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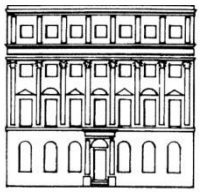

BULLETIN

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New Approaches to the History of Adoption. Conference Report
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New Approaches to the History of Adoption, workshop organized by the German Historical Institute London and held at the GHIL, 22–3 Mar. 2010.

The nature of adoption has changed greatly over recent decades. New trends, such as gay and lesbian couples, single parents, and patchwork families, and a dramatic decline in the birth rate provide new challenges. Today the welfare of the child is the major concern, but it has taken a long time to arrive at this attitude. This workshop, convened and moderated by Benedikt Stuchtey (GHIL), aimed to explore the history of child adoption as a national and an international issue from the nineteenth century. Nine papers on adoption in different contexts were given by historians, one lawyer, and one youth worker from Canada, the USA, the UK, Germany, and Turkey. The main aims were to exchange experiences in the study of the history of adoption, to find similarities and differences within various national contexts, and to reconstruct the development of child adoption up to the present as a transnational issue.

The two-day workshop was chronologically divided into five sections, each thematically building a rounded idea of adoption within the last century. After a welcome and general introduction to the history of child adoption, the problems it involved, and the perspectives of historical research by Benedikt Stuchtey, the first paper was given by Christina Benninghaus (Bielefeld). Entitled 'Inspiring Concern: Adoption in Early Twentieth-Century Germany', her paper gave an insight into why adoption inspired so much concern. Her sources were fictional texts by Clara Viebig and Adele Schreiber, and reviews of these texts and other popular writings. While Viebig depicted adoption as a fascinating idea in her fiction, she identified several major problems and difficulties, with the result that her novel was not very encouraging regarding adoption. *Einer Mutter Sohn*, written in 1906, was highly successful and went through eighteen editions, but it portrayed all the negative consequences of adoption, mainly for the adoptee, including alienation, loneliness, economic failure, moral decay, illness, and even death. In 1932 Viebig wrote a novel called *Das Kind* with a happy ending for the adoptee and the adoptive mother. The question of matching the adoptee's age, religion, and social standing was raised in the discussion, and the conclusion could be drawn that in Germany, social and religious matching with

the new family took precedence over the child's interests and well-being.

Jenny Keating's (London) paper, entitled 'Adoption in England, 1918–1945', gave an insight into adoption and family life in Britain between the wars. She started by suggesting that solutions to the question of best interest varied over time. Adoption was illegal in Britain until 1927, but baby-farming was very common. The majority of women were mothers, and those who could not give birth naturally often adopted children. However, there was no secure and organized procedure and adoption was seen as the last resort. Adoption helped to create new families and new households. The discussion provided answers to a number of questions. Interestingly, single men were also allowed to adopt. In the 1950s and 1960s adoption agencies were established and the welfare of the child became the main focus. Unfortunately, many records from the pre-war period were destroyed or lost.

After an intense discussion, Jörg Lewe (Meckenheim) spoke on 'Adoption during the Third Reich'. Hitler's regime was not able to abolish all adoption agencies which had been founded in the Weimar Republic. It should be remembered, of course, that there were many Nazis in the local organizations. Lewe's paper highlighted the religious aspects of adoption, particularly Jewish identity, and also demonstrated the enormous power of the state. In her paper entitled '"In the Best Interests of the Child": Post-War Efforts to Right the Wrongs of Nazi Adoption Policy', Michelle Mouton (Wisconsin Oshkosh) pointed to the well-being of the child and the common thinking that children were best off with their biological parents. She gave an insight into the work of the Kindersuchdienst and other organizations. If relatives could not be found, agencies found it difficult to give children away for adoption. She cited the example of Scandinavian children who looked like Germans and were adopted by families who then changed their names. It was common to interview these children about their family life and habits in order to discover their true identity. Finally, new adoption problems developed after the end of the war, when German children 'turned into Poles'. The main topics of the following discussion were gender and race.

