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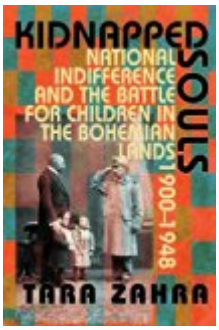

Tara Zahra. *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands 1900-1948.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. xvii + 279 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4628-3.

Reviewed by Gary Cohen

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Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan (University of Nottingham)

Tara Zahra has written a book of great originality and insight that teaches us much about the political and ideological dynamics of nationalist activists in modern central Europe and their efforts to enforce nationalist loyalties in the sphere of child rearing, schooling, and child welfare. This book's lessons are important, if not pleasant, for they show how nationalist political activists, both Czech and German in the Bohemian Lands, presented themselves as champions of democracy and emancipation for their constituencies, while working assiduously to impose collective national rights in the sphere of children at the cost of individual rights to choose (or not) a particular national affiliation or schooling in one or another national language.

Zahra impresses the reader repeatedly by her fresh and perceptive reading of the evidence and her ability to draw out the broader implications of individual events and statements. Without indulging in esoteric social science or cultural studies jargon, she offers analyses of great sophistication that are informed by wide reading in recent scholarship in political science, sociology, anthropology, and discourse studies as well as deep reflection on the many unanswered questions regarding nationalism and politics in modern societies. She joins a growing group of revisionist historians of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century central Europe, including the Americans Pieter Judson and Jeremy King, the Dane Pieter Bugge, and the Pole Tomasz Kamusella, who see the development of nationalist politics not simply as efforts to advance the rights, power, and privileges of one or another nation but as larger projects to create their respective nations in the flux of developing modern societies. These scholars

point to the work of
nationalist activists in constructing conscious national allegiances and
specific group solidarities where they did not exist previously, to create
boundaries in public and private life between members of one's own nation
and others, and then to capture parts of public space and the state for the
interests of one's nation. The social scientists Rogers Brubaker, Katherine
Verdery, Benedict Anderson, Stuart Hall and the philosophers Ernest Gellner
and Etienne Balibar have provided much theoretical ammunition for these
discussions, but Zahra's work, like that of most of her colleagues who are working on the development of modern central European nationalist politics, is profoundly historical in its commitment to a close and faithful reading of a
rich body of empirical data gleaned from a wide range of sources.

Zahra joins Judson, King, and others in arguing that central European
nationalists engaged in battles not only with their nationalist enemies but
just as often with those in the general population who were ambiguous,
indifferent, or mutable in their national loyalties. In that context,
nationalist activists fought hard for influence over the upbringing and care
of children and particularly over the language in which they would be
educated as important parts of the effort to stamp out national indifference
and potential switching of sides. Zahra breaks new ground by tracing
systematically how Czech and German nationalists in the Bohemian Lands
worked on extending to the world of children the nationalist effort to capture
public life and demarcate public spaces along national lines. Older writings on the history of Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia during the nineteenth
and early twentieth centuries have pointed to the nationalist campaigns to
develop parallel systems of popular and advanced education
teaching in Czech and German and to combat parents seeking education for
their children in the other language, particularly the sending of putatively
Czech children to German schools. Those efforts reached a pinnacle in the
pre-1918 era with the so-called Lex Perek, adopted as part of the Moravian
Compromise of 1905, which required that children only be accepted in
an elementary school if they were competent in the language of instruction.
That legislation opened the door to Czech and German school boards taking
legal action against parents' wishes by "reclaiming" children who were
enrolled in schools which did not correspond to their supposed nationality.

Zahra shows persuasively how the Lex Perek and the "reclamations" fit into a
larger process, which began earlier under the monarchy, whereby nationalists
used public authorities to impose collective nationalist controls on
schooling and eventually child welfare services in order to
enhance and indeed enforce national loyalties and solidarity while fighting
national indifference and mutability. During World War I, Czech and German
nationalists in the Bohemian Lands took such effective initiatives in
developing child welfare services that the Austrian government gave them
formal authority for many services and applied their models elsewhere in

Cisleithania. Nationalist politicians, educators, journalists, and officers of local associations all contributed to these efforts, and Zahra weaves a compelling narrative out of the disparate voices. She offers mostly fair and balanced treatments of the Czech and German sides of the story, but inevitably some perspectives are better documented for one side than the other. The discussion of school teachers in the second chapter, for instance, focuses much more on the work of German nationalists than their Czech counterparts.

