

CONVENIENT AND CONDITIONAL HUMANITARIANISM: EVACUATING FRENCH AND FRENCH JEWISH CHILDREN TO SWITZERLAND DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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In November 1940, only a few months after German armies invaded France, a coalition of Swiss charities began an ambitious plan to evacuate destitute and war-stricken French children to neighbouring neutral Switzerland for relief from their everyday hardships. During these three-month stays, French children were fed, clothed and housed in thousands of Swiss homes. After this brief sojourn, these children returned to France and resumed their wartime lives. By 1945, over 60,000 French, Belgian and Yugoslav children had benefited from this evacuation measure, the majority of them French.¹

Although these Swiss-led evacuations were some of the most effective transnational humanitarian operations in Europe during the Second World War, they have not been examined outside Swiss scholarship.² Since the immediate post-war period, Swiss historians have grappled with Switzerland's wartime actions by questioning its so-called 'neutrality', considering its close financial collaboration with Germany and strict refugee policies. The historiographical condemnation

1. Similar large-scale Swiss humanitarian projects included a sponsorship programme (small monthly donations to destitute families), the recuperation of tuberculosis-stricken children in Swiss preventoria and sanatoria, and Swiss-run children's homes in German-occupied zones. For more details, see Chelsea Sambells, 'Saving Foreign Children from "Moral Decay": Switzerland's Children's Homes during the Second World War', *Journal for the History of Childhood and Youth*, 11:1 (2018), 5–26.
2. Swiss studies that investigate these evacuations in close detail include Antonia Schmidlin, *Eine andere Schweiz: Helferinnen, Kriegskinder und humanitäre Politik 1933–1942* (Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 1999), and Serge Nessi, *La Croix-Rouge au secours des enfants et le rôle du Docteur Hugo Oltramare* (Geneva: Slatkine, 2011). Works in English, such as Dorothy Macardle's *Children of Europe: A Study of the Children of Liberated Countries* (London: Gollancz, 1949) and Louise London's *Whitehall and the Jews 1933–1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) mention these evacuations only in passing, in relation to better-known initiatives or events during the war.

of Switzerland's wartime neutrality, which could be seen as self-serving, stands in stark contrast to its traditions of humanitarianism and history as an altruistic nation. Post-war public outcry forced the Swiss Federal Council to commission a major investigation into its wartime activities, resulting in a twenty-five-volume report (1996–2001) which concluded that Switzerland's actions (including the controversial border closures in 1942) had 'contributed to the Nazis' success in achieving their goals'.³ Recently, some scholars including Antonia Schmidlin (1999) and Serge Nesi (2001) have sought to temper this condemnation, by exploring how the Swiss government used many wartime humanitarian initiatives to serve both foreign and domestic political purposes. The present article concentrates on one particular branch of humanitarian action, the one directed at French children, and seeks to set it in context, as well as to contribute to the debate over Swiss neutrality.

Swiss charities were able to mobilize quickly in 1940 because they had previous experience of evacuating children during the Spanish Civil War – a conflict that produced huge devastation, severe loss of life, and tens of thousands of refugees. Children from both Republican and Fascist regimes were orphaned or separated from family, provoking major humanitarian interest from neighbouring nations. In 1937, fourteen Swiss charities joined together to distribute relief and evacuate Spanish children victimized by the war.⁴ By the end of that war in 1939, these charities, in addition to others from all over the world, had evacuated 34,037 Spanish children to Belgium, Switzerland, the Soviet Union, France, the United Kingdom, Mexico, French West Africa and Denmark.⁵

The Spanish Civil War was an ideal rehearsal for humanitarian organizations to exercise their networks, practise their diplomacy and prepare for future wars. As Tara Zahra points out, the movement of these child refugees across borders also generated transnational alliances and even collaboration among enemies.⁶ However, humanitarian workers subsequently criticized this overlapping tangle of rival charities as impractical and politicized, hoping later to create something apolitical and unified.

In early 1940, months before the German invasion of France, seventeen Swiss charities created the 'Swiss Coalition for Relief to Child War Victims' (Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für kriegsgeschädigte Kinder, or Le Cartel

3. Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland – The Second World War (hereafter ICE), *Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War: Final Report* (Zürich: Pendo Verlag GmbH, 2001), p. 501.

4. For a full list see Swiss Federal Archives (hereafter CH-BAR), Bern, Papers of the Federal State Since 1848: E2001D 1000/1552 BD 187, Croix Rouge Suisse, *Motion Reinhard Discours de M. Pilet-Golaz aux Chambres*, 19 May 1942.

5. Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families After World War II* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 48.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Suisse de Secours aux enfants victimes de la guerre, hereafter the Swiss Coalition), so that the lessons learned from the Spanish Civil War could be utilized in the future.⁷ Milk kitchens and nurseries were the first services provided to southern French civilians in early 1940, and these were considered a starting point for larger initiatives.⁸ Importantly, all funds remaining from the Spanish Coalition of charities were liquidated and added to the Swiss Coalition's coffers.⁹ This means that even before France was occupied by the Germans, this particular Swiss Coalition of charities was already offering humanitarian initiatives for the benefit of French children.

