

**‘Don’t just look for a new pet’: The Vietnamese airlift, child refugees and the dangers of toxic humanitarianism.**

**BECKY TAYLOR**

Reader in Modern History  
Arts 4.09  
University of East Anglia  
NR4 7TJ

Email: [b.taylor@uea.ac.uk](mailto:b.taylor@uea.ac.uk)  
Tel: +44 (0)1603 592433

**Abstract**

The Kindertransport remains the most common historical point of reference in contemporary debates over the present position of refugees in Europe. This article instead takes a very different emergency movement of children – the airlift of 99 ‘orphans’ from Vietnam before the fall of Saigon in April 1975 – as a historical point of entry into Britain’s relationship with child refugees. Although superficially a one-off, and an example of ‘toxic’ humanitarianism, in fact the event is suggestive of some of the key themes of modern refugee history. These include the tendency of humanitarianism to hollow out political contexts from the objects of their concern; the prominent, and sometimes problematic, role of voluntary organisations in the movement, reception and resettlement of refugees; and the place of expressions of spontaneous compassion by individuals who become involved in refugee operations. The article suggests that all these themes could fruitfully bear greater historical attention.

**Key words:** refugees, Kindertransport, children, history, Vietnam, humanitarianism, voluntary, 1970s

**Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by the Wellcome Trust under Grant 097727/Z/11/Z. The author would like to thank the anonymous referees for their comments on a previous draft and Lyndsey Stonebridge for assistance with humanitarianism during the revision of the article.

**Biographical Note**

Becky Taylor is Reader in Modern History at the University of East Anglia. Her work explores the relationship between minority and marginal groups and the state including refugees, Gypsy Travellers, migrants and the stigmatized poor.

# **‘Don’t just look for a new pet’: Child refugees to Britain in the twentieth century and the dangers of humanitarianism.<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

As the ‘Jungle’ in Calais was being cleared in October 2016, one of the most intensely debated issues was the fate of its population of unaccompanied minors, many of whom with relatives in the UK. Justifications for allowing their immediate entry rested heavily on the Dubs Amendment – named after Lord Alf Dubs, himself a Kindertransport child – which required the government to allow limited entry to Britain of refugee children displaced across mainland Europe.<sup>2</sup> Constructing a direct lineage back to the Kindertransport, Dubs asked: ‘We did it then; why can’t we do it now?’<sup>3</sup> While his invocation of historical experience succeeded in changing – albeit briefly – British immigration law, thus making it exceptional, the use of history itself in seeking to understand and shape the present refugee situation was unremarkable.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the willingness of commentators to use historical analogies as a way into explaining present-day dilemmas, Jessica Reinisch has rightly warned of the dangers of lazy historical analogy. Those seeking to mobilise historical example for benign purposes, as much as those seeking to use Britain’s ‘tradition of welcome’ to warn asylum seekers not to trespass unduly on the nation’s goodwill, are in danger of using history badly for their own purposes: ‘Every political project can find confirmation from history by selectively or misreading the evidence and isolating it from its context’.<sup>5</sup>

The Kindertransport stands as the pre-eminent example of Britain’s generosity to strangers in peril. In popular and political narratives, their arrival is both framed within, and nourishes, an understanding of Britain as a uniquely tolerant country, one steeped in a history of opening its doors to those in need. If Britain has a proud history of the shelter of refugees, the message runs, then its direct humanitarian response to children in crisis is the pinnacle of that history. Such thinking persists despite the work of scholars unpicking the inadequacies of Britain’s response to the plight of refugees from Nazism in the 1930s and exposing the manipulation of this ‘myth of toleration’ for cynical political ends.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I ask what happens if we shift our focus away from the iconic Kindertransport and look towards another movement of unaccompanied child refugees? What if we take instead the *Daily Mail*’s airlift of ninety-nine infants and children from Saigon in April 1975, as a historical point of reference for Britain’s relationship with child refugees? Was the airlift simply a one-off, and hence of limited or no historic value? Or are there useful points of consideration between this and other refugee moments that can offer historical insights or new avenues for research?

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘A warning about adopting orphans, ‘Don’t just look for a new pet’, *Daily Express*, 4 April 1975, 5.

<sup>2</sup> S.67 of the 2016 Immigration Act ‘make arrangements to relocate to the United Kingdom and support a specified number of unaccompanied refugee children from other countries in Europe’.

<sup>3</sup> Amelia Gentleman, ‘Peer condemns ‘shocking’ delays over help for unaccompanied child refugees’, 27 July 2016, available at the *Guardian* website [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/27/peer-condemns-shocking-delays-over-help-for-unaccompanied-child-refugees](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/27/peer-condemns-shocking-delays-over-help-for-unaccompanied-child-refugees) (viewed 11 December 2016).

<sup>4</sup> The Dubs Amendment was suspended in February 2017, having enabled the entry of 350 of the promised 3,000 children into the UK.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Reinisch, ‘History matters... but which one? Every refugee crisis has a context’, 29 Sept 2015, blog on the *History and Policy* website at [www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/history-matters-but-which-one-every-refugee-crisis-has-a-context](http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/history-matters-but-which-one-every-refugee-crisis-has-a-context), (viewed 11 December 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British immigration policy, Jewish refugees and the Holocaust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2006) for sustained historical critiques of such mythologizing.