If, as Zahra concludes, "by the end of the Monarchy parents no longer enjoyed unlimited 'rights' to educate or govern their children as they pleased" (p. 78), developments during the Czechoslovak Republic only proceeded further down the same road, but now with much greater power and influence for Czech nationalist interests and less for the German. The Czechoslovak state expected formal registration of individuals' nationality in the census, and authorities at various levels made numerous formal investigations of children's nationality and took action to stop many from attending nationally inappropriate schools. Zahra properly emphasizes the long-term trend lines, crossing the divisions between monarchy, republic, the Nazi occupation, on to the aftermath of World War II. The Czechoslovak government put pressure on German schools and stepped up efforts to prevent Czech children from attending them as part of efforts to discipline national loyalties in the population, and the Nazi authorities after 1939 continued to take as a given the notion of collective national interests regarding children while favoring German school interests at the expense of Czech. In a particularly powerful argument, Zahra shows how the Nazi authorities took up already existing Czech and German nationalist notions of nationalist divisions in society and politics and ratified further in law and administrative practice the collective interests of the national groups. The Nazi authorities founded a Kuratorium for Youth Education to assure the loyalty of Czech children to the Reich, but ironically the programs of the Kuratorium actually served the expression of collective Czech national identity among the children, under the guise of nominal loyalty to the regime. Overall, Czechs responded to Nazi racial persecution by asserting not equal individual rights but the rights of the Czech nation, understood in essentialist terms as having its own historic ethnic purity. This, in turn, led at the end of the war to radical ethnic cleansing of the German-speaking minority and the insistence that surviving Jews and Germans prove that they were loyal Czechs.

Zahra tells this complex story in a notably clear and intelligent way. She has researched the project thoroughly in a wide range of Czech and Austrian state documents, court proceedings, contemporary periodicals, personal papers, and memoirs. The book cites a wealth of relevant scholarship in history and the social sciences by west European and North American scholars. The author obviously spent considerable time in the Czech Republic for research in archival documents and printed materials, but oddly she cites relatively few recent publications by Czech scholars.

For both Czech and German nationalists from the late nineteenth through the

mid-twentieth century, the work of constructing, protecting, and perpetuating the nation depended on combating national indifference and side-switching and, as an important means, controlling the rearing, care, and schooling of children. Nationalists genuinely feared that sending a child to the school of the nationalist opponents or to the other side's child welfare services would result in the national adversaries "kidnapping" the child's soul. Such thinking made the nationalist campaigning and contention over schooling and child welfare issues vitally important parts of the larger nationalist projects.

Zahra makes a compelling case for the significance of the nationalist battle for children and opens up such interesting new vistas that the reader can forgive the frequent repetitions of this thesis. Trumpeting the importance that nationalist activists assigned to the issues of children in the struggle against national indifference, however, raises the question of just how large the practical political issues of schooling and child welfare loomed among the various initiatives which the nationalist political parties and voluntary associations pursued concurrently. Just how great a part of any major nationalist party's election platform or legislative effort did the issues pertaining to children represent, and how high did they actually rank? Did the nationalist politicians or major voluntary associations bargain away other concerns in favor of gains for schooling and child welfare, or did they give lower priority to the children's issues at important moments? Zahra's otherwise admirably sharp focus on the nationalist agitation regarding schools and child welfare has the drawback of sometimes losing sight of the relevant larger context for the practice of nationalist politics, particularly for the last decades of the nineteenth century and the 1920s.

This criticism does not take away, though, from the significant accomplishments of this book. It can be recommended in the strongest terms to anyone interested in the development of nationalist politics and ideology in central Europe over the last one hundred and fifty years. Cornell University Press has produced a handsome volume, enhanced by five illustrations, two maps, and an index. The author has provided copious notes, but one misses a list of the archival sources and bibliography. A few instances of missing words in the text and some misspelled foreign terms, names, and book titles in the notes suggest the need for a little more careful proofreading here and there.

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