After the German invasion in May and June 1940, the German authorities divided France into multiple zones, prohibiting unauthorized communication and movement. The northern *zone occupée* was treated differently from the non-occupied, southern zone administered by the Vichy government, the *zone libre*. For example, the authorities demanded that the occupied zone run on German time, one hour ahead of Vichy, and imposed many more restrictions on the civilian population.¹⁰ In this sense, northern France became isolated, allowing for easier pacification and control by the German military.¹¹ This division lasted until November 1942, when the Allies landed in North Africa, and German troops occupied the whole of France.

The southern zone, though technically non-occupied, still suffered from material hardships under the Vichy regime. Food rationing began in September 1940 and food shortages soon became an extreme daily challenge. Long queues meant civilians waited a long time for basic items. Calories were reduced to 1,327 per day, as opposed to the average 3,000 pre-war.¹² Although rationing ensured that the population had adequate quantities of food, the quality of food declined, especially in the towns; wheat flour for bread now contained trace ingredients of barley, beets and potato.¹³ With food scarcity, new solutions were created; black markets thrived and the cost of living increased. Although daily life was arguably more repressive in

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7. Schmidlin, *Eine andere Schweiz*, p. 127. For the full list of organizations, see the ICE, *Switzerland and Refugees in the Nazi Era*, vol. 17 (Bern: Chronos-Verlag, 1999), p. 243.
 8. CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD 187, Croix Rouge Suisse, *Motion Reinhard Discours de M. Pilet-Golaz aux Chambres*, 19 May 1942.
 9. Schmidlin, *Eine andere Schweiz*, p. 130.
 10. This ceased after May 1941 when all zones ran on German time. Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 248.
 11. Lynne Taylor, *Between Resistance and Collaboration: Popular Protest in Northern France, 1940–1945* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), p. 13.
 12. Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 250.
 13. R. Gildea, D. Luyten, and J. Fuürst, 'Surviving Hunger: Life in the Cities and the Countryside during the Occupation', in *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini: Daily Life in Occupied Europe*, ed. by Robert Gildea, Oliver Wieviorka and Anette Warring (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p. 27.

occupied France, Vichy France was not left unscathed; in 1942, weekly rations for meat and cheese were even less than in the occupied north.¹⁴

At the same time, following the capture and imprisonment of so many French fathers, sons and brothers in the wake of the German invasion, farmers' fields were unattended and industrial production was interrupted. Town dwellers pointed fingers at the peasantry, believing that the countryside was laden with unsold produce, resulting in significant resentment between rural and city dwellers.¹⁵ Although Vichy contained almost three quarters of the production of cereals, milk, sugar and meat, agricultural production throughout both northern and southern France fell dramatically in the first years of the war.¹⁶ Agricultural production increased and stabilized as the war continued, but never reached its pre-war levels.¹⁷

For all these reasons, during these first few months of occupation, the Swiss people looked towards their French neighbours with grave concern. The General Secretary of the Swiss Coalition, Rudolph Olgati, immediately created a publicity and fund-raising campaign in Switzerland. By appealing to the humanitarian spirit of the Swiss people, the Swiss Coalition encouraged Swiss families to volunteer to host French children for stays of three months in their own homes, as relief from hardship in war-stricken France. The stipulation of only a three-month duration was intended both to overcome immigration restrictions against refugees, and to be more attractive to Swiss hosts, since the children would neither be a national burden nor a permanent commitment for the receiving families. In practice, as the war unfolded, this three-month policy also meant that children received conditional Swiss hospitality, but not permanent asylum. Since Vichy France was a 'non-belligerent' in the European war, Swiss officials could justify domestic humanitarian measures for some French children as aid to a former peace-time neighbour. Thus, the multiple practical and logistic considerations required to undertake a large evacuation of French children were deemed both feasible and convenient.

In November 1940, therefore, the Swiss Coalition began bringing small convoys of French children from the unoccupied zone to Switzerland for temporary periods. By early 1941, the evacuations grew steadily in size and demand, and became especially popular among Swiss hosts. Not only was an astonishing 717,000 francs raised in 1940 alone, but when the first evacuations from unoccupied France began, the number of families volunteering to host children actually outnumbered the

14. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

15. Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, p. 250.

16. For example, between 1939 and 1940 the production of grain fell from 7.3 to 5.1 million tons, that of potatoes from 14.4 to 10.3 million tons, and that of meat from 1.5 to 1 million tons. Polymeris Voglis, 'Surviving Hunger: Life in the Cities and the Countryside during the Occupation,' in *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini*, ed. by Gildea et al., pp. 20–1.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

children selected for evacuation; over 2,000 places were offered in Geneva alone.¹⁸

Although the methods of processing the children and distributing them to Swiss hosts were modified as the war continued, due to increasingly restrictive Swiss immigration controls, the children were at first selected for evacuation for reasons based on their health.¹⁹ Local Red Cross doctors in France considered that indigent, sickly and malnourished children were those most in need of evacuation.²⁰ No age range was specified in 1940 to 1941, but by 1942, only children between the ages of 4 to 14 were admitted.²¹ It can be assumed that the earlier operations followed similar guidelines. All selected children were then transported to Lyon (in the southern French zone) for processing.²² They were then taken on the 150km journey to Geneva on only one convoy by rail per week, due to transportation limitations.²³ From there, they were sent onwards to various parts of French-speaking Switzerland, usually in the region of Lake Geneva.

