejoice in the tracing of a non-German child (even he may have never been hidden or stolen) because his removal inflicts some sort of compensatory punishment of a German".<sup>68</sup> The anonymous author further notes that the "Nordic idea was the inspiration for the entire creed" of Nazism's racial superiority and of gathering all Germanic people – especially from the North – in Germany.<sup>69</sup> In his view, the IRO should thus focus on

62 "UNRRA Closure Report", pp. 35–36, Almind's Collection..

63 PCIRO Executive Secretary W. Hallam Tuck, Provisions Order "Subject: Unaccompanied Children – Search and Care; and Repatriation, Resettlement or Other Final Establishment," No. 75, 26/7 1948, p. 2, Almind's Collection.

64 Taylor 2017, pp. 233–234.

65 "Memorandum on Child Search," pp. 1–4, 13 June 1947, by E. Dunkel, Child Search Officer at 460 UNRRA HQ, file 15; folder "UNRRA – Unaccompanied Children Reports 1945–47", Almind's Collection.

66 "Memorandum," p. 3, Almind's Collection.

67 "Lost Children and UNRRA Child Search," pp. 1–5, 26/6 1947, by Child Search Investigator, 904 UNRRA Area Team, file 17, folder "UNRRA – Unaccompanied Children Reports 1945–47", Almind's Collection.

68 "Lost Children", p. 1, Almind's collection.

69 "Lost Children", p. 4, Almind's collection.

Polish and other truly abducted children but not on "Children born out of wedlock to 'Nordic' mothers and German fathers" – the insinuation being that as these children were not really abducted while also not being really Nordic, they could just as well belong in Germany.<sup>70</sup> These reports were personal opinions, but they nevertheless reflect internal contestations over how IRO officers understood these Scandinavian-German children – as not just "hidden children" but also specifically as CBOW.

### The Danish Cases and Distrusted Mothers

Danish and Norwegian CBOW histories have similarities but also distinct differences. Norwegian CBOW within the Lebensborn system, with Lebensborn in the view of the IRO being a symbol of Nazism's despised eugenic policies, were explicitly addressed as a "problem" by both national and international actors. The local controversies around the birth of an estimated 10 000 Danish CBOW during the German occupation had not attracted comparable international attention but also affected the children, inside and outside of Denmark.<sup>71</sup> This is certainly tied to the fact that Denmark resorted to secrecy around CBOW much faster than Norway, as both state authorities and families tried to keep German fathers as hidden as possible after the war (as in most other formerly occupied European nations with CBOW populations).<sup>72</sup> This secrecy also extends to the unknown number of Danish women who had gone to Germany during the war and left their children behind, as far as we know without any institutional involvement.<sup>73</sup> Due to its distinct collaboration arrangements with Nazi Germany, the Danish administration had remained in place throughout World War II, and Lebensborn could not establish itself during the German occupation of Denmark until just before the very end.<sup>74</sup> The Danish cases of displacement thus share the same conceptual challenges as the Norwegian Lebensborn children in that IRO welfare officers saw them as CBOWs. However, I argue that due to the individual and personal nature of their abandonment, the perception and valuations of the "distrusted mothers" (even more so than the "enemy fathers") have served as a deciding factor for the children's final

70 "Lost Children", p. 5, Almind's collection.

71 Warring 2017, pp. 10–15.

72 Eva Simonsen, "Children in Danger: Dangerous Children," in Ericsson & Simonsen 2005, p. 279.

73 Warring 2017, p. 16.

74 See Claus Bundgård Christensen, Joachim Lund, Niels Wium Olesen & Jakob Sørensen, *Danmark Besat: Krig og Hverdag 1940–45*, Copenhagen 2005, pp. 120–122 or John T Lauridsen, *Tysk besættelsespolitik i Danmark 1940–1945*, Copenhagen 2013, p. 65.

placement. And in the international documentation of these repatriation cases, we also see proof of the reluctant Danish government's response to repatriation requests for displaced CBOWs.

