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Young "Antisemites" and "Rescuers" in Nazi-Occupied Soviet Belarus. Dynamics of Children's Behavior in the Holocaust

https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2025-0009
Received March 12, 2025; accepted September 11, 2025; published online October 30, 2025

Abstract: Children were direct witnesses of the Holocaust "by bullets" in occupied Eastern Europe – and sometimes more than that. They were capable of roles and actions that have little in common with our traditional romanticized ideas and expectations about "innocent childhood". This article is arguing for a more complex understanding of how children and adolescents confronted the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet Union. Minors, like adults, continuously faced the decision to passively watch acts of discrimination, to participate in them, or even to take part in humiliating and harassing Jews – or, conversely, to come to their aid. In this respect, youngsters were more than just victims or "bystanders". The range of behaviors was very wide, and it is important to realize that children's agency had different consequences for the Jewish population.

Keywords: children; holocaust; agency; antisemitism; children's homes

1 Introduction

"We, the undersigned residents of Moniuszko and Prokhovska Streets, request the Jewish Council of the City of Pinsk to intercede with the school inspector, asking him to exert his influence on the students of School No. 1 on Moniuszko Street to cease their attacks on the Jewish population, which include breaking windows and beating Jewish women and children." (Hoppe 2016, 130). This handwritten petition from 21 Jews from Pinsk to the local Jewish Council, dated November 19, 1941, is an notable source for several reasons. Firstly, it is a rare testimony of the disenfranchised Jews in the Belarusian part of the occupied Soviet Union who, in their desperate situation,

I would like to acknowledge and to thank Dr. Tobias Wals for language checking during the preparation of the manuscript.

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turned to the Jewish Council in search of protection from attacks by the non-Jewish population. Secondly, the tormentors in question were not just any townspeople, but schoolchildren. It is still a taboo aspect of Holocaust history that not only "ordinary people" but also minors participated in the discrimination and even abuse of their Jewish neighbors. There are several other reports from occupied parts of the Soviet Union of violence exercised by children against their peers – or even against adult Jews, as in the case of Pinsk. However, it should be noted, non-Jewish children could also take on the opposite role and protect Jewish children, feed them, or even hide them. This kind of behavior was similarly documented by various reports. Overall, these sources show that children were by no means always passive victims. Children were direct witnesses of the Holocaust "by bullets" in occupied Eastern Europe – and sometimes more than that. They were capable of roles and actions that have little in common with our traditional romanticized ideas and expectations about "innocent childhood".

While the issues of Jewish children in the Holocaust and their survival have been much researched, we still know too little about the non-Jewish children, their knowledge about the Holocaust, and their relations with Jewish neighbors. In this article, I'm shifting the focus to the non-Jewish Belarusian children and their roles during the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet Union. Minors, like adults, continuously faced the decision to passively watch acts of discrimination, to participate in them, or even to take part in humiliating and harassing Jews – or, conversely, to come to their aid. In this respect, youngsters were not passive victims or "bystanders" who were unaware of the genocide. In the following, I would like to address the broad spectrum of actions, motivations, and roles of non-Jewish children in the Holocaust, with a focus on the "grey zones" in the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish children – drawing on insights from recent childhood and Holocaust research. In doing so, I will show that children can be active or passive actors in a genocidal context and must be included in our analysis and understanding of wartime society. Children who kept silent about the identity of their Jewish neighbors or helped them to go into hiding must be considered just as much as those who agitated, mobbed, or insulted the Jews. Both behaviors had far-reaching consequences for the Jews.

The Holocaust was initiated and organized by Nazi Germany. Without German leadership, personnel, and organizations, the mass murder of European Jews and other victim groups would never have taken place. However, it is equally clear that the registration of Jews in the occupied territories, their incarceration in the ghettos, and their subsequent murder would not have been possible without the knowledge and involvement of the local population. The historiography of perpetration and collaboration in the occupied Soviet Union has seen a lot of development in recent years (Dean 2000, 2004; Black et al. 2019; Rein 2011; Waitman 2018). At the same time, certain difficulties remain. For one thing, research continues to be entangled with

political interests and national myths. In Eastern Europe in particular, the culpability of local non-Jewish populations remains a taboo topic. In Belarusian historiography, which is going through a deep crisis following the 2020 repressive turn of the Lukashenka regime, responsibility for mass murders is exclusively ascribed to the Germans or a small group of collaborating "nationalists". Recently, the narrative of the "genocide of the Belarusian people" has been gaining traction, leveling the singularity of the Holocaust (Bezdzel' 2013; Kovalenia 2005). Meanwhile, international research has moved beyond Raul Hilberg's triad of perpetrator-victim-bystander to explain social behaviors. Instead, the most recent studies attempt to shed light on the complexity of social interactions, highlighting the multiplicity of roles and actions that social actors could assume (Fulbrook 2021; Morina and Thijs 2018). At the same time, while it seems easy to define perpetrators or victims, it remains a challenging endeavor to define the actions and behaviors "in between". As the most recent scholarship shows, the population's reactions ranged, following Christina Morina and Krijin Thijs, "from looking away, turning around, doing 'nothing' – which is never doing nothing – to expressing a word of solidarity or hostility, signaling the willingness to help or refusing to denounce, to turning in neighbors and participating in violent assaults" (2018, 3).

Categorization becomes even more difficult when it comes to minors and their shifting roles during the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust. Generally, minors are exclusively portrayed as victims or (particularly in the post-communist historiography) as heroes, even if the latest studies emphasize the various extents of juvenile agency. Numerous recent works focusing on the experiences of Jewish children point out that even they possessed the ability to act, revealing that victimized minors, too, were less passive than previously assumed (Dwork 1991; Michlic et al 2024; Stargardt 2006; Sliwa 2021; Walke 2015). All children were dependent but autonomous actors and all had some degree – depending on age – of agency and were thus part of a deeply asymmetrical occupation society. Meanwhile, the involvement of non-Jewish children in the humiliation or hunting of their Jewish peers has only hesitantly been taken up by researchers. An exception is Nicholas Stargardt's book *Witnesses of War* in which he explicitly problematized this issue. According to Stargardt, children not only knew what was happening to their neighbors, some of them "were eager to play an active part too". Especially children who had lengthy experience with Nazi occupation learned "the new rules of hunting, tormenting and denouncing Jewish children faster" (2006, 190).

This paper draws on Stargardt's observation, although I take it a little further and argue that lengthy experience with occupation was not a prerequisite for participatory antisemitism among children. My study of the Holocaust in the occupied territories of Belarus shows that children of various ages immediately adopted the new antisemitic rules and roles, with far-reaching implications for lives of Jews.