Both the shared language and proximity of the children to Swiss borders were important considerations for selecting French children. The ability for child and host to communicate was understandably a positive motive for these evacuations. (German-speaking children from Alsace, if selected, were to be hosted in German-speaking parts of Switzerland). In this way, avoiding any ‘linguistic and cultural differences’ was explicitly decreed as a core justification for choosing French children for French-speaking Switzerland, rather than from other European nations.²⁴ Crucially, transportation remained a key issue for the charities selecting children. Children from Finland and Greece were not chosen because ‘these countries are too far away.’²⁵ Children’s access to transport and the availability of railway carriages for evacuees arguably proved one of the most critical logistical challenges for the Swiss charities during the entire Second World War. Fortunately, the Red Cross was invaluable in overcoming this particular challenge, as its vast network of resources (including the trains themselves) was allocated to the child evacuations.

18. CH-BAR E2001D 1968/74 BD 16 D.009 14, *Hospitalisation en Suisse d’enfants français*, 27 November 1940 and Schmidlin, *Eine andere Schweiz*, p. 130.

19. While health was the only alleged criterion for selection, later immigration protocols indicate that that the race and nationality of the child also became considerations for selection. CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD187, *Motion Reinhard*, 19 March 1942.

20. CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD 187, *Croix-Rouge suisse, Secours aux Enfants: Circulaires et imprimés des commissions*, 29 May 1942.

21. *Ibid.*

22. CH-BAR E2001D 1968/74 BD 16 D.009 14, *Hospitalisation en Suisse d’enfants français*, 27 November 1940.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.* and CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD187, *Motion Reinhard*, 19 March 1942.

25. CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD187, *Motion Reinhard*, 19 March 1942.

Throughout 1941, Switzerland's Chief of Police, Heinrich Rothmund, who was responsible for managing immigration and border controls, grappled with the voluminous requests from Swiss relatives concerned about family members in France. Rothmund, who was notoriously antisemitic, created a visa known as 'Category B' which permitted French children of French citizens with Swiss ancestry to enter Switzerland indefinitely, but excluded French-born children of immigrants, since Vichy had reserved the right to revise all naturalization via legislation enacted on 22 July 1940.²⁶ Therefore, this meant that only children with documented Swiss (or, as Rothmund termed it, 'Aryan') heritage could be exempted from the strict three-month requirement; Rothmund stated that 'the return of non-Aryan French children'²⁷ would be uncertain and that Switzerland 'cannot run the risk of keeping children hospitalized until the end of the war, or maybe forever, since there can be no question of increasing the already too-high number of refugees residing in Switzerland.'²⁸ While Rothmund's language indicates an antisemitic bias, the creation of the Category B visa was meant to safeguard both the children of 'authentic' Swiss and/or French heritage, and to prevent anyone from exploiting these familial relationships to the detriment of other war-stricken children, with greater needs, for whom these evacuations were intended. Also, as this was a Swiss scheme, operated through Swiss households and funded with Swiss money, it follows that the admission of children with Swiss relatives, whether or not they were suffering from harsh circumstances, were given priority over other children.

Although evacuations were already under way in southern France, the German occupation of the northern zone meant that its children were untouchable and controlled strictly by the Nazi occupiers. However, in May 1941, the German Military Administration for Belgium and northern France provided its consent for these Swiss-led child evacuations. It was argued – rather paradoxically – by the Military Commander, Alexander von Falkenhausen, that the current health problems of local children endangered public peace and order and, therefore, that evacuations to politically-neutral Switzerland would encourage local populations to voluntarily collaborate in the full economic exploitation of the area under his command.²⁹ Even though obtaining German consent was a major challenge to this humanitarian mission, further concessions were called for by the Swiss

26. CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD 187, *Croix-Rouge Suisse, Secours aux Enfants*, 23 May 1941.

27. 'Le retour des enfants non aryens' was the exact phrase in the document, indicating racialist language of the period. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

29. Von Falkenhausen justified his authorization for the child evacuations in 1941 in a memo sent a year later to Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. See Bundesarchiv (German National Archives), R 55/1226, Reeder to Propaganda Minister Goebbels, 18 March 1942.

immigration authorities, which were gravely concerned that increased evacuations could threaten Switzerland's precious, limited resources. Therefore, Swiss Coalition employees turned their attention to the 30,000 French POWs, who had been interned in Switzerland after the German invasion of France. They argued that if these POWs could be returned to France, then the resources previously devoted to their upkeep could be allocated to child evacuees. In January 1941, the German and Swiss governments signed an accord to formalize the transfer of interned troops, and by early February 1941 over 28,000 French soldiers (mostly from the 45th Army) were repatriated to both occupied and unoccupied France. As Raffel Scheck argues, the Germans did not agree to anything that did not work to their advantage; since France had to pay the Swiss government a daily fee for room and board at a hotel for every single prisoner, repatriating them to France stopped that particular financial haemorrhage, while also supplying Vichy France (and hence, Germany) with an extra 30,000 able-bodied men to work for war industries.³⁰

