The history of humanitarian assistance has recently been claimed to be «largely or wholly unwritten» in spite of blooming publications that have been dedicated to its evolution over the last decade. To be sure, the vibrant nature of humanitarian activism challenges historians willing to map out and historicise this field. Hence, it is critical to accumulate knowledge on «the life and death of phenomena and entities existing between and through societies and communities», as recently outlined by P. Y. Saunier. With this in mind, the Save the Children International Union (SCIU), a non-governmental organisation founded in 1919 to help support children victims of war, represents a particularly relevant research topic to understand the evolution of humanitarian activism. Firstly, because NGOs illustrate many revealing factors of circulatory phenomena: considering their position as mediators of intercultural dialogues and facilitators of contacts between nations, they are now regarded as precursors of the contemporary process of globalisation. In this respect, even if previous works amply demonstrate the role of the SCIU in the international diffusion of legal standards for child protection, there is still a lot to be done to understand its influence on the circulation of mechanisms designed to cater for the younger age groups during the twentieth century.

Secondly, the SCIU is also noteworthy due to its very structure. Unlike other NGOs run by a few national actors (such as the Swiss members of the Red Cross International Committee), the machinery of the SCIU was, from its very begin-
ning, truly internationalised. The Union thus proves to be a particularly original case whose functioning announces the further developments of a globalised humanitarian activism. Moreover, the Union is also original for its longevity, since it lasted throughout the century, from 1919 to 1986. In spite of this prolonged existence, most of the work devoted to its history has been focused on the conditions of its emergence in the aftermath of World War I. Driven by its founders’ «heroic» vision,⁶ the existing literature gives little consideration to the organisation’s very mechanics or to its long-term evolution, no more than to the various transformations that possibly altered the children’s cause for which it campaigned.⁷

It is precisely this longevity and this adaptability that will be explored herein. Answering Johannes Paulmann’s call to «highlight the importance of historical conjunctures over continuous developments or trends»,⁸ the focus will be placed on the role World War II played on the organisation’s evolution. Whereas the historiography of NGOs credits the idea of a strong discontinuity between the system established around the League of Nations (LoN) and the one created after 1945,⁹ the case-study of the Union provides a more complex view. If World War II has indeed marked an inflexion point in the evolution of humanitarianism, it is necessary to sort out what was really transformed and what on the contrary proved to be an enduring heritage of former times, processes or networks of personal links.¹⁰

Through the case of the SCIU these historiographical challenges will be addressed, drawing on the circumstances this organisation had to face during World War II. Firstly, an outline of the establishment of the Union in 1919 will underline the originality of its own humanitarian call. Secondly, moving from its birth to its more mature years, the SCIU endured a quite uneasy evolution throughout the inter-war period: although striving to establish a professional expertise as an agency advocating child welfare among international organisations, the Union’s leaders were unable to extricate themselves from their initial humanitarian call. Finally, the beginning of World War II seemed to spell the end of the agency. However, global

8 Paulmann, «Conjunctures», 223.
war paradoxically opened up new opportunities to an organisation that had hitherto quite ineffectively tried to convince its constituencies to alter its initial dedication. Achieved at the end of the war, a thorough process of reorganisation allowed the agency to transform itself into a NGO specialising in the field of youth protection – albeit with mixed results. Approached from this angle, the history of the SCIU offers relevant perspectives on the constraints and opportunities that faced humanitarian activists at times of war: in the Union’s case, wartime offered to a handful of determined leaders a renewed possibility to break with path-dependencies and adapt their organisation to the growing professionalisation of humanitarian action.

1. The Save the Children International Union (1919–1939): Dedicated or Reluctant Humanitarians?

The SCIU was founded by a network of activists convinced that the rebuilding of the continent could only take root on the grounds of pacifism and international solidarity. Building upon the core of the British Save the Children Fund (SCF), this international movement led to the creation of the SCIU (French: Union Internationale de Secours aux Enfants), based in Geneva as of December 1919. The choice of childhood imposed itself as a particularly galvanising target for these dedicated internationalists: the child as an innocent victim was pictured as a neutral, sacred and universal issue. As such, children would most likely transcend international resentfulness, and would then constitute an ideal common ground for reconciliation and collective action. Solidarity around childhood could thus assume a crucial role in the process of demobilisation of minds, prior to the resumption of dialogue between former enemies. As a testimony to the peace-building ambitions of its founders, the Union’s governing bodies not only assembled representatives of both defeated and victorious countries, but also, in a quite innovative approach, both the donors and the receivers of humanitarian relief. Thus, the Union also significantly departed from previous wartime humanitarian programmes set up on the basis of national or identity-forming preferences.

The SCIU moved fast to encourage national committees to affiliate and to develop their own propaganda and fund-gathering operations. The funds raised would be centralised by the Union’s management in Geneva, and then disseminated in the territories most heavily stricken by war, famine and devastation. From its

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12 Archives d’Etat de Genève, Archives de l’Union Internationale de Protection de l’enfance (AUIPE), AP 92.3.6: Sociétés affiliées, December 1919.

onset, priority was to be given to central European countries, where the SCIU and its British funding committee, the SCF, were especially active. The SCIU relief organisation was partly built on pre-existing models, in particular on the International Committee of the Red Cross’s organisation and ideas (ethical and religious neutrality, decentralised organisation). The Union was to be a federation of independent national committees united by their specific target, just as Red Cross societies were brought together by the cause of soldiers’ welfare. Given this proximity to Red Cross principles and architecture, it is no surprise that most of the SCIU national committees emanated from Red Cross national societies.\(^\text{15}\)