Repatriations of Danish CBOWs appear to have been a non-issue for the Danish government directly after the war. If general UNRRA or IRO reports and directives explicitly mention Denmark, then it is just in passing that all forms of cooperation went smoothly.<sup>75</sup> For example, the Danish Royal Military Mission's (the Danish military representation in Allied-occupied Germany) early correspondence with the UNRAA in 1945 focuses on how the organization could support the repatriation of refugees *out of* Denmark.<sup>76</sup> In 1946, the Military Mission briefly asked for help in locating the German fathers of its CBOWs *in* Denmark for alimony cases.<sup>77</sup> The Danish state, however, quickly decided to drop these investigations and just pay alimony for illegitimate Danish children with German fathers in the nation in order to directly and discretely settle the matter.<sup>78</sup> And neither Danish media nor the Danish Red Cross' yearly reports on its post-war relief efforts mention the cases of displaced Danish children in Germany.<sup>79</sup> Displaced Danish CBOW only appear on the record in 1947, when IRO child search officers started to contact the Danish Military Mission with lists of "Children of presumed Danish nationality" while pushing for clarification "whether these children can be granted Danish nationality. Also, if Danish Nationality is granted, do you desire repatriation, or do you consent to their remaining with their present foster-parents."<sup>80</sup> It took over a year to receive the reply that "the Danish Ministry of Justice does not as far as they are concerned wish any

75 "UNRRA Closure Report," pp. 28–9, Almind's Collection.

76 See Files S-1343-0000-0001 "UNRRA Danish Mission Displaced Persons," Series 0527, Box 459, UN Archives, <https://search.archives.un.org/s-1343-0000-0001-00001>; and Protocols of the Allied Control Authority (ACA) between 29/8 1945 and 29/8 1947 in folder 6.1.1, AA.

77 Note by secretariat of ACA Directorate from Internal Affairs and Communication division, 24/7 1946, DPOW/P (46)98, folder 6.1.1, AA.

78 Øland 2001, p. 17.

79 Based on a search of historical newspapers in the "mediestream" online archive of the Danish Royal Library and available documentation of the Danish Red Cross in the "Report on the Activities of the Danish Red Cross, 1938–1948," XVIIth International Red Cross Conference, Stockholm, August 1948, p. 21 and "Danske Rode Kors, Beretning 1945," p. 10. at the Småtryk Afdelning, Danish Royal Library.

80 Letter from field operations to the senior Danish liaison officer, Danish Military Mission, B.A.O.R., Subject: "Children of presumed Danish nationality", 25/4 1947, Ref: UN/110/CWS, folder 6.1.1, AA. See also Letter from Berlin to Chief Representative of CTB UNRRA, 11/9 1947, Danish Military Mission, Journal No. 35 H.I., folder 6.1.1.

action to be taken in view of repatriation of the child.”<sup>81</sup> The IRO case files of Danish children in the Arolsen Archives thus constitute a key source documenting a lack of proactive state interest in CBOW repatriations to Denmark.<sup>82</sup>

The transnational repatriation negotiations were thus mostly a concern of the IRO and the families involved.

The Danish case files in the Arolsen Archives certainly do not represent all Danish children displaced in Germany, but they document that all of the present 32 Danish-German children were abandoned and that only 7 children were repatriated – in one case against the explicit wishes of the Danish government.<sup>83</sup> The IRO welfare officers assessed the well-being of children, their relation to foster parents and the family history of how they came to Germany while also, in some cases, mediating between families in transnational custody disputes. These documents represent a rare glimpse into the family histories of Danish women who had gone to Nazi Germany and of their children through the eyes of an international organization. Many of these women had already been pregnant and travelled to Germany to live with the father’s family or agreed to a 6-month work contract to be able to come to Nazi Germany to give birth to a “German child” without their Danish families knowing.<sup>84</sup> One mother in the files had abandoned her child at a hospital, but in the other cases, mothers placed their child with friends or relatives of the German father, thus blurring the lines between abandonment and private adoption processes.<sup>85</sup> These available traces regarding the mother’s history and the child’s current situation are paired with equally glaring silences on exactly why these women left their children behind. The following two cases, where Danish mothers sought repatriation of their abandoned children after the war, offer some insight in this regard, as they during the repatriation processes had to explain their reason for abandoning their child to IRO welfare officers.

