

**Unaccompanied minors in Europe then and now:  
A comparative approach of the status of displaced children following World War  
II and the 21st century Mediterranean refugee crisis**

by  
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A Thesis submitted to  
The Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies &  
The Department of International and European Studies University of Macedonia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the **Degree of Master of Arts in Human Rights and Migration Studies**

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Thessaloniki, November 2021

## *Acknowledgements*

*Having completed the multi-month process of writing this thesis, I could not omit to thank all those people who supported me and helped in one way or another. First of all, I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Mr Nikolaos Zaikos, for his support, patience and guidance from the first to the last moment. I would also like to express my honest gratitude to my parents and sister, as well as to my friends, who have always been there, encouraging me from the beginning to the end of this challenging procedure of finishing my master thesis.*

## **Abstract**

Over the last few years, especially after the Mediterranean refugee crisis, the discourse around the issue of unaccompanied children, who were within the numerous refugee flows destined for Europe, has increased. Nevertheless, this has not been the first time that Europe experienced the presence of such a huge number of unaccompanied minors on its territory. This is a rather obscure part of history, which deals with children that were left unaccompanied after the end of World War II. This thesis examines and compares the status of unaccompanied minors in the following periods: the period following World War II and the period of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean refugee crisis. In an effort to analyse their interconnection through a comparative approach, it explores the several aspects that shape their status in both eras. These aspects under examination are the reasons that make children unaccompanied, the legal context, the decisions taken concerning the fate of these children, as well as the conditions of their life. The study concludes that these indicators as a whole, although not exactly the same, do not totally differ between these two time periods and that there is an obvious analogy between them.

*The undersigned hereby declares that this thesis is entirely my own work and it has been submitted to the Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies, and the Department of International and European Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Human Rights and Migration Studies. I declare that I respected the Academic Integrity and Research Ethics and I avoided any action that constitutes plagiarism. I know that plagiarism can be punished with revocation of my master's degree.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tsani', enclosed within a large, loopy oval stroke.

Paraskevi Tsani

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## **List of acronyms**

CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EMN	European Migration Network
EU	European Union
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IRO	International Refugee Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNRRA	United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WWII	World War II

## **Introduction**

The 21st century Mediterranean refugee crisis has dredged up the issue of unaccompanied minors, around which there is much discourse. A lot has been heard about these children, who travel alone in order to reach the shores of Europe. According to Eurostat, in 2019 a total of 18.295 asylum applicants in Europe were considered to be unaccompanied minors (Eurostat, 2021). Nevertheless, the issue is not new and this is not the first time that unaccompanied minors have been at the centre of attention in Europe; after World War II, there were hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied children, as well. However, the part of history that deals with the children that World War II has left unaccompanied is probably not so widely known. Therefore, the issue of unaccompanied minors, apart from being one of the most sensitive and concern provoking ones when talking about refugees, it is equal parts topical, recurring and intertemporal.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relation of the status of unaccompanied minors between these two different time periods: the period following World War II and the period of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean refugee crisis. In particular, the thesis's objective is to examine the interconnection of the reasons which render children unaccompanied, their legal protection and handling of this vulnerable population through the political decision making procedure, and the conditions of their life in these two time periods, through a comparative approach.

The aim of the study led to the determination of the kind of research, which is bibliographic and its approach is multidisciplinary, covering a literature review that falls within the disciplines of social and legal sciences. More specifically, in order to cover the period of World War II and find out about the children that were found as unaccompanied, it was necessary to make a chronology. Moreover, the present study examines the reasons that lead to this phenomenon and the conditions of unaccompanied minors' life. Finally, it also examines issues of protection and handling of the population of unaccompanied minors by the responsible bodies.

Having made a detailed investigation of the literature, it was discovered that there are previous researches that have been made about the status of unaccompanied minors of World War II, as well as researches that concern the status of the unaccompanied minors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean refugee crisis. However, this topic has been

researched comparatively, i.e. regarding each period of time separately. Many researchers have already dealt with the issue of unaccompanied minors, which is a sign of the importance of this topic. However, the literature review revealed a gap concerning a comparison of the aforementioned phenomenon between these two different time periods. This is the orientation of the present study, which attempts to cover this inadequacy to a degree and shed light on this issue by making a comparative approach of the status of unaccompanied children during these two periods.

The study consists of four main parts. The first part is an introductory one. It contains the definitions and clarifications of concepts that will be widely used throughout the study, as well as an overview of the vulnerable status of unaccompanied minors in general. The following three parts move onto the same direction, and examine the same subjects, but from a different time perspective. More precisely, the second part focuses on the period of World War II. At first, there is a description of the historical context, in order to provide an image of the general situation in Europe immediately after the end of the war. Consequently, the study examines the reasons that made children be unaccompanied. Afterwards, a legal aspect of the topic is presented, by bringing up issues of protection and handling of the population of unaccompanied minors, through decisions taken to determine their future. Then, the study offers an overview of their life, referring to their living conditions and psychological situation. The third part is dedicated to the Mediterranean refugee crisis. In the beginning there is again a description of the general situation in Europe, in order to proceed then to the presentation of the issue of unaccompanied minors. Afterwards, the study explores the reasons that render children unaccompanied, as well as the circumstances of the unaccompanied journey. Subsequently, there is a presentation of the legal aspect of this phenomenon, examining issues of protection and decisions taken over their fate. Finally, the study provides an overview of the conditions of unaccompanied minors' life and their psychological situation. The fourth part, which is the last one, focuses on the comparison of the status of unaccompanied minors between the two time periods. It follows the same structure as the second and the third part, given that its aim is to compare the common pillars that construct them. As a consequence, it is divided into three further parts: it examines the reasons why children were unaccompanied, the legal aspect of this phenomenon and the conditions of their life.

## **PART I: The concept of ‘unaccompanied minors’ and their vulnerable status**

### **1. Definitions and Clarifications**

It is necessary to clarify some main terms that will be widely used throughout this study. First of all, it is essential to define the term “unaccompanied minor”, that will be the main focus of the study. It is noteworthy that in 2000 it was the first time this term appeared in an official document of the European Parliament concerning the asylum procedures in the EU member states (Parusel 2017, 1).

‘Unaccompanied minor’ is a term that consists of two parts. First of all, it concerns minors. According to Article 2 (k) of the Qualification Directive,<sup>1</sup> a ‘minor’ is “a third-country national or a stateless person below the age of 18 years”.

Therefore, ‘Unaccompanied minor’

means a minor who arrives on the territory of the Member States unaccompanied by an adult responsible for him or her whether by law or by the practice of the Member State concerned, and for as long as he or she is not effectively taken into the care of such a person: it includes a minor who is left unaccompanied after he or she has entered the territory of the Member State” (Qualification Directive, article 2 (l)).

Hence, this definition refers to children that are not accompanied by anybody responsible for taking care of them, neither their parents nor other relatives (International Organization for Migration<sup>2</sup> 2019, 219). It is exactly this point that differentiates this term from the term ‘separated children’. More specifically, the latter includes those children that may have been “separated from both parents or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives” (IOM 2019, 191). Consequently, children that are accompanied by other adult family members can be considered as separated and not as unaccompanied.

It is needless to say that a significant number of children who are found unaccompanied at a country other than their country of origin belong to the category of

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<sup>1</sup> Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees or for persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted (recast), OJ L 337.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter IOM

displaced persons. According to the IOM Glossary on Migration (2019, 53), displaced persons are the

Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, either across an international border or within a State, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters.

Children, as minors, were always considered as subjects needing special protection and rights. Therefore, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>3</sup> came to seal the fact that children are entitled to their own rights and to asylum, as although being children, they can be persecuted (Bhabha 2004, 231). The most basic principle behind any decision and action that addresses children, either taken by public authorities or by private institutions, is the “children’s best interests” (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union<sup>4</sup>, Article 24 (2)).

Unaccompanied children are usually asylum-seekers. Therefore, it is very important to bear in mind that unaccompanied minors have to carry a double burden and they face a double difficulty as far as their status is concerned, as they are not only minors, but asylum seekers as well. This double status is something that makes them even more vulnerable (Montgomery 2002, 56). It is worthy to mention that most of the unaccompanied minors who seek for asylum in the Member States of the European Union<sup>5</sup> are usually granted the refugee status or the status of subsidiary protection (European Migration Network<sup>6</sup> 2018, 16).

According to the Qualification Directive (Article 2 (e)), ‘refugee status’ means “the recognition by a Member State of a third-country national or a stateless person as a refugee”.

‘Refugee’ means a third-country national who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or a stateless person, who, being outside of the country of former habitual residence for the

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<sup>3</sup> The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, entered into force on 2 September 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, OJ C 326.

<sup>5</sup> Hereafter EU

<sup>6</sup> Hereafter EMN

same reasons as mentioned above, is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it (Qualifications Directive, Article 2 (d)).

On the other hand,

‘person eligible for subsidiary protection’ means a third country national or a stateless person who does not qualify as a refugee but in respect of whom substantial grounds have been shown for believing that the person concerned, if returned to his or her country of origin, or in the case of a stateless person, to his or her country of former habitual residence, would face a real risk of suffering serious harm as defined in Article 15, and to whom Article 17 (1) and (2) does not apply, and is unable, or, owing to such risk, unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country (Qualification Directive, Article 2 (f)).

However, Derluyn and Broekaert (2008, 320) use the term “refugee” not only for those who have been granted the refugee status according to the above definition, but also for every other child forced to flee to another country. We should take into consideration that the main differentiation between refugees and migrants is the existence or the nonexistence of free will in their decision to move. Children could not be considered as voluntary migrants, as they are not in the position to take a decision on their own to migrate, nor do they have the resources to support such a decision (Guarnaccia and Lopez 1998, as cited in Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, 320). Hence, based on this assumption and breaking away for a little from the strict definition stipulated in the Geneva Convention, we could informally consider that all unaccompanied minors could be characterised as unaccompanied refugee minors (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, 320).

Although these definitions are very recent, and even the refugee definition came some years after the disaster of the Second World War, in 1951, this does not mean that these phenomena were previously unknown. When talking about refugees and unaccompanied minors, people tend to think about the recent contemporary era, influenced by the current Mediterranean refugee crisis. However, there was a very big number of unaccompanied children among the thousands of displaced people at the end of World War II. Therefore, it seems that this issue is not something temporary, but it has happened again in the past.

## **2. Overview of the vulnerable status of unaccompanied minors**

Unaccompanied minors are particularly vulnerable as far as mainly their emotional well-being is concerned, which can be influenced by many things. Especially when we are talking about unaccompanied refugee minors, their well-being can be affected first and foremost by their refugee condition, by the fact that they have been separated from their relatives and that most of them are in the sensitive age of adolescence.