The network’s coherence was maintained through a collegiate administration in Geneva, in the form of an executive committee whose members were partly appointed by national committees, partly self-appointed among a circle of local personalities (ICRC members and diplomatic officials). Actually, the governance of the SCIU relied on the dedication and crafts of a small team of employees, headed by a general secretary. This secretarial pool was mainly recruited among local personalities, for the most part women from the Geneva elite or middle-class families, benefiting from newly professional knowledge in social work or humanities. Just like the SCF founder Eglantyne Jebb, they were eager to invest their newly acquired knowledge and their social connections in a suitable professional activity. Drawing on a wide network of international connections associated to feminist networks and organisations, these women played a key role in the set-up and daily bureaucratic chores within many international bureaus during the interwar years.\(^\text{16}\)

For its finance as well as for its policies, the SCIU was from the very beginning heavily dependent on the SCF’s assistance and guidance. Under this vigilant leadership, the Geneva secretariat set forth the organisation’s purposes, distributed donations, disseminated propaganda material and managed the relationships between the Union and other organisations,\(^\text{17}\) achieving an undeniable success: in 1922, no less than seventeen committees had already joined the SCIU’s ranks, either as recipients or donors.\(^\text{18}\) Providing relief to foreign children victims of war indeed proved effective to mobilise a wide range of actors anxious to contribute to international reconciliation through various peace-building activities (feminist networks, Red Cross societies, LoN Unions).\(^\text{19}\) More broadly, the cause of children also

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\(^\text{18}\) AEG, AUPE, IVe Conseil Général, 22–23/02/1923.

\(^\text{19}\) Several SCIU members were recruited within the International Federation of the League of Nations Societies. On this association, T. R. Davies, «Internationalism in a Divided World: the Experience of the International Federation of League of Nations..."
appealed to the public’s sensibilities, whose donations continued to pour into successive SCIU international schemes from 1919 onwards, as new humanitarian crises hit Eastern Europe, reactivating the initial solidarity momentum. So much so that in 1921/1922 the Union would be able to collect, transfer and redistribute no less than ten million Swiss Francs throughout the continent. Undoubtedly, the SCIU could boast one of the most impressive achievements in the humanitarian arena; all the more as it had developed its action from scratch and under the constant strains of improvisations due to complex military, sanitary and diplomatic twists and turns.

However, the progressive dwindling of sanitary and military crises, in the 1920s, soon left the SCIU with a perplexing and significant decrease of income (2.6 million Swiss Francs collected in 1923). Among the national delegates committees annually convened in Geneva, much talking and debating occurred about the Union’s future: some members arguing in favour of the closure of its activities now that the resumption of international dialog was well on its way, thanks to the LoN structure. On the other hand, others forcibly advocated in favour of the continuity of the SCIU, arguing that the prestige and legitimacy so swiftly acquired by the Union should not be left to waste. Most vocal in their cry for survival, the Geneva employees received considerable support from both Swiss and British delegates, eager to maintain the SCIU as an indirect diplomatic resource. After a few months of hesitations, during which the charismatic leader of both the SCIU and the SCF, the buoyant Jebb, spared no effort to save her pet project, the Union moved on to a development policy avant la lettre. According to this new agenda, occidental nations and experts were responsible for guiding eastern nations on their way to more progressive childhood policies. To quote a prominent Italian SCIU member: «It is our duty to provide the institution with what we could call a peace agenda after the war agenda [...]. I fear that the SCIU may be dissolved if it does not begin to play, slowly, a more important role in the assistance to mother and children in ‘backward’ countries where there is no such an institution.»

Urgent aid for children in the event of disasters therefore became a secondary purpose behind the newest ambition of the SCIU to develop itself into a platform of information (clearing house) and diffusion of best child welfare practices (health,
education, employment, assistance). This evolution towards a policy of aid to the
development of «backward» countries was clearly embodied in the Declaration of
the Rights of the Child, drafted by the Union in 1923 and deftly passed on to the
LoN Assembly in 1924. The sense of moral superiority and «civilising mission»
that underlay this metamorphosis was hardly a path-breaking revolution. Various
other humanitarian agencies faced with similar challenges had already displayed
the same propensity to view European peripheries as a land of opportunity for
investing expert skills in long-term reconstruction schemes. The SCIU and the
SCF, which had played pioneer roles in this field as soon as 1920, were ideally placed
in order to realise similar ambitions. Building on their network of affiliates and
links with high-ranking personalities (Red Cross dignitaries especially in Hungary,
Poland, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia), the SCIU quickly succeeded in setting up and
financing a variety of health and social institutions modelled on occidental philan-
thropy.

These programmes helped the Union to take on a new dimension as an interna-
tional agency among the rapidly growing cluster of organisations teaming around
the LoN. Putting forward its own field experience, the SCIU soon set about participat-
ing in international debates or investigations focused on childhood with the
International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the LoN. In spite of its eagerness to
contribute to this blossoming of international collaboration, the SCIU effective
influence within these highly competitive forums proved to be limited. First of
all, because the Union was not in the best position to attract expertise and profes-
sional fields, compared to other international agencies. The collaboration of national
terrains was indeed a condition sine qua non for the efficiency of international orga-
nisations, using them as ready-made resource-centres for experts, information and
support networks. In this regard, the SCIU remained a marginal organisation vis-
à-vis major actors such as the League of Red Cross Societies or the Health Section

