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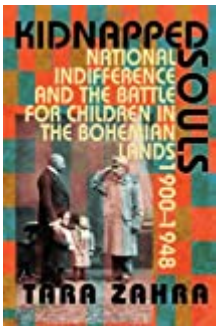

Tara Zahra. *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands 1900-1948.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. xvii + 279 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4628-3.

Reviewed by Eagle Glassheim (Department of History, University of British Columbia)

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The Narcissism of Minor (In)Differences

Historians of Habsburg central Europe are understandably obsessed with the spread of nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nationalism subsequently destroyed the Habsburg Empire in 1918, spawned a handful of mutually hostile nation-states with disgruntled minorities, and led ultimately to ethnic cleansing and genocide during and after the Second World War. Hundreds of books in dozens of languages address the question of how the peoples of the region became national. Older work, inspired by nationalist interpretations themselves, saw nationalism as a revival of long-repressed national feeling, rooted in the common bonds of ethnicity and language. Subsequent interpretations have connected nationalism to the modernization of the social and political order. With the rise of mass politics that accompanied social modernization, so the story goes, pre-existing cultural affinities were mobilized politically as nationalism.

Tara Zahra's finely researched, engagingly written book upends the teleological assumptions of these conventional accounts of nationalism's rise. Focusing on the persistence of "national indifference" in the Bohemian lands of the Habsburg monarchy, Zahra makes two central points. First, exclusive national identification was neither a natural nor an inevitable development in multilinguistic central Europe. And second, competing nationalists had to work hard to win the allegiance of "nationally ambiguous" Bohemians and Moravians. The nationalists' persistent sense of failure motivated their nationalizing efforts as much as their successes. Zahra astutely focuses on nationalist campaigns for the "souls" of school children in Bohemia and Moravia. Not only were schools a central battleground in conflicts between Czech and German nationalists over the control of public resources; they were also an active front in the struggles of both sides to eradicate national indifference.

The first chapter of the book examines the spread of the idea of children as "national property" in late Habsburg Bohemia. Nationalist efforts to claim school children for national communities took place within

a complex and changing legal and institutional context around the turn of the twentieth century. Ironically, in efforts to defuse nationalist political conflict, Habsburg courts and officials sanctioned the segregation of Czech- and German-language schools in Bohemia and Moravia. This decision created new problems. Throughout the linguistically mixed borderlands of the provinces, thousands of nationally indifferent families ignored the linguistic-political demands of the nationalists and choose schools based on convenience rather than national affinity. Czech and German nationalist organizations responded in two ways. First, they created incentives, such as free lunches and school supplies, to lure the indifferent into their own national schools. Second, they used the Habsburg legal system in an attempt to "reclaim" wayward co-nationals. A key 1910 court ruling gave Moravian school boards the authority to rule on the nationality of children based on "objective, concrete characteristics" such as language spoken at home and family background (p. 39). Using this mechanism, hundreds of children were pulled out of Czech or German schools against their parents' will. Thousands of others likely switched to avoid legal action or social/economic blacklisting initiated by nationalists. Ultimately, though, it was next to impossible to determine the "objective" identification of truly bi-lingual Bohemians, an ambiguity that they often used to their advantage in the escalating bidding wars for nationally indifferent children.

After the turn of the century, the struggle for control of school children expanded into competing nationalist welfare organizations in Bohemia, the subject of Zahra's second chapter. These were apparently unique in Europe, with their combination of national segregation and extensive private initiative. As with nationalist pedagogy, the welfare offerings merged progressive methodology with national ideology. Breast feeding, good hygiene, and parenting skills were tied to the health of the nation. Nationally sponsored orphanages sought to rescue vulnerable children from the threat of de-nationalization (and were often located near schools with enrollments dangerously close to the proportional cutoff for public funding). As Zahra shows in chapter 3, during the First World War, Austro-Hungarian authorities turned to these nationalist welfare organizations for help dealing with social dislocations on the home front. Though this strategy may have helped the monarchy survive in the short term, it ultimately undermined its legitimacy. The transition from national welfare to a national state seemed natural to the vast majority of Czech speakers in 1918.

The new state of Czechoslovakia was founded on an explicitly democratic, anti-imperial ideology. In chapters 4 and 5, Zahra shows that interwar Czechoslovak democracy had strong collectivist tendencies, and the idea of children as collective property of the nation persisted after 1918. "Objective" characteristics remained the key criteria for determining the fate of disputed school children. Both Czech and German nationalists fought for the allegiance of Czechoslovak Jews, who increasingly declared themselves Czech, even while sending their children to German-language schools. As Zahra points out, this phenomenon was an example of the "potentially inclusive dynamic of the nationalist battle for children" (p. 133). Similarly, the expanded welfare apparatus (both private and state institutions) sought to attract and include marginal families, not cull them from the national body, as it acted to do in the late Weimar welfare state.

Rather than finding a sharp break after the National Socialist takeover in 1938 and 1939, Zahra sees continuities with earlier efforts to win the allegiance of the nationally indifferent. To the surprise and frustration of Nazi officials, many German-speakers in occupied Bohemia and Moravia did not register for German citizenship. Thousands of Czech speakers did, however, and schools found that many of their pupils needed to learn remedial German. On the other hand, both Czech and Sudeten German nationalism were well entrenched. Sudeten Germans pressed (often in vain) for resources from the Reich to rectify their interwar losses to the Czechs, while the majority of Czechs steadfastly resisted any efforts at Germanization. Indeed, Nazi officials held a certain grudging respect for Czech nationalist culture (as well as the contribution of Czech labor to the German war effort), and they came to accept "Reich-loyal Czech nationalism" (p. 239).

The expulsion of Czechoslovakia's three million Sudeten Germans in 1945 and 1946 was not the inevitable outcome of Czech-German national struggles, Zahra argues. "It was not Czechs who triumphed over Germans," she writes, "but nationalists who finally triumphed in their long-standing war against national indifference" (p. 258). With the official German presence removed from Czechoslovakia, no more schools or universalist culture remained to tempt Czech speakers. The irony of the expulsions was that the Sudeten Germans had more in common with Czechs than they did with Germans in the Reich. During their hundreds of years of coexistence in Bohemia and Moravia, and during a half century of nation-

alist struggles, Czechs and Germans had come to share a political culture (and a culture more widely defined as well). Rather than an epic battle between opposites (as depicted in nationalist historiography), Zahra's story is one of Freudian narcissism of minor differences. "Lurking beneath nationalists' polemical assertions of difference," she argues, "was a powerful set of shared beliefs about children, family, democracy, minority rights, and the relationship between the individual and the collective" (p. 12). The ease with which so-called "amphibians" switched national communities, as well as nationalist frustration at such ambiguity, testify to these similarities.

Zahra's book makes many contributions to several different literatures, including comparative studies of nationalism, the history of the welfare state, and the history of pedagogy. Most striking for me, though, was her ability to write a truly Bohemian history, rather than a Czech or German one. Not only are Czech and German histories intimately intertwined in this book, they are in fact unthinkable without each other. Drawing on Rogers Brubaker's call "to see nations as 'perspectives on the world' rather than 'things in the world' " (p. 8), Zahra shows how Czech and German nationalist perspectives related directly to each other, finding meaning in their relationship to the other. The persistence of national indifference–the fuzzy margins between Czech and German national communities–maintained the salience of these national perspectives, while at the same time casting doubt on their substantive differences.

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