Firstly, we can usefully situate this historical moment within the growing critical literature of histories of humanitarianism. It has been a long time since we have thought of humanitarian intervention as unproblematically and intrinsically benign.<sup>7</sup> Rather scholars and practitioners alike agree that humanitarianism in theory and action is inherently troubled and heavily embedded with disparities of power which consistently serve to hobble both its imagination and effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> Further, as a form of action motivated by a responsibility to ‘humanity’ rather than fellow citizens, humanitarianism can bypass or override the normal channels of state action, thus positioning itself above and beyond the state, demanding questions surrounding the ethics of intervention in an international order which privileges state sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> In short, given the long historical associations between humanitarianism and empire, and how it has walked hand-in-hand with political, religious and cultural imperialism, actions such as the 1975 airlift appear to demand to be understood firmly within this critical lens.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, however, we need to extend our gaze beyond the (neo)colonial. Recent work on Singapore reminds us that humanitarianism has a history more complex than one in which the coloniser simply ‘does to’ the colonised. Indeed, Frost’s work forcefully demonstrates that transnational compassion needs to be de-linked from Eurocentric analyses if we are to understand its existence within complex local and creolised cultural practices.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it is also useful to remember the strong tradition of relief and support work *within* Europe *between* Europeans. Quaker relief workers seeking to offer support during the 1921-22 Russian famine, the formation of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief in response to the humanitarian crisis in Greece in 1942, or the response to the 1956 Hungarian refugee crisis, while not wholly devoid of racially othering the recipients of their, all spoke of acts of compassion enacted outside standard imperial frameworks.<sup>12</sup> This is important, as it points to histories of humanitarianism which seek to understand the role of solidarity, empathy and compassion in ‘boundary-crossing benevolence’ beyond any reductive post-colonial analysis.

---

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid. Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2011); Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss (eds), *Humanitarianism in Question. Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2008); Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason. A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2011); Liisa Malkki, ‘Speechless emissaries: Refugees, humanitarianism, and dehistoricization’, *Cultural anthropology*, vol. 11, no.3, 1996, 377-404; Miriam Ticktin, ‘Medical humanitarianism in and beyond France: breaking down or patrolling borders?’, in Alison Bashford (ed.), *Medicine at the Border. Disease, Globalization and Security, 1850 to the Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 116-135.

<sup>9</sup> The Rwandan and Bosnian genocides undermined this position, resulting in ‘humanitarian intervention’ becoming the justification for war. See Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, ‘Human Rights and History’, *Past & Present*, vol. 232, no. 1, 2016, 279–310; Roberto Belloni, ‘The Trouble with Humanitarianism’, *Review of International Studies*, 33:3, 2007, 451-74. Although see Peter Nyers, ‘Refugees, Humanitarian Emergencies and the Politicization of Life’, *Refuge*, vol. 17, no.6, 1998, 16-21, for an alternative perspective.

<sup>10</sup> Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2002); Kevin O’Sullivan, ‘Humanitarian encounters: Biafra, NGOs and imaginings of the Third World in Britain and Ireland, 1967–70’, *Journal of Genocide Research* vol. 1, no..2-3, 2014, 299-315; Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Mark R. Frost, ‘Humanitarianism and the Overseas Aid Craze in Britain’s Colonial Straits Settlements, 1870–1920’, *Past & Present*, vol. 236, no.1, 2017, 169–205.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to argue that the position of British relief workers was not at least in part refracted through their position as British subjects, and hence carrying with them something of the force of empire.

Thirdly, then, it becomes useful to connect briefly with wider European, and specifically British, histories of charity and welfare. More particularly the tendency which emerged from the early modern period to construct and maintain distinctions between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’. Conventionally children - often bracketed as ‘women and children’ - were positioned as both intrinsically vulnerable and hence ‘deserving’ of charity.<sup>13</sup> Of course, within this, the very notion of child, needs to be understood as historically, culturally and legally fluid: it took the Victorians to develop a legal definition of ‘child’ and to embed within it the idea of innocence, and hence introduced both a requirement for legal protection and the possibility of redemption.<sup>14</sup> ‘Rescues’ of ‘orphans’ by charitable institutions from the streets of Britain’s cities were made explicable to their donors via narratives of ‘stricken waifs’ being offered via physical and moral escape from their surroundings.<sup>15</sup>

Folding an analysis of the Vietnamese airlift into these longer histories of attitudes to children moves us away from any lazy elision between the removal of children from their families and countries without due process and (neo)colonial mind-sets and practices in their most reductive form. We need only to think back to Britain’s history of forced child emigration to Canada and Australia right into the 1960s, and of the forced removal of children to state and religious institutions ‘for their own good’ to realise there is a more complicated story.<sup>16</sup> One which needs to pay attention to the active intersections of class, religion and welfare practices and how these intersect with longer histories of attitudes towards the child. Attitudes in which children were positioned as malleable and ripe for shaping by those charged with their care. In this formulation removing a child from an environment deemed by those with power as unsuitable has long been justified a legitimate, and indeed benign, act, offering the potential of a new life.

