

‘Children are to be regarded as propaganda’: Contradictions of German Occupation Policies in the Child Evacuations to Switzerland 1941-1942

In early 1941, Red Cross officials, under the watchful eyes of German occupation authorities, selected destitute and sickly children from Belgium and northern France and sent them on special trains to neutral Switzerland. After living with Swiss families for three months, the children returned to Belgium and France to resume their wartime lives. In this way, they were able to survive the war a little longer.

This massive operation was chiefly organised, funded and operated by a coalition of Swiss charities that, due to the increasing popularity and scope of the operations, merged with the national branch of the Swiss Red Cross in early 1942. This organisation, *Kinderhilfe des Schweizerischen Roten Kreuzes* (Swiss Red Cross Children's Help), evacuated over 60,000 French and Belgian children for three-month periods during the Second World War. By capitalising on the existing Red Cross infrastructure in occupied territories, the political neutrality of the Swiss Red Cross and Swiss federal government, and the financial generosity of Swiss citizens, *Kinderhilfe's* success extended into other wartime initiatives for foreign children. These activities included a large sponsorship programme (consisting of small monthly stipends to destitute families), the recuperation of tuberculosis-stricken children in sanatoria and preventoria in Swiss alpine resorts, and the establishment of various Swiss-run children's homes in both France and Belgium.¹ The three-month evacuation programmes continued into the post-war era, resulting in Switzerland hosting 100,000 additional children from various European nations until 1949.

Although *Kinderhilfe's* initiatives are some of the most successful transnational humanitarian operations during Second World War, they are not well-studied aspects of European history. More recently, historians have examined Swiss humanitarian actions and are questioning the prevalent post-war historiographical condemnation of Switzerland's strict refugee policies and its so-called 'neutrality' in light of its close financial collaboration with Nazi Germany.² Some Swiss scholars, such as Antonia Schmidlin (1999) and Serge Nessi (2001), have explored how the Swiss government used many wartime humanitarian initiatives to serve foreign and domestic political purposes. However, these studies utilise only Swiss archival materials or interviews with Swiss Red Cross workers, thus contextualising them within Swiss, rather than European, history. No study has yet examined German documents to determine the German occupation authorities' reasons or motivations for allowing these initiatives, particularly the unusual child evacuations, to occur.

¹ Sambells, C. Saving Foreign Children From 'Moral Decay': Switzerland's Children's Homes During the Second World War. *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 2018; 11(1): 5-26.

² Early post-war histories of wartime Switzerland, such as Edgar Bonjour's *Die Geschichte der schweizerischen Neutralität* (Helbing & Lichtenhahn 1970), Daniel Bourgeois *Le Troisième Reich et la Suisse* (Editions de la Baconnière 1974), and Hans-Ulrich Jost *Geschichte der Schweiz und der Schweizer* (Helbing & Lichtenhahn 1983) brought nuance to the difficult diplomatic pressures of the period, focusing greatly on Switzerland's political rather than social actions. After significant public condemnation of Swiss wartime actions in the 1990s, the Swiss Federal Council created the Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland. Twenty-five volumes (1996-2001) investigated all facets of Switzerland's actions, confronting its restrictive refugee policies and financial transactions with both Axis and Allied parties. While the Commission received mixed criticism, aspects of Swiss humanitarianism were raised. Scholars such as Antonia Schmidlin (Chronos Verlag 1999) and Serge Nessi (Editions Slatkine 2001) have explored a wide range of Swiss charitable activities, problematizing Switzerland's foreign policies with its domestic humanitarianism. Due the controversy surrounding Swiss wartime policies, and the growth of humanitarian history as a field of inquiry (Michael Barnett's 2011 *Empire of Humanity* is considered the first general history), it is likely that this topic will continue to attract significant revision.

The most remarkable aspect of these wartime child evacuations from occupied France and Belgium was the fact that they were conducted with full consent and authority of the Nazi occupying authorities. These children (unlike the millions who were evacuated throughout the German Reich) were not sent to Nazi youth camps for training and political indoctrination, but instead were dispatched to benefit from foreign assistance in a neutral country beyond Nazi control. Moreover, these foreign children were selected by Red Cross officials on the basis of health, rather than for their racial heritage, as became the case with other Nazi-endorsed evacuations.³ Therefore, why would the Military Administration for German-occupied Belgium and Northern France allow such evacuation measures? Who authorised these evacuations? Why were they authorised? And, equally important, why were they terminated?

Conversations documented within a German Propaganda Ministry file found in das Bundesarchiv in Berlin-Lichterfelde reveal that the Propaganda Ministry, the Reich Transport Ministry, the Reich Party Office (on behalf of Hitler) and the Military Administration in Belgium and Northern France struggled to agree on the evacuations' immediate impact upon the children and local populations. Although the evacuations from Belgium began in February 1941, it was not until January 1942 when various high-ranking officials in the Nazi elite began to oppose the evacuations. The significant differences of opinion within German departments attest to the controversy of the evacuations within Nazi circles, and eventually led to Hitler's termination of the Belgian program in May 1942.

This article will analyse these crucial discussions to highlight that the commanders of the Military Administration of Belgium and Northern France believed they were exerting more control over the local population through these evacuations and, in turn, were actively achieving Hitler's goals for German supremacy. Ian Kershaw's concept of 'working towards the Führer,' whereby Nazi commanders had large breadth to achieve what they *perceived* to be Hitler's goals, allowed commanders in the outlying territories to implement contentious policies to deal with local conditions. Although this 'drive from below' has been used to partly explain the increased brutality in the Eastern territories,⁴ it can be similarly applied to these child evacuations, whereby the commanders in the western occupied territories interpreted that their orders could be best executed through other measures, even if they were, paradoxically, humane.

Moreover, throughout these conversations, a power struggle between the local commanders in Brussels and the Nazi elite in Berlin culminated in Hitler's intervention. In May 1942, Hitler terminated the Belgian evacuations on the basis that evacuated children would become incited to commit acts of sabotage after they returned to Belgium and France. Although others, including Hitler's personal doctor, refuted this argument on the basis of a lack of evidence, the argument itself is based upon the larger ideological belief that children possessed significant agency and autonomy. Considering the larger youth movement in Nazi Germany, Hitler's justification aligned with the Nazis' overall attitude towards children during this period, who were viewed as politically conscious and persuadable. This article will thus explore how the Nazis' perceptions of children's agency and power in these evacuations became another weapon of further exploitation and control.

Given the massive diplomatic and material challenges of the Second World War, it is

³ Although children evacuated through the Kinderlandverschickung (KLV) program were initially selected for health reasons in the late 1930s, this was modified once the demands of war limited the KLV's resources and scope. See Mouton, M. The Kinderlandverschickung: Childhood Memories of War Re-Examined. *German History* 2019; 37(2): 186-204.

