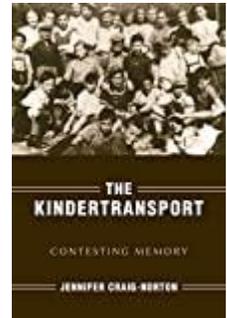




Jennifer Craig-Norton. *The Kindertransport: Contesting Memory.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2019. xiii + 353 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-04221-7.



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The Kindertransport rescue operation, which brought approximately ten thousand children from continental Europe to Britain between 1938 and 1939, is generally remembered favorably as a heroic British effort that facilitated the rescue of innocent children from the clutches of the Nazis. It has been adopted in public consciousness as a moral story “to do good,” and accordingly, the rough edges of trauma caused by separation from parents, and adverse experiences suffered pre- and postmigration, have been smoothed away over the years. The predominant, self-congratulatory narrative of the Kindertransport is therefore one that emphasizes the altruism of the carers (often ordinary citizens) who took in the refugees, Britain’s generosity, and the integration and success of the children, or *Kinder*, while ignoring the fates of their parents who were left behind on the Continent.

Over the past decade, however, a critical voice in scholarship has emerged that brings to light the negative aspects of the Kindertransport experience, which have often been obscured from col-

lective accounts and public reports. Jennifer Craig-Norton’s *The Kindertransport: Contesting Memory* is the latest of such books that attempt to provide a counternarrative to self-congratulatory understandings of the Kindertransport. Powerfully, Craig-Norton concludes that the celebratory and the critical should not be mutually exclusive, and that both the positives and negatives of this history should be acknowledged. This book aims to interrogate the common narratives of “untiring” workers belonging to organizations that supported children financially and emotionally, the “kindly” British public, “humane” authorities, and the “decency” of Britishness (p. 13). In doing so, the author claims to “[chart] a new path” and even criticizes recent scholarship for not adequately departing from celebratory conclusions (p. 14).

Although Craig-Norton’s approach and archival research may be original, hers is not the first critical account of the Kindertransport and its memory; arguably, this work builds on the foundational blocks laid down by scholars such as Tony Kushner, Caroline Sharples, and Claudio Curio.[1]

Nevertheless, the book presents new perspectives on the various actors in the Kindertransport--the organizations, carers, children, and parents--offering a commendable contribution to Kindertransport scholarship. Through exhaustive and careful archival work, Craig-Norton restores the voices of these key actors, which have hitherto been filtered out of the predominant narrative of the Kindertransport. *The Kindertransport: Contesting Memory* destabilizes preconceptions and accepted narratives of the Kindertransport by questioning the success, motives, and intentions of the organizations and carers. Additionally, Craig-Norton brings to light atypical Kindertransport experiences, showing the complex and varied histories of these child refugees. Moreover, her focus on *Polenaktion* Kinder, the subgroup of doubly displaced children who were first expelled to the no-man's-land between Germany and Poland prior to being sent as refugees to Britain, adds another much-welcomed perspective. The author's narrative approach is also worth mentioning. Each chapter, which examines one key actor, begins with a vignette out of Herbert and Manfred Haberberg's archive. Thus Craig-Norton not only makes her chapters cohesive, but also gives new life and expression to the archival records.

Craig-Norton takes a comprehensive, detailed look at the correspondence between the child refugees and the refugee organizations and local committees that supported them. The home-visit reports retrieved from the archive are enlightening, as are the author's observations on how boys and girls responded to agencies such as the Polish Jewish Refugee Fund, West London Synagogue, and the Refugee Children's Movement. Craig-Norton also examines the correspondence between carers and refugee agencies. The inclusion of the carers' perspectives is something that has been missing from many accounts of the Kindertransport. Attempting to take a balanced view throughout, the author suggests how carers could be indifferent, exploitative, or avaricious but also devoted and loving, revealing their

mixed--and sometimes changing--motivations. She concludes that it is difficult to provide a critical evaluation of caretaking, and that issues of selective memory often affect how the Kindertransportees present their guardians in their accounts. Selective memory is not the only factor that distorts reality, however: there is evidence to suggest that even official reports written by welfare officers who reported to organizations at the time could be biased and inaccurate (p. 103).

