

## Women and Child Search: A Gendered View of Post-World War II Reconstruction

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Within UNRRA, one of the most crucial sections was the Child Search Branch (CSB). Headquartered in Esslingen, the CSB faced the mammoth, emotionally and ethically complex task of assisting “unaccompanied children,” who were discovered in far larger numbers after 1945 than anyone had expected; repatriating those children or resettling them where no relatives could be found; and helping often distraught parents or other relatives search for missing children. These field activities soon confronted and often clashed with geopolitical and national interests, as governments set out on the task of nation building and reconstruction.

UNRRA recruited large numbers of employees at very short notice at the end of the war; most were men, especially at senior levels. By contrast, in the CSB many of them were women. Based on personnel files as well as personal document collections and writings, this paper will consider the role and influence of the women who effectively ran the CSB in navigating the world of postwar reconstruction. We examine the extent to which women who worked for the CSB yielded influence beyond their immediate operational work, for example in making decisions over the fraught removal of children from foster families. Further, we consider the extent to which the persistence of gendered assumptions about the “caring” professions have contributed to interpretations of the role of women in the postwar period. Our argument is that gender was not something that the women in the CSB consciously reflected on but that their self-styling as “carers” not only kept women confined to certain roles, as some historians have observed. It also meant that in those roles—many of which were ones of leadership—these women became experts in their fields and made numerous crucial decisions, which changed the fortunes of many thousands of children.