⁴ Kershaw claims Albert Foster in West Prussia and Arthur Greiser in Wartegau competed to rid their territories in the shortest time of its Jewish inhabitants, which Kershaw views as an example of the increased brutality in the Nazi hierarchy to achieve Hitler's vision of a *Judenrein* Europe. Kershaw, I. 'Working towards the Führer.' Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship. *Contemporary European History* 1993; 2(2): 115-116.

surprising that many of *Kinderhilfe*'s initiatives, especially the large transnational evacuation of vulnerable, foreign children, were generally effective. This article takes the position that although *Kinderhilfe*'s evacuations may be shrouded in the historiographic baggage of Switzerland's questionable 'neutrality' or politically-fuelled 'humanitarianism,' and while bureaucratic consent was granted by one of the most brutal regimes in modern history, this merely underlines that the motivations behind 'charitable actions' are never apolitical. This article does not seek to morally redeem any particular party in this complex operation, but to highlight the contradictions within German occupation policy in western Europe. By doing so, this article will, first, demonstrate that these child evacuations were one unique interpretation that (although eventually terminated) implemented the broad aims and policy objectives of Nazi ideology and, secondly, that children's value became central to this bureaucratic struggle. Ultimately, regardless of the desperate local conditions that children faced, including intense hunger and disease, these evacuations were crudely and insensitively manipulated for political gain by *both* local commanders and the Nazi elite.

After the German invasion in May 1940, Belgium and small portions of northern France (including Lille in the northwest, Valenciennes in the northeast and Arras in Pas-de-Calais), were placed under the command of the Wehrmacht. It is important to emphasise that French children were selected for evacuation within both occupied northern France (ruled through the administration in Paris) and the lesser-known Military Administration of Belgium and Northern France (headquartered in Brussels). For the purposes of transparency, this article will exclusively discuss the selection of children chosen from those portions of France and Belgium under Brussels' control.

Belgium suffered considerably under German occupation. According to historian Martin Conway, the German authorities had three goals: to extract the maximum of both human and material resources to serve the German war effort, to ensure the maintenance of order within the country, and finally, to lay the basis of a more long-term Germanization of the nation.⁵ The core issue immediately after occupation was to make Belgium self-sufficient so that it would not rely on precious German supplies. Also, the national memories of 1914 to 1918, during which Belgium had been devastated by extreme loss of life and unrelenting food shortages, were to be avoided at all costs. Therefore, Germany recognized that maintaining a pre-war standard of living was essential.⁶

In 1939, Belgium was the most densely populated country in Europe with 8.39 million inhabitants within just 11,779 square miles of territory. Second only to Great Britain, Belgium was also the most industrialized country in Europe with 48.9 per cent of its work force employed in industry and mining. Whereas the rural northern provinces, inhabited by Flemish-speaking Belgians, tended to be poorer and economically undeveloped, the south and east French-speaking areas under the Military Administration's control were the most heavily industrialised outside of Paris, providing the majority of France's coal⁷. The poor restructuring of these industry-rich areas to produce self-sustaining agriculture in the early years of occupation resulted in thriving black markets, rising hunger and wide-spread food shortages.⁸ According to one study, Belgium had the third lowest calorific value of normal rations in Europe in 1941 (1,360), after Italy

⁵ Conway M. *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p.15.

⁶ Warmbrunn W. *The German Occupation of Belgium 1940-1944*. New York: Peter Lang, 1993, p.198.

⁷ Geller JH. Military Administration in German-occupied Belgium. *Journal of Military History* 1999; 63(1): 105-106.

⁸ Immediately after occupation, the German authorities called for the conversion of 200,000 acres of pasture to grain and potato production and a reduction in livestock, but it failed to be effective during the 1941 harvest year. Warmbrunn. *German Occupation of Belgium*. p.215 and p.219.

(1,010) and Poland (845).⁹ In 1942, Belgium had the second lowest weekly bread rations (1,575 grams) of any occupied territory after famine-ridden Greece (1,260 grams).¹⁰ Such statistics suggest that Belgium had the lowest food rations of all countries in western Europe from 1941 to 1942.

Children were among the first to suffer. A report prepared by the Belgian Commission for the Study of Post-War Problems examined fifteen thousand boys and girls between the ages of three and eighteen in Brussels in autumn 1940. This report determined that 38 per cent of children over the age of 14 were underweight and that 80 per cent of all children were debilitated and always hungry.¹¹ Poor diet left many susceptible to disease and malnourishment. In Nord-Pas-de-Calais, two epidemics of typhoid in late 1940 and in the summer of 1943, and diphtheria during the winter of 1942-43, severely affected the population. Soap and hot water were difficult to obtain, resulting in a rise of dermatological diseases. Moreover, chronic malnourishment led to serious vitamin deficiencies amongst children. Children ages 6 to 14 were at greatest risk, gaining only 9 kilograms on average between the years of 1938 and 1944, as opposed to the more usual 18 kilograms.¹² As the occupation continued, reports submitted to the British Foreign Office in January 1941 conveyed the very grim food situation: 'If no relief in the way of wheat or other substitutes arrives by February 15, there will be no grain of any kind in Belgium.'¹³ Another report emphasized the regular struggle Belgians faced to locate adequate provisions; daily rations of only 125 grams of bread and 35 grams of meat were extremely difficult to procure regularly; vegetable provisions were sufficient but nearly 20 times their pre-war price; and potatoes had not been available for the previous two months.¹⁴ By 1 June 1941, one report stated that the only issue which occupied the minds of Belgians was food – even the word 'famine' was used.¹⁵

Despite these severe food restrictions, angry or violent reactions from Belgian parents and children were uncommon. Although resistance within Belgium and northern France took on various innovative forms including thriving black markets and regular strikes in industries, the dire food situation actually contributed to rising anti-Allied sentiment. Mr. Klecker claimed on 21 July 1941, 'The people in Belgium have a growing grudge against the Americans for not ensuring the feeding of the civil population.'¹⁶ Mr. Van Damme pointed out 'The situation gets worse every day – the people will not forget for a very long time that the blame for it rests on England and America.'¹⁷ Despite the Belgian ministers (in exile in London) petitioning the British government for soup kitchens, milk shipments and basic necessities, the Allied blockade

⁹ Kroener B, Müller RD and Umbreit H. *Organisation und Mobilisierung des deutschen Machtbereichs*. Vol 2. Stuttgart: Dt. Verl.-Anst; 1999, p.226.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.230.

¹¹ Bigwood GJ. *Food and Health Conditions in Occupied Belgium*. Belgian Commission for the Study of Post-War Problems. Doc. S. 4/46, London, 4 December 1942. Quoted in Macardle, D. *Children of Europe*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1949, p.167-8.

¹² Taylor, L. *Between Resistance and Collaboration: Popular Protest in Northern France, 1940-1945*. London: MacMillan Press, 2000, p.57.

¹³ The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Public Records Office (hereafter PRO), Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 371/26342-0002, 10 January 1941, Conditions in Belgium under German occupation, p.3.

¹⁴ TNA, PRO, FO371/26343, 12 March 1941, Conditions in Antwerp, p.4. Potatoes were also rationed at 500 grams per day, a third of what German soldiers stationed in Belgium were fed. See Gildea R, Luyten D and Fürst J. To Work or Not to Work? In Gildea R, Wieviorka O and Warring A (eds) *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini: Daily Life in Occupied Europe*. Oxford: Berg, 2006, p.46.

¹⁵ TNA, PRO, FO371/26343-0007, 1 June 1941, Report by Belgian engineer on conditions in Belgium, p.2.