The refugee condition often involves the loss of every kind of social and cultural bond with the country of origin. Every aspect of the child's social life collapses and the familiar environment they used to live in is lost (Boothby 1991 as cited in Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, 321). They may have gone through traumatic experiences both in their country of origin and in the host country. Many of them have experienced war and cruel loss of their family (Davies and Webb 2000, 542, 547). Hence, having been separated from their family and having experienced traumatic events before their departure, they are more vulnerable to any mental health problems (Keles et al. 2018, 52). In the host country, their well-being is getting worse by the acculturation process that they have to go through in order to get integrated into the new society. They face a completely different society and mode of living, to which they have to adapt in order to survive. They definitely feel anxious and confused in this completely unknown context (Davies and Webb 2000, 551; Derluyn and Broekaert 2008).

In addition, the fact that most of them find themselves in this situation in the phase of their adolescence is very crucial for their development (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, 322).

Therefore, the development and well-being of refugee children, especially if they are unaccompanied, could not be compared to that of non-refugee ones, as it is affected by several factors that differentiate their condition.

As mentioned above, most unaccompanied non-citizen minors are asylum seekers. Asylum seekers, whose status has not been determined yet, face a lot of obstacles as far as the acculturation process and their integration in the host country is concerned, such as the lack of language knowledge and the difficulty in entering the job market. Status plays a crucial role in the sense of belongingness, which is very important for them. Belongingness could be divided in sociological and juridical. The first one refers to the

sense of belonging to the same community in the context of the nation, making the difference between insiders and outsiders distinct. This poses asylum seekers, who are usually considered as outsiders, in a lesser position. The juridical belongingness is about the legal status of people within the society, e.g. being a refugee, a permanent resident or a citizen. According to one's status, they are entitled to a certain number of rights. These difficulties are intensified in the case of unaccompanied children, who are more vulnerable not only because they are asylum seekers, but because they are minors and do not have the right to take part in most procedures and activities that adults can (Montgomery 2002, 58-59).

Although the perception of the host society is that these children belong to their country of origin and it seems that it is in their best interests to have them returned, the children themselves may have a different opinion. Article 26 of the Council of Europe Life Project Recommendations<sup>7</sup> (2007, 5) reads that:

Where a minor involved in the implementation of his or her life project attains the age of majority and where he or she shows a serious commitment to their educational or vocational career and a determination to integrate in the host country, he or she should be issued with a temporary residence permit in order to complete the life project and for the time necessary to do so.

Therefore, it seems that having made huge efforts to get integrated, to learn the language, to pursue an education path and a vocational career in the host country, their return could not probably be considered as a durable solution (Allsopp and Chase 2019, 305-307).

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<sup>7</sup> Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)9 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on life projects for unaccompanied migrant minors.

## **PART II: World War II**

### **1. The situation after World War II in Europe and Unaccompanied Minors**

The Second World War brought Europe in front of an unprecedented humanitarian and refugee crisis. The War left behind totally destroyed cities with buildings literally in ruins, so that they could not host anymore their residents. As a consequence, millions of people were left homeless after the war. Europe faced huge material losses. However, these losses could not be compared to the even worse human losses, which counted approximately thirty six and a half million, during the years that World War II lasted. What is very depressing is that more than half, of the total number of these losses, were civilians. Therefore, taking into account all these facts, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that in the postwar period men, because of their closer involvement in hostilities, were by far less than women (Judt 2005, 16-19, 22).

Displacement was another component of this war. During the war, tens of millions of people were displaced, either by the Nazis – so as to serve as forced labourers in concentration camps – or by the disastrous war itself. The eastern part of Europe was liberated by the USSR and this resulted in around fourteen million Germans losing their homes after the war and having to abandon their land. Most of them were women and children, given that the majority of German men had been enlisted by the Wehrmacht<sup>8</sup> between 1939 and 1945, and they found themselves in the four occupation zones of Germany. Among them, there were lots of displaced children that were unaccompanied. Emigration, deportation, ethnic cleansing and murder were some of the reasons that were responsible for children and parents' separation during and after the war. Only in the American-occupied zone of Germany, approximately 40.000 children of various nationalities and age, separated from their families or orphaned because of the war, found themselves in Germany as forced labourers or – born in Germany or not – used by the Nazis to rebuild the “Aryan race” (Taylor 2017, 3-5; Zahra 2011a, 4).

Most displaced adults – and children – in Europe originated from Eastern Europe: Soviet labourers and prisoners of war, Poles, French citizens, Italians, Yugoslavs, Czechs and Hungarians. Many managed to return home, apart from approximately 1.000.000 refugees – most of them East Europeans – who did not leave German

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<sup>8</sup> The armed forces of the Third Reich (Ray 2019).

territory (Zahra 2011a, 7). It was in 1957 that the last camp for displaced persons in Germany closed for good (Taylor 2017, 5). Some people were trying to escape the consequences of war, but it was the states' conflicting policies that caused greater population movements – in most cases forcible – that served the benefits of the different parties to this war. The result was a Europe with more ethnically homogenous states. Besides, it was believed that peace could be preserved only with the existence of such states. Therefore, the migration strategy of the East and the West followed this direction, as well. They did anything and everything in order to form states as homogenous as they could, by letting in and sending out of people according to what benefited them most<sup>9</sup> - although in some cases things were perplexed with Eastern Europeans who were now stateless and thus they did not have a country to go back to. This was something that was also reflected upon the issue of deciding the fate of the huge number of unaccompanied children, as they were seen as national property by the various states that claimed them (Judt 2005, 22-24, 30; Zahra 2011a, 19-20; Zahra 2011b, 334, 349).

Europe experienced the disintegration of family life, as well. The first priority of the survivors of concentration camps was to find the rest of their family, in case they were alive. However, according to the International Red Cross, for about 13.000.000 European children, the war caused the death of their parents. It is said that in the same period, orphaned children counted as much as 60.000 in the Netherlands, 400.000 in Poland and 500.000 in Yugoslavia (Simonsen 2005, 274-275; Wyman 1998, 86-87; Zahra 2011a, 5-6).

Even for those who had the opportunity to reunify with their family, the situation they found was not the best. Material deprivation was one among other important problems. For lots of children who had been separated from their parents at a very young and tender age, going back home meant that they would go back to unfamiliar people who did not remind them anything. Other children, mostly the Jewish and the East European ones, who were in exile or were hiding during the war, no more had the same names, religious beliefs, languages or national allegiance. This was the context when, immediately after the war, orphanages started being built and children being

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<sup>9</sup> “[...] expelling ‘undesirables’, repatriating exiled citizens, recruiting foreign labour, and even granting asylum to refugees [...]. Under such circumstances, nationalist ambitions to recruit ‘assimilable’ migrants could trump the postwar humanitarian rhetoric of family reunification” (Zahra 2011a, 20).

collected not only from concentration camps, but also from streets and places where they were hiding (Zahra 2011a, 5-6).

## **2. The reasons that led to the existence of unaccompanied minors after the war**

In the postwar period, lots of unaccompanied children<sup>10</sup> were living in Europe, due to the fact that they had lost their parents and so they had become orphans, or they had been separated from their family as a consequence of the war (Taylor 2017, 41).

In short,

There were the children of forced labourers and children brought for 'Germanisation', children from concentration camps and children whose parents had been sent to concentration camps. There were those who had survived the liquidation of the ghettos and those who had fled from villages where the whole population had been locked into barns or wooden churches before they were set alight. There were also German children who had been stranded with their schools in evacuation homes in Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland or other zones of Germany at the end of the war (Stargardt 2005, 390).

During the war, not many children found a way out of Europe in order to live a better life. Lots of them were taken from their schools in order to serve as forced child labourers. They originated from Eastern Europe, they were the so-called Ostkinder, aged even ten, so as to work in the Luftwaffe,<sup>11</sup> in quarries, arms industry and factories. Many of the approximately 28.000 Soviet children that served as forced labourers were still in Germany after the war's end (Wyman 1998, 89-90; Zahra 2011a, 11).

Children were also used as soldiers by the Nazi powers and were compelled to assist the German army. The Hitler Youth, which numbered up to 8.8 million children at the beginning of the war, were youth groups which intended to teach German children the Nazi principles, in order to ensure the future of Nazism. The Hitler Youth did not stop there, as Germany used young children as soldiers against the Soviets. Thus, the Hitler Youth served as a reserve army for the Nazis. Children were separated from their

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<sup>10</sup> Indicatively, by the end of the war in 1945, orphaned and lost children were estimated to be 53.000 in Berlin, 49.000 in liberated Czechoslovakia, 60.000 in the Netherlands, 200.000 in Poland and 300.000 in Yugoslavia (Judt 2005, 21).

<sup>11</sup> German air forces (Wikipedia 2021).

families, often forcibly, in order to be used as fighters sacrificing in most cases their own lives (Butcher 2020; Miller 2017; Wyman 1998, 89-90).

Aerial bombardments made Britain, France, Germany and the Soviet Union proceed to civilians' evacuations. Consequently, children were separated from their parents in order for them to be transferred along with their peers to places where they could be safe (Zahra 2011a, 10).

Moreover, Jewish children were imprisoned by the Nazis in concentration camps, being obliged to experience the harsh and inhuman conditions there. Only the strong ones – as all those who were not considered useful to the Nazis were exterminated in the gas chambers –, those capable of working survived and were deployed in the death industry of Nazi Germany: either preparing the different ways of killing or carrying the corpses. In many cases whole families were taken to concentration camps, were separated along the way and only a few, if any, of their members, finally survived (Wyman 1998, 90-91).

Another category of children who were left unaccompanied, were those of foreign mothers – forced labourers in Germany – and German fathers. These unmarried women gave birth to their babies and they left them in Lebensborn homes<sup>12</sup> in case their babies were considered suitable for being Germanised and thus eligible to be adopted by German families. In any other case that the babies were deemed as “racially unworthy”, they were totally neglected (Zahra 2011a, 10-11).

Among the huge numbers of orphaned and homeless children after the war were also those to whom German women gave birth after having been raped by Soviet soldiers. (Judt 2005, 20-21).

Another common tactic that the Nazis used in order to serve their benefits was the seizure of non-Jewish children from the conquered areas of Europe, and mostly from Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>13</sup> After 1942, these kidnappings took place overtly with the aim to maintain Germany's predominance and to counterbalance the human losses of the war. Children that met the requirements to fit in the Aryan race were chosen for “Germanisation”, in order to be assimilated and considered Germans. For this reason,

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<sup>12</sup> Lebensborn homes were homes established by the SS where single Aryan mothers could find “maternity and child care facilities” and leave their racially worthy babies to have them grow up like Germans (Taylor 2017, 70-71; Zahra 2011a, 10).