81 Letter from Royal Danish Mission Bad Salzufflen to International Refugee Organisation, B.A.O.R. 5, LEMGO, 21/5 1948, Ref 17.E.10/7, folder 6.1.1, AA. See also case file Hilde\*.

82 See files for Danish children in folder 6 “Schriftgut des IST und seiner Vorgänger/6.3 Bearbeitungen und Anfragen/6.3.2 Fallbezogene Akten des Kindersuchdienstes 1947–1951 / 6.3.2.1. Akten von namentlich identifizierten Kindern”, AA.

83 Case files of the repatriated children: Johanna\*, Ilse\*, Heidrun\*, Peter\*, Hilde\*, Paul\* and Louise\* (the latter against the government’s wishes), AA.

84 See, for example, the case files of Sarah\* and Sebastian\*, AA.

85 See case file Ingrid\* for being abandoned in the hospital, AA.

Anne\*<sup>86</sup>

Anne's mother had during the war gone to Vienna as a Danish Red Cross nurse to work in a hospital. There she met and had a child with an SS officer. The mother's political motivations are not stated anywhere and are thus unclear, but she was evidently socializing in SS circles. The father went missing in 1944, and when the mother decided to return to Denmark, she left their daughter with the family of another SS officer. She had been friends with the foster mother and wanted her to adopt the child. When the IRO picked up the case in 1948, they wanted to repatriate, as a first choice, or resettle the child in the US or Canada.<sup>87</sup> The Danish mother refused repatriation and resettlement, instead insisting that her German friend should adopt the child. To finalize the adoption case, IRO officers had to get the mother's consent – however, the mother herself for years delayed signing her consent to the adoption, claiming she could not get a signature without revealing she had kept the "German child" a secret from her Danish family.<sup>88</sup> The mother on multiple occasions reported that she could not act because if her own family knew, they "would tear her to pieces, if it would come out openly, that she had a child with a German SS man."<sup>89</sup>

The IRO was confounded by the mother's behaviour, and officers only understood in 1951, when she finally signed the consent form, that the mother had delayed this process because she had thought of taking Anne back herself this whole time.<sup>90</sup> The disapproval of her own family and her financial circumstances as a single mother made this difficult, but her claim to motherhood was also discredited through the stigma of fraternization, the act of abandonment itself and the unexpected return of the biological father, the former SS officer, in 1950. In a worst-case outcome for the IRO's priorities of reversing the legacies of Nazi Germanization, the German father here claimed his right to the child, married the foster mother and declared the Danish mother unfit for motherhood because "the child's mother has not done anything for the child until today," thereby insinuating that – signature or not – the mother had already forfeited any right to the child through her actions.<sup>91</sup>

86 Case file Anne\*, AA.

87 Letter from Cornelia Heise (Child Search Branch) to PCIRO Central Headquarters and Miss Y de Jong (Child Welfare Officer), 9/6 1948, in case file Anne\*, AA.

88 Letter to John Troniak, Area Child Care Officer, 31/1 1949, from Child Care Officer V. Spain, in case file Anne\*, AA.

