

The Kindertransport: History Informing the Future



RESEARCHER

Dr Andrea Hammel

THE OVERVIEW

The historical event of the Kindertransport 1938 - 1939 to the UK has received increasing public attention over the years. Dr Andrea Hammel's research corrects the myths that surround the Kindertransport, and the simplistic celebratory narratives that are often used by politicians and in the media. Providing a historically accurate account of the complexity of the Kindertransport by exploring under-researched areas, such as the diverse traumas the child refugees experienced and the ways these were mitigated, allows the public to gain a better understanding of historic child refugees and, in turn, allows for informed connections with the situation of present-day child refugees in the UK. It also enables policy makers to learn and encourage strategies and infrastructure for resilience.



THE RESEARCH

When the plight of an increasing number of people seeking refuge in Europe came to public attention in the UK in 2015, the Kindertransport was often cited as a shining example of the UK's past humanitarian attitude towards those fleeing persecution. Dr Hammel's research challenges this view. In her work she discusses the trauma the Kindertransportees suffered and critiques the overly celebratory narratives of the past. More specifically, she explores:

- How the Kindertransport was only partially supported by the British Government; most financial and practical support was provided by private individuals and charities.
- How it was not solely an English phenomenon. Kindertransportees also settled in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and this influenced their sense of identity and belonging.
- How the paucity of research on the children's birth families has contributed to distorting views of the Kindertransport.
- How pre- and post-migration persecution, separation from parents and other family members, ill-prepared fostering placements, discrimination (and in some cases abuse), had a negative effect on the child refugees' mental and physical health. Adapting, coping and resilience were fostered by encouraging relationships with other refugees, a sense of belonging and purpose in the UK, and enabling the child refugees to make connections and communicate about their lives pre- and post-migration.

Providing a historically accurate account of the complexity of the Kindertransport by exploring under-researched areas, such as the diverse traumas the child refugees experienced and the ways these were mitigated, allows the public to gain a better understanding of historic child refugees and, in turn, allows for informed connections with the situation of present-day child refugees in the UK.

THE IMPACT

INFORMING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

By organising public talks and contributing to exhibitions, Dr Hammel has enhanced public understanding on aspects of Kindertransport history previously overlooked. She acted as lead academic advisor to a touring open-air exhibition, which started in Berlin in August 2019 and continued on to Rotenburg and Guldental, and also to a similar exhibition in London. Feedback from the events evidence the exhibition's impact on the public's understanding of the history of the Kindertransport.

Dr Hammel was also invited to speak at an Imperial War Museum (IWM) *After Hours* event with Lord Alf Dubs, Sir Erich Reich and Barbara Winton in London. The event focused on previously neglected narratives of the Kindertransport, and in particular on the history of the parents. The recording of the event continues to be viewed on the IWM website.

STIMULATING AND INFORMING POLICY DEBATE

The significance and reach of Dr Hammel's research is also demonstrated by her engagement with key policy debates, and in providing civil servants and NGO representatives with the historical context to contemporary challenges.

Funded by the ACE Support Hub at Public Health Wales (PHW), Dr Hammel published a report on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and child refugees in the 1930s. The report examined the lessons of the 1930s for child refugee policy today and was launched during Refugee Week 2020 to a virtual audience consisting of health policy advisors, civil servants, Directors of Social Services and representatives of NGOs. It was described as an important example of how historical research can inform policy and practice. In June 2020, the report was presented to the Welsh Government Ministerial Task Force on Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

Dr Hammel also organised a key roundtable event on community sponsorship in Wales with the Home Office Wales Team in December 2017. The workshop was the first of its kind on the subject.