Even though there is no evidence that minors participated in mass killings, there are manifold examples of extreme violent actions by children. The dynamic of social interactions between children and non-Jewish children navigating between solidarity and betrayal toward Jewish peers is therefore the focus of my following analysis, which I examine in the occupied Belarusian territories of the Soviet Union as defined by the Soviet borders of the time. Following the annexation of the Polish Kresy Wschodnie by the Soviet Union in September 1939, Soviet Belarus was a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic society with a high proportion of Poles and Jews, overlaid with ethnic and political lines of conflict. In my essay, I'm going to discuss, whether observed children's cruelty was a result of German propaganda of a "new order" or rather of pre-war socialization or maybe the result of situational decisions shaped by the extreme violent conditions of the occupation. I will also examine if age and gender had an influence. And are there any differences in the experiences of children in the two parts of the country, that was not only divided (until June 1941) by the real border between the eastern so-called old-Soviet parts of Belarus and the rural, recently still Polish (*Kresy Wschodnie*), territories in 1939, but also by ethnic and political lines of conflict with different degrees of Sovietization? The country was also divided by two occupation zones (civilian and military administration) for the entire duration of the occupation (1941–1944), in which the destruction of Jewish life took place at different speeds for these structural reasons. This administrative division roughly corresponded to the ethnic and political line between Western (Polish) and Eastern (Soviet) Belarus. The question therefore arises as to whether and to what extent it played a role in children's experiences of war and their behavior. Because this question was the focus of my major study on various war experiences of children under German occupation, I can only deal with it here selectively in terms of my line of argumentation for reasons of space.[1]

However, it is important to be aware that children's ability to act varied and therefore could have different consequences. This is all the more true given that in some areas of the occupied Soviet Union, minors made up at least almost a third of the population. In the capital of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), Minsk, 44 % of the inhabitants (excluding the Jewish population of the ghetto) were under 18 years old at the beginning of the war (Drabovich 2005, 51, 56). Their decisions and actions mattered.

In the following, I will proceed in three sections. First, I will describe the incipient discrimination of Jewish children by their peer neighbors from the perspective of the former, which varied. Second, I reveal a more comprehensive

1 The study *Kriegskindheiten im besetzten Belarus 1941–1944. Erfahrungen – Erinnerungen – Folgen* is currently in print and is expected to be published by Böhlau Verlag in the book series "Osteuropa in Geschichte und Gegenwart" in early 2026.

picture of the behavior of non-Jewish youth, addressing both antisemitism and violence as well as counterexamples such as solidarity and helpfulness. How diverse and ambiguous behaviors could be, can best be demonstrated using the example of children's homes, in which Jewish children went into hiding under false identities and lived under constant threat from their non-Jewish peers. I will illustrate this, focusing on children's homes in Minsk, which are very well documented in the local archives and have been analyzed by me as places of survival for Jewish children in an earlier article (von Saal 2020). Finally, I raise the question of how we can explain the different behaviors of children.

These questions are associated with some methodological challenges which I would like to briefly mention here. On the one hand, there is the problem of sources; on the other hand, there is the fundamental question of how being a child is defined. This study is based on an above-mentioned long-term research project and on a wide range of documents: my own interviews with Jewish witnesses and oral history testimonies (especially from the Visual History Archive of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, VHA), contemporary reports and sources such as the letter cited at the beginning of this text, diaries, postwar memoirs and postwar trials against Nazi criminals, and documentation from local with Germans collaborated authorities. The perspective of the victims is dominant, which represents the greatest methodological challenge. Children who bullied and mobbed other children remained silent.

These types of accounts are missing. The memory of the relationships between ordinary Soviet people and local Jews is moreover ideologically shaped by the Soviet narrative of "peaceful Soviet citizens" and the image of Belarus as a "Partisan Republic" with only some very few collaborators. What we do have, however, are very few but nevertheless existing observations about relationships between children of the others, "outside" children and adolescents. The lack of these sources cannot be solved, but it can be compensated to some extent by the statements of third parties (witnesses) and survivors. Critical analysis of these testimonies helps however to some degree to reconstruct the varied relations between Jewish and non-Jewish children.

Another question that arises is how to define the analytical category of "childhood". Since childhood is a social phenomenon and is historicized differently depending on the time of study and the society, any definition of a "child" and "childhood" is relative. This concept is not linked to distinct and universal age phases but rather to structural characteristics that imply power relations.

Accordingly, the definition of who is still a child and who is already an adult varies depending on the time and the particular social and cultural context (Allison 2013; Marten 2018; Qvortrup et al 2009). Even though there are no universally valid criteria to distinguish children from adults, when I speak of minors, I use the age limit of 16 years old. In doing so, I follow a functional delimitation that corresponds to

the Soviet sources used for this research. Adolescents under the age of 16 were usually recorded as children in the intern statistics. At the age of 17, young people were already liable for military service. The minimum age applied here results from methodological constraints: it is commonly accepted that children are not capable of creating coherent memories until the age of three or four. Earlier experiences are usually forgotten and are not verbalized. If children and their lifeworld are taken into consideration, however, their war experiences must be explored using social science methods, which in turn presupposes the existence of certain child-specific source genres and the cognitive ability of children to consciously reflect on or produce these sources – be they written documents, pictures, or later self-testimonies. The limitation is therefore partly based on the sources. So, when I refer to children in the following, I mean all those who were under the age of 16 at the time of the war and later capable of remembering and of reconstructing their war-experiences.

2 Suddenly *Zhid*: NS-Occupation, Exclusion, and Antisemitism Among Children

The experiences of Jews in the occupied Soviet Union were similar to those of Jews elsewhere in Nazi-ruled Europe as they were subjected to physical extermination. What sets the genocide in this part of Europe apart was its rapid execution before the eyes of the majority of society, which left Jews little possibility to survive. Unlike elsewhere in Western Europe, Jews from these areas were not deported to concentration or extermination camps; they were shot inside the ghettos or at execution sites near the places where they lived. The Germans had conquered Belarus completely by the end of August 1941, and it remained largely beyond the front line until the Soviet return in the summer of 1944. For the entire duration of the occupation, the country remained divided into two parts: one civilian-administered and one military-administered. The most western parts of the land were transferred from military to civil administration in August 1941 (General Commissariat of White Ruthenia, GCW) and ruled by Reichskommissar Heinrich Lohse as part of *Reichskommissariat Ostland* (RO). The territory of RO consisted of four *Generalkommissariate* (White Ruthenia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia), each governed by a Generalkommissar. These territories were subordinated to Alfred Rosenberg as head of the *Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete* (Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, RMO). Wilhelm Kube was appointed as a general commissioner for GCW (Gerlach 1999, Ch. 3). The original plans to transfer the entire territory to civilian administration was never realized because of military setbacks in the east. Slightly more than half of the Belarusian territory remained under the military

administration of the commanding general, Max von Schenckendorff. This provisional arrangement became enduring. The rapid occupation, the division, and the relative distance of the civilian-administered areas from the front all had consequences for the Jewish population.