89 Report by A Loewenthal on "Foster home visited Thursday 8/9 1949," in case file Anne\*, AA.

90 Report concerning N Anne\*, born: XXX, II, by Carla Hansen, Child Care Officer, in case file Anne\*, AA.

91 Letter from Karl\*, 18/9 September 1950, to the IRO Frankfurt Office, in case file Anne\*, AA.

Peter<sup>\*92</sup>

The case of Peter exemplifies the opposite but nevertheless ambivalent outcome. Documentation of his repatriation partially appears in the IRO welfare board meeting protocols in Almind's collection, which I was able to supplement with a more extensive case file at the Arolsen Archives and through an interview in 2022 with the now adult Peter in a suburb of Copenhagen.<sup>93</sup> One of Peter's distinct memories from his time in Germany was that two Red Cross ladies came to pick him up at his father's house in northern Germany and then brought him to his mother in Denmark. However, he had been unaware that his biological parents fought over his custody via the IRO for two years between 1947 and 1949. Peter's parents had met in Copenhagen during the German occupation. When his mother became pregnant, they both went to Germany to avoid the stigma, where Peter was born in 1942. A year later, his mother returned to Denmark without him. Peter first stayed with his paternal grandparents and, after the war, with his father and a German stepmother. Based on the IRO case history, it is unclear who first requested custody for Peter, but the welfare board summary states that his German father wanted to officially adopt him and that his Danish mother had filed for his repatriation.<sup>94</sup> The resolution of his case reflects the conflicting interests at play. Even though Peter lived with his biological father as a foster child, the father could not adopt him without the consent of the mother. The IRO, who would have seen the father as an "ex-enemy parent", as outlined above, supported the mother's request. The mother's decision to officially file for Peter's repatriation was also unusual, as this meant acknowledging having been a "German girl" to the Danish authorities as well as the shame of having left a child behind. Peter returned to Denmark in 1949, and he fared well in life. But he never understood why his mother had requested to get him back (he grew up with his grandparents without any close contact with his mother) or why she had abandoned him in the first place.

Here again, the IRO welfare board's documentation of the family history and of conflicting assessments of the mother's claim can shed some light on this question. From the vantage point of the IRO, Peter's case clearly called for repatriation to his Danish mother, but their recommendation was rejected by the Allied military government on September 10 1947, with a request

92 Case file Peter\*, AA.

93 Interview with Peter\*, August 2022, Copenhagen.

94 Summary of the welfare board meeting, 20/8 1947, IRO Niedersachsen, Almind's Collection.

"to supply further information as to the mother's interest in the child".<sup>95</sup> In this case, it is not the Danish government but the military government in occupied Germany raising the spectre of the "distrusted mother" in a contested CBOW repatriation – distrusted perhaps politically but certainly in terms of family norms. The HQ rejected the recommendation because "It is felt that as the Mother showed no interest in the child, and the father has given it a home, it should remain with the father, and not be removed".<sup>96</sup> The process was thus delayed, but the IRO prevailed and repatriated Peter two years later in 1949, after his mother had issued a statement justifying why she had abandoned the child:

The mother to the child was living with the parents of her German fiancée, when the child was born. Suffering from a severe Acute Articular Rheumatism she was in 1943 advised by the doctors to go to Denmark for treatment. She had to leave the child behind, as the German authorities refused to issue the documents, needed to bring him over the border and they further took away her Danish Passport. All her efforts to have her child repatriated have up to date been in vain.<sup>97</sup>

It is impossible to assess whether this incident transpired in exactly this way. Authorities in Nazi Germany might not have recognized the mother's right to an illegitimate child, even though she would have had that right under Danish law. However, this is a vague statement, where it remains unclear as to exactly who took her passport. Likely strategically, the statement lays the blame on German authorities, which prevented her from bringing her child, and presents sickness as the main reason for why the mother had to consider leaving her child. In the few additional cases where the individual Danish case files mention a mother's specific reason for leaving, it was either sickness or being ordered to do so by a Danish grandfather that forced them to return on their own.<sup>98</sup> Regardless of whether or not these reasons were true, references to sickness or patriarchal authority deflect responsibility for the abandonment from the mother, and the IRO would have supported such framings to achieve the desired repatriation of part-German CBOW.

95 Minutes of the conference held by the P.C.I.R.O. Child Welfare Board, 10/9 1947, Almind's Collection.

96 See letter from chief of PW&DP Division G Lamont-Watt to PCIRO Child Welfare Board recommendation, 30/8 1947, Ref. PWDP /58362/5/Emp./Welfare, in case file Peter\*, AA.

97 "Clearance Form for an Unaccompanied Child," filled out by R V Almind in Land Niedersachsen, 16/2 1949, in case file Peter\*, AA.

