

Unaccompanied Children

**Care and Protection in Wars, Natural
Disasters, and Refugee Movements**

Reprint of the 1988 edition

Ressler - Boothby - Steinbock

Special Note - 2018

This study was undertaken between 1982 and 1985 in an effort to better understand how to ensure the care of children found outside the protection of their families in emergency situations. It was first published by Oxford University Press in 1988; the publishing rights were returned to the authors in 2016.

In the early 1980s very little information about the care and protection of unaccompanied children was available. The full nature of the problem was not understood. No agreed guidance existed. That challenge was the stimulus for this study and book. The book helped define the structure of the issues and served as a seminal reference for many years.

In the years since the study's release, a growing body of information and guidance has emerged. Unaccompanied children continue to be identified in every emergency, leading to programs, research, guidance, manuals and legal frameworks. A much stronger consensus now exists with regard to "good practice". Persons serious about care and protection of children will wish to be familiar with current materials. The authors encourage the reading of this book largely for any contribution it may make in understanding the origins of some of the ideas and concepts of today.

Understanding has improved but the challenge remains. Today the numbers of children trying to survive apart from their families is even greater than when the study was carried out. Many uncertainties remain as practitioners aim to translate ideas to action in each new situation. Reports of current practice suggest both solid advances and serious gaps. The quality of care and protection of unaccompanied children remains the ultimate indicator.

This re-release is merely a reprint. No attempt has been made to update experience or to present new ideas. Thanks to many hours of work by Phyllis Ressler and Ann O'Brien.

ERessler

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This book is a product of a study carried out between June 1982 and March 1985 entitled *“Unaccompanied Children in Emergencies: Considerations of Placement Options and Legal Implications for Unaccompanied Children Displaced by War, Natural Disasters, and Refugee Situations.”* The study, which was an independent research project, was carried out by the three authors of this book, who are responsible for the analysis and conclusions. It drew, nevertheless, on the participation of people in many countries, to whom the authors are indebted for their information, ideas, and criticism.

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To learn about the care of unaccompanied children in resettlement countries, efforts were made to encourage independent national reviews within various countries. Howard Adelman (Toronto) led a research group at the University of Toronto in examining the Canadian experience. Helga Jockenhovel-Schiecke (Frankfurt), through the German branch of the International Social Service, reviewed the German experience. Joyce Pierce and Ron Baker (London), through the Ockenden Venture, provided a paper on past experience with unaccompanied minors in the United Kingdom. Susan Forbes (Washington D.C.), through the Refugee Policy Group, organized and carried out a review of the U.S. experience. Mr. Eric van der Houven (the Hague), from the Coördinatiecommissie Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Kinderbescherming, shared his research on the experience of unaccompanied children in Holland. Most of these papers are being published independently.

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Preface

This book has four parts. Part I provides an overview of the scope of the problem of unaccompanied children in emergencies. It reviews the problems of unaccompanied children and gives examples of efforts that personnel have taken and problems they have encountered when providing services. Chapter 10 provides an overview of the sociological and program issues, indicating the scope of the problem. It examines the reasons why children and parents separate, describes the characteristics of unaccompanied children, and critiques the assistance provided in ten selected emergencies from the Spanish Civil War to the present. An analysis of the historical experience then follows.

Part II of the book deals with the psychological vantage point. It provides a general overview of a child's psychological and social development as it unfolds within the family and is shaped by cultural influences. The discussion deals with the importance of family attachments and community ties of children in wars, refugee situations, and natural disasters. It focuses specifically on the unaccompanied child and looks at the effects of loss and separation, trauma, and care and placement. It addresses the psychological issues involved in reuniting families, and finally, the experience of children who have been moved to other countries through adoption and resettlement programs.

Part III of the book briefly examines the major legal issues for unaccompanied children, acknowledging the vast field of research and significant changes that have taken place since the first writing of the book.

Based on a distillation and integration of the most important findings in the first three sections, Part IV sets forth recommended principles to guide action in future emergencies. These recommendations stand on their own. People looking for practical implications can refer directly to this section.

The book was written by three authors in collaboration. Everett M. Ressler was principal author of Part I, the historical review and statement of the problem. Neil Boothby was principal author of Part II on unaccompanied children from a psychological perspective. Daniel J. Steinbock was principal author of Part III, unaccompanied children in comparative and international law. The recommendations in Part IV were written jointly.

