

Boaz Cohen

Were the Nazis Conducting a “War Against the Jewish Child”?

Abstract

This article investigates the concept of a distinct “war against the Jewish child” during the Holocaust, exploring child-targeted policies, actions, and systemic atrocities. The deliberate, bureaucratic organisation of these atrocities, and the discussions at multiple levels on the murder of Jewish children, reflect a military-like campaign against them, setting the Nazi treatment of Jewish children apart from historical and contemporary norms of war. The article argues that the examination of pre-war and wartime policies, along with the organised logistics of extermination, validates the concept of a “war against the Jewish child”.

Emanuel Ringelblum, a Jewish historian and chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto, wrote from there in June 1942 – as news of the Germans’ destruction of outlying Jewish communities was filtering in and before the extermination of the ghetto – that

[n]ew reports are continually arriving about the murder of Jewish children and old people ... Apart from Pharaoh ... this is unprecedented in Jewish history ... On the contrary: In the past, whatever was done with the grownups, the children were always permitted to live – so that they might be converted to the Christian faith. Even in the most barbaric times, a human spark glowed in the rudest heart, and children were spared. But the Hitlerian beast is quite different. It would devour the dearest of us, those who arouse the greatest compassion – our innocent children.¹

The systematic murder of Jewish children was indeed unprecedented. Throughout history, children have suffered – and continue to suffer – in wars. Often, due to their vulnerability and dependence, they bear the brunt of war even more acutely than adults. Yet, this was a unique phenomenon: Jewish children were specifically targeted for death, with their extermination requiring distinct decisions, logistical planning, and actions – typical of a military campaign. Typically, children were killed alongside their families and communities, but the German genocide included numerous child-oriented and child-targeting measures, many of them obviously lethal. This emphasis on annihilating Jewish children gave rise to the wartime and post-war Jewish concept of “the war against the Jewish child”.²

The murderous policies of the Nazis vis-à-vis Jewish children explain the very low rate of survival for Jewish children. Deborah Dwork has shown that the survival ratio of Jewish children in Europe was the lowest out of all of the Jewish population: only eleven per cent of Jewish children survived the Holocaust compared to about 30

1 Emanuel Ringelblum, Jacob Sloan, ed. and trans., *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

2 See, for example, Moshe Prager, “The Special German War Against the Jewish Children”, in *Miparashat Hashoah: Shoat Yaldei Hayehudim B’Eiropa* [From the Annals of the Shoah: The Holocaust of Jewish Children in Europe] (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1946), 10.

per cent of the adult population.³ This is the average survival rate; in some countries, the percentage of surviving children was much lower. In Poland specifically, where there were about a million Jewish children before the war, only about three per cent of the children survived, and in Belgium it was two to four per cent.⁴ Yet, do these statistics prove that there was a war against Jewish children?

This article examines the validity of the concept of a war against the Jewish child. Some introduction is necessary.

World War Two was a global conflict waged between nations, with armies doing the fighting, but civilians – women, men, and children – suffering the consequences. Civilians were sometimes targeted directly, as in the bombing of cities, and sometimes became “collateral damage” in acts of war directed against enemy combatants or installations.

However, the Jewish victims of this war were not killed as a mere by-product of the conflict. The Nazis and their allies waged an all-out war against the Jews, aiming for the complete destruction and obliteration of an entire people – a vision of “a world without Jews”.⁵

Wars are not only an armed confrontation between soldiers, the exchange of fire between troops, and the overcoming of one side by another. The confrontation, the actual battles and campaigns, the face-to-face or tank-to-tank actions, are a culmination of discussion and planning, training and exercises, administration and logistics. Likewise, the actual killing of the Jews, be it in *Aktionen* (*Murder operations*), the Holocaust by bullets, or in the death camps, were enabled by policy decisions, staff work, and logistics.

Jewish children, like all Jews – men, women, young, and old – were marked for death. Why, then, do we claim that there was a distinct “war against the Jewish child”?

In my view, the claim that there was a distinct war against Jewish children suggests that the Nazis enacted specific policies and acts of war directed at the children. These policies included expulsions from schools, banning education altogether, cutting food rations, and obstructing child rescue efforts. However, as will be shown here, these measures were also evident in decisions and actions aimed at the mass killing of Jewish children. Jewish children were seen as enemies of the Third Reich and as such had to be eliminated.

The organised murder of Jewish children began with policy decisions at higher levels, where the issue of targeting specific groups of children was discussed, leading to a decision to kill them. Sometimes, as will be shown, the result was in the diplomatic, administrative, or logistic fields, yet there were also cases in which the decision had military outcomes. Once the decision was made, plans were drawn up to assign a unit – a platoon, company, troop, or battalion – to carry out the killings. Commanders of the designated unit were briefed on the mission and needed to discuss various aspects of the operation with their staff. Logistical questions were also addressed. Would transport be required for both the children and the soldiers? Who would allocate the transport and fuel? Ammunition and food for the soldiers also needed to be provided. Was there an available killing site, or would pits need to be

3 Deborah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 274–275 n. 27.

4 Nachum Bogner, *At the Mercy of Strangers: The Rescue of Jewish Children with Assumed Identities in Poland*, trans. Ralph Mandel (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), 15.

