Saving Foreign Children From "Moral Decay": Switzerland's Children's Homes During the Second World War

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The Second World War unleashed overwhelming violence against children. Many governments and aid agencies rose to the challenge to protect war-victimised children, ranging from large-scale evacuations to local daily soup kitchens. But due to the lack of international laws to protect children, governments had no legal right to position themselves within enemy territory, even on behalf of children. Therefore, any humanitarian intervention by governments or organizations, however delayed or poorly executed, was unusual and voluntary.

Governments’ motivations to save children in war served dual purposes. First, the act of protecting children usually served an immediate national and/or diplomatic benefit. For example, in German-occupied Belgium, charitable efforts towards children were based upon the need to pacify local parents to increase productivity in war industries. In Britain, wartime child evacuations demonstrated the government’s goodwill in order to raise morale in national press campaigns. Second, the goal of saving children was predicated upon a belief that children were crucial to the future survival of the nation. Although childhood is generally characterized by innocence, legal protection, education, maternal care, and physical well-being, this implies that children are dependent, vulnerable, and lacking agency. However, when children are caught in war, they possess significant power as national and religious treasures, which must be safeguarded and protected. As the “biological future of nations,” children’s value becomes heightened and essential to the vitality of the state.

During the Second World War, Switzerland became increasingly crucial to the survival and rehabilitation of war-stricken European children, providing local relief within German-occupied zones or transporting children to Switzerland for brief periods. Although Switzerland was neutral throughout both World Wars, this neutrality was difficult to maintain; Switzerland’s
economy was highly dependent on its warring neighbors, and the looming threat of invasion also dictated Swiss actions and policies. However, Switzerland successfully protected its neutrality and borders, becoming a trading center for warring parties, an intermediary for international organizations, and a repository for fleeing refugees. Moreover, the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the mid-nineteenth century had ingrained a commitment to humanitarianism within the traditions of Swiss society. Switzerland thus became essential to those wartime policy makers and practitioners who advocated humanitarian international laws, practices, and standards to participating Red Cross nations.

Switzerland’s national Red Cross branch, the Swiss Red Cross, and numerous other Swiss charities were among the very first to actively provide relief to children directly under German occupation. Despite this fact, the full extent of Switzerland’s humanitarian efforts is rarely appreciated beyond Swiss borders. This is due in part to the heated postwar historiographical debate regarding Switzerland’s strict refugee policies and its so-called neutrality in light of its close financial collaboration with Nazi Germany. Postwar scholars scrutinized Switzerland’s wartime policies, and by the late 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, criticisms were fueled by American documentaries about the Holocaust and lengthy articles precipitated by major anniversary dates (such as the fiftieth anniversary of the “J” stamp—a passport stamp to identify Jewish citizens—in 1988). Historians, such as Daniel Bourgeois (1974), brought attention to the nuance of the period, arguing that although Switzerland’s financial dependence on Germany had been used as an excuse for its close collaboration, Germany was also extremely reliant on Swiss goods for its war effort. Others, such as Stefan Mächler (1997), revealed that Switzerland’s national efforts to help Jewish refugees were poorly funded, discriminatory, and often undermined by increasingly rigid refugee policies. Extremely negative opinions prompted the Swiss Federal Council to issue a formal apology about Switzerland’s wartime conduct in 1995, while also commissioning a panel of experts to investigate its controversial role. Twenty-five volumes published by the Independent Commission of Experts dissected Switzerland’s refugee policies and banking practices, ultimately condemning Swiss authorities as “instrumental in helping the Nazi regime to attain its goals.”

More recently, some scholars have sought to redress these criticisms by bringing attention to Switzerland’s wartime humanitarian efforts. Historian Serge Nessi’s La Croix-Rouge Suisse au Secours des Enfants 1942–1945 (2011) specifically explores the altruism of Swiss Red Cross doctor, Dr. Hugo Oltramare, who standardized the medical procedures of the Swiss-led child evacuations,
presenting Swiss actions in a more celebratory and positive light. Antonia Schmidlin’s *Eine andere Schweiz* (1997) also explores the wide range of Swiss charitable activities while simultaneously arguing that the Swiss government controlled and modified its humanitarian operations in order to serve both foreign and domestic political purposes. Considering the larger historiographical debate, such scholarship seeks to add a greater nuance to Switzerland’s controversial actions, deepening our knowledge by not simply condemning Switzerland’s wartime actions, but by attempting to better understand why and how the Swiss government protected its national interests above those of wartime Europe.

This study will attempt to position itself in the debate by first addressing the remarkable and varied humanitarian operations of the Swiss charities, while also exploring the ways in which Swiss nationalism was manifested within the relief provided to children, especially within Swiss-run children’s homes. It will be argued that Swiss efforts were underpinned by a strong belief that foreign children could be “redeemed” by learning a new national (Swiss) identity. Switzerland’s humanitarianism, both unusual and typical of this period, exemplifies a broader trend among wartime governments, which grappled with their own identity and reconstruction throughout (and after) war, pushing their claims to children in order to ensure the survival of the state.