From the very start of the occupation, Jews were subjected to a wave of looting and sporadic killings. The rapidly moving Einsatzgruppen, supported by SS, Order Police, and Wehrmacht units, conducted a number of killings directed against suspected Communists and male Jews. The murderous activities initially targeted the male population, but already in August of 1941, the killings in the area of the military administration were extended to women and children (Gerlach 2004). If in the GCW, some Jewish specialists together with their families were left alive for another year, the Jews in the east of Belarus did not have such a "grace period." In the few places under military administration where ghettos were established, it was only for the purpose of registering the victims before execution. According to the USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, there were about 101 ghettos or ghetto-like facilities in the military administration area, while there were at least 90 in the GKW (Dean 2012, 1640). As a result, only very few Jews had the chance to escape execution and go into hiding in these parts of the country. The situation in the west of Belarus was slightly better. But the options for survival were very limited everywhere. By 1942, more than half of the Belarusian Jews were murdered. According to various estimates, about 800,000 Jews (roughly 80 % of the prewar population) were killed during the occupation (Hoppe 2016; Smilovitsky 2000).

However, it was not only these structural differences between East and West that were essential to the experiences of Jewish children. No less important were the socialization and the degree of assimilation of Jews into the majority of society. There were differences between the Jews who had spent two decades in the Soviet Union and largely lost their Jewish identity on the one hand, and Jews who ended up in the Soviet Union after the annexation of the Polish *Kresy* in 1939 on the other (this was most of the territory of GKW). In the old Soviet territories, many children who were socialized in the 1930s had a barely pronounced Jewish identity. This generation had an identity that the American historian Jeffrey Koerber has described as "flexible" and "multiple" using the example of the Jews of Vicebsk (Koerber 2020). Many of these children and adolescents came from secularized families which rarely followed Jewish customs or spoke Yiddish. In the 1930s, these children grew up in a new, egalitarian society. Even though the regime categorized people according to ethnicity, this played no role in children's everyday lives and many were therefore not even aware of it.

Many survivors of the Shoah from the old Soviet territories who were children at the time of the war later claimed that they were not aware of their Jewish identity

before the war. "We were all the same, there was no antisemitism," explained Maia Levina-Krapina from Minsk in the interview.[2] Survivors like Levina reported they heard the ethnic slur "kike" [zhid] for the first time after the beginning of the war. Most survivors remembered peaceful coexistence, mixed marriages, "internationalism", and mutual aid as attributes of their pre-war childhood (Margolina 1997, 8; Altshuler 1998; Shternshis 2017).[3] Indeed, in the second half of the 1930s, the Bolsheviks largely succeeded in suppressing antisemitism from the public sphere through repressive measures. Although anti-Jewish sentiment lived on beneath the surface, they were hardly ever expressed publicly, while the use of the term "zhid" was strictly forbidden (Friedman 2011; Zel'cer 2006). Jews in the old Soviet territories possessed a flexible identity with numerous social and familial ties to their non-Jewish neighbors, which distinguished them from the more traditional Jews in the Polish territories. This social resource would be of enormous importance for survival under the German occupation, especially for minors.

In the former Polish territories, traditional Jewish life still dominated, separate from the Christian population. Here, antisemitic resentments were more widespread. Children were well aware of their Jewish identity, as well as of deep-rooted antisemitism (Kerėn-Krol' 2010, 93; Mel'nik 2001, 25). The difference between the Soviet "eastern Jews" and the "western Jews" within the borders of occupied Belarus is best illustrated by Roman Levin, who came from a typically acculturated Soviet communist family and found himself in the Polish city of Brėst at the beginning of the war. He describes the mistrust of the local Jewish children towards him in the Brėst ghetto, who did not perceive him as a Jew but as a foreign "Easterner". He did not understand a word of Yiddish (Levin 1996, 30).

The extent of Belarusian antisemitism under German occupation is traditionally described as low in comparison to the neighboring countries, and even the Einsatzgruppen complained in their reports about the insufficient "pogrom atmosphere" among the population (Mallmann et al 2011, Nr. 43 and Nr. 67). But it is questionable to whether these observations can be easily transferred to children. Still, indirect participation in the Holocaust through denunciations, looting, abuse, or passive observation were in abound everywhere (Ackermann 2010; Brakel 2009). Most Jewish children would have experienced various forms of humiliation at the hands of their non-Jewish peers. And most of them had to realize that they were "Jewish" and therefore worthless even before their ghettoization. "I was not Jewish. I was not Russian. I was nobody. And suddenly…" is how 14-year-old Michail Treister from Minsk remembered the discovery of his Jewish identity at the beginning of the

2 Interview with Maia Levina-Krapina in Minsk.

3 See also Interviews with Wladimir Swerdlow; Ėduard Krupnik; Zoia Oboz; Elena Antonova and Shmyrkin Aleksandr.

war (Levin and Mel'cer 1996; Treister 2011). This realization was particularly tragic for children from assimilated families, who often did not even know that they were Jewish or what that meant. While older children could relate to the term "Jew", for many younger children it remained something abstract and frightening. Some children first had to construct their own explanation for it.[4] Twelve-year-old Tamara Segal' imagined that the difference was that Jews were not only dark-skinned and black-haired, but also had black blood. When she hid in a Belarusian children's home under a false identity, her greatest fear was hurting herself and being exposed as "Jewish" because of her blood (Lapidus 1994, 33).[5]

This new experience began with sudden discrimination, isolation, and humiliation by other people – above all by the children with whom they had played or went to school just a short time ago. Non-Jewish children often parroted antisemitic slogans, insulted Jewish children as "dirty kikes" [griaznyi zhid], threatened them or even physically attacked them (Birger 2016, 31).[6] "Dirty Jews" quickly became a swear word that minors added to their standard vocabulary. Roman Levin describes in his memoirs how, at the beginning of the occupation, he tried to earn his living by shining the shoes of German soldiers, competing with Polish boys for customers. They were not reluctant with insults, and one even deliberately denounced Roman as a "zhid" to a group of German soldiers who were waiting for their train. Roman was lucky, as the soldiers apparently didn't believe these words and even gave the little brat a beating and Roman a piece of bread (Levin 1996, 26).