24 J. Droux, «L’internationalisation»; Z. Moody, «Transnational Treaties on Children’s Rights:
25 D. Rodogno, Against Massacres: Humanitarian Intervention in the Ottoman Empire 1815–1914, Princ-
eton 2012; J. Cooper, Embroidering History; an Englishwoman’s Experience as a Humanitarian Aid
Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–
26 AEG, AUPE, AP.92.2.3 : 7e conseil général de l’UISE, 23–25/09/1926.
27 D. Marshall, «The Causes, Promises and Problems of Coordinated Actions in Favour of Chil-
dren in War and Peace: Philanthropists, Experts and the League of Nations, 1914–1930», commu-
ication to the Workshop «Transnational Networks of Experts and Organizations», Geneva, Sept. 2009; J. Droux, «From Inter-Agency Con-
currences to Transnational Collaborations: The ILO Contribution to Child Welfare Issues during
the Interwar Years», in: S. Kott / J. Droux (eds.), Globalizing Social Rights: The International Labour
Organization and Beyond, 2013 (in press).
of the LoN, much more efficient in their expert-gathering attractiveness thanks to their privileged relationships with important American foundations.29

Moreover, the Union was still deeply identified both by potential experts and public opinion with its original humanitarian ideal, and much less with reconstruction or social policy reform on a long-term basis. Rather, it soon appeared that precious little consensus had been met within the Union regarding its recent evolution as expert advocacy network. A great many supporters of the SCIU remained dutifully attached to its initial raison d’être, clinging to an organisation embodying the unity of the child’s being and needs against the growth of «ultra-specialised» scientific knowledge.30 This internal dilemma continued to rage amongst the Union ranks, weakening the organisation’s budget and directly hindering the SCIU leaders in their effort to assert its role as a partner to be recognised within and among international agencies. Disoriented potential donors, who had been hitherto heartily contributing to its humanitarian scheme, were feeling much less enthusiastic giving money in order to cover the costs of employees’ salaries, experts’ expenses or long-distant technical congresses.

The 1930s crises addressed these tensions by providing a new urgency to child relief. Recurrent natural disasters, social, economic or political crises, and finally military conflicts forced the SCIU headquarters to once again endorse emergency relief’s planning in the wake of their national committees’ eagerness to support young victims (earthquakes in Bulgaria and Greece, 1928; famines in China, 1930; political events in central Europe; wars in Ethiopia and Spain). At the same time, technical cooperation at intergovernmental level soon adopted an increasingly idling pace, as the emergence of authoritarian regimes seized not only the whole LoN structure, but also the very governance of transnational networks. The SCIU was no exception to this trend: between 1934 and 1938, the withdrawal of several national committees (Austrian, Czech, German, and Soviet) considerably weakened the Union: whereas in 1937 the Union could still boast of regrouping 33 committees, there were only 25 left in 1939, with a majority unable to contribute any worthwhile amount to the Union budget.

By then, from both the financial and organisational point of view, the very existence of the SCIU was at stake. Its capacity to intervene in actual battlefields was reduced by sheer lack of funds, its role as a platform of expertise in child welfare drastically hampered by international tensions. As a last stand, faced with new military strategies targeting civilian populations, the SCIU headquarters in Geneva endeavoured from 1938 onwards to make innovative child welfare proposals in the

30 AEG, AUIPE AP 92.1.4: Comité exécutif, 30/04/1929.
form of neutral zones guaranteed by international treaties. But even with the support of their life-long ICRC allies, these hasty-drafted treaties met with general scepticism, including from countries and committees loyally dedicated to the Union.\textsuperscript{31} By accrediting the idea of a near and inevitable conflict, these proposals rather seemed to forecast the bankruptcy of the Union’s emblematic pacifism.

Confronted with the rising power of belligerent nationalism, the SCIU was thus undoubtedly going through a vital crisis. This triggered a no less vital question, that of its governance: between 1936 and 1940, the Union lost half of its budget and the Geneva Headquarters the majority of its permanent staff. Under such circumstances, the new geo-political situation resulting from the European conflict appeared as a most daunting challenge.

2. An International Union without Assistance, International Assistance without the Union (1939–1944)

At the outbreak of war, the Swiss government forced the Union to reorganise its executive bodies in order to ensure its neutrality. An administrative commission was set up in autumn 1939, whose members had to be recruited amongst citizens of neutral countries, namely Swiss citizens. Such was the case of its new secretary general, Georges Thelin, a former employee of the ILO, member of the Geneva executive committee as early as 1925.\textsuperscript{32} His work at the Headquarters was thus highly dependent on the collaboration of local personalities acting in various organisations still situated in Geneva, such as the ecumenical centre or relief organisations for refugees or migrants. These activists were for the most part long-standing partners of the SCIU among LoN-related organisations, arenas, networks, and dedicated internationalists. They shared the conviction that interwar pacifism had to be kept alive in spite of ongoing events, and that international networks such as the SCIU were to play a key-role in future reconstruction programmes. Thus reorganised, the administrative commission backed up Thelin’s efforts to ascertain the Union’s existence.

Its official status as an international non-governmental organisation confirmed, the SCIU still had to face a series of challenges. Firstly, the lines of communication between national committees and the Geneva Headquarters were especially difficult to maintain. During the General Council of May 1940, only fourteen national committees were represented.\textsuperscript{33} In reality, the overall federative organisation of the Union simply collapsed. Secondly, the SCIU organisation had indeed been founded on the possibility of swift cross-border circulation of information, personnel and

\textsuperscript{31} AEG, AUPE, AP 92.1.12: Commission administrative, 22/11/1939.
\textsuperscript{32} Georges Thélín (1890–1963), after graduating in Sociology and Law, he joined the ILO in 1920 and resigned in 1939 to be appointed as Secretary General of the SCIU (1940–1957).
\textsuperscript{33} AEG, AUPE, AP 92.3.99: 21e Conseil Général, 8/05/1940.
funds. All these vital factors were now deeply affected by warfare circumstances: within a few weeks, information on material needs, conditions of shipment or distribution simply dried up, most notably in occupied areas. SCIU delegates were sent to gather intelligence and practical information, but they did no better, not being allowed to penetrate the most sensible combat zones. The national committees would not be more useful, disrupted as they were by population exodus and refugee movements, relocation of command centres or military occupation. During 1940 the SCIU faced an unprecedented situation with regard to the extent of the needs and the difficulty to quantify them, let alone to answer them (particularly in occupied countries, but also in Great Britain and Hungary, where evacuee and refugee camps were set up).