In part, child refugees’ supposed innocence has been based on presumptions around their moral distance from the political affiliations, ideologies and actions of (particularly male) adults. Such an understanding has allowed children as a blanket category to be unproblematically cast as victims of war and circumstance. Although men of fighting age are most at risk from reprisals and violent action, and young teenagers and children have long been active participants in war, however complex and problematic a conflict might be, children are most often depicted as the category most deserving and in need of humanitarian intervention.<sup>17</sup> This has played into responses to child refugees. Myers’ assessment of the

---

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers. The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998); Roert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Harlow: Pearson Longman 2005); Harry Hendrick, ‘Constructions and reconstructions of British childhood: an interpretative survey, 1800 to the present’ in Allison James and Alan Prout (eds), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London and New York: Routledge Falmer 1997), 34-62.

<sup>15</sup> Child is both a legally recognised category – those aged under eighteen in English law – and a much more fluid, historically contingent and highly gendered, social category. See Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2006); Simon Sleight and Shirleene Robinson (eds), *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016); Shurlee Swain, ‘Sweet childhood lost: Idealized images of childhood in the British child rescue literature’, *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* vol.2, no..2, 2009, 198-214.

<sup>16</sup> Ellen Boucher, *Empire's Children: Child Emigration, Welfare, and the Decline of the British World, 1869–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014); Michele Langfield, ‘Voluntarism, salvation, and rescue: British juvenile migration to Australia and Canada, 1890–1939’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* vol. 32, no.2, 2004, 86-114.

<sup>17</sup>And hence the focus for increasingly medicalised interventions to determine an asylum applicant’s age. Pieter JJ Sauer, Alf Nicholson and David Neubauer, ‘Age determination in asylum seekers: physicians should not be

evacuation to Britain of the four thousand Basque children prior to the fall of Bilbao in 1937 highlights the ‘powerful semiotic discourses’ mobilised by campaigners to elicit humanitarian responses from the British public. The child evacuees - despite the hyper-political nature of the Spanish Civil War, and their often close personal identification with Republican politics - were depicted in the press as apolitical, all ‘innocence and vulnerability’ and ripe for the ‘healing powers of England and the humanity of the English’.<sup>18</sup> This raises the question of how ‘child refugees’ have intersected with the actions of individuals and voluntary agencies. Voluntary, as opposed to state, response lies at the heart of much of the history of refugee relief movements generally and child ‘rescues’ specifically. It was the determination of volunteers and relief workers in the face of impending crisis and bureaucratic indifference which made both the evacuation of children from Bilbao and the Kindertransport possible. In part this is an expression of the difference between the working practices of states, with their emphasis on procedure and bureaucracy, and those of voluntary organisations and individuals. These latter historically have often been driven by the enthusiasm or passion of its workers, and their face-to-face engagement with events on the ground and their ambition to make a direct or immediate impact on these events. But here we need to tread carefully. The emergence of the legal field of child protection and of international adoption protocols, as much as the revelations over the devastating nature of forced child emigration, have made it clear that removing children from their home country should not be entered into lightly. While judging risk in the face of prospective war is fraught with difficulty, it seems a given that any humanitarian action should foreground the needs of the child over that of the relief agency or worker. And yet Heerten’s work on the Biafran crisis, demonstrates how the media’s privileging of the ‘emotional reactions of Western observers... over those of the Biafrans’ opened up a space in which the airlift of starving children –described by him as a ‘benign form of child abduction’ – became an acceptable humanitarian response.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps it is helpful here to think about ‘toxic’ humanitarianism, and how this might be distinguished from other forms of humanitarianism, even when these might be inept, ill-thought or even ultimately damaging.<sup>20</sup> Toxicity here, I think, locates an intervention’s genesis in something cynically conceived, driven by the interests of the perpetrator not the recipient, primarily for the purposes of publicity and short-term gain. While any benefit might be short-lived, toxic humanitarianism has the capacity to leave a long legacy of damage in its wake. Tempting as it might be to tie toxic humanitarianism to the rise of ‘celebrity humanitarianism’, a phenomenon often taken to have begun with Band Aid, or ‘brand aid’ as it has also become known, in fact there is a longer historical lineage of such actions.<sup>21</sup> In this article I consider the *Daily Mail*’s intervention – as recorded through the

---

implicated’, *European Journal of Paediatrics*, vol. 175, no.3, 2016, 299-303; Kate Manzo, ‘Imaging humanitarianism: NGO identity and the iconography of childhood’, *Antipode*, vol. 40, no.4, 2008, 632–657; Susan D. Moeller, ‘A hierarchy of innocence. The media’s use of children in the telling of international news’, *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 7, no.1, 2002, 36-56; R. Charli Carpenter, *Innocent Women and Children: Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians* (London and New York: Routledge 2016); R. Charli Carpenter, ‘“Women, children and other vulnerable groups”: gender, strategic frames and the protection of civilians as a transnational issue’, *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 49, no.2, 2005, 295-334;

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Myers, ‘The ambiguities of aid and agency’, *Cultural and Social History*, vol.6, no.1, 2009, 29-46,

<sup>19</sup> Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran war and postcolonial humanitarianism: Spectacles of suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017). I would like to thank the author for generously sharing his unpublished work with me.