From the first convoys in November 1940 until the end of 1941, over 2,200 children from Vichy France were evacuated for three-month periods to Switzerland. After the repatriation of French POWs in early 1941, and having gained consent from German authorities in May 1941, the Swiss Coalition extended the evacuations into the occupied territories and hosted an additional 2,897 northern French children and 2,025 Belgian children.³¹ Although very few statistics exist to differentiate between the immigration categories, from February 1941 to July 1942, 1,135 children – around ten percent of the overall total of 13,050 – were admitted under Category B visas.³²

By late 1941, the overwhelming costs, the wartime transportation difficulties and the allocation of sufficient food, clothing and lodging to the children were becoming insurmountable challenges to this limited coalition of well-meaning charities. Swiss Federal Councillor Marcel Pilet-Golaz and representatives of the Swiss Red Cross and Pro Juventute agreed that the only solution lay in involving the Swiss federal government, the only body that could raise sufficient funds and resources to successfully carry out these evacuations.³³ Therefore, on 1 January 1942, the Swiss Red Cross merged with the Swiss Coalition to create the new Swiss Red Cross Children's Relief Organization (Kinderhilfe des Schweizerischen

30. Raffel Scheck, 'The Prisoner of War Question and the Beginnings of Collaboration: The Franco-German Agreement of 16 November 1940', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45 (April 2010), 364–88 (pp. 378–9).

31. CH-BAR J215 1969/70 BD 104, *La Home*, 1 May 1941 and Nessi, *La Croix-Rouge*, p. 237.

32. CH-BAR E2001D 1968/74 BD 16, *Hospitalisation en Suisse d'enfants français*, 15 August 1942.

33. CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD 187, *Communiqué du Col. Remund*, 6 December 1941.

Roten Kreuzes, or *Croix-Rouge suisse, Secours aux Enfants*, hereafter SRC-Kinderhilfe).³⁴ Although this new organization provided remarkable relief (over 5,000 children were evacuated in just the first three months of 1942), the old methods of the Swiss Coalition were soon revamped, remodelled and, to an extent, forgotten.³⁵ And, due to the involvement of Switzerland's Federal Council in the new charity, the Swiss government had the ability to actively contribute to the policies of the SRC-Kinderhilfe. Put plainly, these humanitarian actions were now authorized by the Swiss government. However, this new dynamic created political tensions among government departments over Switzerland's international reputation; there was an overwhelming concern that if belligerents perceived humanitarian actions as biased or political, then Switzerland's neutrality, and the nation's sovereignty, could be easily threatened.³⁶ The Swiss government thus swiftly appointed new government representatives to the charity, notably Édouard de Haller, and began to closely monitor and modify all initiatives within the new SRC-Kinderhilfe's network.³⁷

The inclusion of French Jewish children in the SRC-Kinderhilfe evacuations had become a contentious issue by early in 1942. In May 1941, Rothmund had already clearly declared that 'children of refugees and persons who might become refugees are thus excluded (from the evacuations), also children who are not of Aryan race – even if they are French.'³⁸ However, this changed in February 1942, after Swiss Jewish organizations lobbied the Executive Council of the SRC-Kinderhilfe.³⁹ As a direct result, the president of SRC-Kinderhilfe, Colonel Remund, petitioned Rothmund with the greatest insistence ('mit allem Nachdruck') to include at least 200 Jewish children within every three-month stay in Switzerland.⁴⁰ Additionally, Remund inquired whether Rothmund could consider the whole issue, in the light of the 'universal idea of the Red Cross', to find a solution that did not exclude Jewish children.⁴¹ Moreover, in March 1942,

34. Ibid.

35. Even post-war Swiss government reports claim that relief work for children in occupied territories did not occur before January 1942. See Documents Diplomatiques Suisses (hereafter DODIS), Series 1848–1945 and 1848–1975, 2286, *Bericht uüber die schweizerische Hilfstätigkeit zugunsten kriegsgeschädigter Kinder 1939–1945*, 1 June 1946.

36. ICE, *Switzerland and Refugees in the Nazi Era*, vol. 17 (Bern: ChronosVerlag, 1999), pp. 239–45.

37. Ibid., p. 239.

38. DODIS 2286, *Bericht uüber die schweizerische Hilfstätigkeit zugunsten kriegsgeschädigter Kinder 1939–1945*, 1 June 1946.

