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## Trapped Between Hitler and Stalin: Nazi Bogeymen and Implicated Subjects in Canadian Children's Historical Fiction

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Although most Russians have supported the Russo-Ukrainian War, many Western media outlets such as “The Guardian,” “Newsweek,” and “The Atlantic” nevertheless have called it “Putin’s war.”<sup>1</sup> By using the expression “Putin’s War,” some Western journalists have minimized the implication of soldiers and civilians in war crimes committed in Ukraine, including forced deportations of children. However, as is the case with the popular depictions of the Second World War and the Holocaust,

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1 See Masha Gessen, “Ukrainian Refugees in Russia,” *The New Yorker*, August 21, 2023, 36–43. While Putin’s official approval in May of 2023 stood at 83% – higher than before the war – *The Moscow Times* maintains that the war is supported by 60% of Russians. However, it notes that the support is significantly higher in some regions. See Alexei Gusev, “Why Support for Putin’s War Is Rife in Russia’s Worst-Hit Regions,” *The Moscow Times*, June 10, 2023, accessed June 11, 2023 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/06/10/why-support-for-putins-war-is-rife-in-russias-worst-hit-regions-a81426>. See also Eugene Rumer, “How Putin’s War Became Russia’s War,” *Foreign Affairs*, 9 June, 2023, accessed June, 10, 2023 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/how-putins-war-became-russias-war>.

this positioning is a problematic oversimplification that overlooks the complicity of collaborators and implicated subjects.

The Holocaust has become a major theme in North American children's and young adult literature. While representing war atrocities in texts for children is challenging for many reasons, "there seems to be consensus now that children's literature is the most rather than the least appropriate forum for trauma work."<sup>2</sup> Most popular Anglophone books set during the Second World War in what Timothy Snyder has termed the bloodlands<sup>3</sup> – that is the territory of present-day Eastern and Central Europe – can be divided into two categories. The dominant one features texts presenting a simplified version of history: the Nazis and their collaborators, blindly following Hitler, emerge as dehumanized monsters who murder Jews in concentration camps. Typically, the Jewish child protagonist survives to share their story and bear witness to the Holocaust – sometimes saved by a Righteous Among Nations or liberated by Allied soldiers. Usually in such books there is no mention of Soviet atrocities and the Nazis "tend to be neither round nor dynamic, and are almost always observed rather than internally focalized"; thus, as Lydia Kokkola argues, such characters "are humans in disguise; they are Bogeymen."<sup>4</sup> The Soviets are absent and the Nazis are dehumanized, so there is "almost no attempt to encourage child readers to understand the position of the perpetrators."<sup>5</sup> This is a problematic positioning because, as Snyder notes, "to find other people to be inhuman, is to take a step toward, not away from, the Nazi position. To find other people incomprehensible is to abandon the search for understanding, and thus to abandon history."<sup>6</sup>

However, there is a different type of Holocaust and Second World War-themed children's books offering a more nuanced version of history. The characters in such texts, often ones who experience Nazi and Soviet atrocities, exceed the categories of the victim, the perpetrator, and the witness. In addition to evil Nazi Bogeymen, innocent Jewish victims/survivors, and sometimes gentile Righteous Among Nations, such narratives also feature an array of characters of various nationalities trapped between Hitler and

2 Kenneth B. Kidd, *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 181.

3 See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

4 Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 2003), 134.

5 *Ibid.*, 134.

6 See Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 400.

Stalin who emerge as what Michael Rothberg has termed implicated subjects. Such characters “are neither victims nor perpetrators nor passive bystanders” and “occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm”<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, they “contribute to, inhabit, inherit or benefit from – in short, are implicated in – regimes of violence and domination, but do not originate or control such regimes.”<sup>8</sup>

Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch and Gabriele Goldstone, acclaimed Canadian authors of historical fiction, challenge the simplistic trope of the Nazi Bogyman and demonstrate the implication of their Ukrainian,<sup>9</sup> Polish, Russian, and German/Volksdeutsche characters who experience Hitler’s and Stalin’s occupation in the bloodlands. This article studies the portrayal of Nazi and German characters in Goldstone’s *Tainted Amber* (2021),<sup>10</sup> a young adult novel set in East Prussia right before the war, and Skrypuch’s middle-grade book *Don’t Tell the Enemy* (2018 – US title *Don’t Tell the Nazis*, 2019),<sup>11</sup> set in Nazi-occupied western Ukraine. As Snyder notes, in order to remember and understand we should “see the victims, but also the persecutors and the neighbors, from every possible angle.”<sup>12</sup> Skrypuch and Goldstone humanize the Nazis and implicated Germans and point to the role of propaganda in the spread of anti-Semitism. Because their books include descriptions of atrocities and individual acts of kindness, both authors demonstrate the complexity of implication. Thus, they may help young North American readers better understand history’s gray zones, which are crucial in preventing the Second World War and the Holocaust from becoming a distant memory.

