7. Bundles from Britain: Child Evacuations from Wartime Britain

The SS Britannic, the ship that carried Alistair Horne and many other young evacuees to America in the summer of 1940. Writes Horne, "We were unassailable optimists: we were not going to be torpedoed, we were not going to be killed—Britain was not going to lose the war." LOC.

Above, left: British writer Alistair Horne's 1994 memoir A Bundle from Britain recalls his evacuation to America in July 1940 when he was fourteen. Tired of air-raid blackouts and food rationing, on the ocean journey Horne quite pleasantly anticipated "a glamorous land of cowboys, gangsters, and Red Indians, where the fountains flowed with ice-cream sodas." Though the reality was quite different, Horne's three years with an "incredibly warm-hearted—and agreeably eccentric" New York family cemented his love for his "second country."

Above, right: Child evacuees from wartime Britain wave at the Statue of Liberty aboard an ocean liner as it steams into New York Harbor. Though most of these "bundles from Britain" went to dominions of the British Crown, some five thousand found their way to America. © HU 68972

On July 29, 1940, the British passenger liner SS Britannic docked in New York Harbor carrying a special cargo—272 children evacuated from a Great Britain gripped by war. These young people made up a small portion of the estimated fifteen to twenty thousand British children spirited to safety overseas during the course of World War II. Among the passengers arriving in New York that day was fourteen-year-old Alistair Horne, who later became a well-known author and historian. His memoir, A Bundle from Britain, recounts his heartfelt experience as a child evacuee.

Horne coined the term as a play on the name of a popular wartime program, Bundles for Britain, in which American volunteers bundled together huge quantities of hand-knitted garments and other materials for shipment to the war-ravaged British Isles. These gifts Americans sent to besieged Britons and the cherished children they in turn entrusted to American shores helped weave the two peoples together in what British prime minister Winston Churchill would later call the "special relationship."

“I think it is well also for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through.”

—British prime minister Stanley Baldwin to the House of Commons, November 10, 1932

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Origins of the Evacuation Program

As the threat of war increased in the late 1930s, the British people suffered the terrible and not altogether unrealistic dread of being bombed to extinction in their own homes. Having observed from afar the bombardment of Guernica by German and Italian warplanes during the Spanish Civil War, as well as Japanese aerial assaults on Chinese cities in the lead-up to war in the Pacific, most Britons concluded that, should war break out again in Europe, civilian casualties would be horrendous. Indeed, by 1939 the United Kingdom government in its preparations for war estimated as many as six hundred thousand civilians could die in German attacks from the air, with injuries expected to top 1.2 million.

The actual number of British civilian casualties during the war, though tragic, would be much lower—about a tenth of the 1939 estimates. But at the conflict’s outset, air power had only recently emerged as a major implement of war, making it a matter of utmost urgency to devise ways of protecting people on the ground.

The British government responded to the threat by laying elaborate plans to move large numbers of civilians out of urban areas likely to be targeted. These plans called for the evacuation of roughly three million people within seventy-two hours of the outbreak of war. The vast majority of the evacuees would be children, who would leave their parents behind to keep the wheels of industry—and of war—turning. The official name for the evacuation plan was Operation Pied Piper.
Operation Pied Piper

Operation Pied Piper was launched on September 1, 1939, the very day Germany attacked Poland but two days before Great Britain formally declared war on Germany.

The plan had divided Great Britain by risk levels into evacuation zones, reception zones, and neutral areas. Radio broadcasts now instructed parents in danger zones to take their children to their schools or to special evacuation centers for transport to areas deemed out of harm’s way. The operation halted all normal train traffic, assembling hundreds of special trains and buses to carry evacuees. Each child was allowed one small suitcase and a gas mask. Pinned to every coat was a card with the child’s name and school.

On the first day, more than two hundred thousand left the city of London alone, after standing in long lines and bidding a grim farewell to anxious parents. Three days later, Operation Pied Piper was complete. Nearly 1.5 million people—mostly children—had been moved to “reception” areas in the countryside.

In this manner, children as young as four, clutching teddy bears and dolls, left home for months or years, the exhortations so characteristic of the Britons’ famous grit—“Keep your chin up” and “Write home soon”—ringing in their ears. The operation on the whole ran rather smoothly.