Unaccompanied Children

Introduction

This is a study about unaccompanied children in emergencies: children who are separated from their families during wars, natural disasters, and refugee movements. Its primary purpose is to provide guidance for policy makers and program staff members in all phases of their dealings with unaccompanied children, from prevention through permanent placement. It aims to encourage the satisfaction of children's developmental needs and the protection of their rights.

The fate of unaccompanied children in emergencies is determined by their circumstances and the assistance provided or not provided them. Intervention on behalf of these children is often necessary, and experience, psychology, and law should guide these efforts. Therefore, by reviewing the history of unaccompanied children in selected past emergencies we first identify the lessons to be learned: common patterns and recurring problems. Unaccompanied children are then viewed from a psychological perspective with special attention to the factors which can increase or decrease their inherent vulnerability. Because the law provides the framework within which actions concerning unaccompanied children take place, we examine their situation in comparative and international law. These three analyses provide the basis for recommendations which we believe should guide future intervention.

Unaccompanied children have existed in virtually every past war, famine, refugee situation, and natural disaster. Unaccompanied children are also present in present-day emergencies. At the time of this writing, unaccompanied children from Vietnam, Kampuchea, and Laos are still to be found in refugee camps and holding centers throughout Southeast Asia. Unaccompanied children exist among the famine victims in Ethiopia, among Ethiopian refugees in the Sudan, and, undoubtedly, in the many other African countries affected by drought and famine. They are also among the multitudes affected by war in southern Africa. Children are separated from their families in Lebanon as a result of the conflict there;

thousands of others have taken refuge in other countries. As a result of the conflicts in Central America, unaccompanied children are known to exist in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica, as well as Mexico. Within the last several years, unaccompanied Haitian, Cuban, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran children have sought refuge in the United States and in Canada. These are only a few examples from current emergencies—there are surely many more. On the basis of past and present experience, it is certain that the future will produce its share of unaccompanied children as well.

For a child, being unaccompanied means living apart from the people who would otherwise provide nurturance, care, and protection—essentials for healthy growth and development. In the milieu of war, refugee movements, and natural disasters, where there are added dangers and difficulties, such care is even more critical. Disconnected from their own families, some children are fortunate enough to be taken in by other caring adults; others are not. For these children, being unaccompanied means having to search for food, clothing, shelter, and other essentials on their own. It may also mean being passed from one adult to another. Unless special assistance is provided, unaccompanied children are dependent upon the chance charity of others, which can fall short of even minimal care and protection. For most unaccompanied children, what happens to them is not of their own choosing, but is forced upon them.

From an administrative or agency perspective, unaccompanied children pose special problems. Relief officials must decide whether to search for unaccompanied children or assume that they are being cared for. When an unaccompanied child has been located, his identity may be uncertain, the whereabouts of his family and their intentions at the time of separation may be unknown, and current responsibility for the child may be ambiguous. Those involved must determine whether the needs of the child are being met in his or her present situation or whether further assistance is required. In the latter case, administrators or agency staff must choose what care should be provided for the child and by whom, and whether the aid is needed on an immediate basis only, for an interim period, or over the long term.

In many past emergencies, however, policy and program staff have not been prepared to make these decisions and have been uncertain as

to what actions should be taken, and, therefore, some unaccompanied children have received no help at all. They have been neglected, abused, abducted or exploited; some have become malnourished; some have died. Where there has been assistance, it has sometimes been inadequate or misdirected. Even when programs have satisfactorily met some of the needs, there has been little carryover of the lessons learned to subsequent emergencies. For all these reasons, this study seems needed and timely. While its focus is often on the past, it is directed to the benefit of those children who will be unaccompanied in future emergencies.

Although this book may also be of interest to psychologists, lawyers, sociologists, and historians, it is primarily intended for people directly involved with children. We have made every effort to limit the use of jargon and technical terms, as readers are likely to have diverse backgrounds. We have not attempted the exhaustive analysis common to some areas of historical, psychological, and legal research. Because of the many issues involved, they are not examined beyond the extent necessary to suggest policy. Rather, our aim is to provide an overview that will be useful to policy personnel, child care workers, relief workers, and resettlement staffs.

BACKGROUND

This book grew out of the experience of all three authors working with unaccompanied children in Thailand in 1980-82, during the influx of refugees from Cambodia, (Kampuchea). In this emergency more than 3,500 unaccompanied children were provided with special services. From the moment the unaccompanied children were first identified, relief workers and policy makers were faced with a number of pressing uncertainties including whether the parents of these children were alive and, if so, how to locate them; who was legally responsible for the children; what kind of care and placement would most effectively meet the psychosocial needs of the children; what would be the long term consequences of emergency actions undertaken.