98 AA, see case files of Anneliese\* or Dieter\*, AA.

Even if the outcomes of Anne's and Peter's cases as well as their relations to family members differ, they reflect the key role of interpretations and perceptions of the mothers in the repatriation process: The stigma attached to having been "German girls," to the illegitimacy *and* to the abandonment, the breach with maternal norms of care. The initial abandonment was here a direct consequence of the child's CBOW status, more than the illegitimacy. Mothers of CBOW *in* Denmark had placed children with other relatives, given them up for adoption, moved to town or married Danish husbands to hide their German paternity.<sup>99</sup> Leaving children in Germany, as the cases here show, was another possible strategy to keep the child's background secret, and it may even have felt safer for the mothers due to the geographic distance. This decision was nevertheless hardly voluntary, and I see the abandonments in Germany as an extension of domestic family secrecy practices concerning CBOWs already in place. The outside IRO repatriation initiatives then disrupted these mutual family-state secrecy arrangements, as they forced the Ministry of Justice to acknowledge the existence of Danish-German children among the displaced and settled cases for Danish/German families.

In sum, the records of the repatriation processes here reflect that despite the different interests of families, state officials and IRO welfare workers, their respective positions were all tied to the child's CBOW background and perceptions of the mothers. IRO welfare officers worked against the stigma attached to "distrusted mothers" and, at times, the best interest of the child to as far as possible ensure CBOW repatriations. Grandparents, as illustrated above, could be both enforcers of maternal stigma or resources for support and care with transnational reach – their positions shaped whether and how Danish children "out-of-place" could return too, especially as few mothers would have been able to request the child being repatriated on their own in the absence of Danish state initiatives. And, finally, the fact that the IRO as an international organization managed transnational custody disputes and pushed the Danish Ministry of Justice to address Danish displacement cases indicates that Danish state officials at the time would have accepted, perhaps even welcomed, maternal abandonment abroad as a private solution to their "German child" problem. These historical insights are now relevant once again as questions of maternal abandonment and the right of CBOWs to return have re-emerged with the displacement of Scandinavian children born to ISIS foreign fighters.

99 Anette Warring, "War, Cultural Loyalty and Gender: Danish Women's Intimate Fraternisation," in Ericsson and Simonsen 2005.

## Reframing Repatriations of Scandinavian Children "Out-of-Place" Today

When in 2019 relatives of a Danish ISIS follower and her child, detained in the Kurdish camps in Syria, approached human rights lawyer Knud Foldschack for help to get them back, he assumed that their repatriation as Danish citizens would be an easy case. He believed that he would have them home in a few weeks, which then turned into years.<sup>100</sup> In the absence of state initiatives in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, NGOs pushed for the children's repatriation together with their mothers. I focus here on the work of the NGO "Repatriate the Children" (RTC) with branches in Denmark and Sweden. RTC was founded in Sweden in 2020 by the team behind the successful repatriation of seven orphaned Swedish children of an ISIS foreign fighter from Syria through their grandfather Patricio Galvez together with the social worker Beatrice Eriksson and filmmaker Gorki Glaser Mueller. The team established ties with Foldschack and the Danish journalist Natascha Rée Mikkelsen who founded the Danish branch of RTC, working together in supporting repatriations and affected families. With governments hesitant to act, RTC built ties to detained mothers, children and their relatives back home, tried to change public perceptions, supported legal cases and lobbied state officials to initiate repatriation procedures.<sup>101</sup>

The context, family constellations and personal stakes in the repatriations of Scandinavian children "out-of-place" from Syria cannot be compared to the situation of Scandinavian CBOWs in post-WWII Germany and the UN-led repatriation schemes related to displaced children. However, there are notable echoes in how governments showed little proactive interest in helping children of enemy soldiers return as well as the fact that non-government actors had to push for repatriations of Scandinavian children "out-of-place". For example, when the Danish state claimed it could not be sure that the detained children were Danish citizens, staff of the Danish RTC traveled to Syria to take DNA samples as proof of identity.<sup>102</sup>

One of the greatest hurdles faced by Scandinavian civil society advocates in current repatriation controversies was the political perceptions that the mothers did not deserve the right to return with their children.<sup>103</sup> Between 2019 and 2022, there was an intense public debate in the region regarding

<sup>100</sup> Panel discussion with Knud Foldschack (12/5 2023), Lund University.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Beatrice Eriksson (18/8 2023).

