

“They Called me Rolf”¹: Examining Race, Memory, and Identity in the Nazi Germanization of Eastern European Children

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*They carted
them off in a
truck and cart
Into Germany,
into Germany,
The wives to be slaves of German men;
The children to start life over again,
In German schools, to German rules.²*

In the dark night of June 9th, 1942, shots rang through the air in the tiny village of Lidice, Czechoslovakia. Unaware that their men were being killed, Lidice’s women and children were taken to Kladno, after which the one-hundred-and-five children were transported to Łódź.³ While in Łódź, Jaroslav Tichy remembered how Nazi officials asked the young children “many questions” and “looked at our heads, eyes, hair.”⁴ Seven children, including Tichy were found to be “racially valuable to [the] German Folkdom”⁵, and were later taken to the Wartheland to be ‘Germanized’.⁶ During the Second World War, thousands of Eastern European children were selected for Germanization and taken from their families; many would forget their native language within a year.⁷ This paper will examine this subject within the context of Nazi racial ideologies and Adolf Hitler’s own

¹ Jan G. Wiener, “Conversations with Jaroslav Tichy, Lidice, September 1965,” in *The Assassination of Heydrich*, 112–16, (New York: Grossman, 1969), 115.

² Edna St. Vincent Millay, *The Murder of Lidice*, (New York and London: Harper and Bros., 1942), 25. This excerpt is from a poem entitled *The Murder of Lidice*. It was written after Americans learned of Lidice’s destruction, and the fact that the children of Lidice had been sent to “educational institutions” (for Germanization).

³ Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children’s Lives Under the Nazis*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 163.

⁴ Wiener, “Conversations with Jaroslav Tichy”, 113.

⁵ *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals Under Control Council Law No. 10. Vol. V.* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1950), 104.

⁶ Stargardt, *Witnesses of War*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

views on Germanization, arguing that the efficacy of this program stemmed from its ethnocidal focus on the extermination of memory rather than the extermination of the body. Additionally, it will argue that this persecution manifested through the erasure and replacement of identity, rather than the more typical accentuation of racial identity which characterized the Holocaust.

The Germanization Process

“We were taken to a hospital...we did not know yet that we were destined for Germanization.”⁸

On October 7th, 1939, the day after Germany’s invasion of Poland ended, Hitler placed right-hand man Heinrich Himmler in charge of a program which would “bring back those German citizens and racial Germans abroad who are eligible for permanent return to the Reich.”⁹ This order became the starting point for the subsequent forced Germanization of European youths who looked like “racial German” children.

To be considered for Germanization, children had to exhibit ‘Nordic’ features typical of the ideal Aryan.¹⁰ Children with these features were plucked from Eastern European orphanages, families, and even concentration camps.¹¹ Under the supervision of the Main Department for Race and Settlement (RuSHA), these children would then undergo many months of testing to determine their “racial value, character, ability and psychological qualities.”¹² Sixty-two separate racial tests¹³ determined a child’s racial type, and whether that child constituted “desirable natural increase.”¹⁴ If found entirely favourable, the children were taken to institutions in Poland where they were immersed in German and punished severely for speaking their own language.¹⁵ Children who passed were brought to Germany and put under the care of the *Lebensborn* organization, which supervised

⁸ “Conversations with Jaroslav Tichy”, 115.

⁹ Trials of War Criminals, 37.

¹⁰ Lynn H. Nicholas, *Cruel World: The Children of Europe in the Nazi Web*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 244.

¹¹ Richard C. Lukas, *Did the Children Cry? Hitler’s War Against Jewish and Polish Children, 1939-1945*, (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994), 115. Also, Nicholas, *Cruel World*, 248.

¹² Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS Janusz Gumkowski and Kazimierz Leszczyński, *Poland Under Nazi Occupation*, (Warsaw: Polonia Publishing House, 1961), 165-6.

¹³ Stargardt, 163.

¹⁴ Gumkowski and Leszczyński, *Poland Under Nazi Occupation*, 175.

¹⁵ Nicholas, 248.

their adoption into German families.^{16 17}

Following the war, teams of British and American workers faced the daunting task of trying to locate the children, many of whom had completely forgotten their original identity.¹⁸ It was so difficult that when Germany's International Tracing Service was given the task in 1950, investigations for 13,517 adopted or institutionalised children were still pending.¹⁹ Though sources differ greatly on the number of children abducted for Germanization, it is generally conceded that, after the war, only 20% of Germanized children from Poland were recovered.^{20,21}

Nazi Racial Ideology

“Several times they examined my light hair and then they transported me to Puskov.”²²

Having noted what Germanization entailed, this paper now turns to why the program existed, which must be contextualized within the Nazi racial ideology. The Nazi views on race were influenced by several significant texts, notably Charles Darwin's 1859 work, *On the Origin of Species*. Following a Social Darwinist approach in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler highlighted historical examples of why he believed certain races had failed to thrive. He observed that a species' survival was contingent on how well it protected itself from competition.²³ Therefore, species that had larger populations would be better protected. By gathering large numbers of “the most valuable stocks of racially primal elements”, Hitler believed he could lead Germany to “a dominating position.”²⁴ Darwin's text also triggered a widespread interest in racial anthropology,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gumkowski and Leszczyński, 176-7.

