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## **Depicting the Innocent: Children as Social Movement Symbols: The Impact of Children as Symbols on Social Movements**

Giehler, Merle

### **Citation**

Giehler, M. (2021). *Depicting the Innocent: Children as Social Movement Symbols: The Impact of Children as Symbols on Social Movements*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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# **Depicting the Innocent: Children as Social Movement Symbols**

## **The Impact of Children as Symbols on Social Movements**

*Merle J. C. Giehler*

*s2341336*

*Leiden University*

*Bachelor Project: Social Movements & Political Violence*

*Dr. C. Jentsch*

*21.05.2021*

*Word Count: 7961*

*Reference Style: APA 7th edition*

**Disclaimer:**

The following thesis features graphic images that some might find disturbing.

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“Children are supposed to be happy and [in] good care of their family. They do not deserve to die like that.”

- Kim Phúc on the image of Alan Kurdi (Logan, 2015)

## 1. Introduction

Children are running visibly distressed down Highway 1 in Trảng Bàng, Vietnam. Soldiers close behind them. In the middle: a 9-year old naked girl whose flesh is burning from the incendiary bomb Napalm. She is crying helplessly as she runs toward Huynh Cong “Nick” Ût, who will capture this moment in a photograph titled “Terror of War”, otherwise known as *Accidental Napalm Attack*<sup>1</sup> (Westwell, 2011). The 1972 image captures not only the moment that will scar the body of young Phan Thị Kim Phúc<sup>2</sup> for the rest of her life, but also the moment that had an enormous impact on the course of the Vietnam war.

It is early in the morning as the limp, lifeless body of a toddler still dressed in his red t-shirt and blue pants washes on the shore near the Turkish town of Bodrum. He lies face down right where the water meets the sand as Nilüfer Demir, a Turkish photojournalist, pressed the shutter button on her camera (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020, p. 75). Then, his small body is carried away. Later, the boy will be identified as 3-year old Alan Kurdi<sup>3</sup>, who drowned while his family attempted to flee in an inflatable boat from Kobane - a Syrian town occupied by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) - to the Greek island Kos (Prøitz, 2018, p. 548). Both his mother and brother drowned with him. The only person left to identify these bodies: Alan Kurdi’s father Abdullah. On the 2nd September 2015 the image immortalizing Alan Kurdi’s truly untimely and brutal death was published, causing international outrage (Vis & Goriunova, 2015, p. 63).

The importance of imagery is highlighted as despite being taken four decades apart, both caused international outrage. Both involved brute violence against children. Both sent the world into shock through immense disbursement in newspapers and also online. Social movements<sup>4</sup> for both causes used their images in protest to advance their advocacy. Yet,

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<sup>1</sup> The image is known under multiple different names, such as *Accidental Napalm Strike* (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003), for the purpose of this thesis it will be referred to by the title used in its initial publication in *The New York Times*.

<sup>2</sup> Following Vietnamese custom, this thesis will refer to her as Kim Phúc

<sup>3</sup> First reports referred to the boy as Aylan Kurdi, the Turkish spelling of the name, however, it was later corrected to Alan Kurdi by his father

<sup>4</sup> Social movements and protests movements will be used interchangeably

neither of these pictures were the first evidence of this violence. The use of Napalm bombs in Vietnam was well known by 1972 and by the time Kurdi's picture was published over 4,000 Syrians had already lost their lives trying to flee via the Mediterranean (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003; Varrella, 2021). Both developments were accompanied by an abundance of (oftentimes graphic) images. Hence, the question arises: what was it about the images of Kim Phúc and Alan Kurdi that yielded them this attention and impact? This thesis will offer a perspective and argue that these images leverage lies in their subject: children. Whilst attempting to specify the nature of effective social movement imagery, this thesis thus poses the question: *How do symbols of children advance the success of social movements?*

To achieve an understanding on these symbols' impacts, this thesis expands upon the notion that images have the ability to invoke emotions that potentially induce levels of mobilization, ultimately being able to advance the success of social movements. First, major contributions on the importance of emotions and symbols, particularly children, in social movements will be elucidated. Then, the theoretical approaches of moral shock, sacred objects and identifiable victims will be presented to connect children as symbols to emotions. Through these findings, a deductive qualitative analysis will be conducted. Following the method of process tracing, the cases of Kim Phúc and Alan Kurdi will be compared to address the research question. Based on this analysis, conclusions on children as symbols will be drawn and stimuli for future research offered.

## 2. Literature Review

This thesis will introduce and compare major contributions on emotions in social movements, as well as on the importance of symbols in the evoking of emotional resonance.

### Emotional Dynamics of Social Movements

#### *Emotions and Mobilization*

Prior to the incorporation of feminist approaches, social movement scholars largely dismissed the emotional component of mobilization dynamics and prioritized resource mobilization, identity politics and networks (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995). Only recently has the focus shifted towards emotions, which grants new insights regarding social movement mobilization or organization, dynamics, their success and failures (Flam & King, 2005, p. 99).

Causes for movement and protest mobilization tend to differ depending on cultural and historical conditions. Next to underlying grievances and political opportunity, emotions are said to be effective for mobilization (Tarrow, 2011, p. 71). According to Flam & King (2005), this is because emotions establish a sense of community and thus enable collective action (p. 43). Klandermans (1984) differentiates between two phases of mobilization that both pertain to the importance of emotions (p. 586). First, the formation of collective identity occurs through framing of the movement's cause. According to Olson (2015), framing is done effectively if it resonates with the feelings and desires of potential recruits (p. 55). Next, sympathization of the cause, as well as motivation and ability of participation, must be evoked to activate mobilization (Klandermans, 1984). A study conducted by Fleishman (1980) compliments the importance of emotions in mobilization, as it found feelings of responsibility with a cause to strongly relate to the level of action taken - i.e. amount of financial contributions made (p. 629).