After the stabilisation of the western front, uncertainty still prevailed. Changes within national or occupied administrations, mobilisation of personnel or successive purges forced the Union to constantly face fresh interlocutors in order to obtain the authorisations necessary to achieve fund or material shipments. Delegates were sent to maintain contacts, but as the war dragged on, travelling became more difficult, and thus less frequent. There were even times when contacts with Geneva would be virtually cut off. Such was the case for Poland and the Baltic countries as early as 1940, where occupant forces imposed the dissolution of SCIU committees. From 1943 onwards, the flow of information between the Union’s headquarters and the rest of the world was gradually paralysed, and the organisation of relief activities, already difficult due to financial barriers, was brought to a standstill.

Moreover, the SCIU committees, whose contributions used to keep the organisation afloat, not only did not contribute anymore, but were now urgently requesting assistance. Such was the case in France. Among its displaced populations, refugee camps and bombarded cities, the country soon came to depend on humanitarian relief. The President of the Child Relief French Committee thus privately conceded that «it is very painful to admit that after having tried to do our best to help children all over the world, it is our turn, we from the French committee, to envisage that we may need help and assistance from our foreign friends, in particular from the International Union». This shift in the flow of humanitarian assistance appeared all the more dramatic since the national committees of central and eastern Europe, which had always been on the receiving hand of humanitarian aid, were in no position to fill the SCIU coffers. Almost everywhere, national preferences indeed prevailed:

36 AEG, AUIPE, AP 92.32.15: Assistance aux enfants européens.
37 AEG, AUIPE, AP 92.19.8: Save the Children Fund (1941–1944): From January 1943 to June 1944, correspondence with the SCF in London was reduced to telegrams.
38 AEG, AUIPE, AP 92.18.19: Comité Français de Secours aux Enfants, 20/09/1939.
understandably, the funds collected by SCIU’s committees were integrally absorbed by assistance to local populations. Their contributions to the Union budget were therefore reduced to a strict minimum, if not totally discontinued.

However, the Union maintained a minimum amount of financial resources through the SCF’s contributions. Yet it proved quite a tricky business to effectively circulate these funds: especially exchange controls made funds transfers more and more difficult, even between neighbouring countries. As a consequence, the Union was virtually powerless in the face of the most crying needs. For instance, the delegation sent in 1940 to Hungary was driven to a state of enforced inactivity, witnessing empty handed the growing affluence of refugees from nearby occupied Poland, due to the lack of financial resources. Even the circulation of merchandise was incredibly difficult, as most European countries limited their exportations in order to protect themselves against growing food-shortage, not to mention the effects of the continental blockade. From their headquarters in Switzerland, the SCIU and the ICRC were only able to send a few precious shipments of food and clothes through complex and excruciatingly slow circuits.

Faced with the disintegration of its federative network, the Union turned to new partners. Building on its relationships with the SCF and the Red Cross, the SCIU tried to contact several philanthropic organisations overseas, setting up delegations in South America (1941), in the United States and in Canada (1942) to promote memberships and solicit donations. Not without difficulty, though: indeed the SCIU, in spite of its alleged universalism, had been from its very beginning a club of fellow European activists and milieus. This exclusivism, relatively harmless during the interwar years, proved now to be a lethal factor. Having no reliable contacts to activate, it was hard for the SCIU delegates to know who to turn to in order to make inroads in the jungle of American charities. Even though links were finally developed, which permitted to obtain new funding to allow a handful of child relief actions, the Union still remained a minor partner for overseas organisations, such as the American Red Cross, the Quakers, and later on the UNRRA.

Even worse, prevailing military strategies were about to crush any hope of voicing the Union’s credo of neutrality. As early as February 1940, the British government decided to authorise the payments from the SCF to SCIU’s bank account on the strict condition that these funds be exclusively used for overhead contributions: the assistance of nationals from enemy countries was under no circumstances to be

39 AEG, AUIPE, AP 92.18.16: Comité Français de Secours aux Enfants, 4/08/1941.
41 The SCIU had only affiliated one US committee as from 1932, the Save the Children Federation of America.
tolerated. From February 1941 onwards, the United States made the same point, and US contributions to the Geneva SCIU dwindled to a few dollars a month. The universal and sacred cause of children, so much celebrated during the interwar years as a common ground for reconciliation, was outpaced by strategic issues: yet another source of bitter disappointment for SCIU pundits.