¹⁸ Nicholas, 505.

¹⁹ Ibid., 513.

²⁰ *Even Richard C. Lukas, a specialist in this field, contradicts himself regarding number estimations. In his 1986 book, The Forgotten Holocaust, he notes that his source indicates 20,000 kidnapped Polish children (p. 27). Yet, eight years later, in his book Did the Children Cry?, he puts the number at 200,000 (p.121). Naturally, these numbers indicate children who were initially deported, and only a fraction of them would have passed the final selection process for Germanization. However, the discrepancy between these figures is concerning.*

²¹ Catrine Clay and Michael Leapman, *Master Race: The Lebensborn Experiment in Nazi Germany*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 96. Also, Nicholas, 121.

²² “Conversations with Jaroslav Tichy”, 115.

²³ Clay and Leapman, *Master Race*, 11.

²⁴ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), 601.

which prompted the development of standardized instruments, such as craniometers, to measure racial characteristics.²⁵ These instruments would later be routinely employed in the Germanization selection process.

Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was foundational in establishing the groundwork for the Nazi belief in the racial superiority of Nordic Germans, whom they referred to as *Übermensch*.²⁶ To establish a race capable of conquering and building a 'Thousand-Year Reich' populated by *Übermenschen*, Germany needed to turn to the pertinent issue of building its population. In order to replace the races expelled in the *Generalplan Ost*'s grand scheme of the "Germanization of the Eastern Territories", Hitler needed more 'Aryan' children.²⁷

On May 28th, 1940, Himmler presented Hitler with a top-secret document he had written, entitled "Reflections on the Treatment of Peoples of Alien Races in the East." It recommended "racial sifting" in dealing with Poland's ethnic groups, with the view of "selecting... the racially valuable and bringing them to Germany and assimilating them."²⁸ For Himmler, these "racially valuable" people were young children with Nordic features. In what Lukas calls a "curiously contradictory reversal of racist ideology", many Nazis believed that these Aryan-looking children were really ethnic Germans who had been "Polonized."²⁹ Nazi word choice here is important. Kidnapped children were officially described as "Polonized German children" or "children of German descent", and Germanization itself was referred to as "Re-Germanization."³⁰ Significantly, during the RuSHA Case in the Nuremberg Trials, the defense argued that most of the kidnapped children from Poland were "ethnic German orphans."³¹ Even those who did not believe that the children were ethnically German thought they should be considered as Nordic. In a 1942 order, SS *Gruppenführer* Greifelt stated that these children, "judging from their racial appearance, *should be regarded as descended from Nordic parents*" (emphasis mine).³²

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler avowed that the goal of children's education in the "folkish State" should be the "branding, through instinct and

²⁵ Clay and Leapman, 13.

²⁶ Gumkowski and Leszczyński, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10,13.

²⁸ *Trials of War Criminals*, 33-34.

²⁹ Lukas, *Did the Children Cry?*, 114.

³⁰ Gumkowski and Leszczyński, 166.

³¹ Clay and Leapman, 170.

³² *Ibid.*, 167-8.

reason, the race sense and race feeling into the hearts and brains of the youth.”³³ This was also the goal of the Germanization program. Unlike most of the victims of the Holocaust, whose race was their death sentence, the racial appearance of the kidnapped children overrode the Nazi perception of their ethnicity. Instead of being killed because of their race, their bodies were saved because they *looked* too “racially valuable” to kill. Thus, this paper argues, instead of physically exterminating them, Hitler chose to exterminate their memories instead, through Germanization. After the war, many children had had their new German “race sense” so “branded” into them that they had no recollection of any other identity. Therefore, the Nazis used memory destruction to achieve the racially driven goal of erasing an ‘inferior’ racial identity and replacing it with one which was considered valuable.