5 Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

dug? If so, who would dig them – the Jewish victims, army engineers, or perhaps the local non-Jewish population? If locals were involved, how would they be compelled to participate – through force or incentives?

These logistical considerations applied to all organised killing actions against Jews and others, but my argument is that when the military or quasi-military apparatus was mobilised specifically to kill Jewish children, it constituted a war against the Jewish child.

These and other military-like operations contrast sharply with actions directed at non-Jewish children, such as the forced Germanisation of “racially fit” children from occupied countries, or the conscription of Soviet children for forced labour. While they suffered hunger, torture, and forced labour, the overall aim was to keep non-Jewish children alive, to utilise them not to kill them.⁶ Military actions against Jewish children, however, were aimed at their death.

Notably, Jewish children had been targets of Nazi policies long before the extermination campaigns began.

Anti-Jewish-Child Policy in Pre-War Nazi Germany and Beyond

The Nazi obsession with Jewish children can be seen in the legislation and regulations pertaining to Jewish children and their education from the Nazi ascendancy to power. One of the early laws enacted by the Nazis was the statute to combat overcrowding in German schools and universities of 25 April 1933. It stipulated that the number of “non-Aryan” students in high schools and universities should not exceed five per cent of the student body and, in the case of new admissions, the percentage allowed was just 1.5 per cent, resulting in mass expulsions of Jewish students. “For the Jewish child it was the beginning of a veritable *via dolorosa*”, claimed Samuel Colodner, “heaping on him humiliation, ostracism, degradation and even self-hatred.”⁷ Those who were allowed to stay in schools, such as the offspring of war veterans, or those who had no other choice of schooling, suffered exclusion and ostracisation, as shown by Marion Kaplan. They bore the brunt of a virile anti-Jewish sentiment that permeated the atmosphere in the schools and in the streets.⁸

The wholesale expulsion of the remaining Jewish children in the German educational system was ordered by the German Ministry of Science and Education already on 10 September 1935.⁹ This was obviously not adhered to by all schools, as on 15 November 1938, following the Kristallnacht pogrom that took place a week before, the ministry reiterated that “there remains a number of Jewish children in German schools, who can no longer be permitted to attend school together with German boys and girls”. The order explained that “it is unacceptable to expect that any German teacher provide instruction to Jewish schoolchildren. It should also be self-evident that it is intolerable for German schoolchildren to sit in a classroom shared with

6 See Dieter Steinert, *Deportation und Zwangsarbeit. Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa 1939–1945* (Essen: Klartext 2013), and Machteld Venken, “Child Forced Labour: An Analysis of Ego Documents Throughout Time”, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 22, no. 2 (2015): 368–388.

7 Samuel Colodner, “Jewish Education under National Socialism”, *Yad Vashem Studies* 3 (1959): 161–185, 165.

8 Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 96–97. Marion Kaplan, “The School Lives of Jewish Children and Youth in the Third Reich”, *Jewish History*, 11, no. 2 (1997), 41–52.

9 Colodner, “Jewish Education under National Socialism”, 162.

Jews”.¹⁰ On 8 December 1938, the few remaining Jewish students were expelled from universities. The Nazi authorities were still bothered by the issue of mixed-race children, the *Mischlinge*, in the school system: the *Mischlinge* were targeted with the directive of 20 July 1942, which stipulated that *Mischlinge* of the first degree could not be accepted into German schools. *Mischlinge* of the second degree could be accepted only if and when space permitted, and those of the first degree could be accepted into vocational and trade schools.¹¹

This statute on the exclusion of Jewish children from schools was interpreted by the Nazi minister of education,¹² Bernhard Rust, as referring to high schools but not to primary schools, since primary schooling was mandatory. Jewish children could be excluded from German schools only when they had an alternative option. This allowed for the opening of Jewish primary schools and high schools, and these were indeed opened wherever possible, with some financial support from the Ministry of Education. The schools’ organisation and curriculum were under the oversight of the ministry. Jewish schools and school children continued to draw the interest of officials and policy makers. On 1 June 1938, Jewish schools were denied the option of tax exemptions and, on 17 December that year, all funding to Jewish schools was stopped by a decree of the minister of education. The *Directive for the Implementation of Article II of the Tenth Decree*, of 14 August 1939, set down the organisational and educational guidelines for Jewish schools. Under the heading “The Jewish School System”, and twenty-five sections and explanatory causes, the directive addressed numerous issues, such as the schools’ legal status, oversight, the teaching staff’s legal status, teacher training, the curriculum, vocational training, and more.¹³ At that point, there were only 10,000 Jewish school-age children in Germany. The elaborate directive regulating their education shows how much Jewish children were a sore point for Nazi leadership.