¹⁶ TNA, PRO, FO371/26343-0032, 19 September 1941, Postal and Telegraph Censorship to FO: Report on Holland and Belgium, p.13-4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

towards German-occupied Europe was unyielding.¹⁸ And although Belgian attitudes became more pro-Allied after Germany increased its persecution of Jews in mid 1942, such letters and actions reflect whom Belgians held most culpable for their suffering in the early stages of occupation.

The German commanders of Belgium and Northern France were Military Commander Alexander von Falkenhausen and, Head of Military Administration, Eggert Reeder.¹⁹ Not only were these men unusual choices for commanding strategically-important Belgium, but historians claim their administration was more conciliatory than others. Von Falkenhausen was the son of a Baron and nephew to the commander of Belgium during the First World War, but his own accomplishments hardly recommended him for this role; he was a conservative and worldly diplomat, having been attaché in the Ottoman Empire, Japan and Chiang Kai-shek's China, and was much older than his peers in other occupied territories. At the age of 62, von Falkenhausen was plucked out of retirement and sent to Brussels, alongside Eggert Reeder, a former Prussian civil servant who was immensely resourceful and had a reputation as a fair administrator in Catholic western Germany, where he had served in Aachen and Cologne in the 1930s. Reeder was wary of the Nazi Party, having only joined in 1933 (likely for careerist purposes), and was particularly protective of his own administration from the Gestapo, whom he viewed as disruptive and fanatical.²⁰

Von Falkenhausen and Reeder dominated Belgian policy implementation at the expense of other Nazi party departments.²¹ Unlike the occupying regimes in Prague, Poland, Norway or Austria, which installed SS-dominated civilian governments, or even puppet governments, von Falkenhausen and Reeder successfully protected their military administration from SS intervention until mid-1944. At the core of the conflict between the Military Administration and Himmler's SS were the interpretations of Belgium's racial and political position in Hitler's Europe.²² For example, immediately after occupation, von Falkenhausen and Reeder initiated a close relationship with the pro-German Flemish nationalists, the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond, which stood in stark cultural contrast to Himmler's favoured group, the right-wing Walloons who were willing to fight for the Germans and eventually formed an elite SS unit on the Eastern front. From 1940 until 1944, the Military Administration and the SS, propped up by the internal nationalist movements and tensions, bickered relentlessly about Belgian policy. In July 1944, Hitler dissolved the Military Administration and installed an SS government and, by September 1944, Brussels was liberated by the Allies.

The infighting between the Military Administration for Belgium and Northern France and Nazi Berlin departments would not be limited to the SS, as will be discussed. Instead, this bickering extended into other local policies that von Falkenhausen and Reeder implemented in early 1941. Shortly after the food situation became very grim, negotiations began regarding the evacuation of Belgian and northern French children to Switzerland by *Kinderhilfe*. Similar Swiss-led evacuations from southern Vichy France had been successful since November 1940.

¹⁸ TNA, PRO, FO 371/36510-0006, 18 February 1943, Ministry of Economic Warfare to Foreign Office, Note on Blockade Policy respecting Relief, January 1943, p.2.

¹⁹ Alexander von Falkenhausen's ambiguous role in the 20 July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler was explored in post-war trials. See Wilken H, *Zwischen Kommando und Kerker. Alexander von Falkenhausen – Deutscher Militärbefehlshaber in Brüssel 1940-1944. IFDT – Zeitschrift für Innere Führung* 2002; 2: 64-71.

²⁰ Mazower M. *Hitler's Empire*. London: Penguin, 2009, p.107 and Geller JH. *Military Administration*. p.102.

²¹ Geller JH. *Military Administration*. p.99.

²² Belgium's inclusion within the greater Reich manifested itself in various ways, such as Himmler's creation of a pro-German Flemish unit for the SS in September 1940. Geller JH. *Military Administration*. p.102-7.

But the issue became about providing adequate resources for these war-stricken children, as the Swiss borders were too overwhelmed by 28,000 French POWs who had not yet been repatriated. Fortunately for *Kinderhilfe*, this crisis was short lived.²³ In January 1941, the German and Swiss governments signed an accord to formalise the transfer of interned troops and, in February 1941, thousands of French soldiers returned to occupied and unoccupied France. In that same month, Odette Micheli, a well-connected Swiss woman working in the French Red Cross was able to secure the necessary German authorisation.²⁴ Child evacuations from occupied France began, and *Kinderhilfe* was the first foreign agency allowed into blocked areas, such as Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne.²⁵

Although children from occupied France and Belgium had been regularly evacuated to Switzerland since February and May 1941, respectively, it was not until mid-December 1941 that a high-ranking Nazi, Erich Hilgenfeld, questioned the appropriateness of the evacuations.²⁶ This marks the beginning of the documented dissent within Nazi circles about these child evacuations.²⁷ Belgium's second-in-command, Eggert Reeder, became embroiled in explicit discussions with Berlin to justify the Belgian evacuations and explain their reasoning on behalf of the Military Administration, and his boss, von Falkenhausen.

Erich Hilgenfeld was a central figure in Nazi welfare activities since the early 1930s, when he had been appointed to lead the Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (National Socialist Welfare Association, or NSV).²⁸ It is important to note for this discussion Hilgenfeld himself was controlling, exploitive, and used his power to eradicate the competition, whether perceived as other rival organisations or specific Nazi officials. By absorbing smaller self-help charities (for the blind and deaf), expropriating the assets of rival socialist welfare organisations and displacing other Nazi-approved charities, such as the Protestant Inner Mission and Roman Catholic Caritas Association, Hilgenfeld's NSV ballooned into the second largest mass Nazi organization (after Ley's German Labour Front).²⁹ Jewish agencies were excluded from charitable councils and even the German Red Cross was purged of its elitist image through new civilian welfare responsibilities that were approved by the NSV. By 1938, funds raised were only to be disbursed with Hilgenfeld's approval; some charities only received 12 to 15 per cent of the funds requested and, by 1939, all funds were terminated on the grounds that the NSV had larger responsibilities in the new annexed lands of Austria and the Sudetenland.³⁰ But Hilgenfeld's

²³ Scheck R. The Prisoner of War Question and the Beginnings of Collaboration: The Franco-German Agreement of 16 November 1940. *Journal of Contemporary History* 2010; 45: 364-388.

²⁴ No German documentation evidences how or why authorisation was granted, or for what reason, until after Hilgenfeld objects to further transportation requests months later, in December 1941.

²⁵ Schmidlin A. *Eine andere Schweiz: Helferinnen, Kriegskinder und humanitäre Politik 1933-1942*. Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 1999, p.137.

²⁶ Bundesarchiv (hereafter BArch) R 55/1226, Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei Reichsleitung (hereafter NSDAP Reichsleitung), 9 January 1941, Oberbefehlshaber Hilgenfeld to the Propaganda Minister Goebbels.

²⁷ Hilgenfeld's attention was drawn to the matter because the NSV wished to increase the number of Belgian children evacuated to Germany (as stated in BArch R 55/1226, 18 March 1942, Reeder to the Propaganda Ministry). However, it is important to note that no other documents were discovered in the Bundesarchiv regarding these evacuations *before* Hilgenfeld brought attention to the matter.