Many survivors of the Holocaust reported verbal and physical abuse on part of their peers. In his memoirs, Al'bert Lapidus writes about hostility towards children under the age of 10, even before the first discriminatory regulations were enacted in Minsk on July 7, 1941.[7] On the streets of Minsk, he was called "zhid" by the other children. One day, the twelve-year-old boy from the neighborhood put him in a headlock and threatened him with the imminent end of all Jews (Lapidus 1994, 6).

The examples are numerous and characterized by a wide range of experiences: from insults to physical violence. One survivor from Shkloŭ in the east part of country near Mahilëŭ, Klara Al'tshuler, born in 1934, was regularly abused, bullied,

4 See Interview with Zoia Oboz.

5 See Interview with Tamara Segal'.

6 See the interview with Feliks Lipskii, Zoia Oboz, Kalmanovich Kiry.

7 There were several orders (Anordnungen) regarding the Jews in July 1941. The registration of the Jewish population through their identification was the subject of the first order of July 7. According to this order, all Jews over the age of 10 had to wear a yellow label on the right sleeve of their clothing. On July 13, the second order was issued which regulated the establishment of Jewish councils, the ban on the evacuation of Jews and their grouping together in the ghettos. The third order of July 24, obliged male and female Jewish youths from the age of 14 or 16 respectively to work. See the orders in Bundesarchiv-Militärachiv (BA-MA), RH 23/270; printed also in Dok. 25 (Hoppe and Glass 2011).

pelted with stones, chased with dogs, and even threatened with fire by several village children. Immediately after the German Wehrmacht occupied her home village, all the Jews were rounded up and killed at a public execution in front of the non-Jewish locals. Klara and her mother were able to hide with a stranger for a very short time. However, her mother was soon murdered by the local police, who caught them on the street one day, and Klara ended up on the street, where she had to hide from the other children (Shenderovich and Litin 2014, 92–95).[8]

Even after the ghettoization, Jewish children were attacked and insulted by their "Aryan" peers right at the ghetto border.[9] Most Jewish children probably experienced various forms of humiliation from their peers for the entire duration of the occupation, regardless of whether they were in the former Polish or the former Soviet territories. So their experiences of being bullied were quiet similar.

As the document cited at the beginning of this text shows, adults were exposed to bullying from minors as well. The Minsk Jewish doctor, Dr Yurii Taits, reported to a Soviet commission of historians in August 1944 that he was pelted with stones and called "zhid" by children from his neighborhood as soon as he left the ghetto, where he had lived during the first two years of the occupation.[10] A Jewish woman from Minsk, Rakhil' Rappoport, describes in her memoirs how she was chased by a "pack of teenage boys" in Minsk, who were shouting and armed with sticks (Rappoport 2008, 29). One of the Bielski brothers recalled how a Polish boy shouted at him in the street in the autumn of 1941 that he as a "dirty Jew" was not allowed to use the pavement (Tec 1993, 38). Even a German participant in an execution of Jews in the eastern town of Mahilèŭ mentioned during his interrogation in a postwar trial that a group of children had beaten the Jews with fence posts. Of course, this statement can be seen as a defensive claim meant to divert culpability.[11] However, the existence of ubiquitous violence committed by minors is confirmed by numerous other sources.

Working with reports from Jewish survivors, children at the time, I often heard and read them say that they were most afraid not of adults, but of other children who could humiliate them, beat them, or betray them to the police. While an adult could still be persuaded to behave cooperatively with excuses, valuables, or the evocation of pity, the options for negotiating with children were generally very limited. Young children were not yet mentally capable of foreseeing the consequences of their

8 See also interview with Maiia Radashkovskaia.

9 Interview with Feliks Lipskii.

10 As a doctor, he was initially allowed to practise outside the ghetto; later he left to join the partisans. See the interview with him in: Archive of the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Institut rossiiskoi istorii Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, IRI RAN), F. 2, razd. 6, op. 15, d. 23.

11 Certified copy of transcript, Juraschek Hermann, Düsseldorf, 1.10.1959, in: Munich State Archives (Staatsarchiv München, StAM), STAANW 32970/7, here p. 1218.

actions and understanding complex relationships. German propaganda, which worked with primitive black-and-white images, fell on fertile ground with quite a few minors. Children were quick to adopt the antisemitic propaganda and incitement spread by the occupiers and possibly parroted within their own families und social groups. Alyaksandr Dzeravianka (born 1937) writes in his memoirs that as a Belarusian child, he insulted a Jewish boy begging in his village with the pejorative word *natsmen* (a Soviet acronym for "national minority") without understanding its meaning (Dzeravianka 2013, 13). Whether and, above all, from what age children could oversee the consequences of their actions can only be estimated. The younger the children were, as the example of Alyaksandr, the less able they were to grasp the implications of their behavior towards the Jewish children concerned.

At the same time, however, it should be noted that awareness of the lack of rights and protection for Jews was evidently widespread among minors of different ages from a very early age. The Shoah was so omnipresent that even the youngest children were not unaware of it. As the murders took place immediately after the occupation and often in the hometowns of the Jews, especially in the eastern territories, children of different ages knew what was going on and were openly speaking about it (Ramanava and Machoŭskaia 2009, 106). Some of them watched their Jewish neighbors being taken to the execution site and heard the shots. They knew that their neighbors were killed, where they were buried, and some visited the execution sites out of curiosity. Lidiya Furs told the Jewish documentary filmmaker Boris Maftsir how she, together with a group of other children, ran into the forest in Navahrudak after the shooting of members of the Jewish population in December 1941 to see those who had been murdered, even though her parents had explicitly forbidden her to do so.[12] In some places, adolescents like Ivan Naumenko, born 1927, were forced to cover the bodies of Jews killed with soil (Shenderovich and Litin 2005, 69).

The thirteen-year-old Russian boy Leonid Rzhendinskii, who survived the occupation in a village near Mahilĕŭ, noted in his war diary in November 1941: "All the Jews [in Mahilĕŭ] have been erased."[13] The pervasiveness of this knowledge is confirmed by other diaries from other regions of the Soviet Union. A particularly insightful source is the diary of fifteen-year-old Roman Kravchenko from the western Ukrainian town of Kremenets. He recorded first the deprivation of rights and then the murder of the local Jews in his diary with unusual precision. He described the means, the course of the killings (disrobing, shooting, and burial) and the involvement of the local police in the crimes, as well as the antisemitism and gloating over the killings among his peers (Ziat'kov 2015, 329–350).