This article will briefly examine the most successful Swiss operations towards children suffering under occupation in Western Europe. First, short-term evacuations to Switzerland sought to revive children in Swiss homes for three-month periods. Secondly, sponsorship programs provided destitute children and their families with provisions and small amounts of money. Thirdly, preventoria/sanatoria throughout Switzerland catered to children suffering from tuberculosis. And, finally, Swiss charities operated numerous children’s homes in German-occupied territories, especially France and Belgium.

Within this context, this study will investigate the operations of a Swiss-run children’s home in Boitsfort, Belgium. Although children’s homes in France have drawn the attention of historians (especially as a Swiss volunteer, Rösli Näf, was directly responsible for saving almost one hundred Jewish children from deportation and execution, which earned her “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem in 1989), less is known about children’s homes in Belgium. However, Belgian children, who suffered some of the worst conditions in Western Europe, also drew significant attention from Swiss charities.

In May 1945, Swiss Red Cross workers wrote a detailed report about the Boitsfort Children’s Home. Although this report often praises Boitsfort’s successful operations, and is, therefore, somewhat subjective, it also reveals that
the Swiss providers sought to redeem the morality of children by reeducating them through Swiss cultural traditions. By reviewing three key elements in the report—the measured improvement of the child’s physical health, the Swiss-focused curriculum, and its surveys of the parents—this article will argue that although the health of the child may have improved, the Boitsfort Children’s Home also sought to inspire Swiss nationalism within the child in order to cure what the Swiss institution called “the moral decay” of the child. In essence, the goal to redeem both the child’s health and the child’s national character were central to the Boitsfort operations.

THE EVACUATIONS OF FRENCH AND BELGIAN CHILDREN TO SWITZERLAND, 1940–1949

One of the most unusual wartime humanitarian operations undertaken by the Swiss was its ambitious evacuation of 60,000 children to Switzerland for three-month periods. In 1940, a coalition of Swiss charities, which had successfully operated similar evacuations during the Spanish Civil War, began evacuating French children to Switzerland for short periods. Fueled by a strong propaganda campaign, this coalition of charities appealed to the humanitarian spirit of the Swiss people, compelling thousands of Swiss families to voluntarily host children from southern France for three months in their homes. The stipulation of the three-month duration was a clever method to overcome the strict immigration restrictions against refugees, as the children would not be a perpetual national burden, as well as appearing more attractive to Swiss hosts, as the children would not be a permanent family commitment.

Hosting war-stricken children was extremely popular among the Swiss public, and by November 1940, when the first evacuations from unoccupied France began, the number of families volunteering to host children actually outnumbered the children selected for evacuation. Thousands of families offered spots for French children; over 2,000 were offered in Geneva alone. By December 1941, Switzerland hosted more than 7,000 children, the majority of them French.

The evacuation program grew stronger. In spring 1941, child evacuations from German-occupied France began, and the coalition of Swiss charities was the first foreign agency allowed into blocked areas, such as Dunkirk, Calais, and Boulogne. By May 1941, the dire conditions in Belgium, along with a shared culture and language, prompted the Swiss to begin evacuations from Belgium. And, due to the huge popularity and anticipated growth of the program, the Swiss Red Cross joined the operations in early 1942, enlarging its scope, infrastructure, and budget. The organization was formally entitled Kinderhilfe des
Schweizerischen Roten Kreuzes, or Croix-Rouge suisse, Secours aux Enfants, hereafter SRC-Kinderhilfe.

While German motivations for this humanitarian action were far from altruistic (and instead due to the Germans’ need to pacify parents while simultaneously temporarily eliminating numerous hungry mouths), major political problems with the evacuations did not arise until the spring of 1942. The German Reich deemed that the short stay in Swiss households would engender “anti-German” attitudes in these war-stricken children, who would, in turn, return to Belgium and/or France and commit acts of sabotage. Therefore, in the autumn of 1942, the evacuations finally ceased. This also occurred around the same time as the closure of Swiss borders, which were justified due to limited food supplies and the growing illegal rings of professional smugglers. While the border closures remain a contentious issue even today, this directive limited the child evacuations, which did not resume until mid-1944.

Over 60,000 children benefitted from the child evacuations to Switzerland during the war, the majority of whom were French. By the last year of operation in 1949, the child evacuations expanded to include Serbian/Yugoslav (654), Dutch (9,769), Italian (5,693), Austrian (32,791), Hungarian (6,075), English (1,716), German (29,053), Luxembourgian (481), Czechoslovakian (796), and Polish children (837), resulting in the temporary evacuation of over 162,000 children.

**Sponsorships for Children, 1940–1949**

Another key service of the SRC-Kinderhilfe was the sponsorships, or small monthly monetary sums, it provided for children who could not travel to Switzerland. Most children who received sponsorships had parents who were imprisoned, deported, bombed-out, killed, or disabled due to war. This initiative began shortly after the invasion of France, due to calls from Swiss families to supply French and Belgian children now under German occupation with money for necessities. In May 1941, the sponsorships to Belgian children were a small sum of seventy Belgian francs per month, which the guardian could use to buy supplies for the child. In February 1941, French guardians received 175 French francs per month. (In relation to costs of living in Belgium, one kilo of bread was 2.60 francs while on the black market it was thirty francs in 1941. Therefore, a mother with seventy or 175 francs per month would be able to afford, on the black market, between two to five extra kilos of bread extra per month. Even with these inflated prices, two to five kilos of bread per month would have been a substantial increase, considering the severe hunger of the time.) The sponsorship system was assigned for six months, after which the
family’s situation was reassessed. If deemed necessary, the sponsorship was extended for an additional six-month period.\textsuperscript{18}