After the commencement of deportations to occupied territories in the east and the prohibition on emigration issued in connection therewith in the fall of 1941, the last remaining Jewish schools were shut down by a directive of the Reich minister of interior on 20 June 1942. It specified that all Jewish schools must shut down by 30 June 1942.¹⁴ Jewish children were now forbidden from receiving instruction from any “paid or unpaid” teachers. As a result, the few Jewish children still alive in Germany were denied any schooling whatsoever.¹⁵

Following the precedent in Germany, legislation discriminating against Jewish children appeared all over Nazi-occupied Europe and prohibited their schooling. Apart from closing schools, Nazi officials also banned Jewish children from playgrounds: the playground issue evidently loomed large in the minds of Nazi officials. By November 1934, Jewish children were banned from playgrounds used by Aryans in Germany. In 1941, excursions by Jewish children into forests were also forbidden.¹⁶ All over occupied Europe, there was a “flurry of decrees placing all parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, and other recreational and cultural institutions off limits for the Jewish community”.¹⁷ On 1 November 1941, writes Deborah Dwork, “Jewish

10 *Amtsblatt des Reichsministeriums für Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung und der Unterrichtsverwaltungen der Länder* 4 (1938), 520.

11 Colodner, “Jewish Education under National Socialism”, 163.

12 The full name of the ministry was “the Ministry of Education, Science and Public Instruction”.

13 Colodner, “Jewish Education under National Socialism”, 180–183.

14 *Ibid.*, 163.

15 <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/exclusion-of-jewish-children-from-public-schools-1938>.

16 *Ibid.*

17 George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games among the Shadows* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 30.

children were thrown out of all playgrounds in Amsterdam-Zuid, a neighbourhood where some seventeen thousand Jews lived. At the order of the authorities, one of these playgrounds became a Jewish market; the rest were reserved for use by Gentile children alone.¹⁸ The playground ban was also implemented in occupied Eastern Europe and the ghettos established there. Even before the sealing down of the Warsaw Ghetto, Haim Kaplan, a Warsaw educator and diarist, wrote on 29 July 1940 that Ludwig Leist, the city governor of occupied Warsaw, “has issued an order forbidding the Jews to enter the city parks or the municipal promenades”.¹⁹ Two years later, on 17 June 1942, Kaplan wrote:

[i]t has already been three years since we last saw a blade of grass or a flower. Even before we were forced into the Ghetto, we were barred from the city’s parks and gardens. These spaces were airy and spacious, yet only a few Aryan children played there. Jewish children – wonderful children, whether from working-class families ... or the well-to-do – were left to play beyond the park fences, on the sidewalks and streets of the dusty, bustling town. When we were crowded into the Ghetto, we were pushed even further, beyond the “beyond the fence”. Within the Ghetto’s boundaries, there is not a single garden. We have been robbed of every tree and flower.²⁰

It was, writes Eisen, a deliberate policy of “psychological humiliation and physical repression”.²¹ Given that most of the children Kaplan worried about, along with Kaplan himself, were ultimately murdered by the Nazis, the issue of schooling – and certainly of playgrounds – may seem trivial. Yet, it underscores the Nazi administrators’ and policymakers’ obsessive fixation on Jewish children, a fixation that, within an exterminationist framework, proved fatal.

A War of Extermination

The killing of Jewish children was a fundamental aspect of the Final Solution. Children were murdered alongside Jewish adults, but they were also specifically targeted in operations known as *Kinderaktionen* (children’s actions). In his harrowing chapter titled “Murdering Jewish Children”, Steven T. Katz provides a detailed and vivid account of the murder of Jewish children under Nazi rule. Katz underscores the extreme cruelty and atrocities that characterised these killings.²²

But the cruel and sadistic child murders perpetrated by Germans or their auxiliaries in the towns, fields, or camps of Europe were the end result of a decision-making process in which the Nazi bureaucracy across Europe and army staff were involved, as they discussed the murder of Jewish children and reported on it. Four examples are indicative of this:

1. *The Deportation of Jewish Children from France to Auschwitz*

The deportation of Jews from France to Auschwitz started on 27 March 1942. The local German authorities in France had a problem filling the trains and cancelled a

18 Deborah Dwork, “The Netherlands”, in *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, eds. Charles H. Rosenzweig, and David S. Wayman (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 74.

19 *The Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, quoted in George Eisen, *Children and Play*, 30. After comparing different translations of this part of the diary, I am using here my translation of Kaplan.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust*, 30.

22 Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust and New World Slavery: A Comparative History* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 630–682.

