

“ALL CHILDREN ARE OURS” – CHILDREN’S HOMES
IN SOCIALIST CZECHOSLOVAKIA AS LABORATORIES
OF SOCIAL ENGINEERING

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This contribution traces the ideological and institutional foundations of the system of children’s homes in socialist Czechoslovakia and its development between 1945 and the early 1970s. During the 1950s, efforts by the communist regime resulted in an enormous surge in capacity. From the mid-1960s onwards, some 20,000 places were available. However, they no longer served in the first place for accommodating orphans, but rather for children whose parents were unable, in the view of the regime, to adequately cater for and educate them. Criteria for categorization as “social orphans” were, on one hand, political and ideological notions of how a “socialist person” ought to be educated. On the other hand, pedagogues, pediatricians, and psychologists formulated criteria of how care should take place. Beginning with the late 1950s, however, long-term care in children’s homes, which was decidedly preferred over adoption and foster care, was submitted to an increasing criticism. In numerous studies, scholars and experts proved that collective education had detrimental effects, and demanded that substitute care in families be reintroduced. This was put into practice in several steps over the period 1958-1973 and resulted in several sets of tools being created which enabled social engineers from the fields of both politics and science to intervene in family life and childcare.