

## **Recent UWE conference addresses the contemporary problems of child displacement during wartime**

Amid the current migrant and displacement situation in Europe, it is pertinent and useful to ask how examples from the historic past might help us to address the multiple political and humanitarian challenges. With this question at the forefront, the conference ‘Wartime Child Displacement: Comparing Historical and Contemporary Cases’ took place at Bristol UWE on 8 September 2016, bringing together academic specialists, members of the Bristol Anglo-Polish Society, local and regional charities and professional educational bodies, as well as experts on post-conflict situations and restorative justice. The aims were threefold:

- (i) to exchange ideas emerging from on-going research about the past and the present
- (ii) to gauge the ways in which questions and methods overlap and vary, and
- (iii) to assess how these ways of working respond to public expectations and requirements

The groundwork was laid with three papers – one each from a sociologist, a lawyer, and a psychologist - which provided a contemporary framework for viewing displacement in legal and experiential (or intimate) terms. The sociologist Alice Bloch began by exploring inter-generational stories and silences in the narratives of second generation members of families of forced migrants to Britain. The structure of narratives, and the meanings of silence, silences (and silencing), were questions taken up and developed throughout the day, as were the observations Alice made about methodologies in relation to research with vulnerable groups and developing capacity building strategies for longer term engagement with migrants.

Noelle Quenivet, from the Law department at UWE, navigated a clear way for us through the complexities of legal definitions, procedures and instruments which shape the lives of refugees, migrants, the displaced, and the stateless. Her paper reminded us that individuals are forcibly displaced either because of state persecution or because the state fails to protect them from other sources of persecution. The extent to which the ‘host’ state takes up the responsibility for protection currently varies considerably across the international scene, just as it did in the inter-war period in Europe in the twentieth century.

The psychologist Emina Hadziosmanovic, herself medically evacuated from Sarajevo as a young child in the early 1990s, shared her methodological insights about early displacement and trauma amongst the children of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The therapeutic potential of narrating hugely traumatic experiences was evidenced quantitatively and qualitatively in study of levels of well-being and in testimony about ‘cleansing’ oneself of ‘bad memories’. A key part of later discussion which was raised by Emina was about the comparative merits of individual-centered therapies as against psycho-social approaches.

These three broad legal, psychological and emotional bases framed the historical case studies which followed.

Educational provision forms part of the ‘social ecology’ of the child refugee, a process frequently over-determined by political aims. Exploring this, Elizabeth White described the attempts made by Russian émigré elites in the 1920s to create a network of schools in which Russian children could receive a national education and preserve their national identity. Crucial to this was an aim to shape and even to reject attempts to bring about assimilation.

This underlined a recurrent theme: the feelings that displaced children often have of being torn between two cultures and not knowing where 'home' is.

Similar attempts to shape education were made amongst the children evacuated to France, Britain and the Soviet Union from the Basque Country during the Spanish civil war, an episode whose aftermath in Britain was explored by Mike Richards. Although the British government refused to offer any financial support at all, and strictly limited the number of children admitted (to 4,000), a substantial section of British society was moved to offer succour and refuge. Humanitarian sympathy quite rapidly narrowed, however, during the Second World War. Mitigating the negative effects of isolation on the children who remained after Franco's victory in 1939 depended on the work of a few dedicated volunteers supported by the Spanish Republican government in exile.

The situation of the 10,000 Kindertransport children with Jewish backgrounds, arriving in Britain from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938-9, was in some ways similar, though a much smaller percentage of these children ever returned to their country of birth. As Andrea Hammel explained, just as Britain would not accept the parents of children from Spain, so the government took only children from Germany, making it impossible for them to live with their parents. In both the Basque and Kindertransport cases, admission of the children depended initially, moreover, on the understanding that they would not stay long.

The afternoon session of the conference was devoted to presentations given by members of the Bristol Anglo-Polish Society who spoke generously and movingly about their experiences as the children of parents who were forcibly displaced from Poland, after that country's dismemberment by Hitler and Stalin from 1939. In the process of recounting these stories, many of the themes from earlier papers were re-visited in discussion: the experience of trauma; the significance of the 'journey' narrative, passed on trans-generationally; the challenges of making a future in a foreign society, culture and language; attitudes in the 'host' country; and feelings of dependency and isolation. Establishing networks and communities of remembering have been important for many people in sustaining connections, public support, ways of life and, for some, places to share testimonies that might otherwise be kept in silence.

These talks, given by Stefan Cembrowicz, Grazynka Kowalewska, Alicja Swiatek Christofides, were extraordinarily valuable in broadening the scope of the debate, especially about our first two aims: exchanging ideas about the present and the past, and assessing the ways in which questions and methods overlap and vary.

The priority of the network we hope to establish for future collaboration will be the third aim: to assess how these ways of working respond to public expectations and policy requirements. In doing so, one key area of focus will be the role of education, a point made by Marian Liebmann during the discussion which drew the proceedings to a close, who spoke about the need to work with young children learning about conflict and the need for restorative dialogue from the ground up.

The conference was organised at UWE by Dr Tillie Curran (Health and Social Sciences), and Dr Mike Richards and Dr Elizabeth White (both from History), with support from the Faculty of Arts, Creative Industries and Education and the Social Science Research Group.

Mike Richards (September 2016)