14 July train that was supposed to deport 1,000 Jews. Records show that Adolf Eichmann was scathing in a phone call with Heinz Röthke, who at the time was the deputy head of the Department of Jewish Affairs in charge of the deportations from France – with Eichmann admonishing Röthke for the delay.²³ Röthke indeed made sure to start sending full trains from France to Auschwitz. To fill the trains, children had to be deported too. On 11 August 1942 an urgent telegram was sent to the RSHA IV B4 (Eichmann)²⁴ by Horst Ahnerst, in which he asked for permission to send children because not enough adults were rounded up: “[s]ince there is a temporary hold-up in the arrest of Jews, I intend to have the children currently housed in the Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande camps deported starting on August 17, 1942.”²⁵ The permission was granted, but initially only for dispersing the children in trains with adults, and not for sending dedicated children’s transports.²⁶

The issue of deporting children was actually discussed before the first train set out. On 6 July Theodor Dannecker, then head of the Department of Jewish Affairs, wrote to Eichmann that Premier Laval has proposed that, in the process of deporting Jewish families from the unoccupied territory, children under 16 years of age should be included. The question of Jewish children remaining in the occupied zone does not interest him. I therefore request that an urgent decision be made by telegram whether, perhaps beginning with the 15th transport from France, children under 16 should also be deported.²⁷

Dannecker pressed the point until he was authorised by Eichmann to send children too.

As can be seen, the Germans were not the only ones interested in deporting Jewish children to the east: in France, the Germans were under pressure to do so by the Vichy government. As Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton shows in *Vichy France and the Jews*, since adults were deported first, “[t]he separation of children from their parents had become, in fact, an acute political embarrassment for the Vichy regime”. The option of caring for these orphaned children was not acceptable to the Vichy regime either, since they would be too big of a burden on public assistance organisations. The Germans, naturally, concurred. In August, the French police, who oversaw the filling of the deportation trains, allocated four trains of children to be sent to Auschwitz.²⁸

Of the 11,400 children deported from France, 6,000 were deported during the summer of 1942. 2,000 of them were less than six years old.

2. Blocking Rescue Attempts of Jewish Children in Southeast Europe

The Nazi view of the Jewish child as an enemy extended beyond extermination to the active obstruction of rescue efforts that developed in regions controlled by Germany’s allies. The focus was on southeast Europe. By 1943, allies such as Hungary,

23 In July, Röthke was the deputy of Theo Dannecker, who had since 1940 been the head of the department. By the end of the month, Dannecker was moved to Bulgaria, and Röthke headed the department and the deportations of Jews to Auschwitz.

24 The RSHA (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) was the Reich Central Security Office, Himmler’s staff. It combined the Gestapo, Criminal Police, and SD of the SS and the Nazi state. Department IV B4 was Adolf Eichmann’s department – the *Judenamt*.

25 Yad Vashem Archive (YVA), 3651819.

26 YVA, 3657322, Rolf Guenther, Eichmann’s deputy to Helmut Knochen head of the security police in France, 13 August 1942.

27 Joseph Billig, *Le Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives (1941–1944)*, vol. 1 (Éditions du Centre, 1955), <https://www.70voices.org.uk/content/day41>.

28 Michael R. Marrus, Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995), 200–203 (transports of 19, 21, 24 and 26 August 1942).

Romania, and Bulgaria were not so confident of a German victory and were open to initiatives allowing some Jews to escape the Nazi net.²⁹ The Germans, on their side, specifically the Foreign Office and the SS, not only sought to ensure the destruction of Jewish children, but also laboured to thwart initiatives aimed at their rescue.

During World War Two, Romania, a German ally between 1940 and 1944, implemented violent anti-Jewish policies under the leadership of Ion Antonescu. These included pogroms in Iași and Odessa, and mass murders in Bessarabia and Bukovina, with assistance from the SS Einsatzgruppe D and local collaborators, as well as the deportation of tens of thousands of Jews to Transnistria, where many perished due to direct killings, starvation, and exhaustion.³⁰ By 1942, plans to deport Romania's Jews to Nazi extermination camps were ultimately abandoned, partly due to Antonescu's disillusionment with Germany and the advocacy efforts of Romania's Jewish leaders, as well as Queen Mother Helena, Archbishop Andrea Cassulo, and the Swiss diplomat René de Weck. Their interventions successfully halted deportations and secured some protection for Romania's remaining Jewish population. It was on the issue of the rescue and repatriation of Jewish children that local German officials, the German Foreign Office, and the SS focused their attention.³¹

Thus, on 3 March 1943, Adolf Eichmann wrote to Fritz Gebhardt Von Hann, of the *Referat D III of Abteilung Deutschland*³² in the German Foreign Office, about a Jewish initiative to transfer 1,000 Jewish children from Romania to Mandatory Palestine via Bulgaria and Turkey:

[a]ccording to reliable information which must be kept secret negotiations which might prove successful are being conducted between Jewish leaders in Rumania . . . and Turkey, for the granting of transit visas for one thousand Jewish children and one hundred Jewish adults who will accompany them on their trip via Bulgaria and Turkey to Palestine. We request every effort to prevent this emigration.³³