Among the personnel involved, there were major differences of opinion as to what actions would best meet the needs of these unaccompanied Cambodian children. Some people advocated removing them immediately from the camps; others believed the children should not be moved prior to the completion of family tracing; still others defended the advantages of

caring for children within their own community, even in refugee camps. There were differences of opinion about assessment, tracing, protection, kind of placement, services required, and the resettlement of the children to other countries.

Relief workers in Thailand had virtually no information which could help resolve these questions. A search for reference materials was undertaken. It was discovered that while the care of unaccompanied children in past emergencies had posed similar problems, there had been no attempt to compile lessons learned or suggest ways of dealing with the problem. From this context the study was conceived.

METHODOLOGY

Out of the Thailand experience, it became clear that the many problems faced by unaccompanied children in emergencies, as well as by those who would offer them assistance, needed to be investigated from historical, psychological, and legal perspectives. As a result, an independent interdisciplinary research team was established: Everett M. Ressler was the principal researcher for the historical and programmatic issues; Neil Boothby for the developmental and psychological concerns; and, Daniel J. Steinbock for the comparative national and international law sections. All three researchers assumed responsibility for integrating their various findings into recommendations to guide future intervention efforts, which compose the fourth and final part of this book. Everett Ressler served as the coordinator of the study.

The actual research began with an effort to identify all available information about the care and placement of unaccompanied children in natural disasters, wars, and refugee situations from the Spanish Civil War to the present. While library searches provided access to existing published materials, much of the most valuable information lay buried in the archives of various national and international relief organizations. This finding dictated that special attention be paid to the collection of unpublished materials. In a similar way, efforts were undertaken to stimulate a review of the national experience of various countries in which unaccompanied children have existed. In this manner, information was collected, background papers were commissioned, and independent research projects were undertaken by individuals and non-governmental agencies

in Australia, Canada, England, France, Holland, Korea, Nigeria, Sweden, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the United States.

Interviews were carried out with policy makers, program personnel, and social workers who had been major participants in past relief efforts. The purpose was to learn as much as possible about the unaccompanied children themselves, the various causes of separation, intervention strategies, and the particular assistance provided and not provided in these emergencies.

In order to better understand the contents within which emergencies occur, as well as the problems faced by countries offering refugees or displaced persons temporary and permanent asylum, visits to ongoing emergency areas and to current resettlement programs for unaccompanied children were a third component of this research project. Assessments of programs for unaccompanied children were undertaken in Thailand, Korea, Nigeria, and Lebanon. Site visitations and interviews with directors of resettlement programs for unaccompanied children from Southeast Asia were conducted in Canada, England, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Holland, Switzerland, and the United States.

ORGANIZATION

This book has four parts. Part I provides an overview of the scope of the problem of unaccompanied children in emergencies. It then reviews the problems of unaccompanied children and gives examples of efforts that personnel have taken and problems they have encountered when providing services. Chapter 10 provides an overview of the sociological and program issues, indicating the scope of the problem. It examines the reasons why children and parents separate, describes the characteristics of unaccompanied children, and critiques the assistance provided in ten selected emergencies from the Spanish Civil War to the present. These were chosen from a larger number of emergencies on the basis of significance and available documentation. An analysis of the historical experience then follows.

Part II of the book deals with the psychological vantage point. It first provides a general overview of a child's psychological and social development as it unfolds within a family and is shaped by cultural influences. The discussion then deals with the importance of family attachments and

community ties of children in wars, refugee situations, and natural disasters. It then focuses specifically on the unaccompanied child and looks at the effects of loss and separation, other trauma, and care and placement. Next, it addresses the psychological issues involved in reuniting families, and finally, the experience of children who have been moved to other countries through adoption and resettlement programs.

Part III of the book examines the major legal issues for unaccompanied children, beginning with the family and child welfare law framework relevant in most countries. After presenting the law of emergencies, particularly of armed conflict and refugee status, it goes on to discuss issues of jurisdiction and choice of law, and concludes with an analysis of the legal role of international and voluntary organizations.

Based on a distillation and integration of the most important findings of the first three sections, Part IV sets forth recommended principles to guide action in future emergencies. These recommendations stand on their own. People looking for practical implications can refer directly to this section.