²⁸ Although historians, such as Michael Burleigh, present his name as Hilgenfeldt, this article will conform to the spelling in the Third Reich documents (Hilgenfeld).

²⁹ According to Michael Burleigh, in 1938 the NSV absorbed 8,000 brown sisters (nurses), whose sole mission was to maintain the nation's biological strength. By 1939, the NSV had over 12.5 million members, or 15 per cent of the population, over 1.5 million volunteers and 80,000 paid workers. Burleigh M. *The Third Reich: A New History*. London: Macmillan 2000, p.221-3.

³⁰ Burleigh. *The Third Reich*. p.221.

controlling management structure proved successful. By 1939, the NSV had over 12.5 million members, or 15 per cent of the population, over 1.5 million volunteers and 80,000 paid workers.³¹

During the war, the NSV (in conjunction with other Nazi departments, such as the Hitler Jugend) operated child evacuations to Reich territories less threatened by aerial bombardment. This initiative was called the Kinderlandverschickung (KLV) program, or ‘Save the Children in the Country.’ Although the goal initially was to physically protect child evacuees, this was modified as bombing increased in 1942 when the evacuations ‘provided a new avenue through which to integrate the physical protection of Germany’s children and their incorporation into the *Volksgemeinschaft*.’³² Children under aged ten were sent to guest families, sometimes with their mothers, while children over aged ten were sent to one of over 9,000 KLV camps.³³ Camps were located throughout the greater Reich, including Poland, Hungary and Denmark. Adolescents often went to HJ camps, which provided military training to prepare youths for service in the army. Although evacuees’ experiences were dependent upon their age, the type of evacuation, and the persons running the camp, these short holidays (which the Nazis would not label ‘evacuations’) were opportunities for children to absorb National Socialist ideology through marching, singing, political lectures, modified curriculums, all without interference from parents.³⁴ Although evacuations were never compulsory, it would have been hard for parents to rationalize keeping their children in zones under aerial attack, especially as the Allied bombings increased in the last years of the war. By 1945, it is estimated that some 200,000 special trains had transported approximately two million German children to as many as 12,000 KLV or HJ camps.³⁵ Such statistics and these wide-ranging initiatives denote that the Nazi government mobilised children and valued them as politically active beings involved in the welfare of the state. The NSV (and HJ) therefore exploited children’s vulnerability in war to serve its own political ends.

It is critical to note that most non-German children in the occupied territories were excluded from NSV-led evacuations. This was likely due to practical challenges of mass evacuations in the midst of war, and the increasingly distinct racial criteria that governed the selection of evacuees. Rather remarkably, Belgium was an exception. Early in the occupation, in 1941, the NSV and the pro-Nazi Deutsche-Vlämische Arbeitsgemeinschaft (German-Flemish Working Group or ‘Devlag’)³⁶ started to evacuate Flemish *and* Walloon children to Germany.³⁷ Presumably, children from both (ethnic) groups were selected as they were threatened by aerial bombardment. As a result, Belgian children benefitted from NSV-evacuations to the Reich for six-month periods and were subjected to significant hype and propaganda. For example, Walloon evacuees were greeted in September 1941 on their return from upper Austria to the Rogierplein,

³¹ Ibid. p.221-3.

³² Mouton, M. The Kinderlandverschickung. p.190.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Mouton (p.194-9) reveals that although the Nazi programmes may have tried initially to isolate children from their parents (and, after 1943, even evacuated entire school classes alongside their teachers to maintain cohesion), this did not prevent parents from visiting their evacuated children, removing them from Nazi camps, or arranging private evacuation measures to relatives in the country side.

³⁵ Kater M. *Hitler Youth*. London: Harvard University Press, 2006, p.45.

³⁶ Devlag received financial support from the SS and stood in stark contrast to the Military Administration’s preferred pro-German nationalist group, the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond. However, both Devlag and Vlaams Nationaal Verbond actively collaborated with Nazi authorities (whether SS or Wehrmacht) during the occupation.

³⁷ From a National Socialist perspective, the ‘ethnically-German’ population of Flanders (Flemish), rather than the chiefly French-speaking peoples from Wallonia (Walloons), were part of the greater Reich identity.

a major plaza outside of Brussels' North Station, with large swastika flags, banners in Flemish that 'warmly welcomed' the children, and a full uniformed marching band.³⁸ As many as 10,000 Belgian children were thus evacuated in 1941 alone.³⁹ While this demonstrates that Belgium – unlike, for example, Poland – was to be strategically integrated within the greater Reich's racial identity, Belgian children were also selected for evacuations due to their parents' collaboration in war industries or volunteerism for joining the Germany army.⁴⁰ Even if children were selected initially due to concerns of aerial bombardment, the archival evidence and blatant propaganda surrounding the departures and arrivals of evacuees undermines any arguments that these evacuations were undertaken on solely the concern for the health of the child.⁴¹

Despite these NSV evacuation efforts, the commanders of the Military Administration of Belgium and Northern France continued to authorise the evacuation of Belgian children to Switzerland. Unlike the NSV evacuations, the Swiss *Kinderhilfe* evacuations employed the local Red Cross to select children based upon health criteria, often exacerbated by poverty and the limitations of food and medicine due to war. Similar to the KLV evacuations, parents were not forced to send their children but, arguably, the Swiss evacuations may have been viewed by some as more favourable due to the absence of Nazi agencies and ideological aims. Importantly, the Swiss evacuations were shorter three-month respites, which directly targeted and monitored the health of the child.

But Hilgenfeld, having learned about these (non-NSV) Swiss *Kinderhilfe* evacuations, was extremely displeased. In December 1941 and January 1942, he raised a series of objections to his boss, Propaganda Minister Goebbels. Hilgenfeld remarked that the use of non-NSV agencies to conduct separate evacuations, including the Belgian Red Cross, could 'hardly be seen as an advertising campaign in favour of the German side.'⁴² He also questioned the exceptionalism of Belgium, by stating that the NSV had total control in the other territories (for example, Poland) where such evacuations had been rejected – so why was Belgium any different?⁴³ Finally, Hilgenfeld claimed that von Falkenhausen was not only evacuating children to Switzerland, but may expand operations to Sweden.⁴⁴ Historically speaking, this was not outside the realm of possibility as Sweden's neutrality and popularity as a host for foreign children had already been well established by 1942.⁴⁵ But the NSV, Hilgenfeld argued, had

³⁸ Archives de l'État en Belgique, Collections du CEGES/SOMA (hereafter CEGES/SOMA), 2 September 1941, Photographie de Retour à Bruxelles d'enfants belges de vacances en Allemagne Image 14246 and CEGES/SOMA, 26 August 1941, Photographie de Séjour des enfants dans les colonies de vacances en Allemagne Image 14192.

³⁹ BArch R 55/1226, 23 January 1942, NSDAP Reichsleitung to the Propaganda Minister.

⁴⁰ BArch NS18/472, 13 February 1943, Submitted memo from Tiessler. Some Belgians, such as Flemish nationalists, volunteered to serve in the Wehrmacht or even in Himmler's own SS unit, in addition to the thousands of Belgians who were compelled to work in the Reich industries, even before the labour conscription of October 1942.