<sup>20</sup> This is not to be confused with the ‘lesser-evil’ strand of humanitarianism identified by Eyal Weizmann in his *The Least of All Possible Evils. Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (New York: Verso 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Of course Band Aid’s intervention was pre-dated by the Concert for Bangladesh in August 1971, fronted by George Harrison and which aimed to increase awareness of Bangladesh’s liberation war and to raise money for refugees affected by the conflict. For critical considerations of celebrity humanitarianism see Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity 2013); Ilan Kapoor,

British mainstream national press, and the archived responses of central government and the charities caught up in the operation – in this light.

Part of the challenge in assessing the airlift, is how to remain attentive to the problematic and sometimes toxic manifestations of humanitarianism while also paying attention to the place of compassion and expressions of common humanity motivating those directly involved in relief efforts. This is not to argue that these two threads are mutually exclusive, for each relief operation can be made up of complex impulses, variously personal, political, opportunistic and contingent. For as Caroline Shaw reminds us, humanitarianism emerged in the nineteenth century more as project of aspiration than as an expression of fact. Those urging humanitarian engagement in the name of British democracy and liberty did so in part because these were characteristics which they felt *should* be part of British society, not because they were already established and uncontested elements of it.<sup>22</sup> So then, with an eye to these ambiguities and the deeply contested terrain of humanitarianism I will now turn to the Vietnamese airlift.

### *The airlift and its aftermath*

The fall of Saigon in the spring on 1975 generated concern in the West for the fate of the southern Vietnamese, particularly children born as the result of liaisons with American servicemen. Prompted by fears of reprisals on these children by the Vietcong, President Ford authorised what became known as Operation Babylift, the evacuation of two thousand Vietnamese children to the USA in the first three weeks of April.<sup>23</sup> Following his lead, the *Mail*'s decision to make a dramatic intervention into global events was cast in a passionate editorial as a heartfelt act of mercy, offering a 'raft of hope' to those drowning in the 'sea of despair'. Its readership rose magnificently to the challenge, within days donating £57,000 to the cause. This money enabled the 'Mercy Airlift', to be carried out over thirty-six hours on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> April with the intention of rescuing 150 orphan babies from the clutches of the advancing Vietcong.<sup>24</sup>

And although apparently apolitical – a simple humanitarian mission to remove innocent babies from a theatre of conflict – the wider political context was vital. The Vietnam war had been a Cold War struggle, and one which the West had lost. A heroic, individualistic effort could tap into the same vein as the Dunkirk evacuation, turning defeat into a story of triumph. This underpinned the *Mail*'s actions as much as the American's airlift.<sup>25</sup> And political capital could be made in other quarters too, since Wilson's Labour government – always politically suspect in the eyes of the *Mail* – had been granting entry to Chileans fleeing Pinochet's CIA-backed dictatorship. Another Cold War struggle, and given that these refugees were either explicitly Communist or at least left-leaning, refugees that in eyes of the *Mail* and the Conservative opposition were on the 'wrong' side. How could Britain turn away Vietnamese babies when it had welcomed Chilean communists?<sup>26</sup> Behind the geo-politics lay a far more cynical motivation, one expressed by the *Mail*'s editor David English, when he

---

*Celebrity Humanitarianism: Ideology of Global Charity* (New York: Routledge 2013); Lisa Ann Richey (ed.), *Celebrity Humanitarianism and North-South Relations. Politics, Place, Power* (London: Routledge 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Caroline Shaw, *Britannia's Embrace: Modern Humanitarianism and the Imperial Origins of Refugee Relief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Victoria Brittain, 'When are we going back to Saigon?', *Times Educational Supplement*, 18 April 1975.

<sup>24</sup> *Daily Mail*, 4 April 1975, 1. Quoted in Roy Greenslade, *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda* (London: Pan Macmillan 2003), 299.

<sup>25</sup> Brittain, 'When are we going back to Saigon?'.

<sup>26</sup> Extract, Hansard, 14 Apr 1975: The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA), HO376/209. At this point 683 Chileans, including wives and dependant children had been granted leave to remain in Britain.

explained that impetus for the airlift came from his explicit belief that the ‘function of a newspaper is not only to report on the news, but to help make it’.<sup>27</sup> This was a form of humanitarianism which demanded dramatic intervention and moral certainty, while offering an emotional journey to its readers.