<sup>13</sup> According to Nazi records found by the Polish Red Cross, 3.000 children from Silesia, 5.000 from Lotz and 30.000 in the Zamosc Action (Wyman 1998, 91-93).

birth certificates were destroyed by Nazi officials and children were given new names. Birth certificates of children aged below six were exchanged with new ones, dated from the Lebensborn homes, which could not challenge their origin. Therefore, their true identities were concealed and falsified, so children were often confused about their nationality. They grew up in institutions or in German families who were often paid in order to provide them with a German upbringing, so as for those children to recognise themselves as Germans. In many cases children knew that they did not grow up with their biological parents, but in fact they were deceived as to what really had happened to them. The actual dimensions of this phenomenon were immense, as it is estimated that around 20.000-50.000 children from East Europe were kidnapped for the purpose of Germanisation. However, according to the UNRRA and the Polish Red Cross, in 1946 around 200.000 inquiries about lost children had come to the Polish welfare agencies (DW Documentary 2020; Wyman 1998, 91-93, Zahra 2011a, 11, 13).

After World War II, and in the logic that only sovereign and national homogenous states could ensure the peace, twelve million Germans who had been living in East Europe were expelled as the Russian army advanced and they resorted to camps in Germany and Austria. Among them there were many children, who were not all German, but also Silesian, Polish-speaking, Czech-speaking and Slovene-speaking. They were forced to leave the German orphanages, Hitler Youth camps and German families where they used to live with (Zahra 2011a, 11, 19).

This evacuation of Eastern Europe is connected with another special category of orphaned children, the so-called “wolf children” of East Prussia.<sup>14</sup> The disintegration of family life that was brought about by World War II was reflected upon this distinctive case of children (Zahra 2011a, 4). These were German children that could not manage to leave East Prussia during the evacuation at war’s end, as the Red Army advanced. They had lost their parents, so they were left behind, finding resort to the forests of East Prussia, wandering like wolves – that is why they were known as wolf children – and trying to cope alone (Fletcher 2019; Wikipedia 2020). Their exact number is unknown. According to estimates, the number of wolf children probably reached 25.000. Many fled to Lithuania, where they hoped they could find the wherewithal. If they were lucky

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<sup>14</sup> East Prussia was an area near the Baltic Sea that belonged to Germany in the interwar period. Today it is divided among Poland, Lithuania and Russia (Wagener 2017).

– mostly the youngest ones – they were picked up by families and were raised by them (Wagener 2017).

Another category of unaccompanied children concerns the children of the “paidomazoma” (meaning the “gathering of children”) of the Greek Civil War. In 1948, during the Greek Civil War, around 20.000 children were evacuated from northern Greece by the Greek Communist Party. They were taken to Eastern European countries that were ruled by socialist governments, where they could be taken care of and educated until the war’s end, when they could return. On the opposite side, there were the children that were evacuated from northern Greece to be placed in children’s homes in several towns of the country during the same period: children of the so-called “paidofilagma” (meaning “saving the children”). The queen of Greece, as a countermeasure, took on a campaign that aimed at removing around 18.000 children. After the closing of children’s homes in 1950, most of them returned to their villages (Danford and Boeschoten 2012, 4-6, 38). There is still a controversy over the element of force that was involved in these evacuations and the degree to which the evacuations from both sides were voluntary or not (Danford and Boeschoten 2012, 54, 93-95).

Finally, the Kindertransport was another venture that was responsible for the existence of unaccompanied children after the war. It was an intense and massive effort to save Jewish children from the Nazis and took place in the period 1938-1939. It resulted in thousands of children leaving Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, usually without the accompaniment of their parents. The main destinations were England, Palestine and the United States. This was the first attempt of children and adolescents to leave the Nazi Germany. (Kaplan 1998, 117; Zahra 2011a, 9-11, 60). The good point was that “By 1939, 82 percent of Jewish children under the age of fifteen had managed to escape Nazi Germany. Most emigrated with their parents, but approximately 18,000 Jewish children and youth left Germany on their own” (Zahra 2011a, 9). The majority of those children remained separated from their biological parents after the war despite the efforts for reunification with their family, as in most cases their parents and relatives had been exterminated in the concentration camps (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.).

### **3. The legal aspect of this phenomenon after World War II**

#### **3.1. Issues of protection of unaccompanied minors**

Given the fact that the United Nations were founded immediately after World War II, in 1945, it could be easily concluded that no legal instrument was then in force as far as children's protection is concerned. Besides, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted much later, in 1989. Therefore, children's protection was not legally safeguarded, let alone unaccompanied children's protection.

However, the predecessor of the United Nations, the League of Nations had already made a preliminary work, making a first effort with the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the Assembly of the League in 1924. Therefore, the ground was set for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, whose provisions are applied both to adults and children. Actually, two of its provisions concern specifically children.<sup>15</sup> Even more important was the 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations and contained more principles as regards children's rights (Ashton, 1986).

Nevertheless, it is very important to bear in mind that all these were just declarations. Of course, it is very important that at that time there were official texts like these, which referred to children's rights, because this means that people recognised the need to protect children. These were the forerunners of the subsequent treaties. However, only conventions are legally binding for those states that have signed them. Hence, the Declarations' character was non-binding, and they could not secure children from mistreatment. Therefore, at the period following World War II, there was not any legal framework defining child protection, although European countries had to manage a huge number of unaccompanied minors in their territories.

#### **3.2. Deciding the fate of Unaccompanied Minors**

When it was about time to decide the fate of the numerous unaccompanied children in Europe after the end of the war, lots of different actors were involved: not only governments and NGOs – both national and international –, but also the United

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<sup>15</sup> Article 25 (2), which stipulates that “motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance” and Article 26, which refers to the right to education.

Nations that had just been founded (Simonsen 2005, 274-275). Indeed, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was established in 1943 and it was responsible for providing material relief and rehabilitation to displaced persons – including of course displaced unaccompanied children – after the war, assisting them to return home (Taylor 2017, 17). However, all these actors had often contradictory priorities that led to battles among them, claiming that they were standing for the children's best interests, as it was not clear who would be entitled to do so due to the fact that the latter lacked legal guardians (Taylor 2017, 335). Therefore, although there was not any international convention in force at that time concerning the rights of the child, and the principle of the child's best interests appeared along with the very recent Convention on the Rights of the Child, the concept of the best interests has been present and important since then. Children should be first searched and found, they should be identified and then by assessing their best interests, they would be either reunited with their families, repatriated, adopted, integrated or resettled abroad.

The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration was the main institution responsible for tracing and helping unaccompanied minors repatriate and reunite with their families or at least go back to their homeland so as to be “renationalised”. (Taylor 2017, 43-44; Zahra 2009). After tracing the children, they should be identified as regards their nationality or citizenship. The child search teams of this institution were mainly focused on tracing children that the Nazis had kidnapped for Germanisation or that their parents had left in German foster homes. Of course the identification procedure was not an easy one, as in many cases the indications about nationality determination were not so clear (Zahra 2011a, 128-129). According to Zahra (2011a, 128), as soon as unaccompanied children were identified, they “were subject to the authority of their respective national liaison officers, who were empowered to approve all decisions about adoption, resettlement, or repatriation”. In reality, for children whose nationality was determined, the liaison officers played the role of the legal guardian (Taylor 2017, 108).

However, although the UNRRA was active in all Occupation Zones of Germany, the handling of the issue was not the same throughout them, as there were not any specific common policy guidelines to be implemented (Stargardt 2005, 390). Things got further perplexed when UNRRA was abolished in 1947 without having completed its mission. It was to be replaced by the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), even though the viewpoints of the two organisations did not totally coincided (Gnydiuk 2021,

2; Taylor 2017). It may seem negligible, but in fact these bureaucratic procedures and contradicting policies cost valuable time. Adding to this, fierce battles and political conflicts broke out among the actors involved, over the determination of the fates of unaccompanied children: “[...] military authorities, German foster parents, social workers, Jewish agencies, East European Communists, and Displaced Persons (DPs) competed to determine their fates” (Zahra 2011a, 3).

### ***Best interests***

Even though the principle of the children’s best interests is a relatively new one, it seems that it has been a concern provoking issue since the post-World War II period. It was introduced, first of all, to signal a shift from the Nazi practices, like the creation of the “Aryan race”; in order to achieve this, the Nazis took advantage of children by taking decisions on their lives, without considering what was best for them (Zahra 2011c, 51). All these conflicts mentioned above among the involved actors stemmed from the claim of the various actors that they stood up for the children’s best interests. Nevertheless, it seemed that in fact their real aim was to serve their own interests (Taylor 2017, 5, 335).

The most popular possible solutions that were proposed for those children in accordance with their best interests were a reunion with their families, or a repatriation or a resettlement abroad (Taylor 2017). Indicative of the opposing viewpoints of the actors is that while UNRRA was in favour of repatriation, the IRO supported resettlement. Both of them, though, supported the removal of children from German homes, considering that it was better for them to return them back to their country of origin. On the other hand, British military authorities had a different opinion, which coincided with that of the German people, claiming that separation from the foster family would be harmful for the children’s psychology. In reality, they were opposed to communism and they aimed at reconciliation with Germans. The American authorities wanted to avoid repatriating East European children in communist states and thus they said that the children themselves were opposed to communism. Things were not very different at East European states, where “ethnically incompatible”<sup>16</sup> and “politically unreliable” children that were not in favour of communism were not welcomed. It is not

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<sup>16</sup> The Volksdeutsche: children with German ethnicity but with different citizenship (Taylor 2017, 79).

so difficult to come to the conclusion that the basis of these disputes over the fates of unaccompanied children was the Cold War (Simonsen 2005, 272; Taylor 2017, 319, 334; Zahra 2011a, 131).

Family reunification was supposed to be of utmost importance; however, national authorities believed that children would be good for trustees of national principles (Stone 2020, 2). Besides, children always symbolise the future, and European countries wanted the future of their country back. This could be justified by the need to reconstruct the ruined after-war European societies and civilisation (Zahra 2011a, 3). In countries struck by the world war, regaining their children was of utmost importance for their reconstruction. Therefore, in this case the best interests were determined according to national drivers (Colomina Limonero 2016, 120; Gnydiuk 2021, 3-4).