39. Nessi does not specify which organizations. Nessi, *La Croix-Rouge*, p. 174.

40. Ibid.

41. Schmidlin, *Eine andere Schweiz*, p. 240 and *ibid.*

the Swiss press began to raise this issue and even wrote ‘countless’ letters to SRC-Kinderhilfe.⁴² By April 1942, the outcry had arisen and Jewish organizations took up the fight. The Swiss-Israeli Municipal Association was particularly outspoken and announced a resolution on 19 April 1942, calling for the unhindered access of Jewish children from France.⁴³ On 23 April, the chief editor of *Die Nation*, Peter Surava, reported in detail that children’s trains travelling to Bern specifically excluded Jewish children.⁴⁴ The press held the mistaken view that the Swiss Red Cross was to blame, rather than the immigration authorities of the Swiss government, for the exclusion of Jewish children. According to Schmidlin, the article in *Die Nation* put the reputation of the Red Cross in danger.⁴⁵ However, Nessi argues that the Swiss public were incorrect to assume that refugee Jewish children *could* have been included in the convoys – since the Swiss government viewed this as impossible.⁴⁶ The public backlash nevertheless caused a severe problem for Haller, the principal liaison officer between the Federal Council and the SRC-Kinderhilfe, who informed Rothmund of the various press articles.⁴⁷ Pressure from both the SRC-Kinderhilfe and the Swiss public forced Rothmund to make a decision.

In late April 1942, Rothmund declared: ‘French, Jewish children from non-occupied France can be admitted to convoys, provided that they benefit from a return visa and provided that their proportion remains reasonable (around two per cent).’⁴⁸ The stipulation for the ‘reasonable’ proportion of Jewish children was neither generous nor laudable, but did indicate that Swiss authorities *could* modify immigration policies to assist Jews. From this moment on, two per cent of all convoys could be comprised of French Jewish children.⁴⁹ Nessi speculates that this was to act as a ‘test’ to see if problems resulted after the three-month period.⁵⁰ Jewish children of foreign descent (refugees) were still excluded.

No evidence explicitly states how many Jewish children from unoccupied France were permitted into Switzerland starting in May 1942. Swiss archives indicate that 8,819 children from unoccupied France were evacuated to Switzerland

42. CH-BAR E2001D 1968/74 BD 16, *Hospitalisation en Suisse d’enfants français*, 29 April 1942.

43. Schmidlin, *Eine andere Schweiz*, p. 240.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Ibid.*

46. Nessi, *La Croix-Rouge*, p. 175.

47. CH-BAR E2001D 1968/74 BD 16, *Hospitalisation en Suisse d’enfants français*, 29 April 1942.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Nessi, *La Croix-Rouge*, p. 175.

50. *Ibid.*

in 1942 (around 735 per month).⁵¹ Assuming that two per cent of those convoys were filled every time with Jewish children *and* assuming that each convoy carried around the same number of children, then the maximum number of Jewish children included in this seven-month period would have been 103. According to Nessi, in late November 1942, some fifty-two French Jewish children were being lodged in eleven cantons of Switzerland; two returned to their parents and the rest remained 'until further notice.'⁵² These French Jewish children remained with the families or homes of their initial placement, but it is not known if or when they returned to France.⁵³ Thus, perhaps as many as 103 Jewish children (or at least fifty-two Jewish children) benefited from the evacuations between May and November 1942.

But July 1942 was a turning point in the persecution of French Jews. The infamous round-up of Jews in Paris on 16 and 17 July 1942 brought discrimination to a new level.⁵⁴ Almost 13,000 Jews were arrested and packed into the Vélodrome d'Hiver cycle stadium, along with a renewed series of raids throughout the occupied zone.⁵⁵ Many were sent to concentration camps in the months and years that followed. Of the 73,853 'racial' deportees sent to concentration camps from France, only 2.7 per cent survived, the lowest rate of survival among such deportees when compared to both the Netherlands and Belgium (both five per cent).⁵⁶

In July 1942, the Germans removed only healthy adults for labour in the east and, therefore, parents and children were separated during the round-ups.⁵⁷ Some collaborationists, such as René Bousquet, argued that children should be deported as well, in order to avoid emotional scenes of separation.⁵⁸ However, children were not included in mass arrests until October 1942, which meant that thousands of

51. An additional 8,872 were evacuated from northern France, for a total of 17,691 French children evacuated in 1942. *Ibid.*, p. 95 and p. 237.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

53. CH-BAR VIII B-02, *Circulaire No. 21 pour les Commissions cantonales d'Hébergement des onze cantons concernés (Argovie, Bâle-Ville, Berne, Genève, Grisons, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Soleure, St. Gall, Vaud et Zurich)*, 19 May 1943.

54. Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation of France 1940–1945* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003), pp. 267–84.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Pieter Lagrou, 'Victims of Genocide and National Memory: Belgium, France and the Netherlands 1945–1965', *Past & Present*, 154 (1997), 181–222 (p. 192).