Likewise, on 14 May 1943, Eberhard von Thadden, the head of the *Inland IIA* department of the German Foreign Office, reported on a conversation with Eichmann on "the Allies' desire to evacuate Jewish children from Romania and the occupied eastern territories" – specifically, on a scheme to allow the transfer of 5,000 Jewish children. Eichmann relayed to him Himmler's position on the matter. Generally, Eichmann stated that "[t]he emigration of Jewish children should be rejected in principle". Yet, if this scheme were to materialise, it would be approved only if four interned Germans were repatriated to the Reich for each child, in all 20,000 Germans. Eichmann further stipulated that these will have to be "not 20,000 old people but rather Germans under 40 years of age who were still able to reproduce", something he could be sure of that the Allies would not agree to. He further explained that "[i]f the departure of Jewish children from Romania or other Balkan cities has

29 Christopher Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978), 170–177.

30 See Howard T. Grant, *Romania's Holy War: Soldiers, Motivation, and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

31 On these attempts, see Tuvia Friling, *Arrows in the Dark: David Ben-Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership and Rescue Attempts During the Holocaust* (Madison Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 143–194.

32 *Abteilung Deutschland* was the Foreign Office department dealing with Jewish matters, and *Referat DIII* dealt with many anti-Jewish policy issues. It was headed by Franz Rademacher and, from March 1943, by Von Hann. This was short lived since the department was dissolved in March 1943 and its functions taken over by the *Inland IIA* department, headed by von Thadden.

33 YVA, 3655644.

to be approved at all [in spite of the general rejection of such an idea, B.C.], it is important that this does not take place without compensation [but on the condition mentioned above, B.C.].” It is worth noting that, in the conversation, Eichmann refers openly to the ongoing extermination of Jewish children: “[i]n any case, negotiations must be conducted quickly, as the time is approaching when, due to the implementation of our measures against the Jews, the departure of 5,000 Jewish children from the eastern territories will no longer be technically feasible.”³⁴ Although a trickle of young Jews managed to leave the Balkan countries, the big rescue plans did not materialise.

It must be stressed that there were other forces at play here that worked to block attempts to rescue Jewish children. One was the leader of the national Arab movement in British Mandatory Palestine, the Mufti Haj Amin el Husseini. The mufti found refuge in Berlin during the war and threw himself wholeheartedly into the German war effort by broadcasting German-Islamist propaganda to the Middle East and by helping the recruitment of Muslims soldiers into Muslim German army units.³⁵ He also worked diligently to convince the Nazi leadership of the coalignment of Nazi and Arab interests in the Middle East and Mandatory Palestine. When he heard that rescue attempts of Jews were discussed, he entered into a flurry of activity, directly approaching the foreign ministers of Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, the Italian embassy in Berlin, and of course many leaders and agencies in Berlin. He suggested that Jewish children or adults should not be allowed to reach Mandatory Palestine, but rather that they should be sent to Poland – where he knew that the Final Solution was already taking place.

Wilhelm Melchers, of the Near East Desk of the Political Division of the German Foreign Office reported that:

[t]he Mufti kept cropping up all over the place and lodging protests: in the Minister’s office, in the Undersecretary of State’s waiting room and in other government departments: for example, the Home Office, the Press Office, the broadcasting service, and also the SS ... At the Foreign office it was a foregone conclusion that steps would be taken – specifically by the Mufti – in protest of any activity concerning the Balkan Jews (“Balkanjudenaktionen”). No doubt, his intervention was welcomed in the one case or the other ... The Mufti was a sworn enemy of the Jews and made no secret of the fact that he would rather see them all killed. He demanded “the absolute rejection of such plans”.³⁶

It is difficult to determine the extent of Mufti Haj Amin el Husseini’s influence in this matter. However, it is evident that the Germans leveraged their success in obstructing the efforts to rescue Jewish children in order to emphasise their commitment to the Arab cause and their “irreproachable German policy towards the Arabs in the Jewish Question”. Himmler himself stressed to the Foreign Office that he did not condone that “such a noble and courageous people as the Arabs be ousted by the Jews from their homeland Palestine”. Klaus Geiske, summarising this sordid tale, sees the mufti as one of those responsible for blocking the rescue attempts: “[t]he emigration of the Jewish children was rendered impossible by the

34 YVA, 3685588.

35 See Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2009), and David Mutadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany’s War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

36 Klaus Gensicke, *The Mufti of Jerusalem and the Nazis: The Berlin Years*, trans. Alexander Fraser Gunn (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011), 122.

joint efforts of Eichmann, Himmler, Ribbentrop and the Mufti”.³⁷ This, in turn, reveals how prominently Jewish children figured in the minds of the Nazi leadership.³⁸