Hitler’s (Original) Position on Germanization

“...they spoke only German to me, they sent me to a German school – and I slowly forgot.”³⁴

Considering the importance of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* on the racial ideology of Nazi Germany, it is worth examining Hitler’s early views on Germanization found within. Interestingly, in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler maintains that Germanization is an impossible task. First, he dismisses the notion that learning German can lead to the adoption of a German identity, arguing that while language can be changed, the learner’s “inner nature will not be changed.”³⁵ He then argues that a true Germanization “can only be carried out with the *soil* and never with *men*.”³⁶ Hitler states that because race “is rooted...in the blood, one could be permitted to speak of a Germanization only if one could succeed in changing...the blood of the subjugated. But this is impossible.”³⁷ Finally, he specifically denounces a plan which he later adopts, the Germanization of the East, by arguing that German superiority would be corrupted by “people of an alien race, expressing its alien thoughts in the German language.”³⁸

³³ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 636.

³⁴ “Conversations with Jaroslav Tichy”, 115.

³⁵ Hitler, 430.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 588.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 589.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 590.

This paper would contend that these arguments, though evidently against the Germanization of *adults*, allow (through omission) for the Germanization of *children* who appear Nordic. Hitler seems to consider only the racially impure adult who attempts to become German by speaking German. Holocaust scholar Lynn Nicholas notes that while adults were indeed “beyond salvation for Germandom”, there was hope for the “racially valuable children” of these “untransformable parents.”³⁹ In this case, Germanization worked because of the young age and appearance of the children. It was believed that children taken for Germanization should be under ten years of age for best results.⁴⁰ The older the child, the better memories he had of his original identity, and these memories made a complete Germanization unlikely.⁴¹ This paper argues that the Germanization process was so successful because the young age of the children made it easy to manipulate and destroy memories.

The relationship between age and memory obliteration is evident. Older children, such as twelve-year-old Alexander Michelowski, generally did not respond as successfully to Germanization. Michelowski resisted assimilation by secretly speaking Polish (despite the threat of punishment), and by communicating with his hometown by letter via a Polish farm labourer.⁴² Similarly, in another institution a group of older children held secret night-time meetings where they spoke Polish and said ritual prayers so the younger children would remember their original identity.⁴³ Conversely, Jan Chrzanowski, taken while still in his first year, was so convinced of his Germanness that after the war he decided to stay in Germany with his adoptive family.⁴⁴ Because of this indoctrination at a young age, young children were so thoroughly Germanized that they were incapable of what Hitler had feared: namely, expressing “alien thoughts in the German language.”⁴⁵ For young children, every memory of these so-called “alien thoughts” had been destroyed, and their original identity erased and replaced.

³⁹ Nicholas, 242.

⁴⁰ Richard C. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation 1939-1944*, (Kentucky: Kentucky University Press, 1986), 26.

⁴¹ Nicholas, 252.

⁴² Stargardt, 164.

⁴³ Lukas, *Did the Children Cry?*, 118.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁵ Hitler, 590.

Genocide and Ethnocide

“They called me Rolf; I wondered why, but they explained that this was my new name and to forget the old one.”⁴⁶

In October of 1947, the crimes committed against kidnapped children were addressed in Case VIII of the Nuremberg Trials, the RuSHA Case.⁴⁷ With ten Germanized children as witnesses, the defendants were charged with ‘genocide’, a term coined only three years previously.⁴⁸ Introduced by Dr. Raphael Lemkin, an advisor in the United States War Department, the term blends the Greek word *genos*, meaning ‘race’ or ‘nation’ with the Latin *cide*, meaning ‘killing’.⁴⁹ Drawing on an understanding of the term from the 1947 U.N. Convention Against Genocide, genocide was declared as a “Crime Against Humanity”. The Convention noted three specific categories of genocide. The two which pertain to the Germanization of children were the “forcible separation of families [being] ‘biological genocide’” and also the “deliberate destruction of the intellectual and cultural life of a nation [being] ‘cultural genocide.’”⁵⁰ The RuSHA case prosecutors forcefully condemned the Germanization program, and accused the defendants of performing a “systematic program of genocide, aimed at the destruction of foreign nations and ethnic groups.”⁵¹ In order to “strengthen the German nation and the so-called ‘Aryan’ race”, the defendants had been guilty of the “elimination and suppression of national characteristics”, accomplished in part through “kidnapping children.”⁵²

The term ‘genocide’, however, was and is a finicky one, and the varying meanings of the word betray an ephemerality which still has not been convincingly defined.⁵³ This essay, therefore, will examine this topic in the more specific terms of ‘ethnocide’. In his book *Genocide or Ethnocide*, Bartolomé Clavero states: “Genocide kills people

⁴⁶ “Conversations with Jaroslav Tichy”, 115.

⁴⁷ Nicholas, 506.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “On The Genocide Convention,” in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 6:336–37, (Catholic University of America, 1967), 283.

⁵⁰ *Trials of War Criminals*, 4.