### The Kulak’s Daughter in Pre-war East Prussia

Germans living in Volhynia and the Volga region were among the most severely targeted groups during Stalin’s collectivization and de-kulakization,

7 Michael Rothberg, “Trauma and the Implicated Subject,” in *The Routledge Companion to Trauma and Literature*, ed. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja (London: Routledge, 2020), 201.

8 Ibid., 201 (emphasis original).

9 See Mateusz Świetlicki, *Next-Generation Memory and Ukrainian Canadian Children’s Historical Fiction: The Seeds of Memory* (London: Routledge 2023), 168–188.

10 Gabriele Goldstone, *Tainted Amber* (Vancouver: Ronsdale, 2021).

11 Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell the Enemy* (Toronto: Scholastic Canada, 2018).

12 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 408.

“shorthand for the ‘elimination of the kulaks as a class.’”<sup>13</sup> The Soviet officials considered all Ukrainian ethnic Germans kulaks – wealthy landowners – so they were deprived of their belongings, abused, and deported to distant parts of the Soviet Union three times more frequently than their Ukrainian neighbors.<sup>14</sup> The scale of Soviet oppression directed towards Volksdeutsche was unknown before Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941 and “discovered survivors living under the most wretched conditions.”<sup>15</sup>

Goldstone’s four first-person novels – *The Kulak’s Daughter*<sup>16</sup> (2009 – reissued as *Red Stone*, 2015), *Broken Stone*<sup>17</sup> (2015), *Tainted Amber* (2021), and *Crow Stone*<sup>18</sup> (2022) – are focalized by Katya Halter, a Russian German girl from Fedorofka near Zhytomyr, Ukraine.<sup>19</sup> In the first book, set right before the Holodomor, the Great Famine of 1932–1933, Katya, a ten-year-old daughter of a windmill owner, loses her father to Stalin’s de-kulakization and is exiled to Siberia with her family. While her mother and youngest brother die there, the protagonist manages to survive and take care of her brother Albert and two sisters, Marthe and Sophie. *Broken Stone* shows Katya’s post-exile life in collectivized Ukraine and then in East Prussia – today part of Russia, Poland, and Lithuania – where together with her siblings, she escapes Stalin’s oppression and is reunited with her lost father’s family. After experiencing abuse from her Aunt Elfriede and discrimination caused by her Russian heritage, in *Tainted Amber*, seventeen-year-old Katya, an aspiring writer fascinated with Thomas Mann, a Nobel Prize-winning author banned by Hitler, is working as a servant at a horse-breeding estate owned by the wealthy Richter family. Set in 1937–1938, that is right before Hitler’s annexation of Austria and the beginning of the Second World War, *Tainted Amber* illustrates the gradual spread of Nazism and anti-Semitism and the various reactions of Germans. Finally, in *Crow Stone*, Goldstone’s protagonist is arrested by the Red Army at the end of the war and is once again exiled to the Soviet Union, where she is

13 Anne Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin’s War on Ukraine* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 124.

14 *Ibid.*, 126.

15 Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 129.

16 Gabriele Goldstone, *The Kulak’s Daughter* (Austin: Blooming Tree Press: 2009).

17 Gabriele Goldstone, *Broken Stone* (Winnipeg: Rebelight Publishing Inc. 2015).

18 Gabriele Goldstone, *Crow Stone* (Vancouver: Ronsdale 2022).

19 See Świetlicki, *Next-Generation*, 143–149.

interned until 1947. While Katya never supported Hitler, her German heritage is enough for the Soviets to position her as a Nazi.

Rachel Dean-Ruzicka argues that the creation of “one-dimensional evil Nazi characters” can be explained by the fact that by positioning the Nazis as the Others, present-day readers can instantly reject them: “if ‘they’ are evil, then ‘we’ must not be.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, depicting Germans in children’s Holocaust fiction as more than Nazi Bogeymen is crucial in showing that “the past is not self-evident.”<sup>21</sup> After all, as Snyder notes, “To dismiss the Nazis or the Soviets as beyond human concern or historical understanding is to fall into their moral trap. The safer route is to realize that their motives for mass killing, however revolting to us, made sense to them.”<sup>22</sup> In *Tainted Amber*, Goldstone attempts to do so by depicting the Third Reich as a “hornet’s nest” inhabited by “National Socialists – the Nazis,” an organization Katya regularly compares to the Bolsheviks led by Stalin, and Germans who are either enchanted with Hitler or disagree with him in silence, too afraid to voice their disapproval.<sup>23</sup>