### ***Solutions for the fate of unaccompanied minors***

Solutions suitable for each child were defined after an identification process, which was not an easy task and it required thorough investigation. This procedure was important in order to define the place where a child should live. However, it was not simple to determine in all cases the child's nationality (e.g. the Volksdeutsche and the Poles, Czechs and Slovenes). The identification process operated by UNRRA was based on the conviction that all displaced children had one nationality of origin, which was uncovered as well hidden as it was, with the aid of appropriate ethnographic and psychological investigation (Zahra 2011a, 127-130).

Therefore, possible solutions for these children were first of all family reunification, and if this was not feasible, the alternatives were repatriation, resettlement abroad, local integration or adoption. More precisely, UNRRA's most important priority was to reunite unaccompanied children with their families (parents, close relatives or legal guardians) or at least return them to their homelands if it was impossible to trace their families (Taylor 2017, 43-44, 99-108, 220). The attention paid to family reunification can be justified by the fact that separation, which was a common consequence of World War II, was a human rights violation and a cause of trauma (Zahra 2011a, 37-38). Besides, it was both the UNRRA's and the IRO's conviction that family played a decisive role for children's psychological development (Zahra 2011a, 61).

It is a fact that repatriation was a very qualified choice, although it did not seem so attractive to the persons involved. Resettlement abroad was the alternative that the IRO preferred to repatriation and it was a choice made for children who did not want to repatriate and their nationality was ambiguous. It was mostly implemented upon the remaining children, most of them Jewish. Economies destroyed by the war wanted to be reconstructed, by importing displaced persons in order to use them as labour. Although adults were preferable for them, because they could immediately enter the labour market, youth were also seen as future labourers. Certainly, all prospective host countries should persuade the IRO about their appropriateness as such, regarding protection and care (Taylor 2017, 220, 243; Zahra 2011a, 199).

For instance, repatriation was the solution that was implemented on the children of the Greek Civil War. By 1950 approximately 5.000 children had returned to Greece from Eastern European socialist countries. However, many of these children returned much later, as adults, when political conditions in Greece were not so hostile for refugees coming from communist countries, whereas some of them remained there for good (Danford and Boeschoten 2012, 6).

Of course, for a child to be either repatriated or resettled there should be a safeguard by UNRRA or IRO that they did not live with a close relative or foster parent or that the adult caregiver and the liaison officer consent to this repatriation or resettlement (Taylor 2017, 196).

Another possible solution for unaccompanied children, although not so widely used, was adoption. Even though in many cases adoptions took place informally – for example by displaced families who declared unaccompanied children as theirs or by couples to whom unmarried mothers gave up their babies – adoptions in their more “formal” form created several legal complications. This is the reason why it was the least preferable option when deciding about the fates of unaccompanied children. Reunification was always the most desirable prospect; hence a thorough investigation about the existence of children’s relatives should take place before adoption, because after adoption reunification would be impossible. Furthermore, in order for adoptions to be valid, adoption laws in all countries involved should be complied with. So if a child from Germany was to be adopted by parents with different nationality with the intention to move there, laws of both countries should be complied with so as for the adoption to be recognised in the destination country. Finally, adoption did not come with

citizenship, so this caused a problem in the cases that a visa was required (Taylor 2017, 99-104).

For unaccompanied children from Eastern Europe living in Germany, it was more possible that they would remain there being integrated, compared to their counterparts originating from Western Europe, who had more chances to be repatriated. This was due to the conflicts between East and West in the years of Cold War (Stone 2020, 16; Taylor 2017, 110). Moreover, children with physical and mental disabilities were another group of unaccompanied children that remained in German institutional care, because they could not leave due to their disabilities. Besides, other countries did not want to accept them for resettlement in order not to take the financial responsibility for them (Taylor 2017, 266-267). Finally, unaccompanied children who were in German foster homes could remain there only if it was proven that their placement there had been done for their own good, without force and without having been persecuted by the Germans (Taylor 2017, 205).

The determination of nationality was very important in order to decide upon the future of unaccompanied children. Children of undetermined nationality were the ones about whom there was a controversy over what should be the best solution. The American authorities wanted to keep them in Germany by considering them German, according to the Allied Control Authority Directive (Taylor 2017, 335). This was in accordance with Germans' desire not to remove children from foster homes and institutions, so as not to separate the child from the loving environment of its foster family (Taylor 2017, 212, 137-138). Moreover, the Children's Court was another institution that helped establish the remaining children in Germany, after examining their best interests (Taylor 2017, 335).

Besides, the Nazis had succeeded in disappearing evidence about children taken for Germanisation, so the search and protection of those children proved a very difficult task. The lack of a common policy by the Allies within the different zones of Germany made the whole procedure even more difficult (Höschler 2020, 228). In some cases, though, the Germanisation program reached its goals, as many children lied in order not to be removed from their German foster family and be sent to their real parents whom they did not know at all (Wyman 1998, 92).

## **4. Unaccompanied Minors' life after WWII**

### **4.1. Living conditions in care structures**

After the end of the war, orphanages, child communities and children's villages were created in many European countries in order to address to the issue of orphaned and homeless children (Mouton 2015, 57; Simonsen 2005, 277-278). Such a village was the children's village that was constructed on the edge of Bad Aibling in the American Zone of Germany, by the IRO in 1948 in order to achieve uniformity as far as the care provided and the conditions in which children used to live are concerned. However, staff and supplies shortage could not be avoided. Essential goods, such as additional clothing during winter and bed stuff were often missing (Höschler 2020, 232-234).

Now more than ever was the time that children wanted to feel the security of living in a home instead of a camp. Hence, a new institution emerged across many European countries (e.g. Poland, Holland, Hungary, Denmark, France, Italy, Yugoslavia): the children's home, which in some cases turned into a children's village. The UNRRA followed suit creating children's centres in occupied Germany: fourteen in the British Zone, six in the American Zone and five in the French Zone (Wyman 1998, 98-99).

Children living in German institutions such as orphanages and hospitals, once identified by UNRRA were placed in UNRRA special centres to be taken care of, until it was clarified what was the best solution for their future (Buser 2014, 112; Höschler 2020, 228). UNRRA attended not only to unaccompanied children's physical care, but to their psychological care, as well. Moreover, each action taken by UNRRA regarding unaccompanied minors' care should be according to the advice of child health and social workers (Taylor 2017, 43, 52). These children's centres were responsible for the reception and care of children, and for their preparation in order to be repatriated or resettled. For this reason, UNRRA made an effort to "renationalise" the children by giving them language and history lessons. (Buser 2014, 114).

Nonetheless, in the postwar period such places were not the only ones where children lived. Unaccompanied children could also be found in regular displaced persons' camps, where there were special facilities for children. There, children could benefit from services and care especially for them (Buser 2014, 114).

In general, “the standards of administration and care in the IRO children’s centres varied across the US zone, and they were strongly influenced by the available facilities” (Höschler 2020, 232). Therefore, living conditions were not everywhere the same, but they depended partially on the facilities that were contextually available. It could be said that often the theory is far apart reality, and in the effort to implement certain ambitious policy guidelines, the encountering of several challenges, ideological and practical, was unavoidable (Höschler 2020, 227).

## **4.2. Psychological situation**

It is reasonable that the war had a psychological impact on children. Children lost their childhood and their innocence and this made them feel that they should take care of themselves in order to survive. Characteristic of the nihilism to which the war had pushed children are the findings of a study of the State Institute of Mental Hygiene about the war’s moral and psychological harm:

Many children claimed to have learned the patriotic virtues from their parents, teachers and the Resistance. But just as many children admitted that they had learned to lie, steal and deceive, hate, treat authority with contempt, feel indifferent to all ideals, and even to have lost faith in the sanctity of human life (Stargardt 2005, 402-403).

Especially those children, who lived in war zones, were those that experienced pain and suffering to the fullest. In the opinion of child psychologists “the loss of a stable family life, in particular the loss of a mother, [...] was as damaging to child development as bombs” (Balint 2016, 154). According to a survey of the psychologist from the Bristol Child Guidance Clinic, Miss Dunson, on 8000 students about “strain” on children, she found that a quarter showed some psychological (nervousness, trembling, crying, aggressiveness) or psychosomatic (headaches, anorexia, indigestion, enuresis, soiling) symptoms (Bulut 2020, 15). Children were traumatised and the result was the emergence of behavioural disorders (Buser 2014, 119). It is important to mention that not so much the experience of war itself was traumatic, but the separation from the family (Simonsen 2005, 276).

## **PART III: The Mediterranean Refugee Crisis**

### **1. Mediterranean Refugee Crisis: the situation in Europe**

The so called Mediterranean Refugee Crisis that burst in 2015 brought about huge flows of people who fled from their countries to enter the European Union searching for a better life. This refugee crisis is known as Mediterranean refugee crisis, as there are three main routes (Eastern, Central and Western) that lead to Europe through the Mediterranean countries – mostly Greece, Italy, Spain and less Malta and Cyprus – and more specifically from Turkey to Greece, from Libya to Italy and from Morocco to Spain (Abedin and Akgül 2019, 164; Torelli 2018). The most distressing fact, though, about this crisis is that thousands of those people could not make their dream for a better life come true, as they lost their lives in the Mediterranean (Melotti 2018, 1-2).

The choice of comparing the two periods that constitute the main pillars of this study is not coincidental at all, in the sense that the last time Europe saw such a large refugee and migrant flow was World War II. Political turbulence, human rights abuses, defective governance, poverty and underdevelopment, wars and armed conflicts in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa were the most important push factors that forced people seek refuge in Europe (Abedin and Akgül 2019, 163-168; Sekeris and Vasilakis 2016, 2; Stockholm 2016).

In 2015, over a million migrants and refugees reached Europe by sea whereas the number of those who arrived by land was much smaller. They mainly came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, and in a smaller proportion from other countries, mostly of the Middle East and North Africa that also experience turbulence and instability (Abedin and Akgül 2019, 163; Eurostat 2016). Many of them were displaced within their own country or became refugees to nearby countries, while others decided to take a very dangerous journey which could offer them a better future that would be finally fatal for thousands of them. Only in 2015 which was the crucial year of the crisis, 3.771 people died or were missing at sea (BBC 2016; Connor 2016, 4-6; Evans 2020; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees<sup>17</sup> 2016, 32). Europe was not prepared to receive such a sudden, big number of people and it was in front of a not only humanitarian, but also political crisis that had to be faced (Jacobi 2020). However, not all EU countries responded in the same way to this crisis, which is still present, although not so intensely

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<sup>17</sup> Hereafter UNHCR

as it was at first (Evans 2020). More precisely, indicative is the number of irregular border crossings into the EU in 2019, which dropped from 2,3 million in 2015 and 2016 to 141.846 in 2019 (European Parliament 2017).