12 See Archive: "The Guardians of Remembrance", https://holocaustinussr.com/archive.

13 Rzhendinskii, Leonid, *Diary 10.7.41-15.18.44* (Diary in the possession of his granddaughter). Entries available at: https://prozhito.org/notes?diaries=%5B2770%5D.

Not unlike adults who denounced their Jewish neighbors and plundered their empty houses, some adolescents also took advantage of the situation. For example, a thirteen-year-old schoolboy called Georg Mersons addressed the regional commissioner, the local German top functionary, in Pinsk in October 1941 with a request for permission to take away an accordion from a Jew he knew so that he could support his mother financially by playing it:

> […] I can't work because I have to go to school, but I can earn money as a member of the city orchestra because it plays in the evenings. Unfortunately, however, the accordion that I play is missing. I know that a Jew owns an accordion, and therefore I kindly ask you to give your permission to give or lend his instrument to the city orchestra, and thus give me the opportunity to fulfil my wish to be useful to my family" (Hoppe 2016, Dok. 11).

Because Soviet historiography did not mention the murder of the Jews by name for a long time and cultivated the myth of unified resistance of the Soviet people against the occupiers, the phenomenon of antisemitism (especially among minors) and the behavior described above was taboo remained following the war. Postwar Soviet accounts also contain the assertion that Soviet children were more resistant to Nazi propaganda than adults because they had internalized the pre-war values of the "friendship of nations". This idealized picture has little to do with the reality of war. Although there are several documented examples of children and adolescents who hid Jewish children and, in some cases, even received recognition as "Righteous Among the Nations", these are more likely to have been exceptions (Feferman 2014, 44–48).

3 Exceptions to the Rule: Underage Rescuer

Due to the limited sources available, it remains unknown how many minors behaved differently and lent a helping hand to their peers instead of denigrating and denouncing them. These were most likely isolated cases. However, some of these exceptions have been handed down and documented. It is worth taking a closer look at these cases in order to understand the reasons for oppositional behavior.

It is all the more remarkable that one girl, Raisa Semashka, who saved the lives of two schoolmates in Minsk, was only 11 years old at the time.[14] Before the war, Raisa attended the same class as two Jewish girls, Nina Tseitlina and Ida Borshcheva. When her friends were sent to the Minsk ghetto, Raisa regularly crawled under the ghetto fence to join them at the risk of being caught and shot. She provided them with food

14 Raisa Semashka was honored with the title 'Righteous Among the Nations' in 2001. See the documentation in Yad Vashem Archive (further YVA), M.31/7200.

and necessary everyday items like clothes. As soon as rumors about impending pogroms in the ghetto arose, both girls found shelter in Raisa's family home. Raisa and her parents provided this selfless help for two years without being betrayed by their neighbors, whose children also knew these girls. The survivor, Nina Tseitlina, testified in the 1990s that Raisa, like the neighboring children in her building, was well aware of the danger of hiding Jewish children or not denouncing them.[15] Shortly before the Minsk ghetto was dissolved in the fall of 1943, Nina managed to find protection in a partisan unit. Ida, on the other hand, was placed in one of the "Russian" children's homes by Raisa's father, who presented her a "Russian" orphan – with the help the civil administration employee in charge in Minsk, Vasilii Orlov, whom he knew personally. Thanks to Orlov, it is estimated, several hundred Jewish children were rescued in Minsk alone. He was connected to the Jewish underground in the Minsk ghetto, whose female members organized the smuggling of at least 300 children. Orlov registered these children as "Russians" in the city's children's homes (Epstein 2008, 172).

Another example is the survival experience of Maia Smel'kinson (née Radashkoŭskaia, born 1934) with the help of the Belarusian Boft family. Maia was in a recreation camp at the beginning of the war. While her mother was evacuated, the girl remained in Minsk with her older twelve-year-old sister, and was ghettoized with the other Jews in the city. Maia survived several mass executions in the ghetto and lived on handouts on the streets of Minsk. Like many other children, she regularly left the ghetto and wandered sick and exhausted from house to house in the countryside near the city in search of food. One day (probably in 1942), the Boft family not only let her into their house and fed her but also washed her and looked after her with care. From then on, she would often visit this family, who shared their meagre food with her and occasionally granted Maia brief overnight shelter. While Boft's young son insulted her as a "zhidovka" because he had to give her some of his food, his brother, Ivan Boft (born 1932), who was only two years older than Maia, helped the girl as much as he could. He even hid her in a hole in the ground in the garden of the house for two months and provided her with food. According to Maia, neither his parents nor his brother were aware of this rescue operation. After the end of the war, Maia returned to this family and was taken in again. Mr and Mrs Boft together with their elder son Ivan were recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations" in 1995.[16]

These two examples show that children could take on the role of both rescuers and traitors. Even within a single family, their behavior could vary. We can agree with Eva Fogelman's somewhat older plea that children and young people should be seen as independent rescuers and not as part of "a family project" (Fogelman 1995,

15 Svidetel'skii list, in: YVA, M.31/7200.

16 See the documentation in: YVA, M.31/6406; Interview with Maiia Radashkovskaia.

237). But conversely, we must also recognize that children as independent subjects could pose a danger to Jewish children of the same age, even if their family played the role of rescuer. The example of this one family teaches us that children have their own *agency* and can make different decisions independently of their parents. The older children were, the more consciously they acted. However, maturation in itself did not immunize them from adopting antisemitic slogans, or from opportunistic or hostile behavior towards their Jewish peers. The decision as to whether a child was insulted, physically abused, or denounced as Jewish, or conversely offered help, depended not only on age or on gender. As the case of Raisa Semashka shows, social ties, in this case social networks and relationships from the pre-war period or friendships, played a major role. These factors were more prevalent in the old Soviet territories than in the former *kresy*, where Jewish children were separated from the children of the majority society at the latest in schools, and rarely had such ties. Personal or family predispositions and, above all, situational circumstances played a role too. This can best be seen in the example of children's homes, where Jewish children under false identities competed with non-Jewish children for scarce resources.