Given these antecedents we should not be surprised that the most comprehensive account of the airlift describes the almost farcical situation in which Angus Macpherson, the *Mail*’s defence representative in Saigon found himself, as he sought to source the necessary number of babies.<sup>28</sup> Confounding neo-colonial preconceptions of a weak, chaotic regime, uninterested in the fate of its children, the south Vietnamese maintained strict policies on foreign adoptions. As a consequence of the American airlifts, by early April ‘the Saigon government had already sent most of its quota of children permitted to go’.<sup>29</sup> Pressured by the *Mail*, and having been ‘ordered’ to source 150 baby orphans by working round-the-clock through a number of different orphanages Macpherson finally managed to source ninety-nine children. Of these not all had birth certificates, twenty-two were aged four to fourteen and at least eighteen had severe disabilities.<sup>30</sup>

The actual airlift itself was physically chaotic. Again, in contrast to presumptions over an absent state, the Vietnamese kept the children corralled in a coach on the runway for hours, demanding to see the exit paperwork for each child, leading to dehydration of some of the infants. When finally on the plane where the children were able to receive some medical treatment, volunteers spoke of older children being distressed, and described futile efforts to identify babies by crayoning numbers on their backs.<sup>31</sup> On arrival at Heathrow confusion reigned as it became clear that not all the children had papers, that four of the children should have gone to Belgium and that three others, with authorisation to come to Britain had gone to America ‘by mistake’. Joyce Pearce, head of Ockenden Venture, which worked with disabled Vietnamese children in Saigon, and ran homes in Britain, confirmed:

Nobody knew what was coming on that plane. I didn’t know that our handicapped group would be on it And I didn’t, quite frankly, imagine that any children would come out other than those that had been cleared for adoption by the Vietnamese.<sup>32</sup>

Chiming with histories of Britain’s child forced emigrants, over subsequent weeks it emerged that a number of the children were not in fact orphans at all. Some had ‘never been in an Orphanage before, but had been put on the Airlift by their parents because their parents thought that they would be safer in England’.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the whole operation, four children had died, fifty-one were adopted – most in the UK, but others in Belgium, France and Switzerland – with the remainder staying in children’s homes or specialist care facilities for the rest of their childhoods. A documentary made by Channel 4 in 2001 – ‘Orphans of the Airlift’ –tracing their lives, showed the chequered outcomes for the children concerned.<sup>34</sup> Along with success stories of those who had gone to loving homes and thrived as adults, there were tales of long years in residential care, abuse and behavioural problems alongside

---

<sup>27</sup> Reported in UK’s *Press Gazette*, 14 April 1975, quoted in Greenslade, *Press Gang*, 303.

<sup>28</sup> Greenslade, *Press Gang*, 299-303.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Shockenden Horror’, *Private Eye*, 27 June 1975, cutting: TNA: HO376/209.

<sup>30</sup> Macpherson was rebuked by David English for not providing the 150 babies as ‘ordered’. Greenslade, *Press Gang*, 300.

<sup>31</sup> Barry Wigmore, ‘No names, just numbers scrawled on their backs’, *London Evening News*, 7 April 1975; Greenslade, *Press Gang*, 300.

<sup>32</sup> Janet Watts, ‘Plenty of sympathy, not much help’, *The Guardian*, 17 May 1975, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Notes of telephone conversation with Joyce Pearce by M Freeman, DHSS, 22 April 1975: TNA, MH152/457.

<sup>34</sup> See also Gemma Ryall, ‘Orphan Lê Thanh still fighting effects of Vietnam War’, 1 March 2011, available on the *BBC Wales News* website at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-16529143](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-16529143) (viewed 17 Sept 2017).

long-held feelings of loss, sadness and displacement. It did not need decades of hindsight to question the wisdom of the operation. Within days the *Mail* faced condemnation, and not just from long-standing opponents like *The Guardian*.<sup>35</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* argued even before the airlift that the best place for the orphans was in Vietnam, with other papers suggesting that while the children deserved support, the money would be better spent improving their conditions in Vietnam.<sup>36</sup>

The 'Mercy Airlift' can fairly easily be taken as an example of toxic humanitarianism, where the demands of short-term sensationalist journalism overrode the long-term well-being of a vulnerable group of children. Yet it is worth pausing to unpick some of the strands of this small moment of history to consider how they intersect with some of the larger themes of histories of refugees and humanitarian actions.

Firstly, the airlift tapped into the long-standing tension between humanitarian urgency and due process – a tension which by the late 1990s had become articulated as humanitarian interventionism.<sup>37</sup> Here, the pressure for good copy became translated into a larger tradition of refugee organisations and committed individuals demanding that the rule book be torn up, or at least ignored, in the name of the urgent saving of lives. The *Mail*'s assumption that it could remove 150 babies at three days' notice displayed both a crude disregard for the sovereignty of the Vietnamese state, and a crusading mind-set which positioned bureaucratic procedure as irrelevant in the face of virtuous humanitarianism. In Saigon the *Mail* was able to use the climate of fear generated by the Vietcong advance to ride rough-shod over British officials. Rex Hunt, Britain's consul-general, had been 'assured' that all the children were orphans, and he arranged all the necessary paperwork, 'despite many not having birth certificates': 'There was no doubt that I was being used... I could guess what the *Daily Mail* would say about the Foreign Office if we didn't help'.<sup>38</sup> On arrival in Britain immigration officials, rather than processing each child individually, under instruction from the Home Office to adopt a 'humanitarian attitude', granted them 'blanket clearance'.<sup>39</sup> Although the *Mail*'s motivations were very different than, for example, the Joint Committee for Spanish Relief which coordinated the evacuation of Basque children from Bilbao, both operations successfully applied similar bulldozing tactics to cast aside bureaucratic objections and explicit government policy.