Due to these restrictions, the marginalisation of the SCIU on the humanitarian battlefield only grew worse. In fact, Swedish and American committees soon set out to develop their own humanitarian planning independently from the Geneva centre, adopting national or identity-forming lines of preference: «Efforts are more and more made in several countries on a national basis and the few organisations that are still able to participate in actions in other countries are doing it directly», deplored Thélin in 1941. Indeed, relief offered by the Save the Children Federation of America was from 1940 onwards almost exclusively directed to the London SCF (40,000 dollars a month against 2900 dollars a month sent to the SCIU headquarters). The whole organisation logistic would soon register this shift in its humanitarian practices. Such was the case of the «photo-card» individual sponsorship formula created by the association in 1920, whereby a donor could symbolically adopt a child by means of a monthly payment. Although marginal during the inter-war period (only 1420 children in seventeen countries benefited in 1925), this action was now taking on a new and crucial dimension among the SCIU actions. The Union’s Geneva centre sponsored more than 2000 children in 1942 and 6500 at the end of 1944. The photo-cards, generalised by several national committees, would finally benefit more than 68,000 children in 1944. Yet this kind of assistance remained insignificant in comparison to the actual needs and time consuming (one had to find sponsors, create lists of recipients and ensure the relationship between them), unsuited to emergency relief actions and moreover, to any form of planning. As of 1943, the SCIU overcame some of these difficulties by favouring collective sponsorships which allowed to symbolically «adopt» a group of children (home or school). Nevertheless, also in this case, the dimension of universality, crucial to SCIU identity and ethics, got strongly undermined: the Swedish committee, for example, reserved its right to channel collected funds almost exclusively towards Scandinavian children: 20,250 out of its 21,1150 sponsorships made in 1943 concerned Swedish, Finish or Dutch children. The Swiss committee proved to be a little bit more eclectic: it registered 17,375 sponsorships between 1940 and 1942, half of them spent on French children (but most of these «French» were actually Swiss by origin...).
This «bilateralisation» of humanitarian actions dangerously weakened the SCIU’s foundations, especially by contributing to the marginalisation of its headquarters. Moreover, the growing preferences practices (whether national, cultural or ethnical) constituted as many radical breaches of the neutrality principle on which the Union had initially built its momentum. International charities thus experienced the two-fold development of decentralisation and re-nationalisation, which risked, on the long term, to render the Union – in its very quality of a federation of multilateral humanitarianism – totally obsolete.

All these threats bearing on the SCIU’s survival may explain why the Union decided to take part in other quite debatable humanitarian actions. Such was the case of railway convoys of children victims of war suffering from malnutrition or trauma (mainly Belgian and French), sent temporarily to Swiss foster families. This kind of assistance had already been implemented at the end of World War I, but had progressively been rejected by SCIU child welfare experts, anxious not to disrupt families and cause trauma. Nonetheless, the railway convoys, reactivated at the time of the Spanish conflict by several humanitarian associations as the only way to exfiltrate and assist children in need, was broadly implemented from 1940 onwards by a Swiss humanitarian federation. It allowed to shift difficulties related to fund and material export by bringing the beneficiaries to the relief, and not the other way round. The SCIU, eager to be kept in the humanitarian loop, swiftly jumped in. Railway convoys to Switzerland ensured an indirect form of relief for French families before their interruption in November 1942. By then, the assessment of their effectiveness, as far as the SCIU was concerned, was less than enthusiastic. Marginalised in this organisation, the SCIU practically lost any kind of control over the recipients. Eligible children were indeed chosen on the basis of racial and national criteria, directly negotiated between the Swiss Red Cross and the Swiss and German authorities, but the Swiss public opinion was kept totally in ignorance of this screening that excluded Jewish children. Even if the convoys proved to be an undeniable success for the Union by keeping alive its ideals of international solidarity and permitted to actually help needy children and families, they nonetheless challenged its very ethics of neutrality. In order to provide relief to these children, the SCIU leaders had to resort to clandestine actions or to indirect assistance (for example, in France, funding foster homes for foreign or denationalised children). These actions certainly allowed the perpetuation of the SCIU universal ideals in the eyes of its leaders, but the discretion and prudence they required did not allow for substantial assistance. Furthermore, this action did not strengthen the Union’s prestige, since the Swiss public opinion was never informed about it.

49 AEG, AUIPE, AP 92.18.16: Comité Français de Secours aux Enfants (1941–1943). In 1943, the French committee sent to Thélin in Geneva encryp-...
Disconnected from its international partners, limited in its forms of action and marginalised by its own committees, the Union seemed doomed. Yet at the same time, both the London and the Geneva SCF and SCIU headquarters were aware of the necessity of keeping the organisation alive in people’s minds if it were to participate in post-war reconstruction: «I am firmly of the opinion that we ought ever to keep in mind our goal, and be ready for future action as the occasion arises. Therefore in this connection we must keep our machinery in good working order.»

Since humanitarian relief seemed now definitely out of reach especially on such scale that post-war reconstruction would entail, the Union had to build a new credo, a new field of activity and a new constituency for itself.


From a very early stage of the conflict, the SCIU and SCF headquarters lucidly analysed their own situation. The inability of the Union to contribute to mitigate huge humanitarian needs either during or after the war constituted a serious threat for the agency’s survival. In spite of its past prestige, a worthless Union would most certainly die, at least in the public’s hearts, minds and purses. Hence, from 1940 on, a discussion over the role and the future of the Union was launched. Several members of the Union’s management stated that time seemed to be ripe to revive the process initiated prior to the war. There was not a shade of doubt for general secretary Thélin: «The future of the Union lies certainly in the direction of an international centre for child protection.» The context seemed particularly favourable to such an option, since an increasing demand for information related to child welfare emerged from various networks and nations. The question of wartime influence on youth took centre stage. The experiences of families torn apart, mass mobilisations, weakening of educational systems and large-scale violence raised overall fear about the future of the young generations. This was a prominent issue among political and moral authorities in many countries, which were already anxious to prepare themselves for the post-war rehabilitation of their civilian populations.