4 Jewish Children in Children's Homes

After the extermination of local Jews in occupied Belarus took on open forms in the autumn of 1941, and the deadly pogroms in the ghettos increased, many Jewish parents tried to place their children in one of the children's homes under a false identity. Children's homes were established in the occupied Soviet Union mainly because the number of neglected children skyrocketed after the outbreak of war, which in turn posed a security problem for the occupying forces. In the eyes of the occupiers, vagabond children and adolescents were a serious problem for their safety, particularly in the areas under military administration. The administrators put forward ideas as to how the young shoeshine boys and porters, who they labelled "gypsy children", could be placed under the supervision of local commanders (Standortkommandanturen) and mayors.[17] Children's homes offered a practical solution, especially for younger children. For this reason alone, many of the existing children's homes were kept open under German administration and new ones were set up, although the turnover of children in these institutions remained very high throughout the war. Many orphaned children registered in the center of the military area were distributed to the homes in the west, in the GCW. In November 1941, for

17 Panzerarmeeoberkommando 3, OQu/VII: Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 1.1.–31.12.1943, in: BA-MA, RH 21-3/663, see the item from 17.8. and from 19.8.1943.

example, the Minsk city administration had a list of 11 children's homes, one isolation center, and 11 crèches.[18] In the entire regional commissariat, which had a population of around 2.5 million in 1942, 3,373 children were registered as "orphans", according to other sources around 4,000, with most children registered in Minsk (680) and the Minsk region (450).[19] It is estimated that there were around 90 children's homes throughout the occupied Belarusian territory with around 7,200 registered children without supervision (von Saal 2026). Just how conservative this estimate is becomes clear if we look at the post-war statistics for comparison. In the BSSR alone, the Soviet authorities registered 55,545 war orphans after their return in 1944, and a total of 70,000 in the following year, with the figures continuing to rise over the next few years.[20]

Conditions in the children's homes were extremely precarious, and they were recognized as places with a potential of human resources, usually labor resources, in the course of the increased economization of occupation policy and were extensively exploited from 1943 onwards. Nevertheless, they also offered shelter not only to non-Jewish children, but also and especially to Jewish children (von Saal 2020). Despite the desolate conditions, hunger, abuse, and humiliation, and despite the constant German raids in search of Jewish children, children's homes were one of the few places where quite a few of these children could survive. According to various sources, Jewish children made up around half of the approximately 2,000 pupils in the Minsk institutions alone (Smilovitsky 2000, 74). Thus, the clergyman Anton Ketsko, who ran two children's homes in Minsk, was able to save at least 72 Jewish children from death together with his staff. He cooperated with the mayor (Bürgermeister) of Minsk, Vaclaŭ Ivanoŭski, who knew about the Jewish children, and with soviet Partisans at the same time. All the children in his care, including the non-Jewish ones, should have survived the war and the Holocaust.[21]

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18 There was also a workshop (Werkstatt), a children's distribution centre, an information centre and a milk kitchen. In total, the above-mentioned overview list included 29 children's facilities in Minsk alone. Minsk Regional Archive (Dzjarzhaŭny archiŭ minskaj voblasci, DAMV), f. 688, vop. 6, spr. 5, p. 108.

19 DAMV, f. 688, vop. 2, spr. 4, p. 11–16.

20 National Archives of the Republik of Belarus (Nacyjanal'ny Archiŭ Rėspubliki Belarus', NARB), f. 7, vop. 3, spr. 1494, p. 41, 111. Not all children were war orphans. Many of them were separated from their parents during the war and registered as "parentless", even though one or both parents were alive. However, it often took years for children to find their parents, if at all.

21 Nevertheless, after the war, Ketsko was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for 'anti-Soviet propaganda' and interned in the Tachtamygda labour camp in the Amur region in the Far East. Although Ketsko was able to return to Minsk in January 1953, he was only rehabilitated in 1994. And it was only in 2005 that he and employees of the homes were recognized as 'Righteous Among the Nations' by the Yad Vashem memorial site. For more see: https://righteous.yadvashem.org/?searchType=righteous_only&language=ru&itemId=5654329&ind=0 (7.7.22) and YVA, M.31/9273.

Most of the staff at the homes knew that Jewish children were hiding under false names; they disguised their identity, taught the children how to behave and speak "correctly" and hid those who were particularly at risk when the so-called commission visits came looking for Jewish children. But the children themselves were in many cases also aware about the Jewishness of their peers. This shared knowledge harbored great danger for everyone involved. Although the Jewish children in hiding did everything they could to pass as "Russians", especially in the old Soviet territories, their identities were occasionally discovered. The children were often recognized and denounced by their former school friends, acquaintances and neighbors. Kima Kantor was 13 years old when she finally found refuge in Minsk Children's Home No. 3 under a false identity as Katia Zhukova. She was there with her brother, Viktor Kantor, who was exposed by another girl, a former classmate of his. Kima and her brother had to leave the children's home as a result.[22] In most cases analyzed here, however, children instrumentalized knowledge for personal gain or turned to violent behavior, as many survivors have testified. Kima Kantor reported a change in attitude towards her among the girls at the home. From one day to the next, she was harassed as a "zhidovka" (the feminine form of "zhid"), her food and clothes were taken away from her, and cold water was poured into her bed.

Children could be very brutal to each other, according to another Jewish survivor, Eduard Krupnik.[23] Eduard left the Minsk ghetto with his brother in 1942 and found shelter in a Minsk children's home under a false name. The law of the strongest prevailed there: only the impudent children were able to survive, according to Krupnik, because it was easier for them to get food and other essentials. The weakest, on the other hand, were the children who were exposed or labelled as "zhid". Children who were suspected of being Jewish were bullied, brutally humiliated, beaten and, above all, blackmailed by the other inhabitants. Food rations, bed linen, and clothing were taken away from them.[24] Particularly in large institutions with few supervisory staff, children were subjected to psychological terror and ritual harassment (usually in the evening) by the others. Cold water was poured into their beds or they were forced to crush lice with their teeth in front of the other children.[25] According to Krupnik, children had internalized German anti-Jewish propaganda and forced the Jewish children onto the lowest tier of the hierarchy. In his interview, he described the children's behavior as pure sadism.[26] Krupnik was one of the strong ones and, according to him, was able to defend himself well. However, another

22 See interview with Kima and Victor Kantor.

23 See interview with Ėduard Krupnik.

24 Interview with Semen Kaplan.

25 See further interviews with Iosif Krupnik, Ėduard Krupnik, Kima Kantor, Serafima Furman, Anatoli Shvartsman and Genia Freidina.