Especially after the closing of the EU borders in 2016, the Mediterranean countries mentioned above are those that are the most affected, due to the Dublin Regulation.<sup>18</sup> According to this Regulation, the country of first entrance in the EU is responsible for examining an asylum application, provided that the asylum seeker has been fingerprinted there. Therefore, the Mediterranean countries carry a disproportionate burden of this crisis.

Hence, in 2015 the country with the majority of arrivals was Greece (856.700) followed by Italy (153.800) and Spain (15.400). Unfortunately, children were not left untouched by this huge crisis, as 25 per cent of the total arrivals in these three countries only in 2015 were children, many of them unaccompanied (UNHCR 2016). Of course this is something that still happens, as unaccompanied minors constitute a big part of people migrating to Europe and a very important issue that needs sensitive handling.

Unavoidably, all this situation and lack of EU's preparedness had an impact on unaccompanied minors, who are some of the most vulnerable subjects of the crisis, as the measures and policies that the EU took for them were not adequate. (The European Union Committee 2016, 3). Therefore, as unaccompanied minors became more and more a common issue of discussion, they came out to be considered as a crisis figure, representing both "the human face" of the crisis and the fears and anxieties that the refugee crisis brought about (Lems, Oester, and Strasser 2020, 318-320).

## **1.1. Unaccompanied minors in Europe**

As mentioned above, the arrival of unaccompanied minors in the European Union is not a new phenomenon, even though it started concerning most Member States only recently. Indicative are the numbers of the asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors, as reported by Eurostat. More precisely, while in 2008 approximately 12.000

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<sup>18</sup> Council Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast), OJ L 180.

unaccompanied minors applied for asylum in the EU, in 2015, when the refugee crisis was at its peak, this number went as seven times as high, reaching the number of 88.245. After 2016, with the consequent border closures, the number of unaccompanied minors stopped being so high. However, it is very important to mention that these numbers do not include unaccompanied minors who, for unknown reasons, have not applied for asylum, so they cannot be traced by Eurostat and their number remains unprecised. Therefore, it could be said that unaccompanied minors are, in fact, many more (Eurostat 2021; Ferrara et al. 2016, 332-333; Parusel 2017, 1-5).

The share of unaccompanied minors is not the same among Member States, with Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom<sup>19</sup> being the most popular destinations for most of them. The reason is probably that in the eyes of the minors some destinations seem more attractive than others in terms of facilities available especially for them, more conducive asylum systems or because of the presence of their compatriots (Parusel 2017, 3, 12). However, judging by the fact that borders have closed since 2016 and that the Mediterranean countries are the main entrance to Europe, we could come to the conclusion that these countries receive a larger number of unaccompanied minors, if we also take into consideration the Dublin Regulation. Therefore, in this case those who want to leave for northern countries can rely on the possibility to try to reunify with members of their family that already live abroad, according to the same Regulation.

In their majority they are boys aged 16-17. This fact is quite interesting and arouses lots of questions. The predominance of male asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors can be revealing as regards the reasons for leaving their country and the social perceptions about men and women. First of all, boys would be more prone to seeking refuge to another country in order to run away forced military conscription. In addition, boys are probably considered as stronger and more capable of succeeding in this endeavour of migrating that entails a lot of hardships (Clayton, Gupta and Willis 2019, 2-3; Parusel 2017, 5).

They mainly come from regions that suffer from armed conflicts and abuses of human rights (Ferrara et al. 2016, 332). The vast majority of unaccompanied minors during all these years of the refugee crisis and before, come from Afghanistan, as only

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<sup>19</sup> Although the United Kingdom is not anymore a Member State of the European Union, it is still mentioned here, as some sources of this study are prior to Brexit.

in 2015 the Afghan asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors were 47.370. Lots of them are also Syrians, Eritreans, Iraqis, Somalis and Pakistanis (Eurostat 2021).

## **2. The reasons that render children unaccompanied and the motivations for taking the unaccompanied journey**

Undoubtedly, there is the reasonable question, as to why those children travel alone. The reasons are various and different. Given that the unaccompanied minors come mainly from turbulent areas, many of them are left alone because their families have disappeared or have been murdered, so they are forced to leave their country in order to escape violence. Another reason is that they leave alone in order to escape child exploitation, such as child labour. Some other minors were initially accompanied, but they have been separated from their families during the journey. An important push factor for taking the unaccompanied journey is also their having been targets because of elements like their families' political affiliations, so they flee refugee camps. Moreover, in some cases it is their own parents who decide to send them to Europe, so as to look for a better life (Galante 2014, 755).

As already mentioned above, unaccompanied minors usually originate from countries where armed conflicts, security problems, human rights violations and oppression are very common. In addition, in some cases such as Afghanistan and Syria, a destruction of the social structures is observed, because people there experience conflict and poverty at the same time. These children leave their home countries and often their families and enter the EU in order to get rid of exploitation and difficult situations such as wars, poverty, hunger or natural disasters with the hope of finding a better life (EMN 2015, 6; Ferrara et al. 2016, 332-333; Fili and Xythali 2017, 1-2).

It is necessary to clarify that all these reasons and motivations are not always separate, as more than one of them could justify the entrance of an unaccompanied minor in the EU. First of all, one of the most important motivations for them to flee their country is strong security concerns, which lead them to look for protection in the EU by lodging an asylum application that may qualify them with the refugee status. They struggle to escape from dangerous situations such as wars, torture, conflicts, poverty, natural disasters, persecution for political, ethnic or religious reasons and honour crimes. In this case, that people try to go away from such dangers, although

sometimes the minors may have left initially with members of their family, it is possible to lose one another and end up travelling alone due to the abruptness of the escape.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, in such cases the reasons for children's movement do not differ from that of adults who are looking for a safe and secure place to live. This fact explains the increased numbers of unaccompanied minors entering Europe and seeking for asylum in 2015 with the rise of the refugee crisis due to the unstable situation in the Middle East and North Africa (Clayton, Gupta, and Willis 2019, 1-5; EMN 2011, 24). Other push factors that target children are domestic violence, recruitment of child soldiers and forced marriages (EMN 2015, 13).

Economic reasons constitute another very strong motivation for leaving the home country and entering the EU. Young people are searching for a better future. In their poor countries there are not the same education and advancement perspectives, so they leave in order to be better educated and find a good job in order to support their families back home through remittances. In most such cases, this constitutes a decision taken by the parents of the minor, who consider that solution beneficial not only for the minor but also for themselves (EMN 2011, 25-26).

They often intend to reach a specific Member State of the EU and one of the reasons for this is that they aim at family reunification, which can be achieved by various ways. In some cases minors arrive at the EU as unaccompanied in order to be more easily reunified with family members that are already in the EU either legally or illegally. In some other cases, like in Finland and Poland, minors arrive unaccompanied at the EU, apply for asylum and when they are granted the refugee status, they apply for family reunification so as to bring their family from the country of origin, according to the Family Reunification Directive.<sup>21</sup>

They often aim to go to a specific Member State, usually to Scandinavian countries where they consider that they will find better employment opportunities and payments, as well as better social provisions. Hence, they usually see the Member State of first entrance as transit. A factor that plays important role at deciding the desired Member State is the presence of compatriots and the existence of social networks (EMN 2011, 26-27). However, if they are caught and fingerprinted in that first Member State,

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<sup>20</sup>According to interviews conducted by UNHCR in Greece in 2016, 7% of Syrians and 10% of Afghans stated that they experienced separation from family members during the journey (UNICEF 2017, 6).

<sup>21</sup> Council Directive 2003/86/EC of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification, OJ L 251.

things are getting perplexed because according to the Dublin Regulation this state becomes responsible for examining their asylum application.

## **2.1. The cases of Afghanistan and Syria**

It would be of high interest to examine the cases that are high on the list of sending countries, such as Afghanistan and Syria, in order to understand the situation there and the reasons that force children to flee. According to a report which consists an outcome of a collaborative research project by UNHCR and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), in the case of Afghanistan, male minors aged 13-17 are by far the biggest group of unaccompanied minors, as females' role is restricted in those societies. It is known between the sending communities that it is easier for children to get the refugee status and stay in the destination country, so as for them to benefit from the provision of family reunification for recognised refugees and bring the rest of their family.

There are several reasons that force minors to take the journey outside Afghanistan without any adult to accompany them. Poverty and economic insecurity that causes difficult situations at home is one of them, so minors leave Afghanistan in search of a better future that could offer them better education and employment opportunities. Moreover, rights' deprivation, frequent conflicts and the threat of the Taliban's presence make life in Afghanistan very dangerous and comprise a strong motivation for minors' leaving. Another very important factor that leads many families to part with their adolescent boys, whom they prefer to send abroad to stay safe, is the practice of bachabazi. It is a custom according to which adolescent males, dressed as women, are offered to older powerful men for sexual purposes, resulting in the children's sexual abuse. In most cases, though, a combination of push factors is responsible for the children's departure (Echavez et al. 2014, 11-20; Mougne 2010, 15).

As far as the decision making process about migrating is concerned, in some cases it is the parents' decision, whereas in some other cases children decide to abandon their country and family, because their parents do not agree. Nevertheless, the risks that such a journey entails are numerous, such as unsafe transportation, accidents that sometimes are fatal, lack of food and water, physical violence by smugglers and police officers. On the whole, these children have put their life at risk from the very first moment. Although

the families in most cases know about them, they insist on their decision to support it, either because they do not have any other choice or that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Children not in all cases have knowledge of the risks, but even those who have, do not consider them as an obstacle that would deter them from leaving (Echavez et al. 2014, 11-20).

In the case of Syria, it is well known that the main reason that forced people to flee their country is the civil war. Young men usually between 16 and 18 years of age had no other choice than leaving Syria, especially if they lived in government-controlled regions, in order not to be recruited by the military service (Malakooti 2017, 32). In fact, the fear of forced recruitment by armed forces and groups is apparent even for much younger children, constituting one of the main motivations for children to leave, despite the fact that the Syrian Arab Republic has ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict<sup>22</sup> (UNICEF 2017, 4). In government controlled regions, people fear that they might be arrested on the grounds that they have been born in a place in favour of the revolution. Moreover, in such regions the conditions of life have also been unbearable due to economic issues that contribute to the strengthening of the sense of instability that people already experience (Malakooti 2017, 32). On the other hand, in regions controlled by the opposite side and by ISIS – which has now fallen and lost its territory –, random aerial bombing has been a frequent phenomenon and one of the main reasons that motivate Syrians to leave, as it has not only destroyed houses and places of economic activity, but it has also caused fear, insecurity and instability. Restrictions – among which was the ban on education – harassment of Kurds and pressure imposed by ISIS was another strong motive for fleeing the country (Malakooti 2017, 33-34).