Katya, traumatized by her experience under Stalin in Soviet Ukraine and Siberia, initially tries to disregard the spreading Nazi ideology and build a life in East Prussia. However, she soon begins to understand the deadly consequences of Nazism and the 1935 Nuremberg racial laws when they start affecting her personally. Hitler’s “portrait watches [her – M. Ś.] work” and everyday greetings change to Heil Hitler, which Katya says only once because “the words [felt – M. Ś.] like pebbles in [her – M. Ś.] throat.”<sup>24</sup> Her heroes, including Mann, whose books she reads hidden inside of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, are banned. The names of streets in East Prussia change to commemorate Nazi heroes, and anti-Semitic signs excluding Jews from Aryan spaces begin to appear in public spaces. Nazism infiltrates all spheres of life, including customs and traditions. Christmas can no longer be celebrated as the birth of Jesus, which reminds Katya of the Soviet ban on religion and the last Christmas she secretly observed with her brother Albert right before their exile to Siberia. Because all stars “belong to Communists and Jews,”<sup>25</sup> they cannot be used as decorations. Instead, the Christmas market in Königsberg, which

20 Rachel Dean-Ruzicka, *Tolerance Discourse and Young Adult Holocaust Literature: Engaging Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2017), 122.

21 *Ibid.*, 119.

22 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 400.

23 Goldstone, *Tainted Amber*, 62.

24 *Ibid.*, 155.

25 *Ibid.*, 201.

Katya attends with her younger sisters Sofie and Marthe, who are “obedient little Nazi girls,” and Aunt Hannelore, reminds her of “a Nazi market” with “swastika-shaped cookie cutter[s]” and “miniature airplanes and balls painted with swastikas”<sup>26</sup> on the tree. Even the lyrics of *Silent Night* are nazified: “... all is bright/Only the Chancellor steadfast on fight/ Watches o’er Germany by day and by night...”<sup>27</sup> Although Katya is shocked to see the changes and notices the alarming similarities between Stalin’s and Hitler’s propaganda, her sisters accept them with no hesitation. “It’s not surprising that the Hitler Youth is so successful. Children are little copycats,”<sup>28</sup> notes the protagonist thinking about the anti-kulak lessons she was taught by her Soviet teacher.

Katya refuses to join The Faith and Beauty group, “a vanity club for women who want to primp themselves into ‘proper’ Nazi housewives”; after some hesitation, which leaves her “disgusted,” she also dismisses the opportunity to have her writing published in a Nazi women’s magazine.<sup>29</sup> The conversations Katya has with her family members further position her as an outsider who rejects Nazism and her family members as implicated subjects “filled with hope looking upon the swastika.”<sup>30</sup> While Katya recognizes the dangers of Nazism and anti-Semitism, her sisters and Aunt accept the new ideology and celebrate the success of Hitler’s welfare policies: “This government does a lot for young families [...]. A spa vacation to recover from a childbirth? How generous,”<sup>31</sup> notes Katya’s sympathetic Aunt Hannelore. At the Christmas market, she declares that she has “nothing against the Jews” and has “no contact of any kind with the Jews” not because of her anti-Semitism, but because they “don’t have much in common.”<sup>32</sup> Marthe, Katya’s ten-year-old sister, is more vocal in her hatred toward Jews and adds that the leader of The League of German Girls taught her that “Jews are an inferior race.”<sup>33</sup> This anti-Semitic remark is juxtaposed with Katya’s words: “We’re all the same. Germans, Jews, Germans from Russia, Russians [...]. gypsies.”<sup>34</sup> In reply, Katya hears that

26 Ibid., 202; 204.

27 Ibid., 205.

28 Ibid., 201.

29 Ibid., 127; 181.

30 Ibid., 140.

31 Ibid., 195–196.

32 Ibid., 210.

33 Ibid., 210.

34 Ibid., 210.

she should never “criticize the Fuhrer’s ideas.”<sup>35</sup> Marthe’s repetition of Nazi propaganda makes Katya think of “the USSR, except that back then [they – M. Ś.] weren’t supposed to criticize Comrade Stalin.”<sup>36</sup> Notably, Katya tries to excuse her “gullible” younger sisters “infected” with Nazism, believing that they are too young to remember that a few years earlier Stalin positioned their own kulak family as inferior.<sup>37</sup> However, Katya’s sisters’ willingness to embrace Nazism may also stem from their position as Volksdeutsche, Germans from Soviet Ukraine who are anti-communist and desperately want to fit in and belong.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the possibility of joining The League of German Girls allows them to prove their Germanness.