The book was written by the three authors in collaboration. Everett M. Ressler was principal author of Part I, the historical review and statement of the problem. Neil Boothby was principal author of Part II on unaccompanied children from a psychological perspective. Daniel J. Steinbock was principal author of Part III, unaccompanied children in comparative and international law. The recommendations in Part IV were written by all three authors.

TERMINOLOGY

Some common understanding of certain terms is required for discussion. For the terms that follow we use the meaning given here unless the context indicates otherwise.

Unaccompanied child. *A person who is under the age of majority and not accompanied by a parent, guardian, or other person who by law or custom is responsible for him or her.* This definition focuses on the absence of any adult with firm legal or customary responsibility for the child. It excludes from consideration children who are accompanied by one parent or guardian. Historically, children without parents or guardians have been described by various terms, and even when the

term *unaccompanied child* has been used, different meanings have been ascribed to it. The reference to the age of majority in this definition is intended to refer the issue of whether a person is a “child” to the relevant local law or custom. Every effort is made to use the term as it is defined here throughout the book, but at times in the historical chapters we use data based on contemporaneous, local definitions. Because there is no standard definition of unaccompanied child, one is proposed in Part VI.

Emergency. *A crisis such as a war, refugee movement, or natural disaster.* This definition aims to distinguish circumstances of crisis and social upheaval from more normal times, recognizing that there is often no clear line of demarcation between the two.

Parent. *A natural or adoptive mother or father.* When foster or other substitute parents are mentioned, they are so designated.

Family. *A group of people related by blood or marriage.* Unless otherwise noted, this term is used to denote the extended family as it is defined in the particular culture or cultures being discussed.

Refugee. *A person who has fled or has otherwise been displaced from his or her home.* The more limited definition of this term used in international law is reserved for and discussed in Part III.

I

THE PROBLEM OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN

Children have been separated from their families in virtually every war, refugee situation, famine, and natural disaster. (See Table I-1.) In a single emergency the number of children separated from parents can range from a few to hundreds of thousands. At the end of World War II, for example, there were at least 50,000 “homeless” children in most European countries and as many as 200,000 in some.¹ Estimates of the total number of orphaned and abandoned children during the entire war are as high as 13,000,000.² During the civil wars in Spain, Korea, and Nigeria, there were approximately 100,000 unaccompanied children in each country at any given time. Unaccompanied children comprised approximately three to five percent of the Hungarians who fled their homeland after the 1956 revolt, of Cuban refugees who went to the United States, and of Cambodians who entered Thailand after 1979. In situations where more of the refugees are predominately women and children, however, the percentage of unaccompanied children can be much higher.

Even the figures in these examples understate the magnitude of the problem. First, family separations have seldom been counted and cumulative totals are even rarer. Figures such as those above are usually estimates of the number of unaccompanied children at a particular time, for example, at some point during a war or at its end. Second, figures are usually based on select groups of unaccompanied children, generally the more obvious ones. Children living alone, children picked up by unrelated families, street children, and those abducted are often not included. Consequently, the number of unaccompanied children not counted in official tallies can be quite large. Among Kampuchean refugees, for example, the number of unaccompanied children who made informal

family arrangements was estimated to be at least as high as that of those who sought official assistance. Third, statistics for unaccompanied children do not include those who died during the emergency. An estimated 1,800,000 children under the age of sixteen died in Poland during World War II. No one will ever know how many of them died as unaccompanied children. Yet it is known that children in general, and unaccompanied children more specifically, often have the highest mortality rates in emergencies. Fourth, statistics are often misleading because the terms used to describe unaccompanied children have varied and even the same terms have been used differently at different times. *Orphan*, for example, sometimes refers to children who have lost both parents, while at other times to those who have lost only one.

Table 1-1. Selected Examples of Emergencies with Large Numbers of Unaccompanied Children

1915 Armenian Massacre. Some 132,000 Armenian children were rescued, including 63,000 who went to France with their families, 30,000 placed into orphanages in Russian Armenia, and 10,000 in orphanages in Greece.¹

1919 Russian Famine and Revolution. The number of abandoned children was reported to be seven million, of whom 800,000 were provided institutional care.²

1936 Spanish Civil War. At one point during the war the number of orphaned and abandoned children was reported to be 90,000.³ The total number of children separated from parents is unknown. More than 20,000 children were evacuated to other countries.⁴