#### *Types of Emotions for Mobilization*

Despite minor differences, the academic consensus is that stronger emotions are most influential in the mobilization of social movements. Here, Jasper (2014) distinguishes between *reciprocal emotions*, which are feelings of affection protesters have toward each other and *shared emotions* of indignation towards the oppressor (p. 209). Accordingly, one can conclude that both positively and negatively connotated feelings can be action-driven, their influence just depends on the object.

Van Zomeren et al. (2004) designate negatively connotated emotions, particularly anger and outrage as integral components in social movements. Here, it was found that disadvantages imposed upon one's *in-group* positively impact one's alacrity of action and perception of group efficacy. Accordingly, anger in particular is a so-called *action-oriented* emotion, promoting collective action and movement mobilization (van Zomeren et al., 2004, p. 649). Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans (2013) support this notion and describe anger as “the prototypical protest emotion” (p. 893). Emotions - particularly negatively connotated emotions - thus advance mobilization. Especially in democracies, increases of mobilization raise the profile of a certain issue and consequently pressure leaders to cater to those constituencies (Meyer, 2003, p. 388). Accordingly, these emotions also have leverage on the fulfillment of a movements' objectives.

While the positive impact of the invoking of extreme emotions on mobilization has been studied extensively, social movement literature is far less elaborate concerning the provocation of such emotions. Since this is essential to understand the emotional component of social movements, this thesis will propose a certain trigger-mechanism: children as symbols.

### **Symbols and Emotions**

According to Jasper (2014) and Awad & Wagoner (2020), symbols - emblems that may vary from colors, hand gestures and even hashtags - carry potency regarding the evoking of emotions. This is due to the ability of symbols to transform abstract ideas of movements into concrete, pertainable and coherent images that often surpass language barriers (Jasper, 2014, p. 99). Accordingly, photographs inherently carry the ability to reach a larger audience, which increases their competence.

McAdam (2000) posits that photographs have often driven the course of social movements and marked critical junctures in their development. Here, he appeals to the importance of photographs that depict violence. For instance a wave of sympathy and mobilization ensued after the publication of the 1963 photograph featuring police violence against the civil rights activists in Alabama (McAdam, 2000, p. 117). Hagopian (2008) describes the proficiency of photographs as follows: “Unlike a piece of moving film, which viewers process in real time, a photograph allows the viewer to stare, to turn from the picture and then return to it ”(p.



202). Similarly, Hariman & Lucaites (2003) highlight the emotional meaning-making ability of photographs in that they allow for an intense personal analysis (p. 42).

This construction of emotions by images is effectively exemplified in the historic symbol of the Arab Spring: the photograph of Mohamed Bouazizi publicly immolating himself in Tunisia in 2010 (Fassin, 2011). Whilst it caused shock and outrage, it was the image of this Tunisian street vendor that encapsulated both the versatility of local issues and the sheer hopelessness of the population. According to Awad & Wagoner (2020) not only did the moral shock generated by this image drive mobilization, but also formed a unique sense of solidarity and cohesion that ultimately profited the movement's transformative ability (p. 101).

The example of the Arab Spring demonstrates the symbolic and emotional profession of photographs. However, some images have the ability to evoke stronger emotions than others. Famous photographs of atrocities have often featured children. Examples of this phenomenon include photographs of the Ethiopian famine and the war in Afghanistan from the 1980s (Mackie, 2012). While researchers like Hagopian (2008) and Vis & Goriunova (2015) have investigated the impact of images featuring children on political affairs in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), they neglected to inquire the phenomenon's process and omitted a crucial factor in their influence: social movements.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In the following section, theoretical approaches that connect symbols to emotions in social movements will be presented.

#### **Moral Shock**

Moral shock establishes an emotion-related connection between children as symbols and mobilization of social movements. Jasper (2014) describes moral shock as the "visceral unease in reaction to information and events [...] demanding attention and reevaluation." (p. 210). Hess & Martin (2006) therefore describe moral shock as a starting point of political reaction (p. 251). Here, moral shocks can often be the trigger that convinces people to join the movement - Olson refers to this as *self-recruitment* (2015, p. 60). When moral shock occurs later in a movement, it carries transformative ability, marking a turning point for a

social movement that strongly impacts levels of mobilization (Hess & Martin, 2006, p. 249). In their research, Wisneski & Skitka (2017) find that brutal images are particularly effective in inducing moral shock (p. 139). This is because these images evoke a strong emotional response that activates commitment to prevent such an event to occur again (Westwell, 2011).

### **Sacred Objects**

According to R. Collins (2004) every society, culture or community considers certain objects sacred and associates rituals that determine the demeanor in which these objects ought to be approached. In modern society the center of sacred objects is for instance the self and fellow men. This sacredness is reflected through rituals such as polite communication. Once the ritual is broken, however, *moral uneasiness* ensues. Depending on the violation's (perceived) severity this will lead to extreme emotions, a kind of righteous anger and even counter action (R. Collins, 2004, p. 48). Garlen (2019) and Westwell (2011) argue that with regard to particularly Western cultures the innocent nature of children is elemental, as attributes like naivety, purity and impartiality are associated with children.