Katya rejects Nazism not only because of her haunting memories of Stalinism<sup>39</sup> but also due to the fact that her best friend is Jewish. Minna Epstein is a “confident, beautiful and reckless” girl who “has two Jewish grandparents and two Aryan grandparents, so under the Nuremberg laws of 1935, she’s a *Mischling*.”<sup>40</sup> She flirts with Helmut, the Richers’ handsome oldest son, who “carries an air of superiority about him” and wants to become an SS soldier.<sup>41</sup> Marina Warner argues that among “the most profound and puzzling features of the Bogeyman is his seductive power: he can charm at the same time as he repulses.”<sup>42</sup> Although Helmut charms Minna, Katya does not trust him, as he reminds her of another Bogeyman, Uncle Leo, a Bolshevik official who denounced her father. Thus, she warns Minna and asks her to proceed with caution. Before becoming a ruthless Nazi following Hitler’s slogan “*ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer*” [one people, one empire, one leader]<sup>43</sup> Helmut emerges as an

35 Ibid., 210.

36 Ibid., 211.

37 Ibid., 213–214.

38 Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries*, 39. Moreover, Martha points to the attractiveness Nazism held for many German children, which is rarely discussed in children’s literature: “It’s so much fun. In the summer, we went camping and hiking. We travelled to the lake district in Masuren. [...] we stayed in log cabins right by a lake, and we built fires on the shoreline and stayed up late studying the stars, and now we’re learning to embroider and crochet, and we have some special Christmas projects.” Goldstone, *Tainted*, 191.

39 As Snyder argues, “People who experienced both Nazi and Stalinist power, almost everyone in the bloodlands, had every reason to compare the two systems.” *Bloodlands*, 408.

40 Goldstone, *Tainted*, 5; 29.

41 Ibid., 11; 5.

42 Quoted in Kokkola, *Representing*, 167.

43 Goldstone, *Tainted*, 250.

opportunist and a sexual predator. Soon after a trip to the seaside, where the girls go on with Helmut and his shy brother David, Minna, an aspiring actress, decides to leave the increasingly anti-Semitic East Prussia for Vienna. Before moving out, she gifts Katya an old desk to help her become a writer. When at the end of the novel Minna finally sends the protagonist the key to one of the drawers she could not open, Katya finds “a stunning piece of tear-shaped amber” with a “preserved ant caught inside”<sup>44</sup> and a letter from Helmut to Minna. Only then does Katya realize that Helmut, an aspiring SS soldier, raped Minna and forced her to get an abortion: “*See this insect, this life that has no future? You understand what must be done, don’t you? This insect was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Beautiful but tragic.*”<sup>45</sup>

While Goldstone positions Helmut as a Nazi Bogeyman, other characters, including Katya’s sympathetic younger brother Albert and Minna’s former boyfriend Georg also enlist. Moreover, Helmut is juxtaposed with his younger brother David, Katya’s love interest, who becomes a Nazi to prove his masculinity. In addition to Minna, Helmut also impregnates Gretchen, a teenage maid, but he refuses to raise the child as his own. Unequivocally supportive of Hitler, Gretchen decides to give birth at “a Lebensborn home, a place for unmarried mothers to have their so-called perfect children out of the public eye.”<sup>46</sup> Unlike Helmut, who rejects his own child and forces Minna to get an abortion, David would like to become a father and “teach [his – M. Ś.] children how to ride horses.”<sup>47</sup> However, he is deprived of this opportunity because of the Nazi eugenics. As an epileptic, David is forcefully sterilized in accordance with the 1935 Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring. Because in the Third Reich imperfection – like Jews – is not allowed, the authorities call David a “genetically inferior [...] life unworthy of life” that cannot “produce a worthy German.”<sup>48</sup> Right before the sterilization, David gets drunk and wants to force Katya to have sex, which he sees as his last chance to become a father. Upon Helmut’s suggestion, and despite Frau Richter’s<sup>49</sup> disapproval, David’s name, which “sounds too Jewish” is changed

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44 Ibid., 244.

45 Ibid., 245.

46 Ibid., 248.

47 Ibid., 118.

48 Ibid., 169.

49 As Rothberg notes, “most people deny, look away from, or simply accept the benefits of evil in both its extreme and everyday forms.” Rothberg, *Implicated*, 20. In *Tainted Amber*, such a character is Frau Richter, the mother of Helmut and David, a sympathetic woman

to Klaus, a “solid German name.”<sup>50</sup> When he comes back after the procedure, “his eyes are dull, like a sick horse.”<sup>51</sup> Katya’s beloved David, who loves horses, tries to fit in by becoming “Klaus, the brash, Helmut-like alter ego [...] who’s trying to fit in with his brother’s Nazi cohorts.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, even though he does not believe in Hitler, he accepts Nazism as a protective strategy, his only opportunity to demonstrate that he is “worthy of life.” In the opening chapter of *Crow Stone*, set in 1944, David/Klaus dies while proving his worth on the east front.

### Implicated Volksdeutsche in Nazi-occupied Ukraine

Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch, who wrote a blurb for the back cover of *Tainted Amber*, is currently the most popular Canadian author of middle-grade historical fiction. Since 1996, she has introduced various suppressed topics to Anglophone children’s literature, including the Armenian Genocide, the First World War internment of Ukrainians in Canada, and the Holodomor.<sup>53</sup> In the six books forming her commercially and critically-successful Second World War trilogies,<sup>54</sup> Skrypuch demonstrates the scale of Soviet oppression and the power of Nazi propaganda. Like Goldstone, Skrypuch condemns anti-Semitism and points to Soviet and Nazi atrocities. However, she focuses on the war experiences of ethnic Ukrainians.