The sponsorship program was extremely popular and lasted until 1949, providing monthly sums to children in eight nations. During the war, an estimated 54,000 children throughout Europe had benefitted from the sponsorships program, which had raised 2.38 million Swiss francs, the largest revenue of the SRC-Kinderhilfe during the entirety of its operations.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Preventoria and Sanatoria}

Tuberculosis was common among children in Western Europe during the war. Malnutrition often preceded tuberculosis and negatively affected the immune system and respiratory health, especially in children. By 1941, France had 215 deaths from tuberculosis per thousand people, while in Belgium the mortality from the disease was ninety-eight per thousand.\textsuperscript{20} The Belgian Red Cross reported that anemia and rickets were commonplace among children, while tuberculosis rates were higher than at the end of the First World War.\textsuperscript{21} It was not until the immediate postwar period that various antibiotics were discovered that successfully treated tuberculosis.

During the nineteenth century, Switzerland’s crisp mountain air, well-educated doctors, and abundant sunlight attracted numerous wealthy patients with tuberculosis symptoms to Swiss facilities called “preventoria,” while those already infected with tuberculosis were treated long term in “sanatoria.” By the early 1900s, sanatoria placed greater emphasis on the growing belief in heliotherapy, the use of natural light in consumption cases. Vitamin D had a sufficient and measurable effect upon the immune system’s ability to withstand infection, and patients flocked to the Swiss Alps in the pre-antibiotic era.\textsuperscript{22}

The SRC-Kinderhilfe added the treatment of children in preventoria and sanatoria to their expanding list of activities and, despite the closure of the Swiss borders in August 1942, sick children from all over Europe continued receiving treatment in these facilities. Tuberculosis-stricken children stayed for a minimum of one year or until completely recovered in various locations throughout Switzerland, including the suburbs of Geneva (Institut Monnier) and the alpine resorts in Mürren (Chalet des petit belges). Between 1940 and 1949, around 5,483 children attended preventoria, and 186 attended sanatoria.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{CHILDREN’S HOMES: PEACETIME FORMAT BUT WARTIME PURPOSE}

Governments in the twentieth century intervened to protect children they deemed threatened by simply relocating them to locations or facilities under
state (or state-approved) supervision. During peace, orphanages or private foster care were popular and widespread as they sought to remove vulnerable, often parentless children from the streets and provide them with “a home of another kind.” During war, governments mobilized to protect children through enormous and frequent evacuations, which chiefly focused on maintaining their health and, occasionally, even sent them to foreign countries to save them from the hardships of war. Such wartime actions were predicated upon the strong belief that children possessed national value that must be safeguarded. Historians have exposed that although neither orphanages nor evacuations fully protected children from trauma (and potentially exposed them to abuse, neglect, ideological indoctrination, or other negative experiences at the hands of their new hosts), the act of saving children in this manner was culturally acceptable among Western nations in the early twentieth century.

In 1940, the Swiss Red Cross created a new type of institution that bridged together the peacetime format of an orphanage with the wartime purpose of an evacuation. Initially, Swiss (and American) food relief had been sent to southern France from 1940 to 1941, but this aid evolved into other relief projects, such as establishing permanent canteens, sponsorship programs, and, eventually, children’s homes.

BOITSFORT CHILDREN’S HOME

The first children’s home was situated on the French side of Lake Geneva in Talloires in 1940 and was predominantly funded by American Quakers. In 1941, more permanent children’s homes were established in La Hille, St. Cergues, Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, and Banyuls, including summer homes in Faverges and Sarcenas. All homes were in France and were operated by the coalition of Swiss charities until a merger with the Swiss Red Cross in early 1942. Children’s homes were usually converted residences that had been abandoned by wealthy owners and fallen into disrepair. Thus, they were not necessarily comfortable and often lacked proper sanitation and heating, even though surrounded by beautiful scenery. Participating children were generally five to sixteen years old and experienced breaks between three and six months, or indefinitely, if deemed necessary. Only those children with parental consent to stay in the homes were welcomed.

Following a structure similar to the French children’s homes, Boitsfort offered children respite from the realities of war. The local Swiss community in Brussels founded Boitsfort Children’s Home in August 1942 (notably, as a direct result of the termination of child evacuations to Switzerland). The Swiss Consul-General in Belgium selected a nineteenth-century building in Boitsfort,
on the outskirts of Brussels, to host fifty children for three-month durations. Boitsfort was funded by the Red Cross in Berne, the Swiss community in Brussels, and weekly monetary donations (called Wochenbatzen, raised by the Swiss people) in order to maintain its unique Swiss character. By January 1945, over five hundred Belgian children between the ages of six and twelve years old had benefited from Boitsfort.29

The Boitsfort report provides an exhaustive record of the operations of the facility. However, the report does not identify the staff or volunteers involved in the running of the home, nor the extent of their philanthropy. Although it is not clear which Swiss Red Cross carer(s) wrote this report, or for what purpose, it is historically invaluable to understanding the Boitsfort operation as a unique wartime children’s home.30 Three key aspects of this report—improvement of the child’s physical health, the Swiss nationalism in the curricula, and the survey of the parents—demonstrate that the Swiss were not only concerned about improving the child’s physical health, but also sought to redeem its national and moral character.

