

When children and animals fight Nazis: The Holocaust and National Socialism in the *Spirou* comics from Belgium

The crimes of the Nazis are now also being addressed by comics intended expressly for children. One example is the *Spirou* series, which was started by the Dupuis publishing house in Belgium in 1938 and has continued to this day with a changing series of creators. The comic comes complete with action and slapstick. In one strip *Spirou*, a bellhop at the Hotel Moustic in Brussels, turns a swastika flag into a superhero's cape (*Le groom vert-de-gris* 2009, German version *Operation Fledermaus* 2010, Figure 1).¹ This combination prompts the question: is what the comics show here history in a historiographical sense? And if not, what is it?

In Émile Bravo's four-volume series *Hope Against All Odds (Spirou ou l'espoir malgré tout* 2008–2022 / German version *Spirou oder: die Hoffnung* 2009–2022), which has a serious tone and historiographical aspirations, *Spirou* boards a train for Auschwitz holding the hands of two children wearing yellow Stars of David (Figure 2).² Later they escape. The catalogue from the exhibition *Spirou dans la tourmente de la Shoah* ("Spirou in the turmoil of the Shoah") at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris highlights the wealth of historical material and multitude of historical personages in Bravo's comics and extremely considered poetic language. Bravo's *Spirou* comics are designed to inform readers about National Socialism and the Holocaust.

The comic *The Friends of Spirou (Les amis de Spirou / Die Freunde von Spirou*, both 2023) is not part of the established fictional *Spirou* cosmos but rather about the *Spirou* fan club, which has existed since 1938 in the Belgian town of Marcinelle. At its core, therefore, this

1 Yann, Olivier Schwartz, *Operation Fledermaus* (Hamburg, 2010), 69. See Stefan Börnchen, "Oh, wie schön wäre historische Gerechtigkeit: Der belgische Comicheld Spirou kämpft gegen Nazis und Kolonialismus," <https://pop-zeitschrift.de/2023/11/07/oh-wie-schoen-waere-historische-gerechtigkeitautorvon-stefan-boernchen-autordatum31-10-2023-datum/> (accessed 26 June 2025).

2 Émile Bravo, *Spirou oder: die Hoffnung*. volumes 1–4 (Hamburg, 2009–2022) 3:115.

comic seeks to tell a true story. Using distinctly juvenile facial traits, it specifically invites children to identify with it.³

Jean Doisy, editor-in-chief of the *Spirou* magazine who himself was active in the resistance, designed a member ID for the “Friends of Spirou” fan club with the slogan “Friends, everywhere and anytime!” and a partially Catholic, partially humanist code of honor. It contained rules such as “A friend of Spirou is a friend of all but especially the weak.” The deaths of two teenagers from “amis de Spirou” circles in the resistance have been historically documented. The comic cites Doisy’s obituary for them and has him ask “how reading comics could lead to such a horror”. The comics, therefore, are said to have sharpened the teenagers’ consciences and prompted them to become resistance fighters.

The cover of *The Friends of Spirou* shows a group of children pasting over a swastika with a poster showing Spirou’s red bellhop cap and the fan club’s slogan now modified to “Resistance, everywhere and anytime!” (Figure 3). The shadows of German soldiers fall on the children who face them with clenched fists, a slingshot and a club flag. The group includes a somewhat pudgy dog, later joined by a ferret and a squirrel.

Of the six children, one is a girl, named Miche. Her club name is “Spirouette”. Like Spirou, she works at a hotel. Miche’s short trousers, which she wears under her work attire as Superman does his spandex suit, recall the color and design of Spirou’s red livery. Miche joined the “Friends of Spirou” after the Germans shot her cousin and sent her family off on a truck, including a man wearing the hat, beard and sidelocks of an Orthodox Jew – before the eyes of the five boys and the comic’s readers (Figure 4).

Miche is the only girl in the action and also the only Jewish child. The boys hide her and admit her to the Spirou club. She doesn’t shy from brawls with young Belgian fascists (Figure 5). In another fight at the end of the comic, a Belgian boy thrusts a Hitler Youth dagger into her belly. The immediately following and final two-page spread of the comic shows two graves in the snow. Miche has apparently died, like her cousin. (The sequel reveals that she survives.)

3 Jean-David Morvan, David Evrard, Ben BK, *Die Freunde von Spirou*, vol. 1 (Hamburg, 2023) with a brief historical appendix pp. 68–71. For more extensive treatment see Christelle and Bertrand Pissavy, *La véritable histoire de Spirou 1937–1946* (Marcinelle 2013), 87–97 and 201–219.

What does the comic convey? That decency, loyalty and courage, coupled with resistance to the extent of putting one's life on the line, are important values that children can learn from role models. These role models can also be the comic's big or small superheroes and super-heroines.