57. Gildea, *Marianne*, p. 275.

58. *Ibid.* Other collaborationists, such as Maurice Papon, contributed to Jewish deaths through 'administrative complicity', whereby he sought out 20 Jewish children sheltered by family relations after being separated from their parents in July 1942, and then moved them to Drancy stadium collection camp. Nancy Wood, 'Memory on Trial in Contemporary France: The Case of Maurice Papon,' *History and Memory*, 11:1 (1999), 41–76.

children were orphaned and isolated that summer. Historian Robert Gildea argues that this provided French non-Jews with an opportunity to show some solidarity:⁵⁹ some childless couples took in Jewish children,⁶⁰ other sympathetic non-Jewish families adopted Jewish children.⁶¹ Although there was less sympathy among the population in general towards Jews by 1943 (and people no doubt feared the consequences of helping them), a number of underground organizations and networks continued to assist Jewish children, denoting not only resistance to the German authorities, but also solidarity with their fellow (Jewish) citizens.⁶²

The Swiss authorities became aware of these abandoned Jewish children.⁶³ In August 1942, Regina Kägi-Fuchsmann, a member of the SRC-Kinderhilfe's Executive Board, reported that an estimated 5,000 Jewish children had been abandoned due to the series of deportations of French Jews to the East, and 'it is claimed that eventually all Jews will suffer a similar fate, including those who possess French nationality.'⁶⁴ Circulars swiftly passed between Swiss Federal Councillor Marcel Pilet-Golaz and the Federal Political Department. The Swiss Federation of Jews suggested that unoccupied France should host these abandoned Jewish children until they could be transferred to the USA. Alternatively, Kägi-Fuchsmann suggested that the Swiss should shelter them under the auspices of the SRC-Kinderhilfe, for eventual return to France. Finally, Pilet-Golaz clarified that the SRC-Kinderhilfe 'has decided that it could not take an improvised decision on such a serious issue', as doing so would politicize the Swiss Red Cross which, in turn, would implicate the Swiss Confederation.⁶⁵ This indicates that at this stage in the war, maintaining absolute political neutrality was more important to the Swiss government than participation in the complex humanitarian operations within a neighbouring country.

Due to the overwhelming number of refugees fleeing Nazi persecution and round-ups that summer, the Swiss government announced the closure of all its borders on 13 August 1942. Under these regulations, 'only refugees who could prove that they were persecuted because of their political activities were not to be

59. Gildea, *Marianne*, p. 275.

60. Bob Moore, 'The Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Belgium, France and the Netherlands', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 50 (2004), 385–95 (p. 393).

61. Gildea, *Marianne*, p. 275.

62. Notably, Gildea argues the general public lost interest in deportation of Jews after the Gestapo violently put communists who aided Jews on trial in Nantes in January 1943. *Ibid.*, pp. 280–1.

63. DODIS 47417, *Notice du Délégué du Conseil fédéral aux Œuvres d'entraide internationale*, E. de Haller, 2 September 1942, and CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD 187, *SRK-Kinderhilfe*, 21 August 1942.

64. CH-BAR E2001D 1000/1552 BD 187, *SRK-Kinderhilfe*, 21 August 1942.

65. *Ibid.*

expelled directly at the border.⁶⁶ It is important to note, however, that directives issued in the subsequent months modified this blanket policy, resulting in contradictory measures.⁶⁷ For example, some individual immigration cases were left to the discretion of the border official, meaning that unpredictability and luck played a role in the fate of desperate asylum seekers. Also, certain groups were allowed entry due to special circumstances (such as tuberculosis-stricken individuals sent to Swiss sanatoria), and were permitted immigration for the duration of the war.⁶⁸ This meant that the Swiss government possessed moderate *ability* to modify its immigration measures for disadvantaged groups to suit humanitarian purposes. However, these exceptions were rarely used by immigration authorities; it must be remembered that despite reports reaching various Swiss government departments in late 1941, which alluded to mass roundups, large, uncompromising ghettos in the East, and even systematic killings, many officials failed to believe the severity of the situation.⁶⁹ This was hardly dissimilar to other European countries at the time. This treatment of refugees also echoed the refusal of the International Committee of the Red Cross to appeal to belligerent nations in 1942 and therefore indicates that Switzerland was highly concerned to appear impartial, especially within its international charitable activities.

Although the border closures had been publicly announced, an irreplaceable opportunity had briefly arisen for the Swiss government to save thousands of French Jewish children's lives. The Prime Minister of Vichy France, Pierre Laval, has been heavily criticized for his role in the round-up of Jews in 1942, especially as many parties offered to intervene, including the French Catholic Church and the USA.⁷⁰ On 11 September 1942, Laval publicly announced his decision that Jewish children should accompany their parents to the East, believing it would rid France of 'undesirable enemies,' and possibly redeem his personal image, by appearing to keep families together.⁷¹ On 7 October therefore, the French Police began cooperating in the deportation of French Jewish children to the East.⁷²

66. ICE, *Switzerland and Refugees*, p. 131.

67. See *Ibid.*, pp. 101–74.

68. CH-BAR J215 1969/7 BD 29, *Diverse Berichte*, 25 May 1952.

69. The ICE's *Switzerland and Refugees* (p. 85–9) suggests that disbelief was fuelled by 'Gruüelpropaganda', or severe horror-story propaganda that had characterized belligerents' First World War propaganda, by the unfathomable scale of the mass killings, and the relatively small minority being targeted (Jews) given the greater context of war.