⁵¹ *Trials of War Criminals*, 89.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Indeed, when Greifelt was tried on counts of genocide, the defense argued that “the legal concept of genocide had not yet been formulated by any of the authoritative international organizations at the time of the alleged criminal conduct, or even at the time of the trial, and hence that a charge of genocide could not be considered legally valid.” (*Trials of War Criminals*, 1.)

while ethnocide kills social cultures through the killing of individual souls.”⁵⁴ This happens when “an ethnic group is denied the right to enjoy, develop and transmit its own culture and its own language, whether collectively or individually.”⁵⁵ This is precisely what happened during the Germanization process. Children were made to forget their language and culture, and to adopt a new identity along with their new, Germanized, name. According to Lukas, “the core of the Germanization process was to destroy the Polish [or original] identity of the boys and girls.”⁵⁶ This describes ethnocide at its core, in its destruction of the soul through the eradication of memory.

This forced memory loss caused problems after the war. Many Germanized children had forgotten who they originally were, and did not want to leave their adoptive families, an assimilation foreseen by Nazi race specialists.⁵⁷ The efficacy of the Germanization process prompted some British child search workers to argue that, in cases where adoptions had been completed and the child was secure and happy, the child should not be removed.⁵⁸ Finding Germanized children and repatriating them proved challenging. When a child had forgotten his name, language, family, and early life, it was frustratingly difficult to confirm his original identity.⁵⁹ Workers often had to reach deep within a child’s memory to evoke early experiences. Here, a sung nursery rhyme or recited prayer could help, and the child would remember the long-forgotten ritual and join in.⁶⁰ However, reunions with family were often difficult. Taken at the age of five, Alusia Witaszek was so thoroughly Germanized that when she was returned to her village of Poznań, she could only communicate with her Germanized sister.⁶¹ Feeling like outsiders, the girls eventually ran away from home in a (thwarted) attempt to reach Germany.⁶² Witaszek’s German accent remained with her, a reminder of the years when her identity had been replaced.

Dr. Marie Meierhofer, a Zurich psychologist, noted that the repatriated Germanized children underwent not one but two changes

⁵⁴ Bartolomé Clavero, *Genocide or Ethnocide, 1933-2007: How to Make, Unmake, and Remake Law with Words*, (Milano: Giuffrè, 2008), 100.

⁵⁵ William Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 189.

⁵⁶ Lukas, *Did the Children Cry?*, 117.

⁵⁷ Stargardt, 353.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁵⁹ Clay and Leapman, 128.

⁶⁰ Nicholas, 506.

⁶¹ Stargardt, 354.

⁶² *Ibid.*

to their “language, social environment, culture, religion and, indeed, nationality.”⁶³ Considering this, she believed that “their memory holds no past on which it might be possible to build.”⁶⁴ This idea of loss of identity through loss of memory underpins my argument. Most of Hitler’s victims knew exactly why they were being persecuted: the badge they were forced to wear and the treatment they endured was a constant erasure and replacement of identity was what defined their experience as opposed to most other Holocaust victims. This ethnocide was effective. The children’s original identities had been expunged and replaced, making finding their true identity incredibly difficult after the war. Unlike other groups, such as the Jews, Germanized children were left with no unifying identity on which to rebuild or to draw comfort from following the war. Here we can see how effective the racial politics of erasing and assimilating, rather than exterminating, were in the Germanization process. This eradication of memory and repurposing of race constituted ethnocide. As testament to its efficacy, there are likely many adults living in Germany today who remain ignorant of their original identity.⁶⁵

Conclusion

“The war ended and I was still there [in Germany]. The word “Lidice” I did not remember.”⁶⁶

In 1947, Jaroslav Tichy was located by Czech officials and returned to Lidice. His Germanization had been thorough, and he no longer remembered the Czech language.⁶⁷ Having examined the plight of Tichy and thousands of others within the context of the Nazi racial ideology and Hitler’s views on Germanization, this paper has argued that the motive for Germanization was the extermination of memory rather than the body, necessitated to preserve ‘racially valuable’ children. Unlike the fate of Jews or Poles, whose racial ‘inferiority’ was emphasized, the Nazi goal in this case was to erase any trace of original identity and replace it with a German identity, made possible by the Aryan appearance of the selected children. This plasticity of identity is chillingly portrayed in the words of one Germanized Polish child to

⁶³ Quoted in Stargardt, 376.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Nicholas, 5.

⁶⁶ “Conversations with Jaroslav Tichy”, 116.

⁶⁷ “Conversations with Jaroslav Tichy”, 116.

another after the war: “We used to be Germans. But we are Poles now. In a few weeks you will get to like it too.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Lukas, *Did the Children Cry?*, 112.

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