3. *Hunting Children in Izieu*

On 6 April 1944, Klaus Barbie, the chief of the Gestapo in Lyon, allocated three trucks and the relevant manpower for a raid on a Jewish children’s home operating clandestinely in the village of Izieu in the area of Ain. Forty-five children and a small staff of adults, headed by Sabine and Miron Zlatin, had been hiding there since May 1943. The raid was successful, with Barbie reporting to his superiors that

[t]his morning, the activities of a Jewish Children’s Home in Izieu-Ain have been ended. Forty-one children ranging in age from three to thirteen years old and five adults have been arrested. No cash or other objects of value were found. Their transport to Drancy will take place on April 7, 1944.³⁹

After having been first taken to the camp of Drancy, forty-two children and seven educators were then sent to Auschwitz. Most of them were killed upon arrival, except for the educator Léa Feldblum, and two teenagers and the home’s director, Miron Zlatin, who were killed in Reval in Estonia.

The raid on the Izieu children’s home and the murder of the children and staff was not a major chapter in the Final Solution – but it is nonetheless indicative. It took place at a time when the German authorities in France were bracing for the imminent Allied invasion, which occurred two months later. Even as they focused their resources on fortifications and the eradication of the French Resistance, they remained committed to the continued persecution and murder of Jewish children.

Saul Friedländer wrote of the Izieu raid that

the murder of Izieu was but a minute event in the routine of German mass extermination, but it demonstrated, as the war entered its last year, that despite the rapidly deteriorating situation of the Reich, no effort would be spared, no roundup deemed too insignificant in the final drive toward the complete extermination of the European Jews.⁴⁰

Indeed, this was not solely about the Final Solution targeting European Jews – it should also be understood as an act of war against a small group of Jewish children, with the intent of ensuring that no Jewish child would survive.

4. *Massacring Children in Byelaya Tserkov*

The massacre of approximately ninety Jewish children in Byelaya Tserkov in Ukraine offers us, through extensive documentation, an insight into how the murder of Jewish children became a military task – discussed, planned, and executed by the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Friling argues that, while the British were undoubtedly dragging their feet and hesitant to honor their promises, it was the German opposition that ultimately prevented the plans from materialising: “[w]ere it not for this relentless position, the British would have found themselves during that spring and summer of 1943 facing a series of promissory notes that they themselves had handed out and that they would very probably have had to pay off. They were saved from this ‘embarrassing’ situation by the Nazis.” Friling, *Arrows in the Dark*, 168.

³⁹ For the long-term impact of this telegram, see Ulrike Lühe and Romain Ledauphin, “From the Forerunners of Document Collection to the Trial of Klaus Barbie and Beyond: The Transitional Justice Journey of the Izieu Telegram”, *The International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 3 (2020): 440–466, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1794842>.

⁴⁰ Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 601.

German military system.⁴¹ The town, seventy miles from Kiev, was captured by German forces on 16 July 1941. In August, the *Feldkommandant* (military sub-area commander) of the town asked for the SS to exterminate the town's Jewish population.⁴² Indeed, between 8 and 19 August, a detachment of *Sonderkommando 4a*, commanded by August Hafner and supported by the Ukrainian People's Militia and a platoon of Waffen SS troops, executed several hundreds of the town's Jews.⁴³ The children of the victims were not killed with the adults. On the night of 19 August, three lorry loads of children were murdered, and ninety Jewish children were left alive in appalling conditions in a house on the outskirts of the town. The military deliberations about these children and their subsequent murder are indicative of the concept of a "war against the Jewish children".

The children's fate became a military issue following a visit to the aforementioned house by two military chaplains from the 4/607 Military Hospital unit, Ernest Tewes and Gerhard Wilczek, who were interrupted while having lunch by an agitated non-commissioned officer asking them to see the place and take "remedial action". They visited the house and saw that the children were being held in terrible physical and sanitary conditions, starved with no food or water. The "frightful conditions" of the children made the soldiers uneasy. Since this was happening under the German Wehrmacht, it could "ruin its reputation". Not being able to speak with the field commander, Tewes and Wilczek approached the divisional chaplains of the 295th Infantry Division and asked them to intervene. That day at 16:00, the latter chaplains approached Lieutenant Colonel Helmuth Groscurth, the first staff officer of the 259th Brigade, and asked him to intervene. This unleashed a wave of discussions, orders, and counter-orders which involved many central figures in the division and the army. Groscurth took with him Dr Joseph Maria Reuss, the divisional chaplain, the brigade ordinance officer, and an interpreter, and went to check for himself. When in the house, he met *Oberscharführer* Jager from the SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*, security police) who informed him that the children "also had to be eliminated". Groscurth went to the *Ortskommandantur* (town commander) who explained that he could not challenge orders given by the SD. He suggested approaching the *Feldkommandant*, Lieutenant Colonel Riedl. The latter informed Groscurth that he had been notified by the *Sonderkommando* about the planned killing but had no power to change the orders and, anyway, "he was convinced of the correctness and necessity of this order".⁴⁴ Groscurth instructed the *Feldkommandant* to seal off the area of the house and to ensure inconspicuous transport to the execution. But he suggested checking again with the Army Group⁴⁵ whether the "execution of the remaining children should proceed or not". In the meantime, he instructed the *Feldkommandant* to inform the head of the *Sonderkommando* that he would have to postpone action until a decision had been taken by the Army Group.⁴⁶

Groscurth contacted the operations officer of the Army Group, but the latter stipulated that the decision had to be made by the Sixth Army's headquarters. It took

41 The documents pertaining to this massacre are published in Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 137–154.