By Christmas 1939, however, hundreds of thousands of the evacuees had returned home, lured by the months of tranquility that followed Britain’s October 1939 war declaration, a period known as the “phony war.”
The Fall of France and the “Mercy Ship” Campaign

The Nazis’ rapid and victorious invasion of France and the Low Countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg) in the spring of 1940 soon brought an end to Britons’ false sense of security. This eruption of violence prompted another wave of evacuations from British cities to safe areas in the English countryside.

But with Britain now fighting for its own survival—in the summer of 1940 Hitler was ostentatiously preparing an assault on the island nation—many British families preferred to send their children overseas to British dominions such as Canada or to the United States. In May 1940, the British government established the Children’s Overseas Reception Board (CORB) to assist this effort, while in the United States, the nongovernmental U.S. Committee for the Care of European Children (USCCCE) was established in June 1940 in the hope that a significant number of British children might take up temporary residence in the United States.

The USCCEC enjoyed the enthusiastic support of Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt; ER even agreed to serve as the organization’s “temporary administrative chairman.” But complex U.S. immigration laws and a Neutrality Act that barred U.S. ships from entering war zones made it no simple matter to arrange the children’s transport. The USCCEC launched a concerted effort to press Congress for an amendment to the Neutrality Act that would allow specially marked “mercy ships” to carry the refugee children to America if belligerents officially granted the ostensibly neutral U.S. ships safe conduct. This would avoid using British ships needed in the war and at risk of destruction by German submarines, while preventing the skirmish on the high seas many Americans feared would be the pretext for taking their country into the conflict. The amendment passed after much debate, and FDR signed it into law on August 28, 1940.

However, due to lingering concerns on both sides of the Atlantic about the safety and practicability of sending American ships to Britain to carry its children back across the ocean, no mercy ship ever sailed. Though British ships would carry out evacuations, the plan to use American vessels to rescue British children was never carried out.

The successful German invasion of France and the Low Countries in the spring of 1940 persuaded many Britons that their children should seek sanctuary not in the British countryside but overseas. Here, a contingent of some 480 kids ages five to fourteen voyages to Australia to live with relatives, August 1940. They traveled under Britain’s newly formed Children’s Overseas Reception Board.
Bundles from Britain

In the summer of 1940, Hitler having announced his intention to “eliminate the English Motherland as a base from which the war against Germany can be continued,” British families were eager to find overseas refuge for their children. They sent some 110,000 applications for evacuation to their government’s Children’s Overseas Reception Board (CORB) in the first few months after its establishment in May. Americans were ready to help, with tens of thousands of mostly middle-class families offering to open their homes to British youngsters.

Responding to an outpouring of goodwill from the United States and elsewhere, the British government began overseas evacuations of children in July 1940. In that fateful summer, some three thousand British children sailed overseas under the auspices of CORB, while another fourteen thousand voyaged abroad through private arrangements. Most went to dominions of the Crown—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Thanks in part to the efforts of both CORB and the U.S. Committee for the Care of European Children (USCCEC), roughly five thousand of these “Bundles from Britain” went to America.

But in the fall of 1940, though the German Air Force (the Luftwaffe) had begun hammering British targets, large-scale official and unofficial overseas evacuations came to an abrupt end. This was due in large part to the sorrowful fate of the SS City of Benares, a British passenger liner CORB was using to transport ninety British evacuee children and their escorts to Canada. On September 17, 1940, a German U-boat torpedoed and sunk the City of Benares in the midst of a howling gale. Of the 406 passengers and crew, more than 250 were lost, including seventy-seven of the ninety evacuee children.

Britons were anguished and thoroughly outraged by this incident, directing the force of their ire mainly at the British government for allowing the ship to proceed beyond a certain point unescorted. The government canceled CORB evacuations, and most private overseas evacuations also came to a halt.
An Enduring Legacy

For many wartime child evacuees, especially those forced to leave home at a young age or placed in inhospitable foster care, the dislocation left trauma in its wake.

Yet many families and children brought together by the tribulations of war established strong bonds of affection. One evacuee from a British orphanage, for example, stayed in the Bronx, attended a huge urban high school, and would recall that after Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war, fellow students embraced the evacuee children with special warmth. “[We] were really very, very well treated and it was a marvellous experience,” he said.

The evacuees’ experience was just one of the ways that the Anglo-American alliance in war set in motion a lively cultural and social exchange between the British and American peoples—an exchange that would enrich both societies for generations.

Indeed, some British children who came to America as refugees during the war would return to the United Kingdom to pursue illustrious careers in the country of their birth, but others, having spent their formative years in the United States, would ultimately find their way back to its shores to live and work.