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Natascha Rée Mikkelsen (21/4 2023).

<sup>103</sup> See, for example, Aphram Melki, Diana Zadius & Can Savran, "Ta barnen och passet från IS-återvändarna: C-politiker – Sverige måste sluta dalta med terrorister", *Aftonbladet*, 10/8 2019.

the question of whether governments had a responsibility to repatriate the children of their citizens who had joined ISIS.<sup>104</sup> This was a controversy where the responsible Scandinavian politicians found themselves in the unusual position to, on the world stage, defend why they would not prioritize the rights and well-being of "their" children over the punishment of the mothers.<sup>105</sup> For example, the Danish government decided in the spring of 2021 to selectively repatriate thirteen families to avoid the children being radicalized in the camps. In three cases, however, where mothers held dual citizenships, they took away the Danish one and left these mothers behind with their five children, who were still Danish.<sup>106</sup> In defense of this controversial decision, Danish foreign minister Jeppe Kofod specifically called on those mothers to give up their children: "It's a bit harsh, but you can say that it's on these mothers who have joined the Islamic State [to send their children to Denmark without them]. It is on their shoulders whether we as the state of Denmark should be allowed to help those children, so they can receive the treatment that they should of course have."<sup>107</sup> This statement does not just refer to the spectres of terrorism and security. In light of the historical precedents of forced separations of Danish mothers and their children born to German soldiers outlined in this paper, it becomes visible how the mothers' perceived treason and the children's ambivalent claim to national belonging due to their CBOW status inform the government's position here as well.

There is a need for further studies on the large number of different factors informing the controversies concerning the repatriation of current Scandinavian children "out-of-place" from Syria that exceed the scope of this paper. However, the historical insights regarding the post-war transnational decision processes in CBOW placements discussed above already add a crucial perspective: The continued centrality of perceptions of "distrusted mothers"

104 See, for example, Jan Guillou, "Regeringen vacklar inför pöbeln medan sju svenska barn lider i ett fångläger", *Aftonbladet*, 14/4 2019; Solveig Ruud, Kjetil Magne Sørenes & Alf Ole AskJo, "Frp i opprør etter at regjeringen henter hjem IS-kvinne med sykt barn", *Aftenposten*, 15/1 2020; Nilas Johnsen & Mohammed Hassen, "Kurdisk leder til VG: Ny regjering må hente IS-kvinner", *Verdens Gang*, 25/9 2021.

105 See, for example, the debates regarding a UN reprimand in the Swedish parliament, [https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/interpellation/de-svenska-barnen-i-nordost-syrien\\_H810596](https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/interpellation/de-svenska-barnen-i-nordost-syrien_H810596) (August 17, 2022), or Ruud, Sørenes & AskJo 2020 concerning the Norwegian controversy over the first humanitarian family repatriation in January 2020.

106 Morten Skaerbaek & Kristian Corfixen, "Mette Frederiksen: Nu er børnene myndighedernes ansvar", *Politiken*, 7/10 2021.

107 Magnus Mio, Nagieb Khaja, Jeppe Findalen & Thomas Foght, "Kofod nægter att svare," *Ekstra Bladet*, 11/4 2021.

who had not just joined the enemy but also violated ethno-national norms of motherhood, a conceptual intersection of *de-nationalizing and de-mothering* that appears in CBOW repatriation debates in both contexts.<sup>108</sup> As shown in the analysis of the displaced CBOWs of the WWII generation, the ethno-national and moral perceptions of the CBOWs' familial relations – of mothers, the hidden enemy fathers, grandparents and others – shaped how openly family members could support repatriations and how governments as well as IRO staff thought about the children's national belonging. The terms and impact of these evaluations look different today, but they still matter. For example, some of the detained Norwegian mothers refused repatriation offers as they feared losing custody of their children upon returning, thus echoing the stark choices facing former "German girls" in the past.<sup>109</sup> Also, experiences of RTC staff in Sweden testify to the impact that the suspicion of state officials had on grandparents themselves. Blame and distrust silenced relatives trying to bring their daughters and grandchildren home also in recent repatriation cases.<sup>110</sup> Much remains to be studied here in the present as well as the past repatriation cases of displaced Scandinavian children of enemy soldiers, but the historical perspectives developed in this paper show that security and terrorism paradigms do not suffice when it comes to understanding the terms of CBOW repatriation controversies.