26 Interview with Ėduard Krupnik.

Jewish boy had a fate similar to that of Kima Kantor: he was beaten, humiliated, and above all, often had to give his meagre food rations to the other children. Krupnik was unable to defend him, he later reminisced, for he would have given himself away as a "zhid".[27]

The rapid internalization of this new "racial-biological" hierarchization was observed and described very well by non-Jewish witness Marat Kuznetsov. Marat, a Belarusian boy, who survived the war first in a children's homes, then as a forced laborer in Germany, and who later became a psychiatrist, describes in his memoirs how readily the children adopted the "new order". Antisemitic slogans, he claims, caught on particularly quickly among orphaned children. He remembers a Jewish boy, Feliks Zorin, who was helped by another child to escape from the Minsk ghetto and find shelter in the same children's home where Kuznetsov was staying. The boy was often teased and bullied by his "rescuer" and the other children as a "zhid". So, all the children knew about his vulnerability and exploited it for their own ends, mostly by blackmailing him for food (Kuznetsov 2004, 91). Kuznetsov also explains in his memoirs that, besides Jewish children, physically weak and mentally disabled children were also considered inferior and treated accordingly.

As these examples show, children's homes represented a closed social system in which the social identities, roles, and hierarchies, from which it was almost impossible to escape, were known to all children. The social relationships and hierarchies were expressed and constantly re-established by the children themselves in emotionally charged social contexts characterized by fear and tension. In principle, this phenomenon was not new – a large number of neglected Soviet children had lived in comparable circumstances prior to the war and there is broad research about orphaned Soviet children and the dynamics of violence among them. The German historian Mirijam Galley describes the way of life of street children under Stalin as a "violent gang" with their own laws and hierarchies (Ball 1994; Galley 2016). We have also some testimonies from the war children that distinguishes between different cultures of violence among those children who had experience of the orphanages before the war and those without, arguing that the former had brought their experiences and "culture of violence" into the children homes in 1941.[28] Both the pre-war experience of the street and the early loss of family or even the absence of the family environment certainly played a formative role. Studies in childhood developmental psychology clearly show that social isolation and stress severely damage children's moral sense. Their capacity for empathy is partly subject to

27 Interview with Ėduard Krupnik.

28 Kuznetsov makes an explicit distinction between children who came from the streets and those who only became orphans because of the war (Kuznetsov 2004, 88ff.). Serafima Furman makes a similar distinction between war orphans and "underage criminals" in her interview.

hereditary influences, but to a large extent it is linked to early childhood development and socialization. A positive relationship between parent and child promotes the development of compassion and cooperative behavior among children. Children's empathy is learned in a network of relationships and, as studies show, socially neglected children are severely impaired in their ability to empathize (Renz-Polster 2014, Ch. 16).

However, this interpretation is not sufficient to explain the children's widespread hostility against peers suspected of being "Jews", as children from "normal" families also participated in bullying. So, the core question that remains is: How can we explain and interpret these different patterns and dynamics of children's behavior?

5 The Extreme Conditions of the Occupation

Even though children's homes were often the only places of survival for Jewish children, they were also places of misery. We know that the living conditions there were catastrophic and child mortality was high. These survival conditions, the loss of families, unimaginable hunger, and fear of children of becoming sick or being taken away by the Germans must be considered. The situation was particularly miserable in the cities, where children's homes were overcrowded and inadequately supplied (in the countryside, many children's homes had their own land or even farm animals, and received some help from farmers). The important factor was how well the children were cared for in the children's home. Serafima Furman, who initially stayed in the large children's home in Kozarava, was also blackmailed with food by a Belarusian girl who thought she was Jewish. It was only after Serafima came to the children's home under the protection of Anton Ketsko, where the care was better, that she felt safer.[29] Elena Antonova was also in a Ketsko children's home. Despite the decent level of care, the children there still called each other "zhidy", which for her was the worst insult of all.[30] The children's homes under Ketsko's protection are particularly interesting because, despite the antisemitic slogans adopted by some of the children, no one betrayed the Jewish residents – even though there were many of them and most of the children must have known the true identity of these children. In all children's homes, regular "inspections" took place during which the occupiers searched for Jewish children. The employees of Ketsko's children's homes would take care to hide particularly conspicuous and small Jewish children who could blurt out the truth during such raids. Since the children were counted and compared with the

29 Interview with Serafima Furman.

30 Interview with Elena Antonova.

lists of registered pupils, this procedure was not without danger. In such cases, Anton Ketsko and the director of children's home No. 7, Vera Sparning, had "Aryan"-looking children brought to the home from the village community. Ketsko's two daughters often had to pretend to be orphaned children too. Although all the other children knew that there were "fake" children among them, not a single case of betrayal is known.[31] This example is rather unusual and shows us on the one hand again the degree of internalization of the introduced "racial-biological" hierarchy and a new category "zhid" among the children, but on the other hand the importance of the absence or presence of adults and their ability to take care of children and protect the most vulnerable among them. Where these conditions were absent, the law of survival by the skin of one's teeth and completely different group dynamics prevailed. This factor is closely linked to another: Mostly the living conditions in all children's homes were unimaginably precarious and so the brutality of their inmates can be seen as directly instrumental. The excruciating hunger could turn almost any child into a "traitor", especially if they lacked an understanding of the consequences of their own actions due to cognitive immaturity. An example of this interpretation is the case of Tamara Segal'. Thirteen-year-old Tamara, who was in a children's home in Kletsk under a false identity with her five-year-old sister, had to give her own meagre ration of food to her sibling. The little girl blackmailed her older sister by threatening to tell everyone that they were Jewish if she did not get the food. In her desperate situation, the girl did not understand that this threat would have fatal consequences for herself too.[32]

6 Contextualizing Summary

What can we conclude at this point? First and foremost, that non-Jewish children were active actors in a very asymmetrical and non-static war society.[33] Even if they cannot be held responsible for the persecution of their Jewish neighbors, their behavior could have far-reaching consequences. Children reacted directly to the war, the occupation, and the persecution of Jewish population. Most of them were probably familiar with antisemitic slogans and knew well about the exclusion and extermination of the Jews. Moreover, they often displayed selfish or even brutal

31 See the written testimonials from one of his daughters, in: YVA M.31/7761. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Belarusian historian Gennadzij Karatkevich for his help and for sharing his documentation on Ketsko. He knew his private archive and was acquainted with his daughters, who have since passed away.

32 Interview with Tamara Segal'.

33 Tönsmeyer, Tatjana speaks about "Occupied societies" and describes them as an asymmetrical relationship between occupier and occupied (Tönsmeyer 2015).

behavior. Minors did not actively participate in killing Jews, but some of them did have a part in humiliating and chasing them, in extorting food under threat of betrayal, or in providing the occupiers with crucial information about Jews. Their behavior could be particularly brutal towards other children. This is evident from manifold examples in the context of children's homes.