70. Eventually 350 exit visas were granted to French Jewish children to immigrate to the US. See Michael Robert Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 267–9.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

72. Gildea, *Marianne*, p. 278.

But very shortly before Laval publicly sanctioned this deportation policy, he had met with the Swiss Ambassador to France, Walter Stucki, on 10 September.⁷³ The agenda of the meeting was to discuss Swiss-French relations in the light of the anti-Jewish measures in France.⁷⁴ According to Swiss Foreign Office documents, many topics were raised, including the topic of Swiss-run homes in France. Stucki mentioned that French authorities had forcibly removed Jewish children from Swiss-run children's homes, causing 'very considerable agitation' in Swiss circles, including those with financial and political interests in these homes.⁷⁵ Laval's reply was one of embarrassment, and he emphasized that the Germans had forced him to such measures. He stated that he was not in favour of the police using brutality towards Jews, but he later added, the Jews were 'against him and pro-Gaullist'.⁷⁶

Laval confirmed that children over 16 years of age would be treated as adults and thus subject to deportation in any case. This was already the policy in France. However, for children under 16 years of age, Laval stated clearly that no children residing in Swiss-run homes would be removed.⁷⁷ Laval then pointed out that the Dominican Republic had agreed to take 3,500 abandoned children and that it would be ideal if other countries, including Switzerland, could show the same willingness. Stucki replied that Switzerland was already burdened with more refugees than other countries. Shortly afterwards, the meeting ended. Stucki remarked in his report that although Laval had formally assured him that no Jewish children would be removed from Swiss care, Stucki considered it likely that new anti-Jewish actions could be taken in the future.

Stucki was correct; almost immediately, Laval publicly announced his decision to include all Jewish children (including those under Swiss care) in the deportations.

On the one hand, Stucki was caught between two impossible choices; his government had already closed its borders. Retracting that policy – even for obvious humanitarian reasons – might make Switzerland appear indecisive and thus weak, adding only further confusion to the contradictory directives that already followed the 13 August Swiss border closures. And, importantly, offering

73. DODIS 47420, *Le Ministre de Suisse à Vichy, W. Stucki, au Chef du Département politique, M. Pilet-Golaz*, 14 September 1942.

74. However, Stucki remarked that Laval was quite defensive about the whole topic, opening with the question, 'Do you also want to talk to me of morality because of my actions against the Jews?' to which Stucki calmly replied that he only wanted to discuss Swiss-French relations, and it was not Switzerland's role to 'give France lessons'. This tone indicates the tension in Vichy at that time, and awareness of an ethical dimension. *Ibid.*

75. It is not stated which children's home, but could have been La Hille, as the dramatic removal of Jewish children occurred in late August 1942.

76. DODIS 47420, *Le Ministre de Suisse à Vichy, W. Stucki, au Chef du Département politique, M. Pilet-Golaz*, 14 September 1942.

77. *Ibid.*

permanent asylum to orphaned French Jewish children might be interpreted as politically motivated, which directly contravened Switzerland's policy of strict neutrality.

On the other hand, despite Laval's initial assurance that Jewish children in Swiss homes were immune from the anti-Jewish measures, Stucki's report made it clear that nothing could be guaranteed. This reflected the very uncertain political climate of the period and/or his own distrust of Laval. It must be remembered that Stucki did not disclose to Laval that Swiss evacuations already consisted of 'two per cent' Jewish children. Perhaps Stucki was trying to avoid implicating more Jewish children in France's quickly changing antisemitic policies. However, this is unlikely, since when Laval suggested that other countries take children, Stucki merely chose to emphasize the overwhelming refugees flocking to Swiss borders. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Stucki was being deliberately evasive.

Stucki's (in)actions are all the less excusable when considering the massive public support among Swiss citizens for pro-Jewish measures. This debate had been raging for months in media sources throughout Switzerland, and had even caused Swiss officials to change their policy (over the two per cent). Also, the Swiss had already proven that they could accommodate certain groups under special circumstances for humanitarian purposes *despite* the border closures. However, Stucki did not suggest that French Jewish children could be offered the same exceptional right to asylum and protection. Furthermore, the substantial existing infrastructure to successfully evacuate French children, including a number of Jews, proved that Switzerland *could* evacuate these children. Switzerland, more than any other European country, possessed the requisite practical necessities to adequately transport, house and protect these children from deportation and concentration camps. Finally, Stucki was an ideal negotiator with significant clout in various circles throughout Vichy. His rank as both a diplomat and representative of Switzerland was proven when just two months later, in November 1942, the German authorities took over the unoccupied zone after the Allied landings in North Africa. Not only did Stucki actively negotiate the free passage of hundreds of diplomats, but he tirelessly endeavoured to ensure that Germany's takeover happened with the least possible bloodshed.⁷⁸ Thus Stucki was a respected and courageous negotiator with significant influence and connections. Arguably he, more than any other Swiss official in Vichy, would have been the ideal person to conduct such a delicate negotiation with the Vichy government. Instead, Stucki's passive inactions were indicative of both his, and his government's, apathetic attitude to French Jewish children.

78. Stucki's courage was noted when he drove through dangerous German barricades waving his Swiss flag and then demanded to speak with German authorities and the French Resistance, while boldly carrying both a pistol and machine gun.