⁴¹ BArch NS18/472, 10 February 1943, Submitted memo from Tiessler. In addition to considering Belgium one of the 'Germanic countries', this document stated that evacuations should be undertaken with the explicit goal to reinforce Nazi Germany's influence in Belgium.

⁴² BArch R 55/1226, 15 December 1941, NSDAP Reichsleitung to the Propaganda Minister.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Some evacuations of Belgian children to Sweden were intended in spring 1942 but it is not clear whether they were ever successful. BArch R 55/1226, 23 January 1942, NSDAP Reichsleitung Oberfehlshaber Hilgenfeld to Propaganda Minister Goebbels.

⁴⁵ During the Winter War (1939-1940), over 9,000 Finnish children and their mothers had been evacuated to Sweden. By 1945, over 70,000 children had been evacuated to Sweden. See Korppi-Tommola, A. War and children in Finland during the Second World War. *Paedagogica Historica* 2008; 44: 445-455. Sweden's neutrality was also well-known due to their successful involvement in the Greek famine relief efforts in early 1942. See Mauzy M. *Inter Arma Caritas: The Swedish Red Cross in Greece in the 1940s*.

already transported thousands of children from Belgium to Germany, which thus proved that von Falkenhausen's evacuation scheme 'can be achieved also without the utilization of foreign and supranational organizations.'⁴⁶ Hilgenfeld rejected further transportation measures and urged that the evacuations be stopped immediately.

Reeder offered a carefully measured reply shortly after. First, Reeder clarified that 'As a result of nutritional difficulties, children in Belgium experienced extraordinary symptoms of disease last year (1941). We have therefore intervened (by evacuating Belgian children to the Reich)'⁴⁷. This indicates that the German occupiers undertook the evacuations initially as a direct result of food shortages and disease. Although this might arguably appear charitable, Reeder would further illustrate (as will be discussed shortly) that food shortages threatened public peace and order and, therefore, would undermine Nazi occupation. Secondly, Reeder outlined that the initial evacuations had been in cooperation with the NSV ('guided by one of us'), and offices had even been established in the pro-Nazi Devlag headquarters (German-Flemish Working Group).⁴⁸ Reeder admitted this created significant propaganda for the Reich, indicating that the positive response of these evacuations from German civilians was also a major reason for their implementation. However, Reeder explained, this had also caused significant problems for von Falkenhausen because the Military Administration had met with significant resistance from (unspecified) Belgian circles.⁴⁹ In response, the Belgian Red Cross organized evacuations to neutral Switzerland. Reeder concluded that to prohibit special trains for children from Belgium would also prevent any evacuations carried out by the NSV.⁵⁰

Reeder's response is revealing. It indicates that domestic tensions between the Military Administration, the NSV, the Devlag, the Belgian Red Cross and other 'Belgian circles' were unfolding in the background to such an extent that Switzerland, the only neutral body that any group could endorse, was selected as the solution. Thus, these tensions played a significant role in the occupation authorities' policies, which directly undermined the NSV's attempts to gain more power in von Falkenhausen and Reeder's realm. Importantly, the concern about propaganda both within Belgium and within the larger Reich was a major concern and, fundamentally, implied that children (and perceptions of saving them) were politically and ideologically influenced.

However, this did not yet resolve Hilgenfeld's concern. In early February 1942, Martin Bormann, head of the Party Chancellery (representing Hitler and the Nazi party's interests), replied to Reeder directly, claiming that a major challenge to these evacuations was the especially difficult winter traffic conditions.⁵¹ Indeed, such traffic problems had previously

In Clogg R (ed) *Bearing Gifts to Greeks: Humanitarian Aid to Greece in the 1940s*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p.97-112.

⁴⁶ BArch R 55/1226, 23 January 1942, NSDAP Reichsleitung to the Propaganda Minister.

⁴⁷ BArch R 55/1226, 24 January 1942, Reeder to Herrn Direktor im Hause.

⁴⁸ Devlag received financial support from the SS and stood in stark contrast to the Military Administration's preferred pro-German nationalist group, the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond. However, both Devlag and Vlaams Nationaal Verbond actively collaborated with Nazi authorities (whether SS or Wehrmacht) during the occupation.

⁴⁹ 'Belgian circles' is the direct translation and it is not made explicit to which organizations Reeder refers. BArch R 55/1226, 23 January 1942, NSDAP Reichsleitung Oberfehlshaber Hilgenfeld to Propaganda Minister Goebbels.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Martin Bormann, head of the Party Chancellery, was also responsible for the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei Reichsleitung Hauptamt für Volkswohlfahrt (Nazi Central State Office for People's Welfare or NDSAP Volkswohlfahrt), one of many branches which worked closely with Hilgenfeld's NSV to accomplish welfare-related tasks. Documents signed by Bormann have either the Party Chancellery or NDSAP Volkswohlfahrt headings, denoting Bormann's dual roles. BArch R 55/1226, 6 February 1942, Bormann to von Falkenhausen.

prevented a number of convoys from Belgium to Switzerland. Also, Bormann insisted that the completely unacceptable anti-German sentiments of Switzerland should not be allowed to have any propagandistic influence over Belgian children. In fact, Bormann pointed out ‘children are to be regarded as propaganda’.⁵²

Propaganda’s influence on children was a strong argument in favour of already prevalent Nazi attitudes about children, which were based upon comprehensive and historical experiences.⁵³ Nazi Germany’s approach towards children contained not only a strong ideological dimension, but also a practical one. By indoctrinating and mobilising the youth, the next generation of Germans were ready to continue the legacy of the Third Reich. As discussed, the NSV-operated evacuations capitalised on the vulnerable circumstances of children to begin indoctrination at a young age. The KLV camps that received evacuees were designed to teach political principles to children, such as memorising Hitler’s life story, or engaging in ‘Strength through Joy’ activities such as dancing and sport competitions.⁵⁴ In this sense, it was accepted that children became extensions of the state, thereby adopting Nazi doctrine into daily routines and intimate beliefs.⁵⁵ Furthermore, evacuees were positioned to embrace a Nazi worldview without interference from the private family structure or church leaders. This early indoctrination aligns with the state’s mobilisation of adolescents, as indicated by the Hitler Jugend (HJ, or Hitler Youth), which one of the most (in)famous paramilitary youth groups in European history. Not only did this popular movement preach Nazi principles of racial superiority, but it also prepared adolescents for military duty.⁵⁶ Membership in the HJ was an astounding 98.1 per cent of all German youths between the ages of fourteen and eighteen in 1939.⁵⁷ Although the HJ may have begun as a type of after-school activity to encourage political indoctrination, it escalated to the point that HJ members were a significant force to encourage ideological cohesion amongst German families on the home front, and confidence among troops on the battlefield,⁵⁸ especially as the war progressed and the frequency of military failures increased.

While evidence suggests that children actively resisted such activities and/or that even those who willingly participated were not convinced towards the regime’s basic principles,⁵⁹ the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ A strong tradition of mobilising youth groups, such as the Wandervögel, existed in Germany since the early 20th century. See Kater M. *Hitler Youth*. London: Harvard University Press, 2006, and Strassner E. Zur Sprache der Wandervögel, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 2007; 108(2): 399-421 and Peukert, D. *Inside Nazi Germany*, trans. Richard Deveson. London: Yale University Press, 1987.