**IMPROVEMENT OF THE CHILD’S PHYSICAL HEALTH**

Belgium suffered extensively under German occupation, especially in the early years of the war. Poorly executed attempts by the German authorities to
restructure Belgian agriculture resulted in a thriving black market. As Belgium was heavily industrialized and densely populated, food shortages resulted in severe malnutrition of civilians, especially children. In 1941, Belgium had the third-lowest calorific value of normal rations (1,360) after Italy (1,010) and Poland (845); in 1942, Belgium had the second-lowest weekly bread rations of any occupied territory (1,575 grams) after Greece (1,260).\footnote{As the food situation would not improve until late 1942 and early 1943, Belgian food rations were the poorest during the first years of occupation. Therefore, Belgium had the lowest food rations of all countries in Western Europe from 1941 to 1942.} Belgian children suffered from both hunger and disease. While Boitsfort did not treat children with tuberculosis (which had infected over a third of all children under eighteen years by September 1943\footnote{Belgian children suffered from both hunger and disease. While Boitsfort did not treat children with tuberculosis (which had infected over a third of all children under eighteen years by September 1943\footnote{Similar to other children’s homes in France, the health of the child was the sole criterion for selection and the main objective of the entire Boitsfort program. Local Red Cross and other charities screened children and recommended their admission to Boitsfort. A maximum of fifty children were admitted for three-month periods, alternating between all boys and all girls per quarter. Upon arrival, children were deloused (over half had lice), a doctor measured their weight and height (including chest measurements), and vaccinations were administered for diphtheria, if necessary. The doctor also prescribed double rations, if necessary. Every fortnight during the child’s three-month visit, the doctor measured each child’s height and weight. Any health complaints that had arisen between the doctor’s visit (that could not be adequately managed by the Boitsfort staff) were handled during these visits.})), chronic malnutrition resulted in rickets, bloated stomachs, edemas, nervousness, and general hygiene issues such as scabies and impetigo (skin rash), all of which posed significant concern to the Swiss caregivers.

Similar to other children’s homes in France, the health of the child was the sole criterion for selection and the main objective of the entire Boitsfort program. Local Red Cross and other charities screened children and recommended their admission to Boitsfort. A maximum of fifty children were admitted for three-month periods, alternating between all boys and all girls per quarter. Upon arrival, children were deloused (over half had lice), a doctor measured their weight and height (including chest measurements), and vaccinations were administered for diphtheria, if necessary. The doctor also prescribed double rations, if necessary. Every fortnight during the child’s three-month visit, the doctor measured each child’s height and weight. Any health complaints that had arisen between the doctor’s visit (that could not be adequately managed by the Boitsfort staff) were handled during these visits.

The need for a consistent routine and scheduled meals is strongly reflected in the Boitsfort report. Each cohort of fifty children was divided by age into four groups, each assigned a leader and sub-leader to supervise daily tasks. Children followed strict schedules, attending school in the morning (no tests or homework were given), with large lunches served in the afternoon at the home. Afternoons included playtime, snacks, group activities, and letter writing to parents. Children also attended Protestant or Catholic church on Sunday.

Meals were also rather substantial. It is noted that local Belgian rations were complemented by Swiss provisions, which helped to balance any nutritional deficiencies with such items as butter, milk, cheese, and other necessary fats. Breakfast consisted of bread with butter (at discretion), Swiss cheese, and milk with coffee. Lunch usually was a vegetable soup (leek or pea) with potatoes,
spinach, and some sort of meat, such as veal or tinned meat. Afternoon snacks, usually served outside, consisted of bread with butter, jam, carrots, and cold milk. Dinner, the smallest meal of the day, was vanilla cream, bread soup, or French toast.

After three months of this strict schedule, each child’s health was assessed. Although height increases were not substantial, weight increases were considerable. Children today between the ages of six and ten are expected to gain between two to three kilograms per year. Children within the last four groups to attend Boitsfort gained on average 1.525 kilograms, 1.430 kilograms, 1.8 kilograms, and 2.22 kilograms of weight, within only three months. Although height may not have increased, the considerable achievements in weight gain denote that Boitsfort Children’s Home achieved its goal to improve the physical health of the children in its care.

**SWISS NATIONALISM IN BOITSFORT’S CURRICULUM**

One of the most unique features of the Boitsfort Children’s Home was its distinctive Swiss character, which was achieved through exercises that promoted Swiss culture and history. However, the inclusion of such forms of nationalism in youth group activities was hardly revolutionary. Since the late nineteenth century, youth groups, such as Germany’s *Wandervogel*, had also espoused nationalist sentiments to young boys in songs, games, or activities. The Boy Scouts movement (founded in Britain in 1908) also promoted national heroes and histories that essentially legitimized and institutionalized an invented tradition which cultivated “ongoing historical national continuity.” Even the famous Boy Scouts movement, which subsequently founded various branches in numerous countries, customarily honored the culture and traditions of its local region; an American Boy Scouts group swore allegiance to an American flag, not the Union Jack. Despite its location in Belgium, Boitsfort promoted a distinctive Swiss character.