But due to methodological limitations, we only know a part of this reality – the victims did not live to report on it, while the culprits remained silent. The extent of children's involvement in the dehumanization and persecution of the Jewish population cannot be reconstructed exhaustively. At the same time, it bears repeating that there are examples of selfless and conscious help on the part of non-Jewish children. The range of behavior was very broad, showing that the children were more than just passive witnesses or innocent victims of the war. Conversely, it can be said that the war and Nazi propaganda empowered children to act in ways inappropriate for a child. They possessed the agency to undertake various forms of (non) action, depending on their knowledge, age, social background, and so on. This multiplicity makes it all the more difficult to describe children's behavior in adequate terms. But it is clear that they were not merely passive spectators. Looking closely at survivors' testimonies, it is possible to differentiate three main types of behavior among non-Jewish children: those children who actively supported their Jewish peers; those who openly tortured them; and the third and probably even the largest group of more or less "distant observers" who displayed a broad range of indifferent and situational behavior.

The different behaviors of children can be explained by various factors. On the macro level, structural conditions certainly played a formative role. Where the safe spaces of childhood were particularly brutally destroyed by genocidal war, where there was little protection from adults, antisemitism fell on fertile ground and was used instrumentally by non-Jewish children. Such destruction and loses were immense, especially in the eastern parts of Belarus, which was under military administration, and in the urban areas. Cities like Minsk were particularly affected, even though it was part of the GCW. Although we can make some generalizing observations between rural and urban areas, it is hardly possible to compare East Belarus with the western, formerly Polish areas and to assess the impact of antisemitism or sovietization before the war. On the opposite side, it was easier for Jewish children to survive with flexible identity and strong ties to their non-Jewish peers, as it was the case in the old Soviet territories. But the extermination of Jewish life in the east of the country took place almost immediately after the German invasion, so that we have at least a little empirical material to compare the children's interactions. Almost all the cases known to us concerned children in the eastern and Soviet parts of GCW. At the same time, the assumption that antisemitism was less widespread in the old Soviet territories could not be confirmed in the case of the

children. There are several examples to the contrary, particularly in Minsk. Although in purely quantitative terms, the majority of registered rescues were concentrated in the former Soviet territories: of the 794 people recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations" by 2015, only 214 (27 % of all rescuers) came from the former Polish territories or registered cases of rescue took place on the territory of the former *Kresy*.[34] However, these observations are very limited and cannot simply be projected onto the interactions between children because the children's behavior was based on different logic than is the case with adults. First of all, all children were susceptible to antisemitic slogans, regardless of their gender and age. Of course, older children were more likely to understand German propaganda and foresee the consequences of their behavior than the youngest. However, this fact alone did not necessarily protect them from bulling or humiliating their Jewish peers. Conversely, knowledge about the dangers of being a Jew could be used as an instrument. Girls were not necessarily more empathetic than boys. Although the survivors' memoirs usually mention boys as the violent participants on the genocide, examples from the children's homes show that girls could also be brutal. Gender can therefore explain little.

Contrary to this, various examples of behavior in the different children's homes in the city of Minsk allow the following interpretations. First, we are dealing here with children who must have been deeply traumatized by the loss of their families and the brutal acts of war alone. Even if the category of "trauma" was not yet known at the time and we have no empirical material, the children's behavior was obviously shaped by the extreme conditions of the war. In the race for resources, the "racist social order" imposed by the Nazis intensified. The children's behavior was simply connected to their overall living conditions. Second, and a mostly overseen factor, is group dynamics especially in the absence of adults. As William Golding's famous novel "Lord of the Flies" (2008; first publication 1954) impressively illustrates, although a rapid group formation and helpfulness can arise among children, these groups can just as easily be split along arbitrary dividing lines where "morality" as

34 The figures are the result of my calculations based on statistical material (Gerasimova 2015). The statistics from Yad Vashem deviate from these figures. According to them, a total of 683 Belarusian Righteous have been included in Yad Vashem's database by January 2023 (https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/statistics.html). This difference is due to the fact that the rescuers from *Kresy* are counted by Yad Vashem as Poles and thus disappear from the database of Belarusian Righteous. It must be noted that interest in, search, and recognition of the helpers belated in Belarus and has started only in 1990. So it is incomplete (Walke 2024). Historian Franziska Exeler is of the opinion that the quantitative differences in the treatment of Jews were only minimal. At the same time, she points to the more widespread resentment towards Jews in the former Polish territories. Violent attacks by the Catholic inhabitants, in which Jewish neighbors were sometimes humiliated and murdered under the supervision and instigation of German Einsatzkommandos, occurred above all during the interregnum of the first days of the war in the Polish-Lithuanian border region and in the Białystok district, which lasted several days (Exeler 2022, 88).

well as helpfulness and cooperation end. Childhood and youth research shows that children – unlike adults and especially adolescents – have a strong tendency to form groups and peer relationships. Children act and interact in larger social groups and networks, so their behavior can fluctuate between solidarity and betrayal depending on the internal dynamics of the group and the presence or even absence of intervening adults. Most children's homes in occupied Belarus were closed social hierarchical systems where bullying and violence were expressed in a collective setting, regardless of the place, children's age, gender, or social predispositions. It can be assumed that the same group dynamics were also at work on the streets. Particularly in the context of children's homes, it becomes clear that the same children could take on various roles and act differently depending on the situation. This is in line with Holocaust research, which has moved beyond the traditional unflexible triad of perpetrator-victim-bystander, and is exploring the many different forms of collective violence as well as the perpetrators' changing roles and attitudes during the longer period of time. As the latest research reveals, rescue can often have a temporary characterstic. Aid and protection, and even liberation from the Nazi-rule, could be accompanied by violence and exploitation, marking the complex ambivalent character of rescuing (Paulovicova et al. 2025).

While we can apply the category of "rescuer" toward children relatively easily, it is problematic to label a child a "perpetrator" because they betrayed Jews to the police or were violent towards them. Unlike adults, who knew exactly what they were doing, children often acted intuitively or copied adults' behavior. Although it is difficult to determine a fixed age limit here, it is obvious that the younger a child was, the less they could assess the consequences of their behavior. In case they were aware of possible consequences, it may be helpful to apply the German category of *Mitläufertum*. One way or the other, fixed definitions are unsatisfactory. But exploring and understanding these different forms of behaviors of children during the Shoah, with regard to their age and measure of agency can lead to a more detailed understanding of the holocaust and war society in general. Further research needs to look beyond the stereotype of children as victims and address children's varieties of behavior in the context of war and genocides. Only this way can we do justice to the full spectrum of roles and behavior played by children in wars and conflicts, as well as to their instrumentalization by propaganda as we can observe today in militarized Russia or Belarus (Garner 2023; von Saal 2022).

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