42 *Ibid.*, 138.

43 SK 4a, a sub-unit of Einsatzgruppen C, was commanded by Paul Blobel.

44 Groscurth, *ibid.*, 146.

45 The units involved in this story all belonged to the Sixth Army commanded by Von Reichenau. The Sixth Army was one of the armies in Army Group South. The German forces invading the USSR were organised into three army groups: South, Centre, and North.

46 On the chaplains, see Doris L. Bergen, *Between God and Hitler: Military Chaplains in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2–7.

Groscurth some time get hold of the operations officer there, only to be told that he would not receive a decision from the commander-in-chief, Field Marshal von Reichenau, until the evening. Hafner, the head of the Sonderkommando, inquired with Groscurth about the postponement of the order and was told that he would have to wait since “I had to demand that the measures be carried out appropriately, in the interest of maintaining the military discipline of the troops. We would have to wait for the army’s decision.” At 19:00, the divisional commander was notified of all the measures taken and he approved them. At 20:00, the army ordered that the extermination be postponed. One truck already loaded with children had to be unloaded, and the Feldkommandant organised a supply of bread and water for the children.

In the morning, Captain Luley, the *Abwehr Offizier AOK 6* (Sixth Army intelligence officer), Standartenführer Blobel, and Obersturmführer Hafner arrived at Byelaya Tserkov for a meeting at the Feldkommandant’s office. It was obvious, reported Groscurth, that they saw the chaplains’ letter as a matter of “stirring up trouble” and that the chaplains had overstepped their purview. Both Luley of the army and Blobel of the SS stated that the postponement was unfortunate and relayed that the commander in chief, Von Reichenau, “recognised the necessity of eliminating the children”.⁴⁷ “Then we settled the details of how the executions were to be carried out.” Hafner’s testimony sheds light on these deliberations: the question was who would do the shooting and Blobel suggested that it be the Waffen SS, to which Hafner replied that

[t]hey are all young men. How are we going to answer to them if we make them shoot small children?’ To this he said, “Then use your men.” I then said, “How can they do that? They have small children as well.” This tug of war lasted amount ten minutes. I [Hafner, B.C.] suggested that the Ukrainian militia of the Feldkommandant should shoot the children. There were no objections from either side to this suggestion.⁴⁸

And so, with all of the matters cleared between the army and the SS, all that was left was to murder the children. That was done on the afternoon of 22 August. A grave was dug by the army, which also took care of transporting the children to the killing site, with the shooting of the children being done by the Ukrainian militiamen.⁴⁹

There was a postscript to this massacre underlining the involvement of Field Marshal Von Reichenau in the killing. Groscurth submitted to von Reichenau a detailed report of the event explaining his actions and need to intervene. He put the blame on the SS and the Feldkommandant, who should have ensured that “both infants and children should have been eliminated immediately in order for this inhuman agony to have been avoided”. He added, that in any case, “[i]n the interest of maintaining military discipline”, these actions should be conducted away from the troops and not in public. He explained that the agitation of the troops was due to the fact that “measures against women and children were undertaken which in no way differ from the atrocities carried out by enemy which the troops are continually being informed about”.⁵⁰ Reichenau sent a scathing reply, reprimanding the division and Groscurth for interrupting the execution of the children. He also referred to Groscurth’s statements about the atrocities: “I have to describe this assessment as incorrect, inappropriate and impertinent in the extreme. Moreover, this comment was written in an

47 Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess, *The Good Old Days*, 148.

48 *Ibid.*, 153.

49 Hafner, *Ibid.*, 154.

50 *Ibid.*, 150.

open communication which passes through many hands. It would have been far better if the report had not been written at all.”⁵¹ Luckily, the report was written and survived the war, allowing us to see how the murder of Jewish children became a military operation conducted in a military manner. The German Sixth Army, the 259th Infantry Brigade, as well as the local German occupation administration and its Ukrainian militia, in cooperation with the SS, waged war against ninety Jewish orphans in Byelaya Tserkov.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this study underscores the validity of the concept of a distinct war against Jewish children during the Holocaust. Unlike civilian suffering that occurs as a consequence of broader military conflicts, the Nazi campaign against Jewish children was deliberate, ideologically driven, and systematic. Jewish children were not merely caught in the crossfire of war but were specifically targeted as part of the Final Solution. This war against Jewish children was manifested not only in their physical annihilation, but also through a range of discriminatory and dehumanising policies, including the exclusion of Jewish children from education and a deprivation of their basic rights, as seen through their expulsion from schools and playgrounds.