Yet, the aftermath of the airlift showed how quickly the balance between the practice and priorities of states and bureaucrats, and the urgency of the humanitarian imperative could shift. Within hours of the orphans' arrival the Home Office had already begun to work hard at regaining control of the situation. Not only was it having to manage direct offers of similar operations – the Round Table offered to raise funds for another airlift, while 'a group of travel agents contemplated bringing a group in under the auspices of Save the Children Fund' – but they were also being approached with requests to grant visas. Rev Mother Margaret of Ladywell Convent, Godalming, asked for permission to bring 195 nuns and 80 orphans.<sup>40</sup> As the British embassy in Saigon pointed out, admitting the nuns was potentially problematic:

---

<sup>35</sup>'The orphans and refugees', *The Guardian*, 8 April 1972, 12; also 'The orphans of Vietnam', *The Guardian*, 9 April 1975, 15.

<sup>36</sup>'Suffer little children', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 1975, 14; 'Mercy not strained', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 April 1975, 16; Richard West, 'The babies that weren't for burning', *New Statesman*, 11 April 1975; Greenslade, *Press Gang*, 299-303.

<sup>37</sup>Ludwig Hoffmann, 'Human Rights and History'.

<sup>38</sup>Greenslade, *Press Gang*, 300.

<sup>39</sup>Information from Home Office Immigration Department, 8 April 1975: TNA, MH152/457.

<sup>40</sup>Notes of phone conversation, 11 April 1975: TNA, MH152/457; minute, 'South Vietnamese Children', 4 April 1975: TNA, HO376/209.



[It has an] excellent humanitarian ring about it, but there are of course many thousands of Vietnamese subjects who are more deserving... If it is known in UK that we are agitating for this party, will there not be infinite requests for official support for exit visas for individuals with friends or connections in the UK?<sup>41</sup>

Refusing the convent's request, and indeed making it clear that no more orphan airlifts would be authorised, the Home Office emphasised Britain's position as a 'small and overcrowded country, and... not a country of immigration'. Instead of being swayed by the plight of particular groups in Vietnam, civil servants were mindful of Britain's 'substantial obligations... towards UKPH and the dependants of Commonwealth citizens' despite restrictions brought in with the 1971 Immigration Act. Consequently government was only willing to sanction a 'token' number of refugees from Vietnam, selected from those able to demonstrate 'some kind of tie with the United Kingdom', so that only a further 142 Vietnamese refugees were granted entry to Britain before the 'boat people' crisis of 1979.<sup>42</sup> It was not simply the British government which took a firm line – the Vietnamese authorities also rapidly made it clear that no child without proper clearance and documentation would be allowed to leave in any subsequent airlift.<sup>43</sup>

Just as vigorous individual effort could overturn, albeit briefly, government procedure, it was equally the case that the urgency of the moment could also redirect voluntary organisations' working practices. And again, some of its effects were toxic, as well-established procedures were overridden in the name of humanitarian urgency. In Saigon in the hours leading up to the airlift Ockenden Venture and Project Vietnamese Orphan (PVO) – led by the Rev. Pat Ashe – had worked closely with the *Mail*. Ockenden had felt that their home was 'at risk of break-ins and shoot-outs' as Saigon had succumbed to 'an atmosphere of panic' and had agreed to have children under their care included in the airlift.<sup>44</sup> Yet on arrival in Britain, very quickly cracks in the alliance between the organisations began to show. Ashe, and PVO, had as a core aim the 'rescue' of as many Vietnamese baby and child orphans as possible and their adoption into British Christian families, and to this end Ashe strenuously lobbied the Home Office. By contrast Ockenden had an explicit policy of not removing children from their country of origin, nor of supporting adoptions in children over eighteen months old.<sup>45</sup> Now it found itself, as the only British organisation registered to accept unaccompanied stateless children, caring for the children in two of its homes, Keffolds and Kilmore Houses in Surrey.

The scramble to 'rescue' the children caused a number of intertwined problems. Most immediately, there was no clarity over which organisation had care over which children. All, except those immediately going on to a third country, were sent to Keffold and Kilmore but Ashe spent months arguing that PVO should be allowed to house 'their' children, leading to an unedifying tussle over a number of months between the two organisations. Pearce, head of Ockenden, felt strongly that Ashe was 'unreliable and interested in saving 'souls' not children', and worked hard to 'deny him access to any child'.<sup>46</sup> Matters were further complicated by the absence of paperwork, for while PVO was keen to get as many children adopted as possible, British courts would not sanction adoptions in the absence of

---

<sup>41</sup> British Embassy Telegram, Saigon, 'Evacuation of nuns and orphans for Ladywell', 15 April 1975: TNA, HO376/197.

