

## Chalmers, Beverly. *Betrayed: Child Sex Abuse in the Holocaust. Tolworth Surrey: Grosvenor House, 2020*

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**Chalmers, Beverly. *Betrayed: Child Sex Abuse in the Holocaust*. Tolworth Surrey: Grosvenor House, 2020.**

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Known for her award-winning book *Birth, Sex and Abuse: Women's Voices under Nazi Rule*, Beverly Chalmers has made a name for herself as a scholar writing about lesser known or often ignored aspects of Nazi and/or Holocaust history. In her latest study called *Betrayed: Child Sex Abuse in the Holocaust [Betrayed]* (Grosvenor House, 2020), Chalmers takes on the difficult subject of the sexual abuse of children during the Holocaust. This topic, as Chalmers emphasizes, has been treated as a taboo for decades and has received little scholarly attention: while a number of Holocaust texts briefly mention the subject, some canonical histories of children in the Holocaust do not. The general attitude of silence, as Chalmers emphasizes throughout the entire work, made her own research for the book more than challenging and sometimes downright impossible. Not only did she find herself receiving little to no help in tracking down testimonies but Chalmers also reports being blocked at times, both explicitly and implicitly, from accessing files in various international archives, or confronted with public disapproval at conferences.

Due to these limitations and the fact that Chalmers also had to rely on survivors who were actually willing to talk on record, *Betrayed* provides a necessarily non-exhaustive snapshot of child sex abuse during all stages in the Holocaust. Supported by various resources, from diaries and memoirs to oral testimonies, *Betrayed* nevertheless tells the traumatic experiences of 160 Jewish children and 17 non-Jewish children (8 German and 9 British children) who were sexually abused in a variety of ways. Their stories are supported by over 1000 footnotes, 300 citations, and 2 appendices. In addition, the 11 chapters provide detailed background information on the harsh and conservative childrearing principles in early-twentieth century European society, the role of antisemitism and the destruction of the Jewish family unit in enabling abusers, the cruelty of the *Einsatzgruppen* specifically towards children, disturbing medical experiments involving sexual behavior, or the use of sexual exchanges as a way to survive. Chalmers also highlights desperate attempts by Jewish mothers to prevent the abuse by, for instance, disguising their children.

From beginning to end, the content of Chalmers' *Betrayed* is both shocking and sad. The Nazis, as Chalmers makes clear, did not endorse child rape legally nor did they overtly include this in their ideology. Yet, at the same time, they also did nothing to prevent or punish these deeds but rather enabled them through their other actions. As readers, we learn about the horrific abuse that took place in ghettos, camps, or on transit trains but also while in hiding or during international rescue missions. Among the perpetrators, as Chalmers shows, were well-known Nazis (like the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele), various members of the SS and the *Einsatzgruppen*, or soldiers from the *Wehrmacht*. The abuse, however, did not stop here: *Betrayed* exposes how the list of abusers also included supposed rescuers or peers. Russian liberators and other allies appear here but most reported sexual abuse cases, as Chalmers demonstrates, actually came from foster homes in which foster fathers or foster siblings took advantage of the children's vulnerability.

Public discussions about the roles of non-Nazis in the atrocities have always been challenging. In her study, Chalmers calls for the truth, however bitter it may be, arguing passionately against the "symptom of sweetening the Holocaust or its memory" (195), and asking us readers over and over again to be upstanders against past and present sexual violence. As a result, Chalmers does not shy away from one of the most sensitive subjects in this context, namely the rape of Jewish children by other Jews. Of the 160 individual stories of sexual abuse of Jewish children discussed in *Betrayed*, only a few were committed by Jews but Chalmers' list of Jewish perpetrators also includes the controversial head of the *Judenrat* in the Lodz Ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski. Chalmers identifies these dishonorable actions by Jews against other Jews as some of the main reasons for the ongoing public suppression of the subject.

Consequently, the issue of denial takes up the majority of the second half of the study. Chalmers discusses in detail the continued emotional impact of these traumatic experiences on survivors, which often included feelings of shame in addition to feelings of guilt and self-hatred. Yet, as Chalmers convincingly stresses throughout her study, our reluctance to face the truth makes all of us "bystanders, if not accomplices, to multiple crimes against children" (5). Hiding recorded testimonies out of shame, as Chalmers passionately argues, does not protect the children who, after all, had the courage to talk about their sexual abuse, but rather shield the abusers by allowing them to stay unrecognized and unpunished.

Given its subject, Chalmer's *Betrayed* is a hard book to read, yet one that deserves much more academic attention. The study honors and acknowledges the experiences of child sex abuse victims of the Holocaust, calls for larger systematic examinations of the topic beyond the current, mostly individual case studies provided by therapists, and brings attention to the continued and intentional cover-up of sexual abuse and rape of children in recent genocides. Occasional spelling mistakes and narrative repetitions do not distract from the study's relevance, and I highly commend Chalmers for her continued courage and resilience in exploring these tough subjects.