⁵⁴ Mouton, *The Kinderlandverschickung*. 192 and CEGES/SOMA, *Séjour des enfants dans les colonies de vacances en Allemagne*, 1941-1944.

⁵⁵ While propaganda’s effect on children has been evaluated by Belbin (Effects of Propaganda on Recall, Recognition and Behaviour, *British Journal of Psychology* 1956), Davison (Third Person Effect in Communication, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1983) and Gambrell (*Critical Thinking in Clinical Practice*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc 2012) the goal of this article is not to argue that propaganda has a measurable impact upon children, but that the German state *believed* and *operated* upon the assumption that propaganda had a desirable, manipulatable effect upon German youth.

⁵⁶ Kater M. *Hitler Youth*. p.3.

⁵⁷ Ibid. p.23.

⁵⁸ As early as October 1939, Hitler announced that in the Polish campaign alone, some 314 full-time HJ leaders had been killed. Ibid. p.179.

⁵⁹ For example, evacuees of KLV camps listened to Allied radio or mocked Nazi songs and ideals (see Mouton, *The Kinderlandverschickung*. p.193). Peukert also argues that a reactive sub-culture to the HJ was strong within German youth, whereby groups (such as the Edelweiss Pirates) found their own unregimented style in independent gangs, engaging in weekend retreats and changing the lyrics of HJ songs in protest. Moreover, some youth admit they never read *Mein Kampf* nor really understood Nazi philosophy: ‘On the whole we didn’t know much about Nazi ideology. Even anti-Semitism was brought in rather marginally at school...Nevertheless, we were politically programmed to obey orders.’ Peukert,

Third Reich's massive youth mobilizations and generous acceptance of children's role as ideologically fundamental to Germany's national vitality indicates that children were more than just a vulnerable group in need of protection. Nazi doctrine trusted that children were agents of political power, who should be valued for their ability to form (and influence) the basis of the future German state. According to Tara Zahra, the connection between children and the survival of the state is often used by nations that perceive themselves to be threatened by or recovering from war, genocide and displacement.⁶⁰ In the case of Nazi Germany, which Hitler repeatedly claimed (even during peacetime) was under attack from both domestic and external enemies, the German state deliberately nurtured children into believing that they were politically active beings with legitimate power and duty to shape the future of the Reich. While scholars, educators and campaigners today correctly argue that children have agency and inalienable rights, which have historically been neglected or denied, it must be remembered that although children were told they had agency within the political system of the Third Reich, children were actually treated, to a great extent, as objects of state control with restricted powers. Therefore, Bormann's assertion that children were to be regarded as propaganda, and therefore, easily influenced towards (questionable Swiss) political goals, was aligned with Nazi attitudes and, therefore, a reasonable argument to use *against* further evacuation measures to Switzerland.

Two documents submitted to the Propaganda Ministry for consideration expressed both condemnation and support for the evacuations' continuation in February 1942. The first document (addressed to Leopold Gutterer at the Propaganda Ministry from a senior government councillor in the civil service identified only as Dr Hesse) outlined the very negative anti-German attitudes as conveyed in Swiss newspaper articles. For example, Hesse outlined one portion of Swiss article 'Wir Wollen Helfen' in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, which states 'We suddenly realize that in Greece, in France, in Serbia, in Finland, there is a child misery that has not reached our consciousness and our hearts, because (publicised) meetings, films and radio were forced for various reasons to represent this misery with the greatest restraint.'⁶¹ Based upon this excerpt, Hesse argued that the Swiss believed 'Germany is ultimately the sole culprit for the miserable condition of the children.'⁶² He clearly took exception to the fact that the Swiss press failed to emphasize that Germany was not obligated to evacuate children but, nonetheless, 'has done everything for the nourishment of civilians, to make nutrition and food supplies better.'⁶³ This letter cautioned that Switzerland's press campaign would inevitably muster all social classes in Switzerland and those abroad (who can access these messages) to possess an even stronger anti-German attitude.

In contrast, the head doctor for the German Red Cross, Dr. Ernst-Robert Grawitz (also Chief Doctor of the SS and, therefore, of all concentration camps, and eventually Hitler's personal doctor), encouraged the evacuations. Dr. Grawitz's letter to the Propaganda Ministry conveyed that, although the German Red Cross had not participated in the evacuations thus far, he supported the German Red Cross commissioner in Belgium's request for transportation.⁶⁴ Moreover, Dr. Grawitz pointed out that 'the procedure is the same for the child deportations from occupied France to Switzerland and there had been no reported impact of any anti-German propaganda-influence on the children, which would have prohibited the continuation of these

D. Young People: For or Against the Nazis? *History Today* October 1985; 35(10): 15-22 and Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany*, 154-168.

⁶⁰ Zahra, T. *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families After World War II*. London: Harvard University Press, 2011, p.36.

⁶¹ Wir Wollen Helfen. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6 February 1942, p.5.

⁶² The other (illegible and undated) article in the file was from the *Thurgauer Arbeiterzeitung*. BArch R 55/1226, 13 February 1942, Oberregierungsrat Dr. Hesse to State Secretary Gutterer.

⁶³ BArch R 55/1226, 13 February 1942, Oberregierungsrat Dr. Hesse to State Secretary Gutterer.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

deportations.⁶⁵ Grawitz, interestingly, offered his opinion by using Switzerland as the common denominator between these evacuations. One interpretation could be that Grawitz challenged the anti-German attitudes among Belgian children as speculative and unlikely, because they did not occur in France. The other interpretation is that occupied France was more efficiently administered than Belgium, and attention should be given to the occupation regime. However, as Grawitz endorsed his colleague's application for transportation within the same letter, it is more likely that he was offering support for the continuation of the Belgian evacuations.

Despite all the communications to the Propaganda Ministry, there is no evidence that Goebbels made any decision regarding the evacuations. Instead, one last letter from Reeder finally stimulated the Propaganda Ministry to finalize their decision, in accordance with the Führer's wishes.

On 18 March 1942, Reeder penned the final explanation to the Propaganda Ministry to justify the actions of the Military Administration before the termination of the Belgian evacuations. In three pages, his crisp yet articulate letter reveals various motivations behind this unusual transnational evacuation.

Reeder asserted that the Military Administration welcomed the evacuations of children to a neutral country for three reasons. First, the 'always increasing health problems of the Belgian children as a consequence of the lowest food rates of the whole population in all western territories...endangers the public peace and order.'⁶⁶ No emotional, descriptive or statistical embellishment was offered to evidence that children or parents threatened local stability or unmanageable social unrest. Secondly, he stated that such conditions would 'impair the necessary readiness for the voluntary collaboration of the population for the full wartime economic exploitation of the country.'⁶⁷ Predictably, the Military Administration wanted to convey that their interest in the local population was mostly due to a desire for full exploitation, rather than any charitable or humanitarian concern. Thirdly, Reeder added that forbidding such child evacuations to receptive countries could be used in Belgian propaganda to negatively harm Germany's occupation.⁶⁸

Immediately following these justifications, Reeder reminded the Propaganda Ministry that if such evacuations to neutral foreign countries were deemed undesirable, then the Military Administration, naturally, would accept any decision as binding. Reeder also proclaimed absolute obedience to the Reich as he declared that the Military Administration, as direct result of these raised concerns, had suspended all evacuations from Belgium to Switzerland as well as all other plans for evacuations to other 'neutral foreign lands.'⁶⁹ Reeder and the Military Administration, it appeared, were keen to obey all commands.