Ukraine was central in Hitler’s Lebensraum project and the Hunger Plan. Germans were supposed to “deport, kill, assimilate, or enslave the native

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who gives Katya Mann’s books, likes Minna, and disapproves of Nazism. Still, she follows all Nazi rules and knows about Helmut’s actions. Her position can be explained by the limited opportunities women had in the Third Reich and the fear of being targeted by the Nazis because epilepsy runs in her family. Moreover, because her mother came from the “Masuren Lakes district, a beautiful area where Germans, Soviets and Poles all bicker for ownership,” she fears that the Nazis may question her Aryan status. Thus, despite her beliefs, Frau Richter officially embraces Nazism as a protective strategy. Goldstone, *Tainted*, 229–230.

50 Ibid., 71.

51 Ibid., 153.

52 Ibid., 220.

53 See Świetlicki, *Next-Generation*, 19–21.

54 The first trilogy consists of *Stolen Child* (2010 – US title *Stolen Girl*, 2019), *Making Bombs for Hitler* (2012), and *Underground Soldier* (2014 – US title *The Below*, 2018); the second one is formed by *Don’t Tell the Enemy* (2018 – US title *Don’t Tell the Nazis*, 2019); *Trapped in Hitler’s Web* (2020), and *Traitors Among Us* (2021). Notably, Skrypuch’s first book focused on the Second World War and the implicated position of Ukrainian Nazi collaborators was a novel titled *Hope’s War* (2001).

populations, and bring order and prosperity to a humbled frontier” by murdering “between thirty-one and forty-five million people, mostly Slavs,” including “sixty-five percent of the west Ukrainians.”<sup>55</sup> The Slavic population was to be replaced by ethnic Germans who were to build “utopian farming communities that would produce a bounty of food for Europe” in “a vast frontier empire ruled by Germans, bereft of Jews, and scantily peopled by Slavs reduced to slavery.”<sup>56</sup> Although the Wehrmacht failed to implement Hitler’s Hunger Plan, “Germans starved Soviet citizens anyway, less from political dominion than political desperation.”<sup>57</sup>

*Don’t Tell the Enemy* is loosely based on the story of Kateryna Sikorka and her daughter Krystia, who hid their Jewish neighbors in Nazi-occupied Ukraine and were named Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. The novel, set in Viteretz, a town based on Pidhaitsi, is the first volume in Skrypuch’s second trilogy and showcases the fate of Ukrainians who, after two years of Soviet occupation, in 1941 initially welcomed the Nazis as liberators. As Anne Applebaum notes, “anyone who hoped for a better life under German occupation had their expectations swiftly dashed.”<sup>58</sup> After the initial optimism caused by the arrival of the Nazis, Krystia, the twelve-year-old narrator and protagonist of *Don’t Tell the Enemy*, begins to see more and more similarities between the Nazis and the Soviets, who oppressed Viteretz for the last two years. Contrary to some hopeful adults, she almost immediately realizes that the Nazis are “not the cultured Germans who believed in democracy and brought freedom.”<sup>59</sup>

The first Germans who come to Viteretz are Nazi soldiers and some Volksdeutsche from Bukovyna, but they are soon joined by “true Nazi believers” from the Reich.<sup>60</sup> Krystia notices that the Nazis like making lists and dividing people into categories while paying particular attention to their heritage. Although at first she struggles to understand the Nazi beliefs, Krystia eventually realizes that they believe there are different categories of people – the

55 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 160.

56 *Ibid.*, 160; 394.

57 *Ibid.*, 169.

58 Applebaum, *Red Famine*, 328.

59 Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell The Enemy*, 59.

60 *Ibid.*, 67. Notably, in the novel’s author’s note Skrypuch highlights that “German and Nazi are not interchangeable: German and Volksdeutsche refer to ethnicity, not political beliefs. Some Germans and Volksdeutsche who opposed the Nazis became victims too. Others were executed or sent to slave labor camps by the Soviets.” Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell*, 183.

superior Aryans and inferior subhuman like Slavs and Jews. This reflects the Nazi “conviction that all of humankind belonged to one of two racial categories, the *Herrenvolk*, the ruling people, and the *Untermensch*, or ‘subhumans.’”<sup>61</sup> Together with her mother and younger sister Maria, Krystia has to work as a servant at the Nazi Commandant’s house, where she observes the first Nazi execution of Jews and is told by the Commandant’s wife: “You Slavs are all alike. You can’t think further than your own shallow needs.”<sup>62</sup> While Krystia’s family works for the Nazis, they have no choice to say no. Moreover, it provides them with an opportunity to learn more about the political situation, including the surprising fact that “the Soviets and Britain were now on the *same* side of the war, fighting the Nazis together.”<sup>63</sup> Krystia struggles to understand the reasons behind this cooperation: “Surely the British knew that the murderous Soviets were not much different than the Nazis? Couldn’t the British fight them both?”<sup>64</sup> Thus, it can be argued that Skrypuch attempts to challenge the simplistic version of history with which many North American readers may be familiar. While Jews in Viteretz are put in a ghetto and Slavs starve, Krystia is surprised when she witnesses the commandant’s wife and her friends “talk[ing] about silly things like dresses and cake recipes. Didn’t they know that we were in the middle of a war?”<sup>65</sup> she asks.