### **Identifiable Victim Effect**

The identifiable victim effect - sometimes also referred to as iconic victim effect - establishes a stronger resonance of an audience with victims that are identifiable, as opposed to statistical (Loewenstein et al., 2005). An identifiable victim evokes (strong) emotional reactions and therefore carries the ability to influence the behavior of the audience. A study conducted by Jenni & Loewenstein (1997) found that this effect is elucidated by the difference between *ex post* and *ex ante* evaluation (p. 237). Addressing the issues of statistical victims is usually made *ex ante*/before the risk producing event has transpired. The addressing of issues involving identifiable victims, on the other hand, is made *ex post*/after an event has occurred. This impacts the cost benefit-calculus of action, amplifies matters of responsibility and blame and limits the significance of statistical analysis. Therefore, stronger (emotional) responses to identifiable victims as opposed to statistical victims have been empirically observed by both the study by Jenni & Loewenstein (1997) and Loewenstein et al. (2005).

### **Connecting the Theories**

The concept of moral shock, following Jasper (2014), describes the dynamics through which strong emotions of an audience may be triggered and lead to *self-recruitment* (Olsen, 1965, p. 60). While moral shock can be prompted by a multitude of factors, the theory on sacred

objects is more specific. Here, breaching the rituals connected to the sacred objects by an according society will garner strong emotional reactions. In Western societies in particular this involves the innocence of children. The identifiable victim effect reveals that children as victims will be particularly effective in provoking emotions and mobilization if they surpass the statistical nature and become identifiable.

It is through the concepts of moral shock, sacred objects and identifiable victim effect that I develop the following argument: *children as symbols advance the successes of social movements through invoking emotional resonance.*

#### **4. Method**

##### **Case Selection**

With regard to the recurrent trope of contemporary social movements in symbolically featuring children, one must differentiate between activist and symbolic roles that children can take in social movements. Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg fall into the activist category as their involvement in their respective movements surpassed the symbolic role. However, following Halperin & Heath (2017), the case selection for this thesis will be on a revelatory basis aiming to investigate the mechanisms behind children as symbols of social movements and respective successes (p. 154). Therefore, to ensure the focus lies on the symbolic potential, children as activists are intentionally omitted in the analysis and two cases prominent particularly due to their symbolic nature will be analysed.

In order to achieve a detailed analysis on these mechanisms and rich textual description, a small-n comparison will be conducted. Accordingly, the case selection is *purposive* in design, as these cases were deliberately selected due to their similarity in nature but differences in historical, political and institutional context (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 218). First, Nick Út's 1972 image of young Kim Phúc - the Napalm Girl - and the mechanisms behind its impact on mobilization of the anti-war protests in the US will be examined. The US was selected, as it was the belligerent force and hence US protests would be most influential. Second, the same approach will be applied when investigating the impact of Nilüfer Demir's image of Alan Kurdi, the toddler that drowned whilst his family attempted to flee from Syria to Greece in 2015, on the movement *Refugees Welcome* in the UK (Koca, 2016).

Both symbols are similar in their nature in that they are photographs that feature children as victims. Both embodied a particular cause and were utilized by protest movements in the global West. Therefore, this case selection follows the Most Similar System Design, since the dependent variable differs but I expect the same outcome (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The temporal difference of four decades between the two cases further emphasises the seemingly abiding relevance of imagery in social movements.

### Research design

To deductively examine the impact of children as symbols (X) on movements' successes (Y), this thesis draws on the method of process tracing. Hereby, a causal path with several intermediate steps will be assessed with regard to the two cases selected (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 154). Drawing on research on emotional dynamics in social movements, the ability of these images to construct emotional resonance will serve as Mechanism 1. Next, Mechanism 2, the impacts on respective movement mobilization will be critically investigated. Then, the political pressure exuded from mobilization is outlined, which will be Mechanism 3. Finally, the political pressure's impact on the movements' successes is examined.

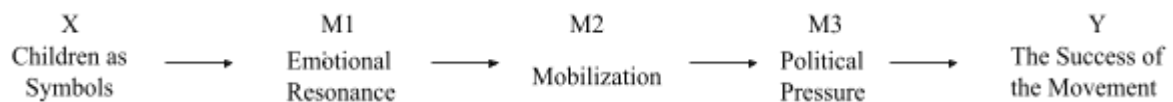


Figure 1:

Flow chart of causal path

While this descriptive investigation increases the research's internal validity, it simultaneously reduces the external validity (i.e. generalizability). However, considering the limited occurrences of children as social movement symbols, this research simply aims to add onto social movement literature through investigating a potential trigger of emotions. Utilizing process tracing helps inhibit concept stretching and endorses inferential leverage between each mechanism (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 27).

### Conceptualization

Generally speaking, successes of social movements are strongly dependent on the cause, setting or environment. However, in order to assess the images' influence on movements'

accomplishments, their success will be conceptualized following Gamson (1990). Here, success is understood in terms of acknowledgement of the movement by its adversaries as well as concessions in favor of the movements' beneficiaries (p. 383). To encompass this two-stranded conception, this thesis will utilize public political responses that encompass policy favorable to the movements' cause as an indicator for their success.

### **Data collection**

Pursuant to Beach (2016), each mechanism requires evidence that indicates or refutes the connection to the previous mechanism - see Figure 1. These will be understood in four different types. For M1 - emotional resonance - indicators will be divided into three subgroups. First, the creation of moral shock through the violation of sacred objects will be investigated. Then, public reactions and responses to the images will be contrasted to reactions to previous photographs and to preexisting public information regarding their cause. For mobilization (M2), the application of the images in protests as well as a temporal increase in protests will be indicative of a connection to emotional resonance of the image. The emanation of political pressure (M3) relies on context specific indicators. The involvement of other political actors or democratic instruments like petitions could for instance be exhibitiv of increasing pressure on the government. Finally, following the understanding of successes of social movement depicted under conceptualization, the implementation of policies catering to the respective movements' demands - ideally with direct reference to the images - will be examined. For the anti-war movement in the US this will be policy that accelerates the withdrawal of troops in Vietnam. Regarding *Refugees Welcome* in the UK, success will be policy that authorizes an increased amount of refugees to enter the UK.