In this regard, pre-war networks which had centralised and divulged information on these phenomena were no longer active. Such was the case of the Association internationale de protection de l’enfance, with its head offices in Brussels, whose activity had been cut off by military operations. Intergovernmental organisations,
whose competences also included youth issues, were similarly disorganised; the ILO had been forced to move from Geneva to Montreal, and the employees of the LoN’s technical sections had been scattered.\footnote{M. A. Balinska, Une vie pour l’humanitaire: Ludwik Rajchman 1881–1965, Paris 1995, 169–225.} It was not until well into 1941 that delegates and experts from Allied countries would be working on planning post-war reconstruction on both sides of the Atlantic.\footnote{B. Shepard, «Becoming Planning-Minded: The Theory and Practice of Relief, 1940–1945», in: Journal of Contemporary History 43 (2008), 405–419; Rheinisch, «Internationalism».}

Thélin was well aware of this gap. As early as 1939, he planned to address this issue by profiling the SCIU as an international platform of expertise in child policies, an evolution that he had constantly advocated during the interwar period. Backed by the SCF, he was determined to take advantage of wartime circumstances to definitely impose this metamorphose, and get rid of previous resistances. First of all, the Union’s governance had to adapt to new circumstances: since the annual meetings of various national committees could no longer be held, power inevitably shifted to the Geneva Headquarters. Democratic debate within the Union thus no longer took place, leaving a small group of decision-makers in charge. Among them, several members of international networks still working in Geneva were ready to follow the secretary general’s call to reconstruct the SCIU around «a more stimulating and positive conception on which the movement must be engaged, despite the difficulties, in response to the huge current needs when facing the demands of the after-war period: that of recovering the sense of the Union’s value by positioning it within the network of major international humanitarian organisations».\footnote{AEG, AUPE, AP 92.1.12: Commission administrative, rapport de G. Thélin, déc. 1940–janv. 1941.} Here came the second crucial change: in his view, the humanitarian mandate of the SCIU had to be left aside in favour of a leading position among technical and expert organisations. This was the only solution that would put the SCIU in a stronger position to resist autonomous and centrifugal tendencies among national committees. In other words, let them act on the humanitarian field along their chosen line of activity, as long as they provide the Union with expert advice and information to be valued in the international forum: «If relief work is surely an after-war emergency, there is an infinitively more difficult and more serious task awaiting the organisers of child protection: the rehabilitation of young generations by bringing them back to sound living standards.»\footnote{AEG, AUPE: AP 92.3.125 : Mission de Thélin en France, Belgique, Hollande, Luxembourg, Danemark, Norvège, décembre 1945.} This was, according to Thélin, the only way to prepare the future role of the Union as a platform of expertise on child welfare within the international organisations, soon to be reformed at the end of the conflict (and centred in Geneva, as it was wrongly assumed at that time within the SCIU).
The new SCIU executives approved this scheme at the end of 1940, without any form of consultation of the affiliated committees. The general secretary quickly moved on to create specialised sections within its bureau, with relief activities counting only as one among other responsibilities – and a minor one. More important were the information section, the medical care section and the social policy section, the latter including the growing issue of laws and institutions for maladjusted children. The secretariat was to develop contacts along these lines with a variety of national experts in order to endorse the new SCIU ambitions. The Union thus established solid connections with psychology experts, juvenile judges, schools for specialised educators, and correctional institutions: at this point associations, networks and professionals previously linked to other networks were willingly taking part in the Union, now the sole world-wide agency federating child welfare private organisation.58 Such was the global shift of loyalty that the SCIU finally absorbed its long-standing rival, the Association Internationale de Protection de l’Enfance in 1945, changing its name to become the International Union for Child Welfare. The choice of the term «Welfare» was no coincidence, wanting to emphasise the Union’s new ambitions.59

Building on these sources of expertise, a whole range of inquiries and reports were soon released in the SCIU’s journal, helping to assert the new identity of the SCIU federation as an international think tank on public youth policies.60 But not only professional and scientific networks were captured by the SCIU. Now, the general secretariat drastically reorganised the Federation’s body. As soon as 1942/1943, Thélin put pressure on the various national committees to make them regroup into more coherent agencies. Through this centralisation process, different epistemic communities were thus merged with the SCIU’s committees, in order to create pools of legal, scientific and technical skills for the Union. Drawing from the expertise of these panels, the SCIU was preparing to assume its role of clearing house and data mining in the realm of child and youth welfare as soon as governments and international organisations would need it.

The last months of the conflict were entirely devoted to this effort, though sometimes with mixed results. Such was the case in Sweden, where the national committee declined to feed the SCIU expert pool in order to prioritise the humanitarian relief that its neutrality status still allowed it to play.61 Generally, however, the changes initiated by the Geneva management provoked a clear reorientation of affiliates towards long-term protection schemes and professionalisation. Conversely, partners that did not respond to this drive were swiftly excluded from the Union.

58 AEG, AUIPE, AP 92. 1.13: Commission administrative, 3/03/1942.
60 See its December 1941 survey on «L’hospitalisation et la psychologie de l’enfant réfugié».
61 AEG, AUIPE, AP 92.32.15/16: comité suédois, 1941–1944.
Such was the fate of a small Swedish women's committee: «I am certainly not misogynist – confided Thélìn – but I do not believe it is in the interest of the Union to carry on the old tradition of charity committees.» The Union’s credibility was at stake in the general context of mounting professionalism and certificated competences within which social work was now evolving.