Rising Swiss nationalism in the 1930s could be one of the reasons behind the Swiss character of Boitsfort. Historians today agree that Swiss nationalism certainly flourished between 1933 and 1939, but scholars have not yet reached consensus about its causes or character. Soon after Hitler came to power in 1933, Switzerland invoked a series of policies that protected its borders from refugees, foreign trade, and other perceived external threats. Nationalism subsequently grew within various segments of society; some groups were thrilled by Germany’s new racial order (*Volksgemeinschaft*, which they believed included German-speaking Switzerland), while others lobbied for open borders, hoping that investors fleeing the Nazis would help to diversify Swiss economic
Fig. 2. Page 20 from the Boitsfort report outlining the detailed weekly menu, which aimed to improve the health of the children. CH-BAR J2.15 1969/70 BD 104, La Home Suisse, May 1, 1945.
structures. Although this rising nationalism was fueled by competing ideologies, Oliver Zimmerman points out that Swiss schools in the late 1930s began including patriotic songs, national holidays, and decorations as a way to portray themes of Swiss history to primary and secondary students. Both the popularity of including nationalism in youth group activities and flourishing Swiss nationalism evidently had an impact upon the curriculum at Boitsfort, regardless of its location in Belgium, or the fact that its students were Belgian and not Swiss.

Due to the wartime occupation of Belgium, almost all children at Boitsfort experienced an educational deficit, falling two or three years behind the regular peacetime development; some children (seven years) did not know the alphabet and others (nine to ten years) could not read or write. Therefore, the goal of the Boitsfort Children’s Home was to “concentrate on [children’s] physical education and character building,” rather than intellectual or educational enhancement. Even half-days at Boitsfort’s nearby school simply maintained the child’s knowledge and required no homework or tests. Educational activities fashioned by Swiss caregivers that promoted Swiss history and culture were also emphasized as secondary to health improvement.

Two uniquely “Swiss” programs were developed at Boitsfort. First, a course called “Petit Samaritain” taught elementary hygiene and first aid and was devised for children ten years and older. Designed in accordance with a program for the Red Cross Youth, the course taught methods for staying healthy and basic first aid skills, such as properly administering bandages. At the end of the course, the children were assessed by a “Red Cross jury” and, if successful, received a diploma and pin. Approximately 70 percent of all children successfully passed the exam. Although this course was based upon the Red Cross, a Swiss-founded organization, it was similar to many other basic first aid courses taught to youth groups in the mid-twentieth century. In that sense, the Petit Samaritain course was not specifically designed to espouse Swiss nationalism, although it was certainly a product of Swiss culture.

However, another two-stage course called “Chevaliers of William Tell” was designed for children (mainly boys) aged ten years or younger to prove themselves as role models. In many ways, this exercise was designed to encourage moral awareness and education, based upon Swiss principles and culture. The criteria for the children’s success depended on their ability to successfully mimic ten behaviors of the Swiss hero William Tell. For example, “A chevalier respects his superiors. . . . A chevalier is a good Samaritain. . . . A chevalier sings when he is struggling.” If successful, the child was then promoted to the next level to become a chevalier, whereupon he proved his abilities through ten simple tasks. These tasks included attaching a button to his shirt, successfully naming
the Swiss cantons, reciting the Swiss anthem by heart, repeating the “Chart of the Chevaliers of William Tell,” and successfully passing the “Petit Samaritain” course, in addition to other drawing and handcraft exercises. Although these exercises promoted general ethical behavior and developed basic knowledge and life skills (such as sewing or first aid), they were taught with little regard for the true national identity of the child.

In all of the educational activities mentioned in the Boitsfort report, no Belgian heroes were celebrated, nor were any activities undertaken that promoted a sense of Belgian heritage or nationalism. Despite the fact that Belgian children attended Boitsfort Children’s Home, the Swiss institution did not consider it essential to provide educational games revolving around the “Belgianess” of the child. Therefore, from an ideological standpoint, the Boitsfort Children’s Home imparted a type of Swiss nationalist agenda upon the child, while simultaneously ignoring, and invalidating, the true Belgian character of the child.

**BOITSFORT’S SURVEY OF THE PARENTS**

The families of Boitsfort children were oftentimes destitute and struggling to survive under German occupation. Admission records denote that of 270 families (just over half of all admission records of the entire Boitsfort operations), forty-three children were homeless as a result of bombing, fifty-six children’s fathers were POWs, fifty-six children’s fathers were disabled or in ill health, and seventy-one families depended entirely on welfare. Moreover, singular accounts denoted some truly impoverished circumstances; one child named “Roger H” claimed that his mother abandoned him and his father in 1939. Upon his father’s internment at Abbeyville (near the Somme) in 1940, Roger H returned alone to Liege and, shortly thereafter, was discovered by Scouts and brought directly to the Red Cross in Brussels. Therefore, the report conveyed that many Boitsfort children lacked a supportive family structure, as parents were either disabled, deceased, imprisoned, or had abandoned their child(ren).

In an effort to better understand the effects of the Boitsfort program upon the child’s behavior within his/her family environment, 120 questionnaires accompanied with stamped envelopes were sent to parents.44 The Boitsfort report discussed the results of the questionnaires in depth, as seventy-one parents or guardians replied. Although many quantitative problems underlie the results of this self-reporting (such as objectivity and clarification of terminology), the responses are still historically valuable.