If the outlined causal evidence can be provided, this supports the argument that children as symbols advance the success of social movements through the defined mechanisms. To account for alternative context specific explanations for the success of the movement, political reactions before and after the exudation of pressure by the movements will be compared (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 248). If the political reaction was indeed by the virtue of pressure originating in the social movement, we would expect to observe divergent reactions before and after mobilization.

## 5. Analysis

### **Kim Phúc - Anti-war protests in the US**

#### *Historical Background*

Serving as a proxy for the Cold War, the war in Vietnam lasted from 1955 to 1975 and claimed at least 3 million lives. North - the Viet Cong/National Liberation Front (NLF) - and South Vietnam - the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) - faced each other as warring forces with the US supporting the South (Kindig, 2008). As this was the first televised war, the potential of rivaling viewpoints was augmented and thus information distributed from government and military officials was consistently at odds with the information provided by the media (Hallin, 1989, p. 6; Page, 1996, p. 2). Accordingly, the American perception of the war was characterized by an overflow of media painting vastly contrasting images of the Vietnamese conditions. The governmentally favored notion of “a theater of war with clear battle lines and victories [and] a justifiable political objective” dominated the public discourse in the beginning of the war (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 42). The focus soon shifted towards a rather critical view promulgated by the media (Khong, 2020, p. 49). Throughout its 20 year course, countless images of the atrocities of the war in Vietnam were published (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 42).

#### *The War in Vietnam and Symbols*

In 1963, an Associated Press reporter captured the image of Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức publicly immolating himself in protest of the Diem regime (Hagopian, 2008, p. 218). Seeing as this was the side supported by the US, the public began to question why “why the United States was supporting a regime that was so dreadful that this monk felt compelled calmly to burn himself to death in protest against it” arose (Hagopian, 2008, p. 211). Following the image, protesters - primarily students - began to take to the streets to demand the withdrawal of US troops (Miller, 2015).

By the end of 1967, the American government exuded the impression that their adversary, the NLF, was close to surrendering. In January 1968 this illusion was drastically shattered by the Tet offensive - a series of attacks carried out by the supposed weak NLF (Wirtz, 2017, p. 273). This carried considerable consequences for trust in the government and decreased public support of escalation in Vietnam from 55% in 1967 to 34% in 1968 (Lunch & Sperlich, 1979, p. 27).

In the same year, two other events reinforced this perceived illegitimacy of US involvement in Vietnam. In February, the photograph *Saigon Execution* of General Loan shooting a suspected Viet Cong supporter in the head was published. The image clearly depicting a war crime committed by an American ally ran on the front page of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* the following days (Hagopian, 2008, p. 211). Not only did this image cast doubt on the US ally - the Diem regime - but it is also credited to have furthered the diminishing legitimacy of the war as a whole (Current, 1987, p. 880).

In March 1968, US soldiers entered the village My Lai 4 located in central Vietnam and annihilated close to 500 defenseless citizens, raping many others (Gray & Martin, 2008). Despite rumors and some witness reports, this atrocious war crime only had political consequences when Ron Haeberle published his photographs of the massacre the following year - in 1969. Hagopian (2008) writes: “the photographs pushed these realities into the face of the public, and [...] the reaction to them forced policy-makers into an institutional response” (p. 203). Whilst this response was limited to a public statement of condemnation, here, a photograph successfully sparked an emotional reaction that urged political reaction (Gray & Martin, 2008).

By 1969, the number of Vietnam protesters in the US reached hundreds of thousands (Miller, 2015). Despite the above detailed reactions to the images of Thích Quảng Đức, the Saigon execution and the My Lai massacre, merely limited effects regarding public opinion and political change were found. A study conducted by Berkowitz (1973) analyzed 15 significant anti-war protests within the US between 1965 - 1972 and did not find a statistically significant effect on American public opinion regarding the war in Vietnam (p. 9). Nor did the protests during this time have an actual effect on the politics of the Vietnam war. In fact, paradoxically, short term increases in the president’s popularity positively correlated with the occurrences of mass protests. Although by 1970, 58% of Americans believed that involving US troops in Vietnam was a mistake, the general public did not support a total withdrawal from Vietnam (Page, 1996, p. 274).

### *Accidental Napalm*

On June 8th of 1972, a battle between the ARVN and the NLF transpired. Near the hamlet of Trảng Bàng, a small group of journalists stood by anticipating newsworthy reports, while the ARVN attempted an aerial attack. Their Napalm B<sup>5</sup> canisters missed the NLF post and exploded above a small village instead. Seconds after, a group of villagers ran onto Highway 1, closely followed by the smoke of the explosion. Seeing a naked girl with severe burns, American-Vietnamese photographer Nick Út decided to take a picture of the event (Westwell, 2011). Through the Associated Press in Saigon, the image was published in numerous newspapers the following days, such as *Newsweek* and *Life* (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 39). This image will later be cited as one of the most influential images of the Vietnam war and the anti-war movement. While there are numerous explanations for this impactfulness, such as the artistic depiction of pain (Hariman & Lucaites, 2003, p. 40), this thesis argues that it is the subject of this image that makes it unique: a child.



Figure 2:

June 8th 1972, Kim Phúc, center, running down Highway 1 Trảng Bàng, Vietnam after a Napalm attack; *Accidental Napalm Attack*;  
Nick Út, Associated Press

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<sup>5</sup> an incendiary bomb distinctive because of its incomplex manufacture



## ***Mechanisms***

The impact of the image on political reactions in the US will be examined through three mechanisms: Emotional Resonance, Mobilization & Political Pressure.