1939 World War II. The number of orphans and abandoned children was reportedly as high as 13,000,000.⁵ After the war national services provided for most unaccompanied children, and the United Nations organizations provided special services for more than 22,000 displaced, unaccompanied children.⁶ The large evacuations of children during the war are noteworthy. Within Great Britain more than 730,000 children were moved from urban centers to rural communities.⁷ In another evacuation more than 67,000 Finnish children were evacuated to Sweden.⁸

1948 Greek Civil War. More than 23,000 children were abducted to neighboring countries by guerrillas⁹, and the Greek government relocated at least another 14,500 from war zones to safer places within Greece.¹¹

1950 Korean War. At one period during the war the number of unaccompanied children was estimated to be as high as 100,000¹¹ of whom 10,000 were street children. The total number of unaccompanied children is unknown. At the end of the war, some 53,000 children were in orphanages.¹²

1954 Tibetan Refugees. Among the approximately 80,000 Tibetan people to take refuge in India were unaccompanied children. At least 2,000 children, some orphans, but some with absent working parents, needed and were provided residential care. At least 250 Tibetan children were subsequently resettled in Switzerland.¹³

1954 Vietnam War. Total number of unaccompanied children is unknown. In South Vietnam in 1973 there were 880,000 children reported to be “orphans” (this included true orphans and children with one surviving parent); 20,000 children were then in registered orphanages; and 5,000 were estimated to be living as street children, or in nonregistered orphanages.¹⁴ At least 3,900 children were moved to other countries through adoption services including those moved in the babylift.

1956 Hungarian Revolt. Among the refugees during this revolt were at least 6,000 unaccompanied children.

1960 Cuban Revolution. Between 1960 and 1983, parents and Cuban authorities sent some 17,000 children from Cuba to the United States.

1970 Nigerian Civil War. During the war, the number of unaccompanied children is estimated to have been at least 100,000. The total number of unaccompanied children is unknown. An estimated 500,000 children died in one famine period during the war. Approximately 5,000 children were evacuated to neighboring countries. At the end of the war, 40,000 unaccompanied children lived in orphanages and relief centers.¹⁵

1970 Bangladesh Cyclone and Tidal Wave. Approximately 7,000 children were reportedly orphaned.¹⁶

1970 Bangladesh War of Independence. At the end of the war, estimates as to the number of orphans varied from 30,000 to 400,000.¹⁷ Some 6,300 children were placed in institutions and over 4,000 were cared for in temporary reception centers.

1972 Famine in Ethiopia. Over 2,000 unaccompanied children were identified in the feeding centers and relief camps¹⁸

1975 Vietnam Refugee Exodus. Between 1970 and 1984, some 22,000 unaccompanied children left Vietnam.¹⁹

1975 Laotian Refugees. Between 1975 and 1984 it is estimated that more than 2,000 unaccompanied Lao children who had taken refuge in Thailand were resettled in other countries.²⁰

1979 Cambodian Crises. The total number of unaccompanied children is unknown. In 1980, approximately 6,000 children were living in institutions in Cambodia.²¹ The number of unaccompanied Khmer children to take refuge in Thailand is estimated to have been at least 5,000.

1. Dorothy Legarreta, *The Guernica Generation* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1985), in Notes, quoting John Frope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem* (Oxford, 1937), pp. 30-38.

2. Save the Children Fund International Union, *Proceedings of the First General Congress on Child Welfare* (Geneva, 24 August to 28 August 1925), Part II, p. 43.

3. Patrick Murphy Malin, Report to the Committee on Spain and to the American Friends Service Committee, IUCW Archives, p. 19.

4. Legarreta, op. cit. This book documents the evacuation of the Basque children and their subsequent care.

5. Harbar et al., log. cit.

6. This figure refers to those unaccompanied children assisted by UNRRA and IRO through special programs between 1945 to 1951.

7. Gillian Wagner, *Children of the Hmpire*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1982), p. 248.

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9. "Repatriation of Greek Children," quoting figures as reported by the League of Red Cross Societies. n. d.

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12. David C. Chi, "The Institutional Care of Children in Korea," study papers, 1984.

13. Marianne Kahnert, "Tibetan Children in Switzerland," a Review of the Emergency situation and a summary of the Comparative Study on Young Tibetans in CH (Switzerland), quoting Aeschmann, and Junge Tibeter, study papers, p. 5.

14. Jean and John Thomas, "Visit to the Republic of Vietnam," Report to USAID, November 1973.

15. Fredrick Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafra Story* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 257.

16. Bette Sprung-Miller, "General Information Concerning Government Operated Orphanages," quoting the Directorate of Social Welfare, November 1972. It was also indicated that within one year all but 600 of the children had returned to their "parents or guardians."