Critically, the brief also included a personal note from von Falkenhausen. He amplified the neutrality of the operation by highlighting that the housing and selection of Belgian children in Switzerland was a responsibility of Switzerland's *Kinderhilfe* (from the Swiss Red Cross), and *not* other Christian charities, such as the 'Internationale Kinderhilfe.'⁷⁰ Crucially, von Falkenhausen emphasized that the *Kinderhilfe* had integrated the independent medical judgments of the Belgian Red Cross, in cases where transport through the German Red Cross in Belgium was concerned. Therefore, von Falkenhausen stated, the possibility of 'supranational forces' somehow affecting the judgment of the Belgian Red Cross was not feasible.⁷¹ Moreover, he

⁶⁵ BArch R 55/1226, 13 February 1942, Oberregierungsrat Dr. Hesse to State Secretary Gutterer.

⁶⁶ BArch R 55/1226, 18 March 1942, Reeder to Propaganda Minister Goebbels.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.. Sweden is presumably the other neutral reception country to which he referred.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

claimed that children (aged 10 to 14) returning from Switzerland with anti-German attitudes had not (so far) been reported to any local departments, nor to the Propaganda Division. The letter closed with promises of readiness to obey.

A number of significant insights can be garnered from this letter. First, the concept of neutrality was heavily emphasized. The term ‘neutral foreign country’ (neutrale Ausland) was favoured when discussing the evacuations in theoretical terms, while ‘Switzerland’ was used when specifically referencing its role in some previous action. The political status of the receiving country was obviously a consideration for von Falkenhausen and, moreover, a persuasive argument in favour of continuing the evacuations. Also, von Falkenhausen’s stress on the objective impartiality of the Belgian Red Cross’ selection process underlines the apparent importance of neutrality within the charities involved in this operation. Neutrality, it can be argued, played a major role in the justification for, and the defence of, child evacuations.

Additionally, von Falkenhausen and Reeder’s comment about the lack of anti-German sentiments among youth, ages 10 to 14, returning from Switzerland was another strong argument in favour of the evacuations. By drawing attention to the age of the children, von Falkenhausen also implied that these returning cohorts were not babies or young children, but in the persuadable age before and around entrance into the Hitler Youth (ages 12 and up). Also, despite Bormann’s insistence that evacuated children should not be exposed to Swiss influence, von Falkenhausen stated plainly that no evidence had been found to support such a claim. As it would probably have been impossible to manipulate or lie about such data held by the Propaganda Division in Brussels to the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin – both operated under the same administration – von Falkenhausen’s argument must have been based upon shared and accessible evidence.

Less than a month after the Military Administration’s succinct justification and defence of the evacuations, the Propaganda Ministry in Berlin sent a telegram to the Propaganda Division in Brussels. It indicated that photocopies of news clippings had revealed two certain outcomes.⁷² First, children evacuated from occupied zones to Switzerland were influenced by the Swiss general mentality (which was prevalently anti-German).⁷³ Although any nation’s general mentality is arguably impossible to generalise (especially Switzerland’s due to its complex and controversial relationship with Nazi Germany), the earlier evidence of Swiss newspaper articles that negatively portrayed the Reich may have contributed to this argument. Furthermore, although the telegram acknowledged that this negative influence might not be immediately noticeable, such propaganda might eventually cause children to commit acts of sabotage, such as bomb attacks.⁷⁴ Because no photocopies of these supposed news clippings were included in the archived file, and a suspicious lack of additional information in the memo failed to identify the news clippings, it is entirely possible that they may have been ‘misplaced’ or ‘forgotten’ when drafting this response. It is also critical to note that because this order was coming from a superior, it is unlikely that subordinate officers would question the evidence that justified a decision.

Secondly, the Propaganda Ministry assured that these news clippings revealed the Swiss intent to politically compete with the Germans regarding the child evacuations.⁷⁵ To an extent, this is a reasonable argument because the overlapping nature of the NSV and Swiss *Kinderhilfe* evacuations, in addition to the various competing agencies that sought control in Belgium (such as the SS). However, as discussed earlier and clearly argued by von Falkenhausen and Reeder,

⁷² No information was granted to identify these news clippings, though it was conveyed that they were sent through telephone lines.

⁷³ BArch R 55/1226, 13 April 1942, Dr Helm to Propaganda Division in Brussels, Belgium.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

the tensions between these rival departments had resulted in the commanders electing the Swiss *Kinderhilfe* operations in order to achieve local policy objectives. In the absence of a collective forum for decision making, these commanders took control by choosing a method and organisation that was arguably neutral, enigmatically altruistic and, yet, still politically-motivated.

The controversy surrounding the evacuations of Belgian children to Switzerland for three month periods was resolved when Hitler gave his final negative decision. On 10 May 1942, Bormann informed Propaganda Minister Goebbels that Hitler shared Goebbels' view and, therefore, the evacuations should not take place.⁷⁶ The justification became clear on 18 May, when Bormann informed Reeder that Hitler terminated the evacuations because 'in these countries the children would only be politically incited.'⁷⁷ Within the same week, Bormann relayed Hitler's decision to various offices: the SS Main Office, Foreign Office, Reichs Transport Ministry, Welfare Office for Ethnic Germans, the NSDAP Office for People's Welfare and several Reich Security Offices (headed by Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Himmler).⁷⁸

Why did the Nazis terminate the evacuations to Switzerland? Ultimately (and despite the lack of tangible evidence to support such a claim), the Nazis stopped the evacuations because they believed that indigent, war-stricken children would be politically incited against German occupation authorities to such an extent that they would subsequently commit acts of sabotage (such as bomb attacks). The news clippings attesting to rising anti-German attitudes by Swiss hosts (which were, interestingly, not attached to the Propaganda Ministry file) were a propagandistic ploy to terminate a major humanitarian enterprise in Belgium. By doing so, the Nazis hoped to limit the exposure of local populations to anti-German propaganda and therefore to strengthen their control within the occupied territories. Children's health and well-being were not primary considerations.

The tensions and infighting between the Military Administration in France and Belgium and the Reich ministries in Berlin over a local evacuation measure indicate that in the Third Reich 'there was no real collective government in any sense.'⁷⁹ Occupation policies, and how to achieve them, had not been clearly defined. The commanders responsible for extracting and exploiting local resources from occupied lands were thus left to their own interpretations and methods of how to best control their sphere of influence. As discussed, von Falkenhausen and Reeder not only bickered with the Propaganda Ministry and NSV about the child evacuations, but also with the SS about racial policy. Such tensions signified and echoed the polycratic nature of the Nazi system. In the absence of coherent planning and collective decision making in the Nazi leadership (beyond Hitler's own role as a 'linchpin'), the officials in the occupied territories were granted wide berth to achieve what they *perceived* to be Hitler's goals. Although this child evacuation obviously contradicts the infamous brutality of the Nazi regime, it is exactly these exceptions, contradictions and paradoxes that epitomised the Nazi leadership.