### *Mechanism 1: Emotional Resonance*

#### Moral Shock & Sacred Objects

The image *Accidental Napalm Attack* strongly violated Western, in particular US, norms. Not only did the image depict violence, but more shockingly: violence against children. As Westwell (2011) writes: “In Western culture, children are generally understood to be pre-social, pre-sexual, apolitical, and innocent” (p. 410). This picture infringed upon these values. To avoid censure, editors of the image deliberately cut out a shadow above Kim Phúc’s genitalia, as it was feared to be misinterpreted for pubic hair (Westwell, 2011). This demonstrates the notion of innocence attached to children in US society at the time. Hariman & Lucaites (2003) documented public reactions to this image and found that through the breaching of societal norms (i.e. violence on children), it violated the perception of a *just* war portrayed by the US government and created moral shock (p. 42).

#### Identifiable Victim Effect

To the US government's dismay, the use of Napalm B and its violent, deadly nature were public knowledge eversince the *New York Times* broke news of US trained AVN soldiers dropping Napalm bombs in 1962 (Neer, 2013, p. 109). Four years later the use of Napalm was an integral constituent of US military affairs in Vietnam with 4500 tons being dropped every month (Neer, 2013, p. 111). Reports of the victims - amongst which were oftentimes children - reached the US without any significant strong resonance. The image of Kim Phúc changed this. Suddenly, the body counts were personified, graphically illustrated (L&H, 2003, p. 41). This image “dissolved a psychological comfort zone” (Hagopian, 2008, p. 209) by fracturing the distance that statistics allow the viewer to put between themselves and the victim, which made it “an intimate and present encounter“ (Y. Ibrahim, 2017, p. 2). Kim Phúc runs toward the viewer, seemingly asking us for help.

#### Self Agency

As outlined under the historical background, the war in Vietnam was characterized by an abundance of horrific, often graphic, images. The self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức, raped corpses lying on the ground in My Lai and a public execution. Yet, the shock caused by

these images was primarily temporary, without constructing sustainable resonance. Almost immediately, indulging rationales for these actions were constructed. “the civilians must have been armed, the soldiers must have been fired on, the photographs of the dead must not be authentic, and were perhaps staged for anti-war propaganda purposes.” (Hagopian, 2008, p. 207). It became apparent that more self agency was expected from these victims. Drastically speaking: it was their own fault. The monk could have chosen not to set himself on fire, the people in My Lai must have been armed. These criticisms became obsolete with *Accidental Napalm Attack*. Kim Phúc was merely nine years old. Any and all blame on her part was inexcusable. The dismissal employed with the other pictures of being “bound to happen in a war” (Hagopian, 2008, p. 207) was simply ineffective when the victim was a child.

Through the severing of Western values, identifiability of the victim and the obsolescence of excuses on the basis of self agency, *Accidental Napalm Attack* therefore constructed an emotional resonance that was unmatched to previous photographs of the war in Vietnam.

#### *Mechanism 2: Mobilization*

Soon after the issuance of the image, *Accidental Napalm attack* was globally placarded on almost every newspaper and magazine. Public sentiments opposing the war in Vietnam were drastically increasing. It incited such an uproar and discourse that US President Nixon questioned the validity of the image and suspected a politically strategic construction of the opposition<sup>6</sup> (Y. Ibrahim, 2017, pp. 2 - 3). Protesters mobilized around this image and utilized the emotional resonance for recruitment. By decorating numerous posters with the symbol of the naked napalmed girl - see Figure 3 - protesters intended to duplicate this shock and emotionality. Strategically speaking, this aimed at increasing mobilization by aggravating the anger felt by many regarding the refusal of the US government to respond to the anti-war movement adequately (Hagopian, 2008, p. 217). This repeated application of *Accidental Napalm Attack* at protests alongside with a sudden increase of protests in 1972 is indicative of a connection between the emotional resonance to the image and mobilization of the movement (Miller, 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> It should be remarked that this was only released to the public when over 500 hours of the Nixon tapes were released in 2002 (D. Collins, 2002)



Figure 3:

Symbol of the naked napalmed girl on a protest poster

Author: Bradford Lyttle; Source: National Museum of American History;  
[https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah\\_1916824](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_1916824)

### *Mechanism 3: Political Pressure*

An increase of annual protests from 69 in 1971 to 200 in 1972 intensified pressure on the Nixon government to act (Miller, 2015). *Accidental Napalm Attack* had deemed justifications for violence impertinent and thus there was practically no sensible response other than concession. Additionally, the emphasis on a slow withdrawal that Nixon had pushed from 1968 on no longer sufficed in the face of the immediate violence portrayed in Nick Ut's image (Lunch & Sperlich, 1979, p. 31). Meyer (2003) describes the efficacy of social movements as follows: "By displaying a large and engaged constituency, social movements provide political support for leaders sympathetic to their concerns [...]" (p. 388). Thus, seeing as 1972 was a US election year and support for the presidential policies in Vietnam was steadily declining, political pressure on Nixon (who was running for reelection) grew (Lunch & Sperlich, 1979, p. 26).

### *Outcome: Political Reactions*

Years later, President Nixon would credit the domestic political pressure exerted by the anti-war movement to have made nuclear deterrence in Vietnam impossible (Meyer, 2003, p. 388). Hallin (1989) claims that it was the disenchantment of the people (made clear through mass protests) that ultimately urged American withdrawal (p. 4). Complimenting this, Meyer (2003) extends “the movement helped end the draft, institutionalizing all-volunteer armed forces.” (p. 388). Although it would be exaggerated to credit the image with ending the war in and of itself, half a year after the release of the image - the US signed the Paris cease-fire agreement in January of 1973 calling an end to the war in Vietnam (Y. Ibrahim, 2017, p. 2). This speaks to the efficacy of political pressure emanated by *Accidental Napalm Attack*.