<sup>42</sup> Refugees from Indo-China, 'Background Note', November 1976, and letter from T Fitzgerald, Home Office to DF Hawley, FCO, 30 April 1975: TNA, HO376/197.

<sup>43</sup> Minute, 'South Vietnamese Children', 4 April 1975: TNA, HO376/209.

<sup>44</sup> Brittain, 'When are we going back to Saigon?'

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Patrick Ashe to Alex Lyon, 16 June 1975: TNA, HO376/197.

<sup>46</sup> Minute by J MacCarthy, DHSS, 21 April 1975: TNA, MH152/457.

Vietnamese documentation proving a child's orphan status. Of the fifty-four children that PVO said were intended for adoption only nineteen had with them the necessary clearance. This, in combination with the fact that the expected social breakdown had not occurred when the Vietcong entered the city, meant that as Ashe continued to press for adoptions and planned more airlifts, days after the airlift Ockenden was already talking of flying the children back to Saigon.<sup>47</sup>

While Ockenden took a dim view of PVO's attitude towards adoption, PVO repeatedly, and with some justification, complained of the children's living situation. Although Ockenden was licenced to take the children, its two homes were in poor condition and were ill-equipped to deal with the sudden arrival of scores of children of varying ages and care needs. Reports of the homes described them variously as a 'shambles', 'inadequate' and 'very bad, with health and fire hazards'.<sup>48</sup> This compounded by a mismatch between expectations and reality: 'instead of the weak babies they expected, they got four large nine year old boys and a girl, succinctly described by the Vietnamese social worker who brought them as 'the naughtiest children in the orphanage''.<sup>49</sup> Visits by the local social services found a number of shortcomings, so that although Kilmore was run in an orderly manner, it lacked 'warmth' and the staff seemed unprepared to engage with the children's needs:

The television appears to be left permanently on as background noise... The handicapped children were sitting about or lying on the floor in their rather small dayroom. Staff did not appear to have very much idea on how to try and interest them and there was very little talking. Most of the children could only make noises so staff said that they saw little use in talking to them.<sup>50</sup>

By contrast, Kiffolds was friendlier and the staff 'quite obviously had the children's welfare at heart', but here they were hampered by a lack of language skills and 'experience in child care, hygiene... leading to a lack of morale'.<sup>51</sup> Being cared for by a patchwork of voluntary helpers proved problematic, as the home became filled with 'many people offering their services, but not having much idea on child care'. Offering a contrasting perspective on the home, one of the volunteers, a local teacher, felt it was the resident staff who had failed to give 'any lead in organising the considerable number of qualified helpers... The result was chaos... and the general state of hygiene was appalling'.<sup>52</sup>

Taken together these accounts suggest that if giving home to child refugees was the humanitarian pinnacle of Britain's relationship with refugees, it was a very dubious pinnacle. Having thrown out decades-worth of experience regarding the pitfalls of extra-national adoption and the cavalier removal of children from their homes, the voluntary agencies were complicit in an enterprise for which they had not planned, and did not have the resources to maintain.<sup>53</sup> If the presumed innocence of the evacuees from the moral quagmire of civil war had justified their removal, their actual vulnerability and long-term needs provided the far longer-term context in which their lives were lived. As with the Basque and Kindertransport children, their future lives were by no means the simple story of salvation promised by their rescuers.

---

<sup>47</sup> Notes of phone conversations by M Roberts, 10 and 11 April 1975: TNA, MH152/457.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Brittain, 'When are we going back to Saigon?'

<sup>50</sup> Report of DHSS visit to Kilmore House, Camberley, Surrey, 17 April 1975: TNA, MH152/457.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Jeanette M. Whiteman, to Home Secretary, 8 May 1975: TNA, MH52/457.

<sup>53</sup> The *Daily Mail* continued to provide funds for the children remaining in the homes.

Prominent in the accounts of the reception effort and the early weeks in the homes were the presence of varied and multiple volunteers:

The house has on the day of our visit more adults than children ... [in addition to the staff there were] 2 WRVS ladies who came every day to sort through the mountains of clothing that had been sent in for the children... St John's Ambulance were being particularly helpful in offering their services, and were covering night duty. On one night eleven turned up which was quite obviously far in excess of the home's requirements, so now on an average four come each night'.<sup>54</sup>

These volunteers were important, and they tap into a final theme. As with all the refugee movements to Britain, people across the spectrum of British society were moved for a whole range of reasons – personal, religious, political – to give their time, resources and personal effort in the aid of complete strangers.<sup>55</sup> The eleven St John's volunteers, the WVS women sorting clothes, the fourteen year old boy who came to Kilmore house each day, as well as the volunteer doctors who had accompanied the children on the flight itself all formed part of a longer history of individuals who stepped out of their normal lives to help refugees in a moment of crisis. Often, in the writings of civil servants and even full-time voluntary organisations, the tone towards these transient helpers is calibrated somewhere between exasperation and patronising: they might be able to bring enthusiasm, but their lack of expertise, knowledge of any wider political or policy contexts rendered their help at best limited, and more often misguided or counter-productive.<sup>56</sup> When we combine such attitudes with an enterprise as compromised as the *Mail's* orphan airlift it would be easy to dismiss the presence of enthusiastic helpers out of hand. Yet given that the children's first experiences of Britain and British life was through contact with these diverse individuals, offering a historical account of individuals' voluntary engagement in refugee reception and resettlement operations becomes compelling.