While it is not accurate to state that von Falkenhausen and Reeder were undertaking humanitarian operations in order to *be* humanitarian, they utilised this avenue of action as another tool of exploitation. In the absence of national or international law, Nazi commanders had 'only their own ethical constraints (to) set limits to what they regarded themselves as justified in doing.'⁸⁰ Some commanders may have felt uncomfortable using 'humanitarian' tactics to meet policy objectives, while others may have felt uncomfortable using brutality to achieve the same ends. This article reveals that von Falkenhausen and Reeder initiated the

⁷⁶ BArch R 55/1226, 10 May 1942, Bormann to Propaganda Minister Goebbels.

⁷⁷ BArch R 55/1226, 18 May 1942, Bormann to Reeder.

⁷⁸ BArch R 55/1226, 15 May 1942, Bormann to numerous departments.

⁷⁹ Mazower. *Hitler's Empire*. p.9.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p.11.

evacuations based upon the poor local food conditions and their negative effect on the full exploitation of Belgium, the objective impartiality of the Red Cross to select the children, and the political neutrality of Switzerland as the host country. These combined factors were evidently strong arguments for the evacuations' continuation. By relocating hungry children from their parents to a neutral land that would feed and house them – crucially without any cost to the German authorities – labour production would increase. Parents' concerns for their children's health would no longer be a burden, and parents would be more likely to cooperate with local authorities. Humanitarianism, or any perception of its existence, was merely a by-product of a larger quest for control.

After the termination of the Swiss *Kinderhilfe* evacuations in May 1942, Hilgenfeld's NSV was the only authority to evacuate children from Belgium and northern France. By June 1942, thousands of children were photographed departing Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent for KLV camps in Germany's Black Forest, Baden-Württemberg, East Prussia, and Austria. Departures and arrivals of children were orchestrated with great propaganda, including speeches from local Nazi leaders at train stations and even supplying children with little flags which depicted the Swastika on one side, and the Belgian lion on the other. While such propaganda stunts implied that children in the occupied zones could embrace multiple compatible national identities within the greater Reich, the victims of German occupation would have likely argued the reverse. Also, in stark contrast to the Red Cross photographs of the Swiss evacuations, many archived photographs of the NSV-led evacuations do not document the medical evaluations, sleeping arrangements, or negative emotional reactions of children and parents. Instead, photographs the Nazi-operated child evacuations focus upon the pleasure and excitement of Belgian children and parents' inclusion in the initiatives, and the harmonious leisure activities while holidaying in the greater Reich. This strategy implies that both Hilgenfeld and the NSV were acutely aware of the propagandistic benefit these evacuations could serve. But although Hilgenfeld's objections to the Swiss *Kinderhilfe* evacuations were made on the basis of efficiency and irregularity of their conduct (which is quite reasonable considering the substantial NSV-operated evacuations to the Reich), it is extraordinary that the Swiss evacuations were not terminated on these grounds. Therefore, the role of the Propaganda Ministry and children as propaganda becomes amplified.

As discussed, Nazi Germany valued children as politically active and cognisant beings, who were capable of being influenced to specific ends. While this usually facilitated Nazi ideological aims and even its war efforts (especially when HJ graduates were then mobilized into the SS or the Reich Labour Service),⁸¹ the belief that children were politically conscious was used against children in Belgium and northern France, and to their detriment. Although the Propaganda Ministry asserted that rising anti-German attitudes in Switzerland would elicit hostile (and even violent) tendencies in (starving) evacuated Belgian children, both the Military Administration and the Chief Medical Doctor argued that no evidence had been found to substantiate these claims. Despite the lack of evidence, both Hitler and Goebbels concurred that child evacuees in Switzerland would be exposed to political incitement. The vague references to news clippings of apparent anti-German Swiss sentiments were a convenient excuse to cease the evacuations.

Ultimately, the discontinuation of the Belgian evacuations actually reveals that German authorities could not terminate them simply on the grounds of efficiency, as proposed by Hilgenfeld's NSV, but rather that evacuations had to be rejected based upon a stronger argument – the ideological confidence in the political agency of children themselves. Thus, the strong

⁸¹ After March 1935, all men over eighteen and all HJ graduates served six months in the Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labour Service). By 1941, Wehrtüchtigungslager, or armed-preparedness camps, for youths aged sixteen to eighteen became compulsory. By the end of 1943, 226 Wehrtüchtigungslager camps had serviced 515,000 Hitler Youths and, from 1944 onwards, fifteen year olds were included. Kater. *Hitler Youth*. p.192-214.

value of children, which was usually a positively held attitude in Nazi Germany and even granted moderate social autonomy to groups such as the HJ, was contorted so as to be used against the children themselves. Children's *perceived* agency and power, in this instance, became another Nazi weapon for exploitation and control.

Despite Hitler's orders, the Reich's Foreign Office in Brussels was inundated with requests by various organizations to continue the evacuations.⁸² The responsibility to refuse these requests fell upon Reeder. His justifications portrayed the Reich positively, and even expressed gratitude to the 'friendly Swiss government' for its participation.⁸³ Although the three-month evacuations ended in May 1942, a small group of tuberculosis-stricken Belgian and northern French children continued to be evacuated to Switzerland for convalescence for the duration of the war.⁸⁴ This was with the full authority of both the Military Administration and Hilgenfeld's NSV, and were even immune to the Swiss border closures in autumn 1942.⁸⁵ And while it can be argued that German authorities wanted to remove sickly and contagious children from their sphere of control, these children received appropriate medical attention, rather than being overlooked by authorities in Belgium, or selected for extermination in a concentration camp.

When contextualised within the larger framework of Nazi occupation policies, these child evacuations are both unusual and atypical of Nazi leadership. The authorised use of neutral organisations to provide relief to a suffering group of foreigners under Nazi occupation is obviously remarkable and contradicts the tenets of this genocidal regime. Meanwhile, the intense infighting and inconsistent opinions of how to exert methods of control and fully exploit local populations epitomises the polycratic nature of the Nazi regime. But perhaps such nuances and rare archival findings will bring attention to multiple opportunities Nazi commanders possessed to achieve their vision. While some may have chosen more brutal initiatives, perhaps others could have chosen more charitable methods? As evidenced, these 'humanitarian' evacuations were fundamentally employed to achieve a certain level of positive propaganda to prop up both the larger Reich's *ethos*, and local parents' morale; economic output would increase, while local populations would better cooperate with authorities. While this may not have been the first or last time that such paradoxical policies were implemented by Nazi occupation authorities, these child evacuations demonstrate that the Nazis would stop at nothing – including manipulating the perception of saving children – to meet their policy objectives.

⁸² The specific organizations were not indicated in the documents, but only that they were (now) questioning whether the earlier excuse of 'transport difficulties' related to the evacuations was still relevant and, if not, could the evacuations resume. BArch R 55/1226, 2 June 1942, Foreign Office to the Propaganda Ministry.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Notably, child evacuations from the larger portion of northern France not under the Military Administration's control (administered through Paris), and from Vichy France, continued until October 1942.

⁸⁵ Sambells C. *Humanity in Times of War? The Evacuation of French and Belgian Children to Switzerland, 1940-1945*. PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, UK, 2016. p.274-5.