One day after their meeting, on 11 September, Laval publicly announced that all Jewish children under the age of 16 years in Vichy would be deported to the East. On 15 September, Pilet-Golaz vetoed proposals either to host 500 Jewish children in Switzerland, or to accept them temporarily before transit to the USA. In a handwritten remark, he stated:

I do not agree with either of these solutions. Any intervention or assistance must take place in France. The unrest surrounding this problem is becoming more and more dangerous. We should realize that in the past hundred years, Switzerland has twice been close to going to war because of refugees. This time there will be no England present to intervene.⁷⁹

Although the child evacuations (still theoretically including two per cent of French Jewish children) continued until late November 1942, it must be noted that Pilet-Golaz's decision ended all requests by the Executive Committee of the SRC-Kinderhilfe to admit deserted Jewish children en masse.⁸⁰

Conclusion

The Swiss charities had evacuated many French children for short stays during the early years of the war, thus putting in place the logistics for a larger operation. However, the large-scale evacuation of deserted French Jewish children during the summer of 1942 was one failed humanitarian initiative that, arguably, *could have been* undertaken. More than any other European nation at that time, Switzerland had the practical resources to conveniently shelter foreign children, the large infrastructure of national Red Cross branches to process and transport children, respected and well-connected negotiators, strong public support for pro-Jewish humanitarian measures, proven ability to modify immigration policies to support Jewish children and, of course, the necessary political neutrality to broker such a humanitarian mission. This article has suggested that the meeting between Laval and Stucki is a clear example of an invaluable but missed opportunity to change the fate of thousands of abandoned children.

How are we to explain Swiss reluctance at this time? It is possible that Stucki's ultimate intention for this meeting was for it to be one step in a longer process of political negotiations to facilitate greater Swiss intervention. Or perhaps Laval's antisemitic responses merely confirmed the fate of Jewish children from Stucki's perspective. It appears however that Stucki's failure to react more

79. DODIS 47423, *Notice du Délégué du Conseil fédéral aux Œuvres d'entraide internationale*, 15 September 1942. The two affairs Pilet-Golaz refers to are, first, the conflict with France in 1838 which demanded the deportation of the future Napoleon III and, secondly, the conflict with Bismarck in 1889 regarding Wohlgenuth.

80. ICE, *Switzerland and Refugees*, p. 246.

strongly to the antisemitic measures affecting Jewish children conveyed the impression (also confirmed by Pilet-Golaz) that the Swiss government was not willing to push harder, act faster, and intervene (even during the brief period before Jewish children were told to accompany their parents). Instead, Swiss officials and government members delivered the message that Switzerland's own self-mandated neutrality could not be compromised, to the detriment of their French Jewish neighbours and the humanitarian actions towards deserted French children.

The Swiss border closures throughout the autumn of 1942 prevented western European children from benefiting further from evacuations to Switzerland. Some Swiss politicians argued that humanitarian concerns should override such immigration restrictions, especially when Switzerland could still offer asylum to the refugees of Europe. Swiss National Councillor Albert Oeri stated that 'Our lifeboat is not yet overflowing; it is not even full and as long as it is not, we will continue to fill it. Any other action would be sinful.'⁸¹ On the other hand, the worrying possibility of receiving unlimited numbers of refugees, as well as the refusal of other countries to grant visas, were additional justifications for border closures. In July 1944, when the tide of war had shifted, Switzerland reopened its borders and again began to evacuate thousands of European children for three-month stays. These continued even into the post-war period and by 1949, over 160,000 children had benefitted from Swiss hospitality.

Switzerland's rejection of French Jewish children occurred during a tumultuous period of Swiss and French history. Historians today are still coming to grips with Switzerland's actions, including the fact that ICRC at that time – one of the few international organizations to influence the treatment of civilians by governments – also failed to appeal to belligerent nations about the basic principles of humanitarianism, the effects of civilian bombings and the treatment of foreign detainees (particularly, Jews).⁸² Inaction was justified as the only method to maintain Swiss neutrality, in the very strictest sense. One Swiss bureaucrat stated, 'The threats of war over the past century because of refugees should remind us that we should show ourselves to be worthy, firm and cautious, but without either illusions or sentimentality.'⁸³ But some voices were nevertheless raised to argue that even if the nation's impartiality would be questioned, it was still necessary to act.⁸⁴

81. Ibid. p. 95.

82. Jean-Claude Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust*, transl. and ed. by John and Beryl Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 142.

83. ICE, *Switzerland and Refugees*, p. 93.

84. Isabelle Voneèche Cardia, *Neutralité et engagement: les relations entre le Comité international de la Croix-Rouge et le gouvernement Suisse (1938–1945)* (Lausanne: SHSR, 2012), p. 189.

A Basel banker who had discreetly collected aid for refugees, Paul Dreyfus, declared that 'In these difficult times we must be concerned with more than preserving Swiss traditions; rather we must also think of the future, when operations like [SRC-Kinderhilfe] will give Switzerland's image a new luster.'⁸⁵ These conflicting opinions suggest that Switzerland was struggling, within various departments and while handling multiple projects, to balance its obligation of strict political neutrality against its humanitarian activity, in the face of increasing refugees, wartime atrocities, and pleas from victims.

85. ICE, *Switzerland and Refugees*, p. 92.

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