In *Don’t Tell the Enemy*, Skrypuch focuses on the cooperation of Ukrainians and Jews, but she also showcases the difficult situation of all inhabitants of Ukraine caused by Hitler’s plans. Notably, after the harvests all produce is confiscated by the Nazis, which reminds Krystia of the actions of the Soviet regime. Krystia’s family begins to starve, yet Frau Hermann, the Commandant’s wife, does not care, “except for the fact that [the Slavs] might steal food from her.”<sup>66</sup> Consequently, Slavs can no longer work in the kitchen, but have to “carry trays of food, though, and it nearly drove [Krystia – M. Ś.] mad seeing meat and cheese and buns, and smelling them all.”<sup>67</sup> Frau Hermann eventually fires Krystia and her mother because “the sight of [their – M. Ś.] gaunt faces ruined her appetite”; therefore, as the protagonist says, “by late

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61 Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries*, 20.

62 Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell*, 52.

63 *Ibid.*, 70.

64 *Ibid.*, 70.

65 *Ibid.*, 73.

66 *Ibid.*, 89.

67 *Ibid.*, 89–90.

February, [they – M. Ś.] were like walking skeletons.”<sup>68</sup> Importantly, the protagonist does not compare her situation to that of her Jewish friends. As Mr. Segal, Krystia’s Jewish neighbor says: “We’re all living under the Hunger Plan, but you know they have worse intentions towards us Jews [...]. Your family might live through this occupation, but if even a fraction of the rumours are true, we need to get Jews out of here.”<sup>69</sup> While Ukrainian and Poles are starving, the situation of Jews is even worse, for they have no farm animals. Initially, they can buy overpriced food from Volksdeutsche and are helped by Gentiles. Eventually, all Jews of Viteretz are put in a ghetto, and many die of starvation or freeze to death in winter. Nazis confiscate food from the local farmers because, at that time, Nazi soldiers in the Soviet Union were told that in order to get food, they “have to starve the surrounding population.”<sup>70</sup>

While Goldstone’s *Tainted Amber* depicts the experience of Katya, a Volksdeutsche who moved to The Reich before the war, Skrypuch’s *Don’t Tell the Enemy* features ethnic German secondary characters who are forced to move to Nazi-occupied Ukraine and actively or passively participate in the Holocaust.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the novel showcases not only Nazi Bogeymen trope in the form of the Commandant – based on *Kriminalpolizei* Willy Hermann – and his ruthless wife, but also the implication of the Volksdeutsche, who were supposed to take over the properties of Jews and Ukrainians and play the role of “the human building blocks for the new order.”<sup>72</sup> Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, “a Nazi party organ founded in 1935 to centralize and coordinate all organizations and activities in the Reich dealing with the *Volksdeutsche*” confiscated Jewish and Slavic houses, “personal belongings, from furniture to socks and shoes,” and clothes, which “became available as the deportations and the final solution commenced.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, as Snyder notes, “German children wore the socks of Jewish children shot in Minsk, German men the watches of Jewish men shot at Babi Yar, German women the fur coats of Jewish women shot at Maly Trastsianets.”<sup>74</sup>

68 Ibid., 130–131.

69 Ibid., 91.

70 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 170.

71 Świetlicki, *Next-Generation*, 188–204.

72 Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries*, 13.

73 Ibid., 202.

74 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 396.

Even though some Volksdeutsche in *Don't Tell the Enemy* emerge as victims of Stalin and Hitler, they also benefit from the Nazi policies. Herr Zimmer is a sympathetic Volksdeutsche who shows Krystia kindness but takes over her father's old workshop. Krystia is surprised when Zimmer says that he does not support the Nazis and shares his story of Soviet repression: "The Soviets took over my shop and our house during the time of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. We were deported to the Reich. My soon was drafted into the German army, and I was selected to live here. I pray every day that my son survives the war. But even more, I pray that my son does not become a Nazi."<sup>75</sup> Another sympathetic character is Frau Lange, who is pregnant and moves into the house of Doctor Mina, a Jewish doctor for whom Krystia's mother used to work, and buys milk from Krystia. The protagonist notices that her new neighbor likes surrounding herself with pretty things, which makes her wonder: "where it had come from. Were the old owners now in a slave camp or ghetto? [...] How could they seem so normal, even almost nice, yet live like vultures – benefiting from the destruction of others?"<sup>76</sup>