### *Alternative Factors*

By the time *Accidental Napalm Attack* was published in 1972, the Vietnam protests in the US had already gained a foothold and the support of the political opposition grew increasingly stronger. Other war photographs had already established the brutality and injustice of the war in Vietnam (Hagopian, 2008, p. 209). The joining of veterans to the movement demonstrated by the veterans throwing away their medals in front of the capitol in April 1971, had desecrated the argument of protesters simply being ignorant and unpatriotic (Page, 1996, pp. 288 - 291). Additionally, the presidential elections in November 1972 were approaching and Nixon was forced to make concessions to hold his ground. Particularly since the Watergate scandal began to unfold during this time, it is possible that in order to win re-election, Nixon had to address the anti-war constituency (Aycock et al., 1975). Therefore, the publishing of the image could have simply occurred at a strategically favorable time and with opposition on the rise, signing the cease-fire agreement could have just been the next logical step for Nixon to maintain face.

### *Concluding points & Limitations*

Although, as outlined, alternative factors influenced political reactions to the mobilization that occurred in the name of *Accidental Napalm Attack*, the unique emotional resonance created by this image was indicated to benefit the anti-war movement in this analysis. Yet, in March 1964, an image of a napalmed baby was published with reactions being nowhere near compatible with those of *Accidental Napalm Attack* (Neer, 2013, p. 110). This suggests that it was not merely the symbol of a child that evoked the potency of Nick Út’s image, but also the

surrounding factors that its publishing was embedded in - i.e. preexisting mobilization structures.

## **Alan Kurdi - *Refugees Welcome in the UK***

### ***Historical background***

Inspired by the Arab Spring, high unemployment rates and corruption, protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad materialized on the streets of Syria in 2011 (Moodrik-Even Khen et al., 2020, p. 2). Due to the government's violent repression this civil war quickly turned into one of the violent conflicts in modern history, claiming over 200.000 lives (half of them being civilians) as of December 2020 (BBC News, 2021). The demarcation of parts of the Syrian military into the Free Syrian Army created leeway for additional forces such as Jabat Fateh al-Sham, ISIS and Kurdish forces. Soon, the conflict extended into the international arena with the US, Russia, Iran and Turkey each supporting armed militias to secure their respective interests (Moodrik-Even Khen et al., 2020, p. 2). Conflict escalated further when in 2014 ISIS managed to secure nearly half of the Syrian territory. One year later, the Russian air force began bombing opponents of the Assad regime.

### ***Syria & the refugee crisis***

Because of this destructive, violent civil war, millions of Syrians began seeking refuge outside of Syria<sup>7</sup>. Whilst the majority are currently staying in countries bordering Syria, a considerable proportion attempted to make their way to Europe (UNHCR, 2021). In 2014/15 (as a reaction to the Russian bombings and ISIS) over one million asylum claims from Syrian refugees were documented in Europe. The large majority of these refugees arrived via the Mediterranean - a dangerous sea route that led to at least 3.000 deaths in 2014 alone (BBC News, 2021). This influx of Syrian refugees in 2014/15 was described to be "one of the largest humanitarian crises since World War II" by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Moodrik-Even Khen et al., 2020, p. 218). Images of crammed inflatable boats were circulating online, some even displaying children (Prøitz, 2018, p. 554). Yet, according to *the Guardian*, the UK admitted merely 166 Syrian refugees between 2014 and Summer 2015 (Harding et al., 2015). Comparatively to other European countries, this was very little. Therefore, numerous movements demanding an open-door approach, such as the Refugee

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<sup>7</sup> According to the UNHCR 6.6 mio Syrian refugees as of March 2021

Council, mobilized during this period of time often using the slogan *Syrian Refugees Welcome* (Cooper, 2014; Koca, 2016, p. 98). However, with little to no success in terms of political reaction.

### *Alan Kurdi*

On the 2nd of September 2015, the small, lifeless body of Alan Kurdi washed up on the Mediterranean shore in Bodrum. The three year old was one of twelve Syrian refugees that drowned this day whilst trying to cross over to the Greek island Kos. The image Nilüfer Demir took of the dead toddler was disseminated through both traditional and social media, quickly becoming a symbol of the refugee crisis (Smith et al., 2018). This thesis argues that the impact this image has on the successes of the protest movement *Refugees Welcome* in the UK is owed to the subject of the picture: a child.



Figure 4:

The dead body of three year old Alan Kurdi, which washed up on the shore of Bodrum, 2nd September 2015

Alan Kurdi by Nilüfer Demir, DHA (Dogan Haber Ajansi<sup>8</sup>)

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<sup>8</sup> A Turkish newsagency

### ***Mechanisms***

To demonstrate the abiding nature of symbols, the impact of Alan Kurdi's image on the success of the protest movement *Refugees Welcome* in the UK will be investigated by the means of process tracing. Contrary to *Accidental Napalm Attack*, a more unconventional mobilization tool played an important role here: social media.