The 1939 moribund SCIU, faced with bankruptcy and impotence, was now hardly recognisable. While in 1941 the Union was composed of 39 committees spread through 26 countries, it registered no less than 54 member organisations in 34 countries in 1946. However, the situation remained fragile, and the internal balance quite lopsided: following wartime destructions, which the progressive rise of the iron curtain would only aggravate, Central and Eastern Europe were now only represented by a handful of committees. Undoubtedly, the organisation was more than ever oriented towards European democracies, in spite of its avowed intentions to regain ground as a global organisation: among the 54 affiliates of the Union in 1946, 40 were located in Europe, two in North America, nine in South America, and three in Asia. The SCIU was represented in 34 countries, out of which 22 were Europeans.

Nonetheless, this reorganisation led the Union to function as a clearing house of information, enlarging the recruitment pool of its personal: at the end of 1942, the Geneva secretariat of the Union thus counted ten employees and about twenty at the end of 1944, recruited among young graduates of different nationalities and remunerated thanks to the committees’ contributions. This secretariat was henceforth able to collect and process data provided by its national experts. One of the first international organisations to publish surveys and statistics about the situation of post-war European youth, the Union turned into an agency to be reckoned with.

Drawing on its pre-war relations with a large number of international organisations and actors, the Geneva secretariat sent hundreds of letters to various correspondents, keeping them informed about its reorganisation both at national and international level. The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) civil servants in particular, among whom many who were previously in the LoN administration had entertained personal contacts with SCIU members during the interwar years, were now anxious to ask for the Union’s data and expertise. The growing number of letters exchanged between Lake Success and the Geneva headquarters in the very first post-war years testify to this newly re-established prestige of the SCIU as a professionalised agency on child welfare issues among UN secretariats.
Calling itself the «authorised voice of the worldwide public opinion» on childhood issues, the Union was from 1945 onwards undoubtedly the sole global federation unifying child welfare charities and associations. Yet in spite of its restructuring – or because of it – the Union had to face mixed consequences. Mostly, its Eurocentrism turned out to be detrimental to its global status, since its uneasy relationships with US agencies remained unchanged, despite frequent missions conducted in the US by its Secretary General after 1945. This proved all the more dramatic when it became clear that the United Nations head offices would eventually not be established in Geneva, but in the United States. Pressing advice from its US partners to move the SCIU management to New York in order to gain visibility were rejected on the grounds that it would endanger their links with European networks and would put its independence at risk. Hence, the Union’s leaders had to lower their sights in relation to the UN organisations. To be sure, the SCIU finally succeeded in gaining a consultative status within the UN system. Nonetheless, it remained a minor partner thereof.

Moreover, and most ironically, further historical events ran contrary to the SCIU’s chosen path. At the very moment when the Union was achieving its metamorphosis into an expert network brushing its humanitarian tradition aside, relief works were about to explode. In fact, humanitarian agencies, under UNRRA’s lead, were now rushing into Europe. Whereas UNRRA was not unknown by the SCIU headquarters, the reverse unfortunately seemed all too true. Early SCIU efforts to liaise with UNRRA’s headquarters were thus seldom acknowledged, and its good offices quite neglected. The fact that the Union had entertained very few connections (if any) with Russia and China during the interwar years and quite distant ones with its US affiliates, certainly made the contact more difficult with the Great Powers that were operating UNRRA. What is more, UNRRA social workers, convinced of the path-breaking nature of their mandates and superiority of their competences, were not seeking any outsider’s professional expertise. Finally, the Union’s obvious lack of connections with the military apparatus of the Great Powers certainly did not help to uphold the Union’s visibility in the caring of civilian populations in the liberated war zones. Deprived of any human or material means of action, the SCIU remained cut off from the various humanitarian works set up by the international

64 Bulletin UISE, 1944.
66 AEG, AUIPE, AP 92.3.128: Correspondence between SCF and SCIU, 18/02/1946.
67 Bulletin UISE, 1943, on the relationships with the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations in Washington, and in London with the Interallied Committee on Post-war Need or with UNRRA.
68 AUIPE, AP 92.T 16 bis: UNRRA: Telegrams of Thelin to Lehman (18/02/1944) and McGeachy (14/06/1944).
welfare community, even in their own field of child welfare institutions.\textsuperscript{70} In any case, the fact that the SCIU now favoured expertise rather than relief, and that it had neither material resources to pour into UNRRA’s schemes nor any opportunity to inform about its activities, clearly contributed to its marginalisation in the immediate post-war period.

At the end, in spite of immediate post-war connections between UN agencies and the SCIU, the Union’s connections to the United Nations system would prove to remain tenuous: as the years went by, its publications would be ignored and its influence limited. In 1947, the once enthusiastic Thélin had to acknowledge the fact: «We are proselytes standing at the door, with no power whatsoever. We have no say in the way everything is organised.»\textsuperscript{71} The Union seemed doomed to remain «in the periphery, or even outside»\textsuperscript{72} of the debates that took place within the UN structure. The SCIU was undoubtedly rapidly becoming a minor regional organisation even considering its own turf of child welfare policy and programmes, which would soon be dominated by UN-based agencies funded on UNRRA’s remainder (FISE and UNICEF).\textsuperscript{73} The fact that UNICEF was mostly intended to cater for medical needs and provide assistance to national systems of public health, an expert field rather neglected by the SCIU, may also explain the Union’s marginal status compared to other newly-founded and hygiene-oriented agencies such as the Paris Centre International de l’Enfance.\textsuperscript{74}

On the other hand, the Union’s score was more encouraging with UN agencies operating from the European front. Drawing on its network of professional experts, the Union actively contributed to UNESCO and FAO programmes on handicapped children or nutrition.\textsuperscript{75} But it was mostly on the issue of maladjusted youth, which would become one of the central issues of post-war youth policies on both sides of the Atlantic,\textsuperscript{76} that the Union comforted its standing as an international think tank. Thanks to its «Consultative Commission on delinquent youth», set up in 1948 to regroup national experts involved in juvenile justice, the SCIU was regularly consulted by international and regional organisations.\textsuperscript{77} Due to its collaboration with