Parental satisfaction with their child’s stay was high, as only three parents responded they were not satisfied. Thirty-nine parents claimed their children
were less difficult, twenty-six reported no changes, and six claimed their children were more difficult. Overall, the three greatest changes in behavior noted were calmer and less nervous disposition, dedication/readiness to help, and obedience/speed. With regard to physical health, 60 percent of parents mentioned the child’s weight gain. There were only two comments about exceptional problems upon the return home; one child chased his mother around with a knife and was consequently placed in an institution in Brasschaet for children with “personality disorders” (“troublés de caractère”). The entire family of two brothers attending the Boitsfort home was killed by a V1 bomb. It was speculated that they would need to be placed in another holiday camp. However, the questionnaire’s results indicated that these two instances were uncharacteristic of the larger surveyed group.

The Boitsfort report also assessed the parents as culpable for the decreasing health of the child: “In view of the effort we have put into returning the children to their parents in good health . . . it is important to see that this effort is not ruined by the parents in a short period of time.” In this sense, the parents were denigrated for reversing Swiss efforts, much to the detriment of the child. The Boitsfort report is also unforgiving to the impossible situation that parents found themselves in due to the pressures of war; it only acknowledges the war once as responsible for poor parenting: “Because of all their sorrows, parents often do not supervise their children. Even worse, they encourage them to go begging which leaves the door open for any other moral decay.” This condemnation continued when the Boitsfort report claimed that parents “with their numerous prejudices and principles, do not like to see the children adopt habits that are not theirs,” and, therefore, children become torn between respecting and obeying parents and the feeling that parents are wrong and the child should not act like them. This conclusion blatantly implies that the new behaviors learned from the Swiss institution were somehow more correct than those learned from their own Belgian parents. As this attitude negates and condemns the role of the parent in the child’s upbringing, the Boitsfort home repositions itself as central to the child’s salvation and wellness.

**SWISS MOTIVATIONS: THE “MORAL DECAY” OF BELGIAN CHILDREN**

It could be claimed that Boitsfort Children’s Home was simply a product of Swiss charity run by Swiss caregivers and, therefore, espoused only Swiss curriculum. However, the fact that Boitsfort neglected and, arguably, supplanted the foreign nationality of its students through its teaching, in addition
to criticizing Belgian parenting, problematizes such simplistic reasons for the strong Swiss curriculum.

The fact that Boitsfort was located within German-occupied territory perhaps indicates that the German authorities explicitly wished Belgian children to remain ignorant of Belgian nationalism, fearing it would inspire unity and revolt. Such fear was not unprecedented. In fact, the concern that Belgian children evacuated to Switzerland would return with anti-German hostility was the primary reason for Hitler’s termination of the evacuations in the spring of 1942. However, the Boitsfort report only acknowledged the role of the German authorities with regard to the negative effects of war upon the children. Moreover, even if Germany’s regulation of the Swiss school was the reason behind its lack of Belgian curriculum, such intervention does not justify the inclusion of a strong Swiss dimension in its education. Therefore, there is no evidence to suggest that the German authorities served anything but an ancillary role to the Swiss institution’s pedagogical goals for Belgian children.

Instead, the Boitsfort report revealed that its operations hoped to cure the “moral decay” of Belgian children. In the final assessment of the Boitsfort operations, one section entitled “moral tasks” of the Swiss caregivers outlined that due to the occupation, food scarcities, and general lack of discipline, the decay is general; not only in terms of morality but also regarding the interpersonal relations. An honest man who can claim to have a clear conscience is, one must admit, rather rare in our time. Most people got used to cheating in whatever business they are involved. All interpersonal relations currently display this moral decay.

Despite the obvious and complex quantitative problems underlying any assessment of the “moral” task of institutions, this excerpt reveals that the Swiss caregivers perceived their role as crucial to the moral redemption and salvation of war-torn Belgium. And, as the report continued, it distinguished that children’s poor behavior, such as exhibitionism, swearing, and one instance in which two boys were found having sexual relations, were all the result of this “moral decay.”

The report admitted that three months in the Boitsfort home could not repair all the damage to the children’s “moral education.” However, in order to “re-educate the child morally,” the Swiss institution must achieve this through consistency, discipline, and leading by example. Parents, it stated, were often too consumed with “their sorrows” to provide good parenting, thus contributing to the child’s moral decay. Although the report conceded there was not enough staff to deal with the children individually, it was essential to try and “give these children a moral basis, something they can keep and that helps
them once they return back home." Therefore, in the quest to redeem the child’s
decaying moral fiber, due to both the effects of war and poor parenting, the
Boitsfort home chose to instill them with strong Swiss principles.