Rothberg notes that implication is multidirectional because "it does not remain limited to one set of entanglements but encompasses a range of powers and interests that frame our actions."<sup>77</sup> Frau Gertrude Schneider and her daughter Marga are the most important Volksdeutsche characters in *Don't Tell the Enemy* who reveal the complexity of implication and the fact that in the bloodlands "it is hard to find political collaboration with the Germans that is not related to a previous experience of Soviet rule."<sup>78</sup> When Krystia sees them for the first time, they are exhausted, dirty, and can barely walk. Desperate and hungry, Frau Schneider asks the protagonist for some milk for her daughter. Krystia feeds them and is thanked for this act of kindness. The poor German woman and her daughter speak Ukrainian because they are refugees from Bukovyna, who were also victimized by the Soviet regime: "The Soviets put my father in a slave-labour camp in Siberia [...]. Mama and I were rescued by the Germans. This whole area is now part of the Reich, so there will be a lot more of us Volksdeutsche settling here," says Marga.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Skrypuch, *Don't Tell*, 104–105.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>77</sup> Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Redford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 145.

<sup>78</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 397.

<sup>79</sup> Skrypuch, *Don't Tell*, 39.

After the war, the officials of Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle claimed that they “had nothing to do with the final solution, concentration camps, deportations, and the like”; moreover, they “emphasized their lack of anti-Semitism and even cited instances of individual efforts to save Jews.”<sup>80</sup> However, “claims of total innocence in these matters and assertions of ignorance about atrocities are incredible,” as most Volksdeutsche directly or indirectly benefited from Hitler’s policies.<sup>81</sup> The Schneiders become Krystia’s neighbors because Aunt Iryna is forced to leave her house. When the Nazi official tells Aunt Iryna that apart from her personal belongings “everything else is to remain in the house,” Krystia realizes that “he didn’t specifically say to leave the cow and the chickens.”<sup>82</sup> Marga, who quickly joins The League of German Girls, accuses Krystia of stealing their cow and chickens and threatens “to tell the Commandant [...] your whole family is going to be in big trouble.”<sup>83</sup> Krystia is afraid of Marga’s threat, but her mother suggests going to the Schneiders and once again showing them kindness by giving sharing some milk and eggs. When Krystia goes to their house a day after witnessing Frau Schneider sorting the personal belongings of the Jews killed by the Nazi Commandant, she sees “Marga [wearing – M. Ś.] the baker’s white trousers and shirt,” and “Frau Schneider [...] the dogcatcher’s grey shirt and brown trousers.”<sup>84</sup> This sight makes Krystia think of vultures. Krystia explains Aunt Iryna’s situation to Frau Schneider, who understands and gives the protagonist tinned pork because “the Volksdeutsche Liaison Office [Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle – M. Ś.] acts like a welfare agency, supplying [them – M. Ś.] with all that [they – M. Ś.] need”; she also asks Marga and Krystia to shake hands, saying “we’re in the midst of war, but all the more reason for human kindness.”<sup>85</sup> Krystia struggles with understanding the paradox of showing kindness and wearing the clothes of the dead: “it was not a kind woman I had seen the day before, coldly sorting through the clothing of murdered Jews.”<sup>86</sup> Despite singular acts of kindness, “evidence reveals that in certain situations VoMi and the people working under its

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80 Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries*, 202.

81 *Ibid.*, 202.

82 Skrypuch, *Don’t Tell*, 37.

83 *Ibid.*, 57.

84 *Ibid.*, 63.

85 *Ibid.*, 65.

86 *Ibid.*, 65.

authority either assisted in anti-Jewish measures or exploited the plight of Jews to benefit the Volksdeutsche.”<sup>87</sup>

Although it “is tempting to say that a Nazi murderer is beyond the pale of understanding,” trying to understand the perpetrators can prevent us from failing to recognize our own implication.<sup>88</sup> Marga in *Don't Tell the Enemy* wants to fit in and prove that she is worth being in The League of German Girls, but she follows her mother's advice and does not tell the Commandant about the missing cow. However, she is the one who unwillingly denounces Krystia's family. The day after Krystia's mother is hanged for hiding Jews, the protagonist sees Marga with a bruised face, wearing a dress that belonged to Krystia's Jewish classmate, and confronts her: “Why did you tell the Commandant that we were hiding Jews?”<sup>89</sup> Marga's answer is surprising, for she starts crying and says: “You were pumping much more water. They beat me and still I didn't tell them. But they were going to kill Mutter if I didn't say something...”<sup>90</sup> Instead of condemning the Volksdeutsche girl who had lost her father, the protagonist only thinks: “What would I have done to save my own mother from death?”<sup>91</sup> Thus, Marga emerges not as a one-dimensional perpetrator but an implicated subject.