## Conclusion

There is much to suggest that the Vietnamese airlift, rather than being an isolated, morally ambiguous one-off event, contained within it many threads running through modern Britain's relationship with refugees. From Southampton mayor's welcome of Basque evacuees to the city in May 1937 'on humanitarian grounds as he disliked the injection of political matters in these questions', to *The Guardian's* Christmas 2016 charity appeal for refugee children which side-stepped popular associations between Islamic terrorists and refugees, a focus on child refugees has long been a path to depoliticising what are in fact highly politicised events.<sup>57</sup> The *Mail's* insistence on evacuating Vietnamese babies can then sit within a broader historical framework of moments when children were used to make complex geo-political situations tangible to, and manageable for, the British public. Its original insistence on 'babies' might have been an extreme attempt to side-step the ambiguities presented by adult,

---

<sup>54</sup> DHSS visit to Keffolds House, 17 April 1975: TNA, MH52/457.

<sup>55</sup> On volunteers during the Hungarian refugee movement of 1956-7 see Becky Taylor, "'Their only words of English were 'thank you'': rights, gratitude and 'deserving' refugees to Britain", *Journal of British Studies* vol. 55, no. 1, 2016, 120-144.

<sup>56</sup> For examples from the Basque context see Ministry of Health meeting minutes, 4 May 1937: TNA, MH57/322.

<sup>57</sup> MoH minute by Roundell, 6 May 1937: TNA, MH57/322; on the *Guardian's* charity appeal see for example 'The Guardian view on child refugees: an appeal to give what you can: Editorial', 26 December 2016, available on the *Guardian Comment is Free* website at [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/26/the-guardian-view-on-child-refugees-an-appeal-to-give-what-you-can](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/26/the-guardian-view-on-child-refugees-an-appeal-to-give-what-you-can) (viewed 13 December 2017).

or (male) teenage children, refugees, but sat comfortably within a long humanitarian history of positioning child refugees as apolitical, vulnerable and uniquely deserving of rescue. Assumptions that the removal of children from their homeland was an appropriate and proportionate response to potential danger were supported by , but can also usefully be situated within a century-long practice of forced child emigration for ‘welfare’ purposes.

That the airlift was brought together by a combination of non-state actors again places it within a longer history. States, having little to gain from being proactive during refugee crisis which are not on their doorstep and which may threaten established immigration procedures, tend to be reactive. It was a constellation of non-state actors which drove the Basque evacuation and the Kindertransport, and which has been behind efforts to bring unaccompanied minors from Europe in 2015-16. Even when the British government was an active partner in refugee movements - the 1956 Hungarian crisis, the arrival of the Ugandan Asians in 1972 and the Vietnamese in the early 1980s – voluntary effort formed a significant part of the reception and resettlement process.

Yet sudden movements and arrivals of large numbers of people cause multiple logistical problems, and archives are littered with examples of voluntary organisations and *ad hoc* bodies struggling to manage the consequences of their humanitarian impulses. The draughty and damp bell tents of Eastleigh camp for Basque refugees and the use of empty holiday camps in winter for Kindertransport children suggest that Ockenden’s struggles to make its homes fit for purpose once again sit comfortably within broader historical experience. Similarly, the patchy life outcomes of the Vietnamese airlift children, the debates over adoption and whether they should have been returned quickly to Saigon resonates with the earlier movements which also struggled with the longer-term issues of child refugees’ relationship with wider British society. While a ‘rescue’ might be life-saving it offers no automatic happy ending: without a unequivocal legal status and sustained care and support into adulthood child refugees remain vulnerable. In turn this exposes both the limited resources of voluntary agencies charged with caring for refugee children and the differences between different agencies, pointing to the importance of developing fine-grained historical analyses of their motivations and working practices.

Critically examining voluntary organisations does not mean dismissing the efforts of countless individuals who have stepped forward to help refugees. Indeed, we can celebrate expressions of common humanity towards vulnerable strangers even as we take note of their limitations to intervene effectively in international crises. Little sustained and comparative historical work has been done on the motivations of individuals becoming involved in humanitarian movements, and this offers a potentially fruitful avenue of research. All the more so as much of Britain’s ‘tradition of welcome’ seems to flow neither from the rights of refugees under law nor rest primarily on state action, but rather lies in the spontaneous responses of individuals and voluntary groups. Perhaps if there is a single historical lesson to be drawn from the *Mail*’s airlift it might well be that refugees need protecting as much from quixotic and chaotic humanitarian impulses as from bureaucratic indifference.