**CHILDREN AND NATIONHOOD**

Removing the child from the family home in preference for an institutional
upbringing was acceptable in mid-twentieth-century Europe. Due to the unprec-
edented suffering of children in the aftermath of the First World War (such as
in Vienna in 1918) and the creation of passports to help control the migration of
refugees, governments began to recognize that children, in addition to their eco-

nomic and social roles, also contained national value. Evacuations, orphanages,
and charitable efforts for children, such as those undertaken after the Turkish-
Armenian War (1920), exemplified the critical link between children and the
vitality of nationhood. Before the twentieth century, children were certainly
valued for their economic functions in factories, mines, and other industrial
settings, but as Bruno Cabanes states, their rights were limited to and defined
by domestic politics within the political boundaries of Western European coun-
tries; it was not until the late 1890s that children’s welfare was discussed on an
international scale (notably, within international pediatrics conferences), which
was the result of rising international humanitarianism and progress in medicine,
whereby childhood was seen as a key moment in human development. By
the 1920s, children’s welfare became a preoccupation of humanitarian orga-

nizations and governments, especially among those reconstructing nationalist

agendas in the wake of the First World War. Children became so essential to
the warring nationalist movements that for one of the first times in history,
humanitarian groups and governments sought to reaffirm the rights of children
in a foreign land. As historian Tara Zahra suggests, “The recovery of lost chil-
dren was tightly linked to national regeneration by communities decimated by
genocide, war and displacement.”

Children were national property, and by ensuring their survival, a nation
could ensure its survival. However, it could be argued that as a result of the
First World War and the Armenian genocide, children’s value became height-
ened and more complex. No longer were they simply defined by the national
boundaries of their upbringing, but governments’ reinterpretations of (and
claims to) political boundaries began to contain a stronger racial element.
According to Zahra, when these children were lost, and then recovered, they
became both victims and beneficiaries in the quest to create nationally homog-
enous states in Europe. This attitude that children were national objects was
maintained and reinforced during the Second World War, as evidenced by
major wartime evacuation efforts, Switzerland’s children’s homes, and even Germany’s large Hitler Youth movement. In order to fully protect and reclaim the child from the atrocities of war, caregivers were required to provide both a diet of food and a diet of nationalism.

Improving the health of destitute Belgian children was obviously the most important reason for the Boitsfort home and, notably, this goal was achieved with significant success. However, Boitsfort’s Swiss curriculum also revealed that children’s redemption from wartime-induced “moral decay” was not only achieved through improving their physical well-being, but also reeducating them to embrace a new, more ideal nationhood. By reclaiming their nationalism, the Swiss were fully protecting the child, saving him/her from the physical hardships of war, and even the perceived social challenges of poor parenting.

When contextualized within the larger sociocultural attitudes of wartime Europe, Boitsfort is both typical and unusual of the period. Almost every European nation mobilized resources to protect its children under threat of war, but very few nations intervened on behalf of foreign children. Despite Switzerland’s declared neutrality, it positioned itself within war-torn Europe for the altruistic purpose to “protect” children, while simultaneously strengthening its own nationhood by imparting a new national identity upon the recipients of its relief—children. Although the Swiss caregivers did not explicitly state that their goal was to renationalize the child to become “Swiss,” the undercurrent of nationalist sentiments in the quest to “redeem” the child indicates that children’s identities were not perceived as static, but fluid. Governments could rebuild their resources by redeeming foreign children to adopt a new identity, despite the devastation of war, the declared neutrality of its government, or even the foreign birthplace of its youngest citizens. Secondly, this also meant that children themselves were vulnerable to both the obvious aggressors within their country (such as Germany) as well as the humanitarian actors who sought to protect them (such as Switzerland). Although the politicization of humanitarian relief was not unusual even before the Second World War, Boitsfort reinforces that children were central in a larger power struggle between nations and non-state actors to reestablish their authority during (and presumably in the wake of) a massive, devastating conflict. The vitality of nationhood and children, in essence, were inextricably connected.

The Boitsfort Children’s Home, and the comprehensive report regarding its operations, provides unique historical insight into the vital connection between children and nationhood during the Second World War. Although Boitsfort’s children’s home was only one of many initiatives implemented by
Switzerland during the war, its existence both complicates and redresses some of the postwar scholarship that criticizes Switzerland’s wartime actions. Despite the strong nationalistic dimension of Switzerland’s humanitarianism, this intervention also drastically alleviated the suffering of children, during a time when Europe’s diplomacy, charity, and resources were acutely low. Moreover, by better understanding how the connection between children and nationhood was manifested within wartime institutions, such as Boitsfort, such studies contribute to a growing world of scholarship about how governments and humanitarian organizations have, historically and culturally, protected children in war.

NOTES
2. Switzerland depended heavily on Germany’s coal, which supplied 53 percent of Switzerland’s total coal imports. Germany’s embargo on Switzerland’s coal in late June 1940 resulted in the eventual unemployment of over 300,000 people. From that point on, historian Herbert R. Reginbogin posits that the Swiss were forced to comply with German wishes (Faces of Neutrality [Berlin: Lit Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2009], 79). Although historians cannot conclusively agree on the viability of Germany’s invasion of Switzerland, historian Klaus Urner points out that despite Switzerland’s strong contribution to the German war economy, its neutrality was always a source of irritation to Hitler, and, therefore, Switzerland was always under threat of some sort (Klaus Urner, Let’s Swallow Switzerland: Hitler’s Plans against the Swiss Confederation [Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002], 8).
3. Some critics, such as Hans-Ulrich Jost, claimed that the Second World War was the darkest chapter in Swiss history. Others, such as Jacques Picard, established a link between the attitudes towards refugees and the internal social conditions (i.e., anti-Semitism), exposing new dimensions of the problem to Swiss audiences (George Kreis, “Swiss Refugee Policy, 1933–1945,” in Switzerland and the Second World War, ed. Georg Kreis [London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000], 109).
5. For example, Stefan Mächler notes that despite the fact that 95 percent of children helped by Hilfswerk für Emigrantenkinder (also known as SHEK, a private Swiss charity founded in 1933 that supported children of emigres in France) by 1935 were Jewish, the government did not increase funding or relax policies, but instead restricted refugee intake, which forced SHEK to approach the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee for funding. See Hilfe und Ohnmacht, Der Schweizerische Israelitische Gemeindebund und die nationalsozialistische Verfolgung 1933–1945 (Zürich: Chronos, 1997), 437–38.