\textsuperscript{71} AEG, AUIPE, AP 92. N.1.2: ONU, Division des activités sociales, 27/03/1947.
\textsuperscript{72} AEG, AUIPE, AP 92. N.1.4: Conseil économique et social de l’ONU, 27/03/1947.
\textsuperscript{74} Archives of the Centre International de l’Enfance, Université d’Angers, 1 CIDEF 12: Rapport d’activités, 1950–1954. The UNICEF’s governing body substantially funded the CIE (1 million dollars in 1950–1952) in order to «ameliorate conditions of children’s life in their physical, moral and social aspects, and to disseminate useful knowledge to pediatricians, psychiatrists and social workers all over the world».
\textsuperscript{75} AEG, AUIPE, AP 92.36.13: Relations de l’UIPE avec sa consultante à l’ONU.
\textsuperscript{77} AEG, AUIPE, AP 92. N.1.1: Correspondance avec le Conseil économique et social de l’ONU (1946–1947).
other emerging networks tackling the issue of juvenile justice, the Union thus helped build the convergence of West European policies aimed at managing youth at risk.

4. Conclusion

Several recent studies have pointed out the need to challenge preconceptions about periodisation of contemporary developments in international institutions and organisations, calling for the creation of new narratives aimed at changing the circumstances that determine the nature of their activities. The case of the SCIU, developed here in its evolution from its foundation at the time of World War I to its transformation between 1939 and 1947, seeks to contribute to such a nuanced view of the nature of humanitarian action as well as of the constraints that determine its transformations. It was thus possible to highlight the fact that the circumstances of World War II were most certainly conducive to its transformation into a professional expert network, but also that this very metamorphosis had actually already begun during the first decade of its existence, although with mixed results. In this regard, a careful examination of this uneasy evolution reveals the competing threads of continuity and change during this period: on the one hand, it measures the role played from above by the movement’s leading personalities or groups linked to ongoing notions of internationalism and how they acted upon organisations and networks debating social rights and universal norms at a transnational level; on the other hand, it shows the enduring influence of various constituencies that continued to cling to the Union’s original calling to humanitarian relief.

Moreover, taking into account the changing historical context in which the SCIU was involved, this case-study sheds new light on the history of post-war humanitarian action and the nature of its relation to global political developments. In the case of the SCIU, its transformation into a platform of expertise in the field of child welfare policies undoubtedly enabled the Union to survive the insurmountable difficulties faced by its relief activities and the ultimate failure of its universal ethics during wartime. However, the desire to remain an agency independent from major intergovernmental organisations, and to continue to represent the world opinion the way non-governmental agencies had claimed to do during the interwar years, ultimately failed to materialise.

Indeed, the war rebalanced powers between non-governmental movements and state structures, both on the national scene and within intergovernmental organisations. The growing role of states, especially the predominant influence of the Great

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79 Mazover, No Enchanted Palace; Paulmann, «Conjunctions»; Salvatici, «Help the People».
Powers in the UN – so clearly demonstrated by UNRRA – caused an irreversible process of marginalisation for private organisations in most international agencies of the United Nations. In fact, while allowing the Union to be recognised in the jungle of NGOs within UN agencies as an international platform of child welfare expertise, the SCIU never recovered the status, prestige or level of influence that had been attached to its label in the aftermath of World War I. The golden age of NGOs that had allowed asserting themselves as partners of states in the field of international socio-cultural policies gave way to the secondary status of consultative organisations, which was to become prevalent in NGOs in the UN structures.

However, more detailed studies should be dedicated to post-war humanitarian organisations such as the SCIU in order to understand how this type of agencies has been able to adapt to this new consultative status, and how it performed its role in the evolution of national and international social policies. After all, as far as the SCIU is concerned, the shift to professionalised humanitarianism proved to be a successful step that helped the agency to survive and develop on the margins of the UN system well into the 1980s. Further studies on SCIU post-war evolution should focus on its strategies and programmes, and on its relations at national level with the ideas, wishes and needs of their local constituencies, an aspect hitherto neglected by the existing literature. Further studies dedicated to these post-war decades would help us understand how humanitarian activists such as the SCIU affiliated committees and members negotiated the challenges of development policy in the context of decolonisation and Cold War, to define and shape its new role within global civil society.
From Child Rescue to Child Welfare:  
The Save the Children International Union Facing World Warfare  
(1939–1947)

The SCIU was created in 1919 to assist children victims of war. As the first organisation dedicated to childhood, this agency is an already well known case-study for the historians of international humanitarian aid. Yet its later evolution is much less studied, even though the SCIU persisted until the 1980s. This article shows to what extent the Second World War played a fundamental role in the reconfiguration of the SCIU towards a role of expertise regarding child welfare by disrupting the internal rules and modes of collaborations which had been set up within the federation since its creation. During the war, the organisation gave itself new tasks and a new way of functioning, in order to regain some kind of leeway within the intergovernmental organisations that the Great Powers were setting up across the Atlantic. This reconfiguration yielded mixed results: While the SCIU succeeded in surviving wartime, preserving and even expanding its affiliates and helping them reorient their actions towards child welfare expertise, it remained nonetheless a European-based agency, and in this respect only a minor partner of the intergovernmental organisations during the post-war era.

Von der Kinderrettung zur Kinderwohlfahrt:  
die Save the Children International Union im Angesicht der weltweiten Kriegsführung (1939–1947)


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