Craig-Norton presents a new perspective on the Kindertransportees themselves by examining their agency and dependency through the letters sent by children to refugee organizations. She concludes that Kindertransportees were not simply "passive actors" but rather "engaged agents" (p. 210). Some correspondence suggests that children knew how to play the system to their advantage; Craig-Norton reveals how "manifestations of gratitude could not always be taken at face value" (p. 197), and how demonstrations of thankfulness were both heartfelt and calculated. This, the author suggests, is an important corrective to notions of children being vulnerable and helpless--a simplified narrative that creates space for Britain to enter as the heroic rescuer and which consequently upholds celebratory views of the Kindertransport. Her analysis of this fascinating correspondence between children and refugee organizations shows the Kindertransportees' perseverance, resourcefulness, and initiative, but also their frustration and upset. These archival records provide crucial information that fill the gaps found in individual memory and add authentic childhood voices to the Kindertransport narrative.

Parents' voices are likewise restored. By examining the letters written by parents who were trapped on the Continent, Craig-Norton reveals their attempts at self-censorship as well as their attempts to locate their children during war. Powerfully, though not necessarily originally, Craig-Norton concludes that "there were no unambiguously happy endings" and that even those par-

ents who escaped to Britain and were ultimately reunited with their children did not necessarily have an easy time (p. 309). Years of separation often took their toll on child-parent relationships.

While Craig-Norton's findings add to our understanding of the Kindertransport actors, the author's critical tackling of memory is the book's major strength. Throughout her analysis, she shows how various memory sources conflict with each other, and how a reliance on several types of sources is essential to build a more accurate picture of this complex history. The book highlights gaps that would remain unfilled if not for a particular memory source. For example, in one case, archival correspondence between a refugee organization and carers suggests that the foster parents were motivated by money; however, a later interview with the Kindertransportee's daughter gives an altogether different impression, emphasizing instead how loving and attentive her foster parents were. Craig-Norton shows how researchers who rely on a single source may jump to premature conclusions based on that one piece of evidence, and that this might not reflect the reality experienced by a child refugee. If researchers rely only on one type of source, there is a danger that such quick evaluations are too easily written into Kindertransport scholarship. As Craig-Norton warns: "no correspondence, no matter how unambiguous it might appear at first, can be definitively interpreted without the addition of later testimony or other corroborating information" (p. 115). Time and time again the author sheds light on several discrepancies between children's memories and archival documentation. Another Kindertransportee's account, for instance, is "problematized by the documentary evidence, and in turn, her memories compel scrutiny of the archival records" when archival documents attest to her teacher being particularly dedicated and supportive, yet the Kindertransportee remembers this figure as reproachful and somewhat bitter (p. 163). Craig-Norton is, rather refreshingly, forced to ad-

mit that there is no "true" or "false." Both sources have their *own* truth.

At times, however, Craig-Norton seems overly dismissive of memoirs as a memory source, arguing that they are influenced by many factors such as selective memory, retrospect, and editing processes during the production of the book. While this may be true, her research reveals that other sources are just as unreliable. In fact, the silences and active construction seen in memoirs can be just as revealing and can illuminate lingering traces of trauma. Indeed, several points the author makes that are based on archival documents could be further supported by Kindertransport memoirs. For instance, many written accounts (including autobiographical fiction) scrutinize carers' motives, include letters from parents, and mention contact with refugee agencies. While the author occasionally refers to memoirs, a further examination of life-writing could have added an extra layer to the pictures she paints of the major actors.

Despite this, the book succeeds in contesting memory on several levels. First, it follows previous works in confronting and destabilizing understandings of the Kindertransport that have kept the simplified, celebratory narrative of the rescue operation afloat. Second, it illuminates how memory sources contest each other and shows how fully understanding one person's Kindertransport experience, let alone the Kindertransportees as a collective group, is nigh impossible. Remarkably, these two ways of contesting memory intertwine and complement each other: the overarching arguments that destabilize the celebratory Kindertransport narrative are enriched by the ins and outs of memory. By shedding light on how these sources converge and diverge, Craig-Norton calls into question the construction of any one narrative that claims to represent the shared history of thousands of people.

Note

[1]. Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British Society during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Claudia Curio, “‘Unsichtbare’ Kinder: Auswahl- und Eingliederungsstrategien der Hilfsorganisationen,” in *Die Kindertransporte 1938/1939: Rettung und Integration*, ed. Wolfgang Benz, Claudia Curio, and Andrea Hammel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2003); and Caroline Sharple, “The Kindertransport in British Historical Memory,” in *The Kindertransport to Britain 1938/39: New Perspectives*, ed. Andrea Hammel and Bea Lewkowicz, Yearbook of The Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies 13 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

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