But this message is too simple. For one thing, all the comics mentioned here disregard the documented fact that Belgian comics themselves participated in the antisemitism of the 1930s and 1940s. Antisemitic and otherwise racist caricatures were found not only in Hergé's *Tim and Struppi* and removed in part after 1945, but also in the *Journal de Spirou* which Dupuis publishes to this day. The figures are from the pen of Jijé⁴ who makes a cameo appearance in *The Friends of Spirou*. Not that antisemitism would have been out of place at the time. Thomas Mann, for example, wrote a series of antisemitic denunciatory texts as a young man, including the derisive novella *The Blood of the Walsungs* about of all things the Jewish family of his wife.

The point here is that the comic undertakes a number of modifications in the underlying historically documented story of resistance. For example, the moral standards of today set the tone for the children in the comic. The children themselves say that being Catholic, Jewish or Marxist plays no role for them. Yet the historical ID of the "amis de Spirou" requires members to be "faithful to God". Miche and her cousin are active resistance fighters who nonetheless might have emerged from a Netflix series.⁵ Miche is brave, quick-witted and 'empowered' in a feminist sense. Young readers both male and female can identify much more readily with her than with defenseless victims like her deported family members whose powerlessness elicits pity but also shame. The price for accepting the identification offered, however, is the social Darwinist assumption of "survival itself as a merit rather than an accident of fate".⁶

4 See Geert De Weyer, *La Belgique dessinée* (Anvers, 2015), 108–111 ("De si gentils 'Nègres'") and 112–115 ("Jijé, Hergé, Rob-Vel, et les Juifs"); excerpt in English at: www.europecomics.com/racism-belgian-comics-rich-sneaky-jews/ (accessed 26 June 2025).

5 On Anja Spiegelman not as a victim but an activist in the resistance cf. Marianne Hirsch, "Rethinking Holocaust Memory After October 7," *Public Books*, 15 July 2024: www.publicbooks.org/rethinking-holocaust-memory-after-october-7/ (accessed 26 June 2025).

6 Emiliano Perra, "The Guardians of Memory: An Interview with Valentina Pisanty," *Journal of Perpetrator Research* (2021), 4.1:5–14, doi: 10.21039/jpr.4.1.101.



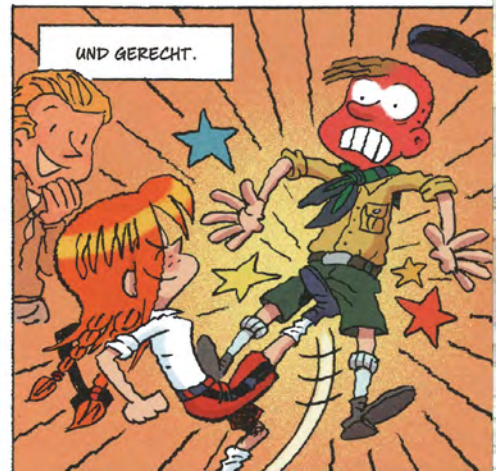
Fig.1: Yann, Olivier Schwartz, *Operation Fledermaus*, 2010 (© Carlsen Verlag, Hamburg)

Fig.2: Émile Bravo, *Spirou oder: die Hoffnung*. vol. 1-4, 2009-2022 (© Carlsen Verlag, Hamburg)

Fig.3: Jean-David Morvan, David Evrard, Ben BK, *Die Freunde von Spirou*, vol. 1, 2023 (© Carlsen Verlag, Hamburg)

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Figs. 4 and 5: Jean-David Morvan, David Eyrard, Ben BK, Die Freunde von Spirou, vol. 1, 2023 (© Carlsen Verlag, Hamburg)



Moreover, a resistance consisting of fun and games and including even animals, a resistance in which the good figures are invulnerable and retain the upper hand right up to the (apparently) bitter end, a Jewish Pippi Longstocking who kicks Nazis in the groin and grins while history applauds (Figure 5) – none of that ever happened. It is a matter of projecting what is desirable from today's perspective ahistorically onto the past. This form of treating and falsifying the past – albeit with good intentions – is what Lynn Hunt has termed presentism: “[History] becomes the short-term history of various kinds of identity politics defined by present concerns [...]. Presentism, at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation.”⁷ For the German tradition, Harald Welzer and others have shown how history “is successively heroized with the passage of generations” until morally ambivalent or even wrong behavior can be “validated in accordance with today's standards and normative appraisal.”⁸

Can this charge be leveled against the comic *The Friends of Spirou* and the Dupuis publishing house? Or is it more a matter of the comic liberating its Jewish protagonist Miche from the post-Holocaust ascription of eternal victimhood – transmitted at worst transgenerationally as Marianne Hirsch argued in her article “Rethinking Holocaust Memory After October 7”?⁹ Or might the publishers even be co-opting ‘Jewishness’ in order to put their own history in a better light? These questions remain open. It is our task to address them.

Perhaps, whether we want it or not, an element of “presentist” identity politics and virtue signaling is the price without which historiography is not to be had (or was ever to be had). Either way, the following applies: History is not that which we wish to remember.

7 Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 1 May 2002: <http://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/against-presentism-may-2002/> (accessed 26 June 2025).

8 Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, *Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002), 66–67.

9 See footnote 5.

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