Adding to all these, another push factor for Syrian children who travel alone, as in the case of Afghans, is their aiming at applying for family reunification, so as for the family to come regularly afterwards, either because they cannot afford an irregular journey for all the family members, or because of physical weakness to endure the hardships of that journey. It is noteworthy that although Syrian children may be officially attributed the characterisation of unaccompanied minors, in reality they are often accompanied by extended family members or neighbours (Malakooti 2017, 35).

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<sup>22</sup> Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, entered into force on 12 February 2002.

Nevertheless, there are cases of Syrian children that reported separation from a member of their family during the journey (UNICEF 2017, 6).

### **3. The legal aspect of this phenomenon following the Mediterranean Refugee Crisis**

#### **3.1. Issues of protection**

##### *International legal instruments*

As far as the protection of unaccompanied children's rights is concerned, it is important to bear in mind that there are now legislative provisions both in international and European legal instruments. However, neither international nor European legislation has instruments that refer exclusively to unaccompanied minors. (EMN 2018, 55).

Among international instruments, the most important one regarding the protection of children's rights is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that was adopted by resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 and was entered into force on 2 September 1990, along with its three Optional Protocols.<sup>23</sup> This international legal instrument provides for the protection of the rights of children either they are accompanied or not. In fact, Article 22 makes an explicit reference to asylum-seeking or refugee minors who – either accompanied or unaccompanied by an adult – need to be protected and get humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, the Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted in 2005 the General Comment No. 6 about the “Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin”. The aim of this General Comment is to provide assistance to States as regards the interpretation of the CRC and the implementation of Article 22 in relation to unaccompanied minors (EMN 2018, 55-56).

In addition to this, the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees<sup>24</sup> provides also for the protection of minors who are unaccompanied. All EU Member

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<sup>23</sup> (a) Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, entered into force on 18 January 2002 (b) Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, entered into force on 12 February 2002 (c) Optional Protocol on a communications procedure, entered into force on 14 April 2014.

<sup>24</sup> The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, entered into force on 22 April 1954.

States have ratified both conventions, so they have to respect and embody their provisions into their national law (EMN 2018, 56).

Moreover, other international instruments, such as the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>25</sup> and the Covenant on Social, Cultural and Economic Rights (ICESCR),<sup>26</sup> to which most EU Member States are parties, contain relevant provisions,<sup>27</sup> but with no explicit reference to unaccompanied children (EMN 2018, 56).

Another Convention that falls within the scope of international legislation concerning the protection of children is the Hague Convention on Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children.<sup>28</sup> Although it does not contain specific provisions for unaccompanied children, it has an important role in the procedures that follow their status determination. Therefore, it allows authorities to provide support in order to protect children that have been granted the refugee status (EMN 2018, 56).

### ***European legal instruments***

At the EU level, the principal Convention in force is the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which does not refer explicitly to rights concerning children or unaccompanied minors. The only relevant provision is Article 8 that refers to the protection of the right to family life that in some cases interceded in order for some states to help reunify children with their families (EMN 2018, 56).

Except for the ECHR, there are several EU Directives and Regulations that all together form the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and they do have specific provisions for the protection of children and especially for asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors.

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<sup>25</sup> The 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, entered into force on 23 March 1976.

<sup>26</sup> The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, entered into force on 3 January 1976.

<sup>27</sup> Articles 12 (protection of family life) and 24 (respect of children's rights) of the ICCPR and Article 10 (protection of children) of the ICESCR.

<sup>28</sup> The 1996 Convention on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children, entered into force on 1 January 2002.

First of all, the definition of the term “unaccompanied minor”, that has already been analysed in the introduction of this study, can be found in the Qualification, in the Asylum Procedures and in the Reception Conditions Directive, as well as in the Dublin III-Regulation. Nonetheless, their content is not limited only at the definition, as it goes beyond it, including provisions and guarantees especially for these children (EMN 2018, 57).

More precisely, the Qualification Directive determines that unaccompanied minors who have been granted international protection are entitled to rights such as legal representation, family unity with siblings, finding family members and being accommodated in a place appropriate for minors. In addition, according to Articles 26, 27, 28 and 29, all Member States must ensure that unaccompanied minors have access to employment, education, procedures for recognition of qualifications, social welfare and healthcare respectively (EMN 2018, 57).

The Asylum Procedures Directive<sup>29</sup> has provisions for unaccompanied minors regarding the access to asylum procedures and the way of realisation of the asylum process (e.g. conduct of interview and legal representation).

The Reception Conditions Directive<sup>30</sup> defines the provision of reception conditions for all international protection applicants. It includes provisions about the reception and care for minors and unaccompanied minors (Article 24) and it makes clear that authorities should resort to detention of unaccompanied minors only if there is no other solution (Article 10). Moreover, Article 21 clarifies the vulnerable categories of asylum-seekers within which unaccompanied minors fall (EMN 2018, 57).

The Dublin Regulation contains provisions for unaccompanied minors, as well during the procedure of defining the State that is responsible for examining the international protection application, as regards the legal representation of the minor according to Article 6 (2) and the possibility of family reunification (Article 8). The latter is also further provided by the Family Reunification Directive for unaccompanied minors who have been granted the refugee status, according to Article 10 (EMN 2018, 57).

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<sup>29</sup> Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection, OJ L 180.

<sup>30</sup> Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast), OJ L 180.

Hence, there are a lot of legal instruments both at international and European level, but most of them contain provisions for the protection of children in general, within which we consider that unaccompanied children fall as well. The sole area of the legislation that covers this special part of the migrant population is found at the regional level in the Directives and Regulations that constitute the CEAS, that were formed in order to face effectively and in an organised manner the refugee crisis.

### ***Provisions regarding reception and integration of unaccompanied minors***

As far as integration of unaccompanied minors is concerned, there are several provisions, as laid down by the recast Reception Conditions Directive and the Recast Qualification Directive. The recast Reception Conditions Directive refers to unaccompanied minors that are still asylum seekers, ensuring specific reception standards for them, such as their right to education (Article 14), accommodation (Article 24) and healthcare (Article 19).

Status determination comes with several rights that unaccompanied refugee minors can enjoy. More precisely, according to the recast Qualification Directive Member States must provide access to education (Article 27), social welfare (Article 29), healthcare (Article 30) and accommodation (Article 32) always taking into consideration the best interests of the child (Article 20) (EMN 2018, 30).

## **3.2. Deciding the fate of Unaccompanied Minors**

Lots of different actors are involved in the procedure of deciding the fate of the special group of unaccompanied minors, such as ministries, asylum offices and local authorities, who in most cases have the first word as far as issues of care and integration are concerned, like accommodation and guardianship. However, the role of NGOs should not be underestimated, as their action is not limited only in providing accommodation and guardianship, but they also offer many more services, including legal, social and psychological support, education and several other activities (EMN 2018, 6, 22).

### ***Best interests of the child***

One of the core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, provided by Article 3, is the best interests of the child, according to which for every decision and for every action that addresses to children, the “children’s best interests” must be the most important principle taken into consideration, in order to ensure the levels of protection and care that are necessary for their well-being. The same provision lies also in Article 24 of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights, which came into effect with the Lisbon Treaty.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, this principle should be always taken into consideration when decisions concerning their care, integration and return are to be taken, so as for the child to have their individual needs covered (Allsopp and Chase 2019, 297; EMN 2018, 10). Best interests determination is very important a procedure, due to which the definition of the best solution for this sensitive migrant group becomes possible – family reunification, return to the country of origin, integration into the host country, resettlement or adoption (IOM 2011, 55; UN CRC 2005, 20-24).

In other words, there is the need for durable solutions for this special migrant group, which only a best interests assessment could ensure, providing stability and security; two necessary components that an unaccompanied minor may need (Williams 2019, 189). For this endeavour to be successful and for the best interests of the child to be respected, the role of the guardian is very crucial (Arnold et al. 2015, 50; IOM 2011, 49). Given that unaccompanied children are still minors, they need an adult that should have complete awareness of the needs of the minor, represent them before public authorities and ensure their protection. For this reason, there is the institution of the guardianship for unaccompanied minors, corresponding to EU law. Specifically, the guardian is appointed once the identification of the minor takes place at the receiving Member State (EMN 2018, 26-27; Nikolopoulos 2018, 47).

### ***Durable solutions***

The furthest aim of assessing the best interests of the child is to find the best durable solution that accords with their needs and their situation. This solution must be such that makes the unaccompanied minor feel secure in order to live and develop

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<sup>31</sup> Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, signed at Lisbon, 13 December 2007, OJ C 306.

(Alsopp and Chase 2019, 300-301; Senovilla and Lagrange 2011, 14; Williams 2019, 189, 208). This procedure is in line with the UNHCR's three durable solutions (repatriation, resettlement and local integration) and with the durable solutions that the General Comment n° 6 of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child proposes.<sup>32</sup> Three of them – family reunification, return to the country of origin and local integration in the host society – are the ones mostly related to the situation of unaccompanied minors that prevails in Europe (Senovilla and Lagrange 2011, 15; UN CRC 2005; Williams 2019, 189).

The procedure of searching the best durable solution should begin as soon as a child is identified as unaccompanied. The first prospect that is examined in this context is that of family reunification in the country of origin, in the country of destination or in a third country, so tracing of the family is the first and foremost that must be done. In fact, this prioritisation is consolidated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child itself, in Articles 9 and 10 that deter children-parents' separation and promote their reunification, respectively (Senovilla and Lagrange 2011, 15; UN CRC 2005, 20-21). According to the Convention, children should not be separated from their parents, so this is the reason this solution is qualified compared to others. Of course this is decided after a best interests assessment and only if it is in the children's best interest. However, if it is against the child's best interests to be reunified with their family in the country of origin because there is the risk of violation of their fundamental human rights or if they have been recognised as refugees, the possibility of family reunification in the host country has to be examined, which is provided by Article 10 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC 2005, 21). In fact, according to the Family Reunification Directive, unaccompanied minors who have been granted the refugee status have the right to bring their family members from the country of origin, taking advantage of more conducive terms<sup>33</sup> (EMN 2018, 8). In addition, the Dublin Regulation in Article 6 has specific guarantees for minors, whereas Article 8 provides for the family reunification of the minor with relatives established in other Member States after assessing their best interests.