17. Bette Sprung-Miller, "A Study of the UICW Programme in Bangladesh, with Recommendations," January 1973, pp. 4 and 6.

18. Mekuria Bulcha, "Final Report on Children Relief and Rehabilitation Activities in the Drought Affected Province of Wollo," Ethiopia (Dessie), April 1976, p. 3.

19. See Chapter 8, footnote no. 45.

20. Accurate statistics on the number of unaccompanied Lao children resettled from Thailand exist only for the last several years. The figure of 2,000 is based on a departure rate of between 27 and 47 children per month, estimated by the UNHCR.

21. Helga Jockenhovel-Schiecke, "The Unaccompanied Minor Refugee from Kampuchea in the Camps of Thailand," International Social Service-German Branch, November 1981.

Lastly, statistics about family separations are available for only a few of the wars, mass population movements, famines, and natural disasters since World War II.

The precise number of all children separated from their families in emergencies this century will never be known, but the tally would likely be in the millions. Such a large number seems plausible only when compared with the magnitude of the disruption and losses caused by the monumental crises that have plagued the world in the last eighty years. World War I, the Russian Revolution and famine, the Armenian massacres, the famines in India, and the Spanish Civil War were but a few of the earlier large-scale emergencies. At least fifty million people died in World War II alone, and in the forty years that followed some 145 smaller conflicts have claimed the lives of an additional twenty million people. One hundred million men, women, and children are estimated to have been forced to leave their homelands since 1900 because of war, political upheaval, and persecution, and even more people have been displaced within their own countries for the same reasons. Tens of millions have also died or been displaced by famines and by such natural disasters as drought, floods, cyclones, and earthquakes.

No attempt has been made to document the number of unaccompanied children in present-day emergencies, but on the basis of the scattered information available it is safe to say that the total is very likely in the range of hundreds of thousands of children. It should be kept in mind that at the time of this writing there are wars and internal conflicts occurring in some forty countries. An estimated ten million persons are living away from their homelands as displaced persons. Drought and famine in Africa threaten millions of people, and natural disasters continue to occur around the world almost daily. In all of these emergencies, children are separated from their families.

There is some correlation between the type of emergency and the relative number of unaccompanied children. More children are likely to be separated from their families in war, refugee, and famine situations than in cyclones and earthquakes. Children most often separate from families in which a death has occurred or the parents themselves have separated, or where there is a continuing threat to safety, abject poverty, or displacement. Such circumstances are more likely to follow in wars, famines, and refugee situations, than in natural disasters. While many lives may be lost

and the hardships great after natural disasters, seldom is the extent of deprivation comparable to that created by man-made emergencies.

This then, is the broad picture of unaccompanied children in emergencies, but the plight of these children is best understood in the context of individual crises. What follows is the account of nine emergencies. Each presents a discrete story of children separated from their families and of the assistance subsequently provided. Together, these case studies provide a broader view of the nature and dimensions of the problems that unaccompanied children face in emergencies. Commonalities can be discerned and these will be described and examined in Chapter 10.

1

Spanish Civil War

Thousands of children separated from their families during the Spanish Civil War. To understand how and why such large numbers of children were unaccompanied in this emergency necessitates an examination of the actions of all involved children, parents, families, organizations, and governments. It requires at least a brief review of the Spanish Civil War as social history, from the perspective of individual families. The evacuation of children here also provides a valuable case study of problems that can arise with the movement of children in time of crisis.

Civil unrest, rapid changes of government, and revolts preceded the war by several years. Actual fighting began on 17 July 1936 with a revolt by Spanish troops led by General Francisco Franco against the elected Republican government. The insurgents represented conservative values, defended the traditional feudal systems, and sought to implement an authoritarian regime. The elected liberal Republican government was composed of a coalition of parties (with the socialists and anarchists most prominent) and was dedicated to sweeping political and economic changes. Spain was quickly divided by provinces, cities, and in some cases within individual families for or against the insurgents. Helped by Moroccan troops and with military assistance from Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany, Franco's forces fought Spanish troops loyal to the existing government and finally defeated them. The war ended in 1939.

Fighting in the Spanish Civil War was localized. Those who suffered most from the war lived in the areas controlled by the losing Republican government. About one million people were killed, and the war continues to be remembered for its brutality. Even young children were sometimes hanged. There was little discipline among the soldiers and hastily recruited civilians on both sides. Also, for the