### Conclusion

“History is a hunt for truth, understanding, and responsibility, not a scroll of sacrifice, blame, and meaning,” writes Snyder in *Bloodlands*.<sup>92</sup> However, until recently the focus of Anglophone children's and Young Adult authors of Holocaust fiction was predominately on depicting the Jewish sacrifice and the Nazi blame. Still, as Rothberg observes, a narrative “based on clear-cut visions of victims and perpetrators of innocence and guilt evacuates the political sphere of complexity and reduces it to a morality tale.”<sup>93</sup> In addition to such oversimplified texts, numerous new books, usually ones presenting previously underrepresented perspectives, are also regularly published. After

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>88</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 400.

<sup>89</sup> Skrypuch, *Don't Tell*, 172.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>92</sup> Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 408.

<sup>93</sup> Rothberg, *Implicated*, 139.

all, as Hamida Bosmajian notes in her influential book *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust* (2002), “no one narrative for young reader is sufficient in knowledge or understanding of Nazism and the Holocaust.”<sup>94</sup> Among the most interesting novels introducing new voices to historical fiction are those by Canadian authors whose parents or grandparents were born in present-day Ukraine, such as Gabriele Goldstone and Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch. Books like *Tainted Amber* and *Don't Tell the Enemy* can familiarize young readers with the complex history of the distant bloodlands and encourage them to look for truth, understanding, and responsibility. Goldstone and Skrypuch point to the role of propaganda, ideology, and opportunism in the spread of Nazism, anti-Semitism, and Stalinism. Thus, amongst Nazi Bogeymen and innocent victims, both novels feature implicated characters entangled between Hitler and Stalin.

Notably, as Rothberg argues, “the concept of the gray zone can transcend the Holocaust and take on broader reach related to the exploration of implication and implicated subjects.”<sup>95</sup> Historical novels by Goldstone and Skrypuch can help Anglophone young readers better understand not only the entangled history of the bloodlands but also the present-day Russo-Ukrainian War and the implicated position of Russians and Putin’s international supporters.<sup>96</sup> Although many Westerners have actively supported Ukraine, others have failed to recognize the transcultural character of the Russo-Ukrainian War, its global consequences, and its links to the complex history of the Second World War. Positioning “German crimes [as] metaphysical and Soviet ones [as] meaningless was politically convenient for Vladimir Putin’s regime, which did its best to export the idea”<sup>97</sup>. In his justification of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, which he calls a “special military operation” conducted to “denazify”<sup>98</sup> Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has repeatedly referred

94 Hamida Bosmajian, *Sparing the Child: Grief and the Unspeakable in Youth Literature about Nazism and the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2002), xx.

95 Rothberg, *Implicated*, 39.

96 See Serhii Plokyh, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2023).

97 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 408.

98 Putin has frequently called Ukrainians Nazis and referred to the Second World War collaboration between Ukrainian nationalists and the Nazis in Western Ukraine. See Świątlicki 168–177. However, “many Ukrainians saw the Russian invaders as the true Nazis” because, as Serhii Plokyh observes, “the Russian occupation of Ukrainian cities and villages was reminiscent of scenes of the Nazi occupation of Ukraine in World War II.” See Plokyh, *Russo-Ukrainian*, 166.

to the myth of the Great Patriotic War – as the Second World War is known in Russia. This myth does not include Stalin's collaboration with Hitler between 1939 and 1941 and the 1939 double invasion of Poland – which at that time included parts of present-day western Ukraine. According to the official historical discourse in Russia, the Red Army only liberated Europe and defeated Nazism, positioned as the greatest and inexplicable evil. The Nazi-Soviet collaboration, anti-Semitic pogroms, and ethnic cleansings of Poles and Ukrainians are not part of the official history. Thus, the lack of historical knowledge, combined with state propaganda, makes it difficult for many present-day Russians, who are used to thinking of themselves as the victors or the victims, to recognize their own entangled history of implication.

## Abstract

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*Trapped Between Hitler and Stalin: Nazi Bogeymen and Implicated Subjects in Canadian Children's Historical Fiction*

This article studies the portrayal of Nazi and German characters in Gabriele Goldstone's *Tainted Amber* (2021), a Young Adult novel set in East Prussia right before the war, and Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch's middle-grade book *Don't Tell the Enemy* (2018), set in Nazi-occupied western Ukraine. The article demonstrates that Skrypuch and Goldstone point to the role of propaganda, ideology, and opportunism in the spread of Nazism, anti-Semitism, and Stalinism. Amongst stereotypical Nazi Bogeymen and innocent victims, both novels feature characters entangled between Hitler and Stalin that emerge as what Michael Rothberg termed implicated subjects.

## Keywords

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Volksdeutsche, children's literature, bloodlands, Canada, Ukraine, implicated subject