Meanwhile, resettlement to a third country within the EU accounts for another solution for unaccompanied minors. In practice, this has been implemented mostly for

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<sup>32</sup> Family reunification, return to the country of origin, local integration, inter-country adoption and resettlement in a third country (UN CRC 2005, 20-24).

<sup>33</sup> Without applying the conditions laid down in Article 4 (2)(a) of the same Directive.

the most vulnerable ones, who used to live in inadequate conditions in Greece, after the adoption of the Action Plan for the immediate measures to support Greece, presented by the European Commission in March 2020. In particular, during the last year, more than 1000 unaccompanied children were relocated from Greece to other EU Member States, in an effort to support Greece that faces several challenges especially after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (MIICT n.d.; The National Herald 2021).

When an unaccompanied minor is considered to be illegally staying in a Member State's territory, their return is provided by the Return Directive.<sup>34</sup> The return-repatriation to the country of origin, without the prospect of family reunification, should constitute an option as a durable solution only in case this complies with the children's best interests and with the principle of 'non-refoulement',<sup>35</sup> in order not to return a child in a place where they may face the risk of violation of their fundamental human rights. In such a case, the return should be voluntary, having assured the child's consent after having taken into consideration their views and opinion, as provided by Article 12 (1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore, the only case in which return could be considered as a durable solution that accords with the child's best interests is if the country of origin could offer them more opportunities and a better standard of living (Clayton, Gupta and Willis 2019, 190; Senovilla and Lagrange 2011, 16-17; UN CRC 2005, 22). Given the fact that the subjects are children, there are some guarantees that must be met and they are defined by Article 10 of the Return Directive. More precisely, before the issuance of the return decision "assistance by appropriate bodies other than the authorities enforcing return shall be granted with due consideration being given to the best interests of the child". In addition, before the removal of the unaccompanied minor, the authorities of the Member State must ensure that the child "will be returned to a member of his or her family, a nominated guardian or adequate reception facilities in the State of return" (EMN 2018, 44-45).

When the requirements for family reunification are not satisfied or the return to the country of origin cannot be justified by legal or factual grounds, local integration is qualified as the best durable solution. This constitutes an option when there is a stable legal status (refugee or beneficiary of subsidiary protection), in the case of permanent

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<sup>34</sup> Directive 2008/115/EC Directive on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, OJ L 348.

<sup>35</sup> The principle of non-refoulement forbids countries to return individuals to a country where they may be in danger of facing torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, human rights violations or persecution based on the five reasons listed in Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the status of Refugees (race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion) (Trevisanut 2014, 663).

settlement at the host country (Senovilla and Lagrange 2011, 17; UN CRC 2005, 22-23; Williams 2019, 189). Nevertheless, this implies that there is a hierarchy in the different durable solutions, on top of which is the possibility of return to the country of origin. That should not exist, based upon the individual examination of each case according to the best interests principle (Senovilla and Lagrange 2011, 17). Besides, certainly a few children residing in the host country have developed the sense of belongingness in that society, especially if they have tried hard to get integrated, by learning the language and attending the education system. In such cases, local integration should prevail over their return (Allsopp and Chase 2019, 305-307).

### ***What really happens***

However, lacking an articulate ‘best interests’ definition, there is neither a common understanding of best interests among European states nor a common strategy as far as best interests determination is concerned. As a result, there is distance between what states conceive as children’s best interests and what children themselves conceive as their best interests. Even more, when these children turn 18, solutions that tended to ignore their desires and experiences cannot be considered as durable and are unfortunately doomed to fail. The prioritisation of the principle of children’s best interest ceases to exist when they turn 18, whereas the children themselves tend to worry about the future that comes after that. Consequently, these young people try to survive after their return, they disappear in the destination country or they follow the path of secondary migration (Allsopp and Chase 2019, 297, 300, 306, 307; Iusmen 2020, 933). In fact, although all member states take into consideration children’s best interests as regards their care, integration and return, most of them actually lack particular laws and policies in practice (EMN 2018, 10; Iusmen 2020, 933). Moreover, it should not be ignored that the situation of unaccompanied minors is so complex, that even if an appropriate solution is found, it cannot so easily and directly alleviate the repercussions of separation and exile (Williams 2019, 189).

There are not any statutory rules as far as the best interests determination and assessment process are concerned. Therefore, the responsible actors implement these principles according to their own perception and policies. As a result, in most of the times the motive of their actions is not the satisfaction of the best interests principle and the definition of a durable solution for the child, but the obligation they feel to

implement the law, that comes from their role's responsibilities. The reason for this lays on the fact that Member States' actions are regulated by the need for migration control, which overrides the protection of human rights (Iusmen 2020, 933, 935, 943).

## **4. Unaccompanied Minors' life**

### **4.1. Living conditions in care structures**

The recast Reception Conditions Directive, the recast Asylum Procedures Directive and the recast Qualification Directive are those which define the minimum criteria according to which asylum seekers should be treated (Buchanan and Kallinikaki 2020, 208; EMN 2018, 21). As regards unaccompanied minors, the Reception Conditions Directive (Articles 21-22) states that they should live in “care and reception structures”, suitable for their age and away from adults. Moreover, the reception conditions must be such that unaccompanied minors do not lack the basic goods and have access to health care and assistance by social workers. In case there are vulnerable minors, such as victims of human trafficking or violence, their cases must be examined in order to find out if they have special reception needs (Papademetriou and U.S.. Global Legal Research Directorate Law Library Of Congress 2014, 9).

From the moment that an unaccompanied minor enters the territory of a Member State, they should be placed with an adult relative, in a foster home or in special accommodation centres for minors. Therefore, tracing of their family is very important, but it should be made according to the children's best interests and with confidentiality (Papademetriou and U.S.. Global Legal Research Directorate Law Library Of Congress 2014, 9; Reception Conditions Directive, Article 24).

For example, in the case of Greece, apart from shelters, one of the solutions for unaccompanied children is the establishment of “safe zones” inside the camps. These children need special protection that the camp cannot provide them. For this reason, they are only allowed to stay in separate places in the camps, especially for those children, with staff that is responsible for organising their daily routine and activities, in order to meet their needs. Besides, according to the UNHCR, Greek Law and childrens's rights organisations, the authorities have to make unaccompanied minors feel secure and host them in safe places (Buchanan and Kallinikaki 2020, 208, 216; Jacobs 2018, 280).

Nevertheless, unfortunately this is not always the case and the reality is often not so appealing. Although there are some good examples, as it seems there are several cases across the European Union that prove that the conditions are insufficient or in some cases inappropriate for unaccompanied children to live in. For instance, in

Norway and Denmark, especially for those children above 15, living conditions are such that accommodation in reception centres is due for a small amount of time. Nonetheless, their staying there turns out to be longer, as asylum procedures are not so fast, having as a result the deterioration of their living conditions (Lidén 2019, 248).

Except for the fact that sometimes the places they live are overcrowded (e.g. Greek and Italian hotspots), in accommodation structures in camps they are more prone to see violent scenes or be victims of violence or abuse. In fact, in a paper published in 2017, it is said that accommodation structures in Greece “do not follow any common standard operating procedures, their operation is not regulated by any law and there is no specialised supervisory body to monitor the living conditions”, something that has an impact on their whole operation and quality (Fili and Xythali 2017, 9). In general, conditions in some camps cannot meet the needs of the big numbers of migrants that they host, so when it comes to unaccompanied children, they are the most adversely affected. (EMN 2018, 26; Fili and Xythali 2017, 9; The European Union Committee 2016, 42-43)

Inevitably, all this evidence shows that some Member States do not comply in all respects with EU and international obligations as regards the protection of the vulnerable group of children (The European Union Committee 2016, 42-43).

## **4.2. Psychological situation**

As mentioned above, refugees usually experience harsh conditions and sometimes the environment in the host country is not so friendly. Adding to this, they have to bear traumatic experiences related to loss, as they may have lost their home, family, culture, school, customs and way of living. All these pre-departure and after-arrival experiences account for their vulnerability and their augmented mental health needs. In the same way, war and its consequences have traumatised children and have had an effect on their development (Davies and Webb 2000, 542, 547; Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, 321).

As far as unaccompanied children are concerned, they are more prone to mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression, in contrast with their accompanied peers (Keles et al. 2017, 1414-1415). According to Derluyn and

Broekaert (2008, 321-323, 328), unaccompanied minors have increased mental health needs and their emotional well-being can be affected by three factors: their refugee experiences, the fact that they are adolescents and the fact that they are separated from their relatives. Firstly, the refugee experience involves multiple losses, as mentioned above and consequently their whole life is disrupted. In addition, they experience trauma not only before fleeing their country – having experienced war, armed conflicts, violence – but also during the flight and after it, in the host country, where they have to face racism and discrimination and adapt to a completely new society and culture, having to face the challenge of acculturation (Davies and Webb 2000; Keles et al 2018, 52-53). Indeed, the fact that these children belong to an ethnic minority could affect their psychosocial development (Banhatti and Bhate 2002, 67-68).

Secondly, adolescence is another important factor that influences the emotional well-being of unaccompanied minors. It has already been mentioned earlier in this study that the majority of unaccompanied minors are in the phase of adolescence. Adolescence is at any rate a transitional, sensitive period in a human's life, with emotional and cognitive changes, decisive for their development and the construction of their identity (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, 322-323).

Finally, separation from their parents and the rest of their family affects a lot the psychological condition of unaccompanied minors. The lack of parent protection results in maximising the perception of experiences as traumatic and losing the sense of security and stability (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008, 323).

Therefore, it is vital to meet the mental health needs of these traumatised children as soon as possible. Besides, according to Articles 11 and 17 of the recast Reception Conditions Directive, access to mental health must be provided to asylum seekers, and especially to unaccompanied children, by Member States (European Union Committee 2016, 46).

## **PART IV: Comparison of the status of Unaccompanied Minors between the two periods**

### **1. Reasons and motivations**

The two periods that form the main pillars of the present study are characterised by the presence of a huge number of unaccompanied minors in Europe. In an effort to make a comparison as regards the reasons for the existence of so many unaccompanied minors, it can be said that although they share some general common reasons, there are some other important factors that differ, related mostly to the circumstances that mark each period.

In both cases a part of unaccompanied children were unaccompanied because they had been separated from or lost their parents due to the war, so they became orphans, like the “wolf children”. Their families had either disappeared or been murdered; therefore they ended up all alone. In some other cases, children were separated from their families along the way, such as families that were separated in concentration camps of the Second World War. As far as minors that come unaccompanied in the Mediterranean are concerned, in many cases they were accompanied when they fled their country, but separated from their parents during the journey so they were left alone and unaccompanied.