## Conclusions

The contested repatriation cases of displaced Scandinavian children from post-1945 Germany and post-2019 Syria share hitherto little acknowledged similarities in the children's construction as CBOW. This paper has focused on how, in the absence of state initiatives, IRO welfare workers and family members transnationally negotiated the national and familial belonging of displaced Scandinavian "children born of war" after WWII. I have argued that Denmark's official disregard for its displaced CBOWs, Sweden's refusal to take any further CBOW adoptees beyond the Hohenhorst children and Norway's frequent U-turns and backchanneling to keep repatriations to a minimum all represented different expressions of a similar underlying reluctance to accept responsibility for children understood as CBOW, as citizens with a liminal claim to belonging due to their ties to "enemy fathers" and "distrusted mothers". At the same time, the available documentation of internal communication at the IRO shows that officers pro-actively wanted

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, Melki, Zadius & Savran 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Olga Stokke & Afshin Ismaeli, "UD: Nå vil ingen av de norske IS-kvinnene i Syria hjem til Norge", *Aftenposten*, 25/4 2022.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Beatrice Eriksson (18/3 2023).

to repatriate displaced Scandinavian children exactly because they were CBOW – children of what UNRRA referred to as ex-enemy parents – to reverse the legacies of Nazi Germanization plans and to erase the visibility of CBOWs' German paternity as far as possible. The needs or wishes of the mothers and children found little regard in this context. The outcome of repatriation cases depended on the discretion of welfare officers as well as the ability and willingness of the affected families and mothers to reclaim the children. Taken together, it is evident that displaced Scandinavian children being associated with an enemy stigma influenced placement decisions made by welfare officers, impacted their families across borders and challenged governments reluctant to provide access to rights and citizenship.

The recent controversies surrounding the repatriations of Scandinavian children of ISIS foreign fighters from Syria underscore the continued relevance of CBOW perceptions, as international and civil society actors had to advocate for the children's right to return with their mothers in the face of governmental reluctance. This paper has adopted an analytical focus on how CBOW perceptions influenced the respective repatriations after 1945 and 2019 in order to change the way we understand both of these contexts. The analytical focus within the scope of this paper has been on the post-WWII generation, but the echoes in the controversies between the two generations call for a broader approach to the contested return of Scandinavian children of ISIS foreign fighters that goes beyond terrorism and security paradigms. At the same time, I want to highlight that we do not just learn from the past to better understand the present. The current contestations and focus on "distrusted" mothers in repatriation debates also ask us to in new ways revisit the histories of displaced Scandinavian CBOWs in Germany. For example, my analysis has documented how (forced) maternal abandonment in Germany shaped the realities of Danish mothers and CBOWs in the late 1940s – a perspective that speaks to current debates on de-nationalizing/de-mothering women who joined ISIS. By examining repatriation cases from both generations through the lens of CBOW perceptions, this paper has begun to shed new light on the complex interplay between security concerns, familial belonging and children's rights, and the results open up new avenues for future comparative research on the inclusion and rights of Scandinavian children "out-of-place."