The afternoon session began with a paper on 'Changes in Adoption Practices among Muslim Ottomans and Turks' given by Ferhunde Özbay (Istanbul). Özbay explored the similarities between

informal adoption and domestic slavery. Although the anti-slavery law of 1964 prohibited slavery and slavery-like practices, informal adoption could not be abolished for good as the ideology and interests of the state took priority. Özbay stressed that the slave trade continued in different forms. Middle-class Muslim Ottoman families kept Turkish girls to raise as Muslim Ottomans. She explained that the introduction of legal adoption was a significant step forward regarding child and family protection. Problems remained and new ones occurred with the legalization of adoption, and regulations often changed within years. While private adoption is illegal, the welfare of the child is still not the focal point. The discussion looked at the role of religion and the interpretation of the Koran. The Koran outlaws adoption on the grounds that biological parents play a very important part in a child's life. The recent interest in the child's welfare as part of Turkey's Westernization must therefore be regarded with caution. The afternoon ended with a guided tour through the Foundling Museum in London.

The second day of the workshop began with a paper on 'The Humanitarian Origins of Inter-Country Adoption: Rethinking Genealogies' by Heide Fehrenbach (Northern Illinois) dealing with the question of racism within society. She explained that there was more support for transnational adoption than for adoption within the country, because the countries who provided children for adoption wanted to get them off the streets. Many mixed-race children, known as 'brown babies', were among these and provoked informal racism. In the 1960s, transnational adoption was considered the last resort. The following discussion focused on German-American children and asked whether mixed-race babies helped to liberalize the United States.

In her paper on 'Babies without Borders: Transnational and Transracial Adoption between Canada and the Americas', Karen Dubinsky (Kingston, Ontario) considered the political symbolism of children and visualizations of 'the helpless and innocent child'. Dubinsky spoke of 'imperialist kidnap' in North America, Cuba, and Guatemala, concentrating on the sending rather than the receiving end. She distinguished between three types of babies put up for adoption. First, there were national post-war babies whose parents were encouraged to send their children to white middle-class families. Secondly, the so-called 'hybrid baby' was a metaphor for an

inter-country adoption. And thirdly, she claimed that the plight of children needing help is highlighted at times of terrorism and war, when the media take the opportunity to involve potential adopters at an emotional level. Dubinsky concluded that transnational adoption implies a special type of kidnapping, but that it is the most privileged form of immigration.

Nayanika Mookherjee's (Lancaster) paper 'Available Motherhood: Legal Technologies, State of Exception, and the Dekinning of War Babies in Bangladesh' focused on women's rape and its consequences. She explored the connection between adoption and politics and the law in Bangladesh. It became clear that the Bangladeshi Court regulated and controlled motherhood, and when numerous Bangladeshi women were raped by Pakistani soldiers in the 1970s, the government was concerned that these women needed to be protected from their emotional experience of motherhood. The term 'war baby' can therefore be explained as a baby born as the result of sexual violence during war. In their desperation, many women saw abortion (illegal at the time) as their last chance not to give birth to a 'Pakistani bastard'. Abortion centres were located in middle-class areas where these women had access to medical treatment. Throughout 1972, Bangladeshi children were sent to a number of Western countries. In the following discussion similarities between post-war Germany and post-war Bangladesh were identified and debated. In the case of Bangladesh, the question of why rapes had happened can be explained in terms of a racial discourse generated by stereotypes.

The final paper, 'International Adoption in Germany 1995–2008: A Short History of Mixed Feelings' by Michael Busch (Frankfurt am Main), focused on the struggle between independence and economic constraints in private placing agencies. Providing German statistics from 1994 (8,449 adoptions) and 2008 (4,201 adoptions), Busch pointed out that the number of agencies almost tripled in these years. He drew attention to the Hague Convention which demands strict observation of laws and high-quality placement of children. As a result, Busch pointed out, private placing agencies have struggled. Germany's infrastructure for international adoption, he suggests, is far from satisfactory. Today German agencies concentrate more on international activities.

Legal traditions and public opinion regarding adoption, to name

but two topics, are particularly interesting in the study of the history of adoption. The workshop demonstrated that birth parents have so far played a relatively small part in historical research and the media. Nine individual papers with different concerns and historical aims provided a chronological overview of adoption from the nineteenth century in the context of a transnational comparison. The focus was on child rather than on adult adoption. Questions concerning the role of the media, the power of institutions, international organizations, the birth parents, and the influence of fostering were taken into account. The workshop was inspired by new cooperative international research in the history of adoption. Publication of the proceedings is under consideration.

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