In fact, the true cause that lies behind all these is the war itself. It was regional wars that in the post-World War II period caused hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied children and set the stage for their exploitation in every possible way. Of course, as happens in every war, the defeated Axis Powers were obliged to pay reparations to the Allies, as a means to compensate for their atrocities during the war, although the amounts finally paid, were decreased compared to the ones initially defined (Gibbs 2015).

Similarly, war, armed conflicts and general turbulence are of the most important factors that nowadays have caused a wave of unaccompanied minors, who flee their countries, often after having lost their parents, in order to escape violence, insecurity and frequent conflicts that put their lives at risk. Aerial bombing has been a common, terrifying element used at wars, in both periods, causing feelings of fear and instability that led to evacuations.

It has also been said that human rights abuses is a strong driver for children to take the unaccompanied journey to Europe nowadays. They flee in order to find a safer place to stay and save themselves from child exploitation, such as child labour, forced marriages, domestic violence and recruitment of child soldiers. This could be compared with the Kindertransport in 1938-1939. Thousands of Jewish children were taken to other countries in order to be saved from the persecution and extermination by the Nazis. Therefore, this latter endeavour, although massive and organised compared to the individual decision making of the contemporary era, had its start at the same point, namely the escape of children from dangerous conditions that would deprive them of their human rights.

Being alone in such a tender age is not pleasant at all, no matter what the conditions under which a child is rendered unaccompanied are. However, one basic difference between the two periods is that in some cases nowadays there is – at least superficially – a decision making process before departure, maybe as a result also of the fast flow of electronic information. Of course it is the need for a better future that pushes all these children in all periods to leave their country even in such cases, but deciding to take the risky journey is up to them and they do so in order to run away from difficult situations. On the other hand, being an unaccompanied child in the post-World War II period was a condition that the child had just found themselves in because of external factors, without being able to control it.

In addition, what happens in the modern era and differs from the past is that some children come unaccompanied to Europe for economic reasons. They mainly come from countries where there is extreme poverty and underdevelopment and they see this perilous journey as the means that will lead them to better education and employment opportunities. In some cases, actually, it is their own parents that decide to send them unaccompanied to Europe in order to seek for a better life. This attitude is indicative of the despair of these parents; so difficult are the conditions of life in some countries that the parents themselves get to the point of taking the tough decision of separating from their children and disregard the dangers that such a decision entails if there is a chance to ensure them a better life. In the same vein, unaccompanied minors sometimes migrate alone in order to open the way for their family's migration through family reunification.

Another difference between the two periods is the fact that in the post-World War II period, the majority of unaccompanied children were forcibly taken from their

families in order to be murdered or serve the Nazis' interests; they were seized for Germanisation, for serving as forced child labourers (the Ostkinder) and as child soldiers.

## **2. The legal aspect**

### **2.1. Issues of protection**

The legal aspect of the issue of unaccompanied minors, as regards their protection, has one essential difference between the two periods: the legal instruments that we know today for the protection of children did not exist in the post-World War II period. In fact, there was not any official legal framework back then that could stand for the protection of children's rights. Consequently, although the number of unaccompanied minors was very high, their protection was not legally ensured and there was a lack of official guidelines concerning this issue, except for some Declarations. These declarations were not legally binding; however, they indicated people's predisposition and desire to protect children.

The breakthrough in children's protection came in 1989, with the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with which children's rights have been consolidated. Moreover, it set the basis in order for other international and European instruments to include provisions for children, either unaccompanied or not. It is important to mention that some of these legal instruments refer explicitly to unaccompanied minors, and this is something that proves that their rights are now more safeguarded than ever.

However, even though they lacked an official legal framework, people in the post-World War II period tried to respect and protect children, recognising their vulnerable status. Despite the fact that the principle of the best interests of the child came along with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it was being fostered all the way until a solution was found for them.

### **2.2. Deciding the fate of Unaccompanied Minors**

In both cases, many actors were involved in the handling of the issue of unaccompanied minors and the decision making process about their fate, such as NGOs, local authorities, governments, trying to determine what is best for their interests.

Best interests appear in both periods and they are taken into consideration, despite the fact that in the post-World War II war period this principle was not officially established. In this vague context surrounding the post-World War II period, the different actors were fighting for the children's best interests, each of them claiming different things on their part. On the other hand, not even nowadays, that the best interests are officially recognised is there a common strategy among European Member States as far as the best interests' determination is concerned.

Regarding the proposed solutions for the future of unaccompanied minors, they do not differentiate much between the two periods: family reunification, repatriation-return to the country of origin, resettlement, local integration and least adoption. In both cases family reunification is the most preferable solution, as it is thought that children should not be separated from their parents and the affection of the family environment. Therefore, after identification procedures that are common in both cases, the first concern of authorities should be tracing the family of unaccompanied children, because they aim at family reunification.

Something that differentiates family reunification nowadays from what it used to be in the postwar period is that nowadays it has two variations: family reunification in another EU country under the Dublin Regulation and family reunification for recognised refugees under the Family Reunification Directive.

Repatriation is another common solution between the two periods. However, in the postwar period it was the second most popular solution for unaccompanied children, whereas nowadays it is implemented only if it complies with certain requirements: the children's best interests and the principle of non-refoulement. On the other hand, in the postwar period repatriation was considered as a very good solution in case the family could not be traced, because returning to the country of origin was considered the same as returning home, like a substitute of the family; instead of returning children to their family, children were returned to their nation.

Resettlement is another possible solution that the two periods have in common. Mostly promoted by the IRO then, it was implemented in cases of children that did not

want to repatriate or had undetermined nationality and thus were welcome by economies ruined by the war. Resettlement nowadays is also a popular answer to the issue of deciding about the future of unaccompanied minors; however the rate of the cases that are finally resettled is not very big. In fact, most EU countries have left the receiving countries of the Mediterranean alone to cope with the vulnerable unaccompanied minors; for instance, only few unaccompanied minors have managed to relocate to other countries outside Greece (Buchanan and Kallinikaki 2020, 216).

Last but not least, adoption is a solution proposed in both cases, although not so popular. On the one hand, in the postwar period it entailed many legal complications and it was not an easy procedure. On the other hand, in the contemporary era it is not among the durable solutions that prevail in Europe.

Overall, despite some expected slight differences, the general frame is rather similar in both periods. Best interests, either institutionalised or not, have been at the centre of discussions in both eras. However, even nowadays that it is provided by Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, most states parties have not enacted relevant detailed legal rules. In addition, children themselves have never had an active role and they have not been asked about issues that concerned them directly. As a consequence, in both periods, children were generally not heard, even though they might have had a different opinion as regards what they considered as the best solution for themselves.

### **3. Unaccompanied minors' life**

#### **3.1. Living conditions**

In both cases unaccompanied children have been placed in care and accommodation structures intended specifically for children. Besides, these children have come through so many difficulties and adversities, that undoubtedly felt the need to be somewhere that would offer them safety, security and protection.

These structures do not differ much between the two periods. On the one hand, in the post-World War II period orphanages, communities, special centres and children's homes that sometimes were extended to children's villages, were the structures that hosted unaccompanied children. Except for these structures, unaccompanied children

were also hosted in special facilities in displaced persons' camps. On the other hand, nowadays unaccompanied children usually live in special accommodation centres as well as in safe zones inside the refugee camps.

Hence, although in the post-World War II period there were not any specific international conventions or directives to define what should be done with unaccompanied children, the authorities recognised the children's vulnerable status and placed them in places suitable for them. However, this is not enough in order to ensure all children's essential needs and appropriate living conditions. Living conditions have not always been as ideal as they should be according to the policy guidelines. In the post-World War II period, there were cases of children's facilities that lacked basic goods and staff. Moreover, camps could not be considered the best place for a child to live, despite the existence of special facilities; children needed to feel the security that only a home could provide. Similarly, today's reception structures are intended for short stays due to the insufficient living conditions – although the reality is different. Camps, also, are overcrowded with unsuitable surroundings for little children. However, they keep living in the safe zones of camps.

### **3.2. Psychological situation**

Certainly, human pain and suffering is not an element that can be measured and compared. It would be absurd to compare the psychological condition of minors, which is definitely bad. Besides, such a comparison is not one of the aims of this study. In contrast, the objective here is just to point out the fact that at all times, the conditions that cause the existence of unaccompanied minors aggravate their psychological situation. It is an intertemporal phenomenon that is undoubtedly detrimental for the children's psychology, leaving them with incurable traumas that they would carry for their whole life.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the present dissertation has been to examine if there is any similarity or parallel between the legal status and overall experience of unaccompanied refugee minors in two different periods of history: the period following World War II and the period of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean refugee crisis.

This study compared several aspects common in both eras as regards the status of unaccompanied minors: socio-political reasons that render children unaccompanied, handling and treatment of this vulnerable group in the sense of the decision making process over their fate, legal protection issues and conditions of living.

The existence of unaccompanied minors is an issue that has always concerned society and especially the bodies responsible for them. The two periods that constitute the two main pillars on which this thesis is based have been selected on purpose; the Mediterranean refugee crisis is well-known for the huge number of unaccompanied minors that it brought to Europe. On the other hand, Europe has not seen a refugee and humanitarian crisis, equivalent to this one, since World War II. One of the most serious consequences of the Middle East conflict was that it left hundreds of thousands of children unaccompanied.

By juxtaposing several aspects that encompass the status of unaccompanied minors, the study comes to the conclusion that there is indeed a certain parallel between these two different periods. In particular, the reasons that render a child unaccompanied, the living conditions and the handling of the refugee children have not been totally different. Nonetheless, as far as protection of unaccompanied minors is concerned, there is a vital point that differentiates the two periods; while in the post-World War II period there was not any legal framework to ensure children's rights, now there are several international and European legal instruments to guarantee children's protection, on top of which lies the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In any case, they laid the foundation for children's rights protection with the several Declarations they adopted, although non-binding, and with the fact that they recognised the need to protect children, prioritising their best interests whenever they were to take any decision that affected them.

If we set aside the case of Jewish children during the Holocaust, when mass extermination was carried out solely on racial grounds, the explanation for the fact that

most other indicators are similar between the two eras is that at the heart of the problem in both cases lie primarily the same reasons: war, generalised violence, human rights abuses. These are then the very grave common features between them. Even though it is expected that the overall political, legal, military and social circumstances are not the same in the two periods, the sad final picture one gets is that the two periods have actually much in common, reminding us that the issue of unaccompanied minors is intertemporal.

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