

University of Southampton meeting.

A panel chaired by Wendy White, director of library and learning services at the University of Southampton, discussed the importance of history in initiating and gaining public support for refugee initiatives and the narrative of rescue associated with those initiatives. The Panellists, Professor Tony Kushner and Dr Jennifer Craig Norton, both made particular reference to The Kindertransport and of course, The Basque Children.

Topics discussed included:

- The speech Samuel Hoare (home secretary) gave to parliament on 21st November 1938 following Kristallnacht, using previous refugee programmes to persuade parliament of the need for what became known as The Kindertransport

- The founder of the 1936 Children's Inter-Aid Committee, Gladys Skelton's assessment of the needs of the Kindertransport children compared to the 'simpler needs' of the Basque children, an assessment based on class and religion.

- The reluctance by government to fund refugee initiatives in part due to the perceived opposition by the British public to an influx of refugees 'taking our jobs'.

- And perhaps the main concern of the discussion, which only now in the 21st century is part of the refugee narrative, is that 'rescue' and 'salvation' is a very short-sighted notion in the welfare of refugees, particularly unaccompanied children. How a 'rescued' child of the 1930s lost not only their family, but their culture, their religion and their language. How many children suffered severe lifelong trauma from their 'abandonment', for the youngest children, abandonment by their parents and then by the foster care. And how, in some instances the proselytising and anglicisation of these children was even sought and celebrated. The main lesson learned is that separating children from their parents is bad.

The panel concluded with questions from the audience that included how, in the age of social media, to record refugee experience and preserve that for future historians making the case for the refugee initiatives to come.

Jan Carr, 8 December 2022