15. The Boitsfort report denotes that due to the limited supplies and decreasing value of money, Switzerland converted the money into food packages of cheese, milk, sardines, and other provisions. It is unclear when this transition occurred.


20. In France, this was compared to 155 in 1938 or seventy-two in 1947, while in Belgium, this was compared to sixty-eight in 1938. Marc Daniels, “Tuberculosis in Europe during and after the Second World War,” *British Medical Journal* 2, no. 2636 (November 12, 1949): 1068.


25. For example, Britain’s Operation Pied Piper relocated one and half million children to the countryside in September 1939, while the Commonwealth Overseas Reception Board sent over 2,000 children to Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand. Neutral countries, such as Sweden, welcomed 70,000 Finnish children for the duration of the war, billeting them in Swedish homes. And Germany’s *Kinderlandverschickung* (KLV) protected
children from air raids by sending them to safe rural places, which also provided the Nazi state an additional opportunity to begin political indoctrination at an earlier age than in the Hitler Youth.


27. For example, in October 1940, “Swiss milk” was supplied daily to one thousand children in Gers, and by February 1941, over eight thousand children in southern France received “Swiss milk.” Schmidlin, *Eine andere Schweiz*, 146.


30. Although no claims of authorship are made in the report itself (and it is unsigned), additional preceding pages in the same folder include a hand-written note from “Cécile van Dongen,” to a Mademoiselle Liebi. The brief, undated note refers to a work that Cécile wrote with positive thoughts about the children who improved her life, then proceeds to thank Mme. Liebi for teaching her. Although it seems highly likely that Dongen authored the Boitsfort report, this note is immediately followed by a detailed postwar table outlining numerous summer performances for children in 1946. Unfortunately, without further clarity, it remains unclear whether Dongen’s note refers to her authorship of the Boitsfort report, or to this elaborate table of performances.

31. Germany’s normal daily rations, the highest from 1941 to 1944 on average, were approximately 1,900. Bernhard R. Kroener, Rolf-Dieter Müller, and Hans Umbreit, *Organisation und Mobilisierung des Deutschen Machtbereichs*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999), 226.


38. Historians, such as Edgar Bonjour (*Schweizerische Neutralität*, 1978) and Hans-Ulrich Jost (*Geschichte der Schweiz und der Schweizer*, 1986), were among those postwar scholars who explored the domestic factors in Swiss nationalism.


42. According to the Boitsfort report, children from Anvers and Liege had not attended school for the last eight months due to the war. Also, the frequent bombing alarms, destruction of schools, and mandatory school closures had often prevented or interrupted children’s studies, limiting their development.


44. It is not known how long after the child’s arrival the questionnaires were sent out.

45. It is unclear what exactly was meant by “speed.”


50. Das Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter BArch) R 55/1226, Dr. Helm to Propaganda Division in Brussels, Belgium, April 13, 1942.


52. A number of pages were dedicated to the disciplinary action taken by Boitsfort staff to ensure that children maintained respect for the rules, including examples of rule breaking. CH-BAR J2.15 1969/70 BD 104, *La Home Suisse*, May 1, 1945.

53. In the 1920s, rumors spread of Turkish communities kidnapping Christian children and brainwashing them for the purposes of sexual and economic exploitation. The League of Nations (through private Armenian groups, the Near East Relief, and British High Commission) sponsored missions to rescue thousands of allegedly Islamicized Armenian orphans within Turkey, reclaiming 90,819 children from possible exploitation, servitude, or death as a result of war. Zahra, *Lost Children*, 30.


55. Such examples include the Imperial War Relief Fund (a British, nationalist group which sought financial donations from its commonwealth nations for relief in the Empire) or other private Armenian charities which established orphanages for Armenian children during the Armenian genocide. Emily Baughan, “The Imperial War Relief Fund and All the British Appeal: Commonwealth, Conflict and Conservatism within the British Humanitarian Movement, 1920–1925,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 5 (December 2012): 845–61, and Zahra, *Lost Children*, 30.


58. Other neutral states and non-governmental organizations conducted major humanitarian operations during the Second World War on behalf of foreign children. In 1939, the Swedish Red Cross and Save the Children Federation evacuated 70,000 Finnish children to Sweden, while NGOs, such as Save the Children Fund (founded in 1919), fundraised for suffering foreign children by presenting them as the “universal archetype, which were worthy of humanitarian relief irrespective of race, nationality or creed” (Emily Baughan and Juliano Fiori, “Save the Children, the Humanitarian Project, and the Politics of Solidarity,” *Disasters* 39 [S2]: 133).