

Routledge Studies in Second World War History

JEWISH CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE BLOODLANDS OF EUROPE

David M. Rosen



Jewish Child Soldiers in the Bloodlands of Europe

This book is about the experiences of Jewish children who were members of armed partisan groups in Eastern Europe during World War II and the Holocaust. It describes and analyzes the role of children as activists, agents, and decision makers in a situation of extraordinary danger and stress. The children in this book were hunted like prey and ran for their lives. They survived by fleeing into the forests and swamps of Eastern Europe and joining anti-German partisan groups. The vast majority of these children were teenagers between ages eleven and eighteen, although some were younger. They were, by any definition, child soldiers, and that is the reason they lived to tell their tales. The book will be of interest to general and academic audiences. There is also great interest in children and childhood across the disciplines of history and the social sciences. It is likely to spark considerable debate and interest, since its argument runs counter to the generally accepted wisdom that child soldiers must first and foremost be seen as victims of their recruiters. The argument of this book is that time, place, and context play a key role in our understanding of children's involvement in war and that in some contexts children under arms must be seen as exercising an inherent right of self-defense.

David M. Rosen is Professor of Anthropology at Fairleigh Dickinson University. His recent books include *Child Soldiers in the Western Imagination: From Patriots to Victims* (2015) and *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (2005). He has carried out research in Israel, Palestine, Sierra Leone, and Kenya.

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Jewish Child Soldiers in the Bloodlands of Europe

David M. Rosen

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Preface

This book represents, as the poet Walt Whitman wrote, “the circle almost circled.” My first book on child soldiers, *Armies of the Young*, was a comparative study of child soldiers that contained a chapter on Jewish child partisans. At the time, I thought my next book would be an expansion of that chapter. Instead, I began to examine how conceptions of child soldiers had developed historically; the result was *Child Soldiers in the Western Imagination*. I was able to circle back to my original interests in 2015–16 as a fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I spent more than a year in the archives at Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, listening to the voices and testimonies of Jewish former child partisans. I was living in modern Jerusalem, with its own challenges and complications, but nearly every day my mind was transported to the towns and villages of Eastern Europe and to the Jewish children trying to survive as their world was utterly destroyed.

The matter-of-fact testimony of these former partisans infused me with an even greater respect for the capabilities and strengths of children, even in the direst of circumstances. I hope I have faithfully translated those strengths into the words of this book, and that these words will, in turn, contribute to a new realism in the study of child soldiers and the circumstances under which children take up arms.

In writing this book I benefited immensely from the support of my friends and colleagues. Hagar Solomon, Richard Rabinowitz, Barbara Kellerman, Lenny Grob, and Dan Rabinowitz all closely read the text and their critical analyses, probing questions, and editorial suggestions have contributed immensely to the final book. I also gained much from the sound advice and perspectives of Harvey Goldberg, Amos Goldberg, Susan Gorman, and Lynda Kaplan. Myra Bluebond-Langner and Jill Korbin, who have been close friends and colleagues for decades, have taught me to respect the agency and capabilities of children, and the importance of listening carefully to children’s own voices. Although the voices in this study are no longer children, but adults speaking about their own childhood, I have tried to be mindful of the children that they were.

I have presented many of the ideas in this book at meetings of the Society of the History of Children and Youth, the International Studies Association, the Association for Jewish Studies, the Israel Anthropological Association, and the American Anthropological Association. I have gained much from the questions and dialogue generated during those sessions. My colleagues in the department of Social Sciences and History at Fairleigh Dickinson University have provided me a warm academic home for many years. I want to thank Gary Darden, the chair of the department, for his friendship and support. My colleague, geographer Richard Nisa graciously created the map of the partisan forest zones that helps readers locate the events of this book in time and space. The Maxwell Becton College of Arts and Sciences at Fairleigh Dickinson University granted me critical research release time and grants-in-aid. I want particularly to thank former Dean Geoffrey Weinman for his continued encouragement. The research was also supported by a research grant from the Truman Institute; its director, Dr. Menachem Blondheim supported this work in multiple ways, for which I am grateful. The Truman Institute not only provided me an office on the Mt. Scopus campus of the Hebrew University but enabled me to spend the year in an exciting academic environment that supports scholarship in many different areas. Particular thanks go to the talented multi-lingual and incredibly busy librarians at the Yad Vashem archives, who were always helpful and creative in assisting me with the archival materials. As always, the librarians at Fairleigh Dickinson University astound me by their willingness to help me find needed materials even in the most difficult times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When I began writing about child soldiers, my daughter Sarah was twelve years old. She recently completed a PhD in forensic anthropology at the University of Durham in England. She did her field research in the war-torn communities of Guatemala, and I have been profoundly influenced by her understanding of human rights, ethics, and the effects of war on local peoples. There is simply no way that I can fully express my gratitude to my wife Tori Rosen. She is a brilliant writer and editor, whose editorial skills and practical judgement I rely upon every day of my life. She has read through far too many drafts of this book with grace, tolerance, and good humor, despite the fact that she has her own rich and complex life and constantly juggles a multitude of roles and obligations that far exceed my own as a college professor. I am very lucky.



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1 I Flew Like an Arrow

Nathan Schacht was ten or eleven years old in March 1942, when the Germans began deporting the Jewish population of Lvov, Poland (now Lviv, Ukraine) to the Belzec death camp about fifty miles away.¹ As young Nathan and his family were forced into trucks, his mother told him and her other children to run. He was the only one of her children who fled and he was the only one of his family who survived. Nathan found temporary refuge working for a peasant, but when the peasant grew afraid of hiding him, Nathan ran off and managed to join a Soviet partisan group. There he served as a scout, planted mines, and engaged in armed action. He was severely wounded by an exploding landmine near some German trench lines, had shrapnel wounds all over his body and face, and part of one ear was torn off.

When the Red Army defeated the Germans in his area, Nathan was evacuated to a Russian hospital. At the end of the war, he was demobilized and made his way to a children's residence in Krakow, Poland. There he was discovered by Lena Kuchler, who had founded a home for surviving Jewish orphans in the rural town of Zakopane about sixty-five miles south of Krakow.² In 1946, Kuchler left Poland and took about hundred children with her, including Nathan and other young fighters. They travelled to Bellevue, France, where most hoped to gain passage to Israel. There in France, in 1946, the now fifteen-year-old former partisan became one of the first survivors of the Holocaust to tell his story.³

Jewish children in German-occupied Europe were hunted like prey and ran for their lives. Some of these children survived, but most did not. Among those who survived and lived to tell their tales were children like Nathan who joined anti-German partisan groups in the forests of Eastern Europe during World War II (1939–1945). The vast majority of these children were teenagers, although some were younger. They were, by any modern definition, child soldiers, and because they joined these partisan resistance groups, they survived.

This book tells the stories of these children, using their own words and memories. Beginning with the terrifying moments of the destruction of their homes and villages and the murder of their families and friends, to their harrowing escape and search for safety, and finally, to finding both shelter and