



THE TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF THE KINDERTRANSPORT

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

- A nine-month rescue effort authorized by the British government
- The children were aged between infants and 17 years olds
- Kristallnacht took place between 9th -10th November 1938 – the first Kindertransport arrived in Britain on 2nd December 1938
- Priority was given to those who were orphans or to teenagers who were incarcerated in concentration camps during and after Kristallnacht
- Children were no longer safe in their homelands
- Kinder came from major cities as well as more rural areas – Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland
- Kinder travelled to Britain, Sweden, Holland, Belgium, France, Denmark and Switzerland to find safety. Jewish refugee children also journeyed to America and New Zealand. Those who travelled to Australia and Canada during the war did not enter these nations as refugees but as internees as they were categorised as type B and C enemy aliens.
- Some Kinder moved to Israel after the war
- While many Kinder survived the war some refugee children who found refuge in countries closer in proximity to Germany did not survive. Some Kinder were murdered in the death camps and 30 Kinder lost their lives fighting with the British Army.

DEFINITIONS

- The name Kindertransport came into use in the late 20th century
- The term was used in the 1930s and 1940s
- Kinder – entered the discourse in the late 1980s with the first reunions – it is comfortably used by the refugee children themselves
- Former Kinder – this term refers to the refugee children's former childhood selves – but it can be a form of distancing
- Kindertransportee – refers to a child who travelled on the Kindertransport
- Kindertransportees – refers to the children who journeyed on the Kindertransport
- KT2 and KT3 - second and third generation
- Kindertransport – English language
- Kindertransporte – German
- Kindertransports – multiple transports

DEBATES IN PARLIAMENT – HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Quakers were asked to report from Berlin back to Britain about the immediate aftermath of Kristallnacht
- The report concluded that unaccompanied Jewish refugee children should be allowed entry into Britain
- Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, who refused the request
- A delegation then met with Samuel Hoare, Home Secretary
- The Kindertransport was a visa waver scheme
- Organisations and individuals successfully lobbied the government
- The government said that an unspecified number of refugee children could come to Britain

INFLUENTIAL FIGURES

[HTTPS://
WWW.BRITANNICA.COM/
EVENT/KINDERTRANSPORT](https://www.britannica.com/event/kindertransport)

- Lola Hahn-Warburg, a member of a prominent German Jewish banking family who established the framework for the rescues in 1933 before immigrating to England herself
- Former British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, who appealed to British conscience via a BBC broadcast in December 1938 in support of the Lord Baldwin Fund for Refugees – adverts appeared in the newspapers
- Viscount Walter Horace Samuel; Sir Wyndham Deedes; Rebecca Sieff; Rabbi Solomon Schoenfeld (whose efforts were responsible for the rescue of nearly 1,000 Orthodox Jewish children)
- Sir Nicholas Winton, who, working with Trevor Chadwick, Doreen Warriner, and Bill Barazetti, saved 669 Czechoslovak children
- Norman Bentwich – academic
- Quakers Bertha Bracey and Jean Hoare, the latter of whom shepherded a plane full of children out of Prague
- Social workers in the Jewish communities of Vienna, such as Franzi Danneberg-Löw (who later became the guardian of the Jewish children trapped in Vienna after the last Kindertransport)
- Leaders of the German youth movement in Berlin, such as Norbert Wollheim (who accompanied several transports as an escort and refused a place on what he knew would be the last one because he did not want to leave his wife and young child in Berlin; in 1943 he was deported to Auschwitz).
- Geertruida (Truus) Wijsmuller-Meijer, a Dutch Christian, appealed directly to SS officer Adolf Eichmann in Vienna before leading the escape of 600 children on a single train. She also helped smuggle children onto a ship bound from Marseille to Palestine and was largely responsible for the success of the final transport. She sped her charges through burning Amsterdam to the freighter *Bodegraven*, which left IJmuiden, Netherlands, for Dover, England, on May 14, 1940, the day that Rotterdam was bombed and the Netherlands surrendered to the Germans. The ship was raked by gunfire from German warplanes.

IS IT MORE THE CASE THAT HOST NATIONS REMEMBER KINDERTRANSPORT IN ESSENTIALLY NATIONAL TERMS, EVEN WHERE THEY ARE AWARE OF ITS TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY?

- ‘Historically, the Kindertransport was a series of transnational events as many Kinder embarked upon multiple journeys from their lands of birth through different countries of transfer (journeys across different national borders – Germany through to Holland for example), and arrived in many different host countries. For example, some 10,000 Kinder journeyed from Germany, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia to Holland, Holland to Britain, then from Britain to America, Canada, or even as faraway as Australia. Other Kinder started their journeys in Germany and Austria heading for Belgium or France, and some Kinder even departed from Czechoslovakia for Sweden. Twenty Jewish children, known today as the Deckston Children, travelled from Bialystok, Poland to also nine known Kinder who travelled to New Zealand via Britain during and after the Second World War. Two other Kinder journeyed to New Zealand initially but later moved to Australia. To describe the Kindertransport as a movement from threat to safety is too simplistic. This would be to neglect other historical dimensions, because while some Kinder moved from threat to safety, others then moved towards another threat. This new threat came in the Kinder’s host nation (Britain) as some of the older Kinder were later categorised as type B and C enemy aliens and interned, and some were even deported overseas as internees. Understanding the broader transnational character of the Kindertransport may potentially bring to our attention a more complex and problematic history than is suggested by defining it as a movement from threat to safety. For example, it was reported that one Kindertransportee who was relocated to Australia committed suicide when he discovered that his mother had been murdered in the Holocaust. A comprehensive narrative of the Kindertransport would include often overlooked aspects such as the thirty Kinder who were killed while fighting in the British forces, as well as the Kinder who experienced physical and economic exploitation. Likewise, the stories of the Kinder who were deaf, mute and blind would also be included within a complete narrative’.
- Amy Williams, *Memory of the Kindertransport in National and Transnational Perspective*, PhD Thesis, Nottingham Trent University, 2020, pp. 1-3.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

- Most English-language secondary literature produced on the Kindertransport centres on the history of the Kindertransport itself, rather than its memory. The most significant historical studies have discussed the origins of the Kindertransport, who the different organisations and individuals were who aided the Kinder's flight to freedom and how they continued to support them, how the Kinder were rescued, where the children were housed, how they were received by their host nation, the care they received in their host nations such as health care, education, training and employment, and what religious support was accessible to them.
- These studies have also reflected upon how the many rescue operations were funded, why and how the Kinder's lives were restricted during the Second World War, the internment and resettlement of some Kinder to new lands, the immigration policies put in place by the host nations, the Kinder's later naturalisation as well as their further emigration after the Second World War, and who became their legal guardians.

ARGUMENTS

- Some historians discuss the Kindertransport in positive terms – it saved the lives of refugee children after all
- But other historians have more critical arguments – they suggest that British policy was limited and selective
- The Kinder were not able to travel here with their parents
- Louise London for example states in her book *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948* that ‘admission saved the children’s lives. Exclusion sealed the fate of many of their parents’.
- In contrast Anthony Grenville argues that ‘the parents were not ‘excluded’; of those who survived, probably about two in five, the great majority succeeded in emigrating from the Reich before the war, and the bulk of them came to Britain. The parents were no more ‘excluded’ than were any other adult Jews; while it was not easy for them to secure entry visas for Britain, they certainly had some chance of doing so’.