The Nazis’ ideological framework cast Jewish children as existential threats to their envisioned racial order, necessitating their eradication. As Marrus and Paxton argue, “[i]n the Nazis’ biological perspective, Jewish children threatened their new order as much as their parents”.⁵² This was not only because they carried Jewish values and traits, but also because they were perceived as harbingers of a future Jewish “revenge”. As a result, even infants were marked for death.

The Nazis, while unwavering in their commitment to annihilate Jewish children, were aware that such actions contradicted the cultural and human mores to which many Germans adhered. Heinrich Himmler, in a well-documented speech to Wehrmacht generals attending an ideological and political training meeting in Sonthofen on 5 May 1944, felt compelled to justify the murder of Jewish children to his audience:

[i]f you say: “we can understand as far as the men are concerned but not about the children” ... In this confrontation with Asia we must get used to condemning to oblivion those rules and customs of past wars which we have got used to and prefer. In my view, we as Germans, however deeply we may feel in our hearts, are not entitled to allow a generation of avengers filled with hatred to grow up with whom our children and grandchildren will have to deal because we, too weak and cowardly, left it to them.⁵³

This statement, couching Jewish children as potential avengers, is disingenuous. This “threat” may have existed after the extermination of Jewish parents, yet the extermination of Jewish children was not a secondary consideration but an essential component of Nazi policy. From their exclusion from education and public life to the

51 Ibid., 153.

52 Marrus and Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*, 200.

53 A similar speech was made by Himmler to Gau and Reich chiefs of the party in Posen on 6 October 1943. There he explained that “[t]he difficult decision must be made to have this people disappear from the face of this earth”. Several translations exist of the two speeches, but I am quoting from the version in Peter Heinz Longrich, “Hitler’s Role in the Persecution of the Jews by the Nazi Regime”, <https://www.hdot.org/longrole/>.

logistical precision of Kinderaktionen and other mass killings, and the severing of opportunities for rescue, the war against Jewish children was carried out with military-like planning and commitment.

Such policies illustrate the extreme lengths to which the Nazi regime went to ensure that no Jewish child would survive. Case studies, such as the deportations of children from France, the massacre at Byelaya Tserkov, and the raid on the Izieu children's home, demonstrate the chilling efficiency with which the Nazi machine operated and the ideological conviction that drove its leaders to view even the murder of infants as necessary.

These actions stand in stark contrast to Nazi policies towards non-Jewish children, such as the forced Germanisation of "racially fit" children or the exploitation of children for forced labour, where survival, however grim, was often the intended outcome. The explicit targeting of Jewish children for death reveals the ideological consistency of the Nazi worldview, in which the destruction of future generations was as crucial as the annihilation of the present one.

The opposition to the rescue of Jewish children further highlights the Nazis' commitment to this war. Efforts by Jewish leaders, foreign diplomats, and humanitarian organisations to save children from occupied territories were systematically obstructed by Nazi officials, who treated Jewish children not as innocents to be spared, but as adversaries to be eliminated. Even in the face of military setbacks, the Nazi regime prioritised the extermination of Jewish children, as evidenced by their continued targeting of children in the war's final years.

In understanding this war against Jewish children, it becomes clear that their murder was not an incidental byproduct of the Holocaust but a core component of Nazi genocidal policy. The logistical planning and military-style deliberations required to execute these policies further underline the intentionality of this war, reflecting not only the scale of Nazi atrocities, but also their fixation on eradicating the Jewish future. There was indeed a war on the Jewish child.

Ultimately, the war against Jewish children was a war against Jewish continuity – a campaign designed to ensure the permanent obliteration of Jewish life and, through, this of Jewish influence on Europe and the world. By exploring the mechanisms and ideologies that underpinned this war, this article has provided a deeper understanding of how genocidal regimes can mobilise vast resources to target even the most vulnerable members of a population. The historical record compels us to examine not only the atrocities committed, but also the processes that enabled them and the ideologies that fuelled them, and it offers critical insights for recognising genocides and understanding their ideology and structures in the past and today.

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Boaz Cohen is the head of the Holocaust Studies program at Western Galilee College in Akko, Israel, and teaches history at Shaanan College in Haifa. He is also an affiliated research fellow at the Centre for Collective Violence, Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the UCL Institute for Advanced Studies. Cohen's work focuses on the post-war Jewish world, the development of Holocaust historiography and memory in social and cultural contexts, the agency of Holocaust survivors and their early testimonies, and the rehabilitation and early testimonies of child Holocaust survivors. He is co-founder of the "Children of War, Holocaust and Genocide" project with Verena Buser.
Email: boazc@wgalil.ac.il

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