#### *Mechanism 1: Emotional Resonance*

##### Moral Shock & Sacred Objects

As most Western cultures, the UK holds the innocence of children in high regard. In the 2019 Child Safety Index conducted by The Economist Intelligence Unit (2020), which takes into account responses to claims of abuse against children, the UK was ranked at number one. This indicates a strong sensitivity of the British culture concerning child safety. Accordingly, the reactions to the image of the drowned toddler were characterized by shock. A study conducted by Prøitz (2018) investigated the responses of young people ages 18 to 31 in Oslo (Norway) and Sheffield (UK) to the image of Alan Kurdi in a series of in-depth interviews. Here, respondents from both countries experienced the image as incontestable, without leaving room for personal interpretation. As one respondent said: "It was a simple way in, this is ultimately what's at stake. A child has died: What is simpler than that really?" (Prøitz, 2018, p. 556). This consensus in shock was reflected in the plethora of people that took to twitter to voice their shock - see Figure 5.



Figure 5:

Tweet in response to the image of Alan Kurdi

LFC\_Dreamer (2015)

### Identifiable Victim Effect

By the time the image of Kurdi was published, over 4,000 Syrians had already lost their lives trying to flee via the Mediterranean (Varrella, 2021). Despite (some) protests, no real political action or large-scale mobilization occurred in response. While the image in itself evidently did not provide any information that had not already been public knowledge, its impact on public perception and emotions is undeniable (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020, p. 76). In response to the image, Google searches for “refugees” & “Syria” increased dramatically in September 2015<sup>9</sup> (Slovic et al., 2017, p. 641). Additionally, donations for a campaign designed to help refugees skyrocketed in September of 2015 - see Figure 6. The aforementioned protests of *Refugees Welcome* also formally registered as an organization during this time (Koca, 2016). Showcasing that this increased mobilization affected both the previously unmotivated and those already protesting.

The image raised action on all fronts. This strongly indicates that it was the graphic - as opposed to the statistical - nature of the image (following the identifiable victim effect) that activated emotional resonance and action. As Weisberg (2016) describes: “the dramatic reaction to this image shows that statistics, however staggering, hold no emotive power compared to seeing the tiny drowned body of just one of those countless victims” (p. 132).

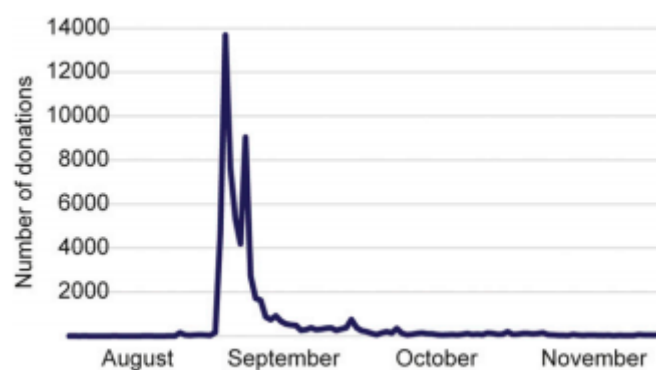


Figure 6:

Number of daily donations to campaign to help Syrian refugees in Sweden (Slovic et al., 2017, p. 642).

<sup>9</sup> Compared to the searches in August 2015



### Self Agency

As outlined, casualties in the Mediterranean were public knowledge long before the publication of the photograph of Alan Kurdi. Yet, both political reactions and mobilization around the cause turned out to be sparse prior to 2015. Due to the profitability of negative news, the media-led discourse surrounding the refugee crisis had predominantly pushed the narrative of “enemies at the gate”, painting refugees as criminalistic terrorists (Esses et al., 2013, p. 518). In a study on the perception of refugees, Esses et al. (2013) found that this media discourse led to the dehumanization of refugees (p. 526). Accordingly, emotional resonance with the (well known) suffering of Syrian refugees was minimal. However, due to Kurdi’s age the portrayal of criminalistic refugees was exhausted in this case. This is further supported by an analysis by Kirkwood (2017) that found a shift towards humanizing discourse in UK parliamentary debates on refugees post the publication of Kurdi’s image in September 2015 (p. 122).

### *Mechanism 2: Mobilization*

Within twelve hours post publishing, the image of the dead toddler was viewed over 20 million times on Twitter in over 100 countries (Vis & Goriunova, 2015, p. 12). On the same day, the image was featured in at least 500 newspaper articles, 35% of which from the US or UK (Vis & Goriunova, 2015, p. 15). Accordingly, the mobilization that ensued was manifold and occupied both the traditional protest sphere as well as more unconventional ones. On the one hand, the group *Refugees Welcome* organized a protest on September 12th demanding more refugees to be accepted by the UK to which tens of thousands people showed up (Graham-Harrison et al., 2015; Koca, 2016, p. 99). Some protesters even dressed in blue pants and red shirts to signify solidarity to Alan Kurdi (Olesen, 2018, p. 656). On the other hand, mobilization also manifested itself online - particularly via twitter. Here, the image was featured in roughly 20,000 tweets per hour, the majority of them accompanied by #refugeeswelcome (Vis & Goriunova, 2015, p. 11). Soon, an online petition demanding more refugees to be let into the UK was started and only two days after Demir captured the photograph, it had already received over 300.000 signatures - more than triple of what is demanded for a petition to be subject of debate in parliament (BBC News, 2015a). As touched upon under the identifiable victim effect, mobilization in the name of Alan Kurdi also manifested itself in a drastic increase in individual aid - e.g. donations for the Red Cross increased by over 100 times (Olesen, 2018, p. 657; Slovic et al., 2017, p. 2).