To conclude, I want to point out one of these future lines of research. In my view, the histories of displaced Scandinavian CBOWs have the potential to develop an empirical foundation for the so-called Nordic Human Rights paradox: The claim that Nordic nations promote human rights in their external activism but much less so in their domestic policies. Humanitarianism and human rights, as a civic *ideal*, have for a long time been of particular

importance for the Scandinavian self-image.<sup>111</sup> These ideals have increasingly come under pressure in the wake of the Nordic turn in the 2010s, and the current contested repatriations of displaced children and their mothers from Syria can be read as part of this development.<sup>112</sup>

Contemporary Nordic human rights commitments are subject to scrutiny, but empirical records of domestic human rights applications in the past are less well-documented than is commonly assumed. Hanne Hagtvedt Vik, Steven Jensen, Linde Lindkvist and Johan Strang thus challenge the presentist outlook underpinning the Nordic Human Rights paradox and note the need for more historical empirical studies on this paradox.<sup>113</sup> I argue that the controversies around CBOW repatriations to Scandinavia represent interesting empirically grounded traces of this paradox across time. While the present repatriation cases flip the Nordic Human Rights paradox, by heeding the children's right to rights domestically after their return but not while abroad, I view the Norwegian and Danish CBOW histories after 1945 as a well-documented domestic breach of children's rights. Finally, the Danish cases of displacement and repatriation analysed here highlight that the very absence of state measures constitutes an empirical historical trace of selective applications of rights with regard to children of enemy soldiers for both contexts as well. Further studies on CBOW histories thus present us with an untapped potential to advance research on children's rights and the history of childhood in Scandinavia.

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111 Kristian Bjorkdahl & Antoine de Bengy Puyvallee, *Do-Gooders at the End of Aid: Scandinavian Humanitarianism in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge 2021.

112 The Nordic turn refers to the impact of the changing geopolitical situation in the mid-2010s due to, for instance, the anxiety related to immigration after the 2015 refugee crisis as well as the fear of the terrorist threat posed by returning Scandinavian ISIS fighters. See Douglas Brommesson, "'Nordicness' in Swedish Foreign Policy: From Mid Power Internationalism to Small State Balancing?" *Global Affairs* 2018:4-5; Adrian Hyde-Price, "Epilogue: 'Nordicness': Theory and Practice", *Global Affairs* 2018:4-5; Bjorkdahl & Bengy Puyvallee 2021.

113 Hanne Hagtvedt Vik, Steven L B Jensen, Linde Lindkvist & Johan Strang, "Histories of Human Rights in the Nordic Countries", *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 2018:3.

## Summary

### Scandinavian Children "Out-of-Place"? Historical Perspectives on Contested Repatriations of Scandinavian Children Born of War

Children born to enemy soldiers, so-called "children born of war", are vulnerable to displacement. The contested repatriations of the children of Scandinavian mothers and foreign fighters from Syria in the wake of the fall of ISIS in March 2019 represent a case in point. Norway, Denmark and Sweden initially delayed and then only hesitantly or selectively supported their return – just as Norway and Denmark had done with displaced Scandinavian children born to German soldiers after World War II. The contexts differ, but the echoes in the controversies regarding the respective children's right to return ask us to look at the histories of Scandinavian-German children's displacement in Allied-occupied Germany in new ways and to broaden our understanding of Scandinavian children "out-of-place" today beyond security paradigms.

The main focus of this paper rests on the post-1945 Danish and, to a lesser degree, Norwegian cases of children's displacement and repatriation from Germany. By analysing the International Refugee Organization's meeting minutes, case files, correspondence and the documentation of two Danish repatriation family histories in the late 1940s, I trace how the specific perceptions of these children as "children born of war" informed their national and familial affiliation, their access to IRO support as well as their final placement.

Building on existing scholarship on the contested repatriations of displaced Norwegian children from Germany after 1945, my analysis adds: 1) new archival research on Danish cases of displacement, and 2) a transnational perspective on how a parental enemy stigma shaped the negotiations on the children's repatriations between IRO staff and family members in the absence of the state showing an interest in their return. These insights shed new light on the root causes behind the controversies around the national and familial belonging of Scandinavian children "out-of-place" that apply to the post-45 generation but also affect the region's children of ISIS foreign fighters as "children born of war." The results thus open up new lines of research for future comparative scholarship on the rights and inclusion of different groups and generations of displaced Scandinavian children.

*Keywords:* Children of Enemy Soldiers, Displacement, World War II, IRO, Repatriate the Children (NGO)