### *Mechanism 3: Political Pressure*

As protests in the UK grew, the government came under increasing pressure. Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron had issued a public statement regarding the image of Kurdi claiming that he felt “deeply touched” and admitted that “Britain has a moral responsibility to help” (Singh, & Masocha, 2020, p. 42). Yet, seeing as he failed to provide concrete policy changes on the acceptance of refugees in the UK, he was met with a lot of criticism (Dathan, 2015). The protesters took to Downing Street chanting “David Cameron, shame on you!” (Graham-Harrison et al., 2015). On Twitter, Cameron was also called out directly - see Figure 7. This pressure from the *Refugees Welcome* movement was accompanied by multiple public figures that joined the cause. The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, for instance contacted Cameron prompting him to accept more refugees to the UK. Additionally, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, Lord Ashdown, called the PM's response to the image “shameful” (BBC News, 2015b).



Figure 7:

Tweet in response to an image of the dead body of Alan Kurdi being carried away by a Turkish soldier in Bodrum  
Lyden-Smith (2015)

### *Outcome: Political Reactions*

Responding to this increasing political pressure, the British PM announced a new policy that would allow up to 20,000 Syrian refugees in the UK until 2020 (Kirkwood, 2017, p. 115). Additionally, Cameron announced £100 million in humanitarian aid to refugee camps in

Syria, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon (BBC News, 2015b). Although it must be noted that the refugees the UK agreed to accept only included those in refugee camps abroad, not those who had already entered Europe (UNHCR, 2020).

### ***Alternative explanations***

As outlined under the historical background, the mobilization structures for the movement *Refugees Welcome* were already in place by the time Demir's image was published. Protests had capitalized on these structures since a year prior - both on and offline. Therefore, it is intangible whether it was the image itself that set off protests or whether political opportunity of any kind would have sufficed. Additionally, images of children that lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean had been published before, indicating that the potency of the Kurdi's image could have been in virtue of determinants beyond simply the subject being a child (Prøitz, 2018, p. 557). For instance, heightened awareness through the "Wir schaffen das" approach from German chancellor Angela Merkels, could also have pressured the British PM.

### ***Concluding Points & Limitations***

Whilst the image of Kurdi evidently elicited an emotional resonance that drove mobilization and through pressuring political leaders caused policy changes - these innovations were not abiding. Already within one year, the UK policies implemented reactionary to Kurdi's death were reversed from a generous refugee approach over to attempting to hinder refugees from even being able to arrive in Europe (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020, p. 75). British alt right groups, such as Pegida UK, began utilizing this image for their agenda, framing Kurdi's death as fictional (Z. Ibrahim, 2020, p. 111). For the 2016 European Union agreement with Turkey that obstructed the Turko-Greek migration route, his death was even utilized as justification (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020, p. 77). Demonstrating the limiting impact even further: since the publication of the photograph in 2015, over 10.000 people lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Varrella, 2021).

## Discussion

The analysis suggests that the proficiency of Alan Kurdi and Kim Phúc's images resides in the fact that they are children as opposed to adults. They were shown to offer less ground for criticism on the basis of self agency and a higher ability to induce moral shock compared to other photographs. The images of the Saigon execution, Monk Thích Quảng Đức's self immolation and the My Lai 4 massacre, did not harbour emotional resonance, mobilization efforts or political reactions in contrast to Kim Phúc's photograph. While there are less examples of photographs utilized by the Refugees Welcome movement in the UK, a similar trend was visible here. Images of overcrowded inflatable boats and reports of dead children, were indicated to not elicit a reaction as strong as that to Alan Kurdi.

Therefore, the findings of this qualitative analysis support the argument that children as symbols - through the creation of emotional resonance - advance the successes of social movements. Both cases demonstrate that the potency of the images lies in their subject being a child, since the images were neither particularly graphic nor did they provide any information that was not already public knowledge. In direct comparison, the second case exhibited a more comprehensible impact, as the reaction of the British PM differed before and after the construction of pressure by the *Refugees Welcome* movement. Additionally, Cameron tied the new policy directly to the photograph of Alan Kurdi, whereas President Nixon only admitted that *Accidental Napalm Attack* inhibited nuclear deterrence years later.

## 6. Concluding Points

### Summary

This thesis aimed to add onto emotional approaches of social movements by proposing a potential trigger: symbols of children. Through the conduction of a qualitative analysis with the method of process tracing, the cases of Kim Phúc and Alan Kurdi were both indicated to advance their respective movements' successes, through creating emotional resonance. In direct comparison, the impact of Alan Kurdi on the *Refugees Welcome* movement was more comprehensible.

### Future Research

Since both photographers worked for news agencies, the images walked the fine line between shock and graphicity. In order to gain notoriety the images could not be too explicit as to not intimidate but explicit enough to outrage. Here, it is thought provoking how platforms with universal access impact these limitations. Not being bound to journalistic guidelines, could cause an excess of shocking imagery on platforms like Twitter. Current psychological research has found an overabundance of shock to paralyze instead of mobilize (Schijndel, 2019). Research on photography in contemporary movements that utilize Twitter should thus investigate this impact.

Yet, this analysis indicated that it was not these pictures on their own that fabricated this emotional resonance. A picture of a napalmed baby had already been published in 1964 and images of children in inflatable boats trying to cross the Mediterranean were already circulating online by 2015. Moreover, an image of the dead Rohingya boy Jafar Alam was published in 2017 without garnering resonance comparable to the cases here discussed (van Schijndel, 2019). Potentially, the potency of these images requires building on existing mobilization structure. Both the Vietnam protests and the *Refugees Welcome* movement had already mobilized prior to the photographs' publishing, which benefited their ability of inducing pressure and provoking policy in favor of the movement's cause. Additionally, policy tied directly to Alan Kurdi was reversed only a year later, suggesting the ephemeral impact of symbols. This indicates a potential fourth mechanism regarding the existence of mobilization structures. Future research should therefore inquire about longevity of the competence of symbols in connection to existent mobilization structures.

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