



German
Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Michael Czolkoss-Hettwer, *Transnationale
Möglichkeitsräume: Deutsche Diakonissen in London (1846–1918)*

by Stefan Manz

German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLV, No. 1 (May 2023), 109–13

ISSN 0269-8552

MICHAEL CZOLKOSS-HETTWER, *Transnationale Möglichkeitsräume: Deutsche Diakonissen in London (1846–1918)*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, 265 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 458 pp. ISBN 978 3 525 31140 0. €75.00

The historiography on German-speaking migrants in Britain has had its ups and downs. After relegation to the fringes throughout most of the twentieth century, the topic started to attract some serious academic interest in the 1990s and 2000s. Studies with a range of methodologies covered different social groups, geographical areas, and historical periods.¹ After a hiatus in the 2010s, there is now some indication of renewed interest, with stronger emphasis on comparative and transnational aspects. One example is a recent Ph.D. project which investigates the emotional history of German minorities in Britain and France during and after the First World War.² Another example is Michael Czolkoß-Hettwer's detailed study on German deaconesses in London between 1846 and 1918. It is the published version of a Ph.D. thesis written at the University of Oldenburg and concentrates on a hitherto understudied cohort of female migrants. Indeed, the author frames his study as a distinct contribution to gender history. Those young women who joined German Protestant sisterhoods entered a world of social confines, shedding their family names and being subjected to a strict dress code and behavioural rules. At the same time, however, the author argues convincingly that the act of joining and their subsequent posting to London allowed them to take on responsibilities within a professional nursing environment which would otherwise not have been open to them – hence the title of the study, which can best be translated as 'transnational spaces of opportunity'.

¹ E.g. Panikos Panayi, *German Immigrants in Britain during the Nineteenth Century, 1815–1914* (Oxford, 1995); Margrit Schulte Beerbühl, *Deutsche Kaufleute in London: Welthandel und Einbürgerung (1660–1818)* (Munich, 2007); Ulrike Kirchner, *Aspekte deutsch-britischer Expansion: Die Überseeinteressen der deutschen Migranten in Großbritannien in der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1999).

² Mathis Gronau, 'Surrounded by Enemies? The Experience of German Minorities in France and Britain between 1914 and 1924' (Ph.D. thesis, University College London, 2022).

The deaconesses were first trained in their German home institutions and then employed either within Germany or abroad. London was an important foreign destination, not least because it hosted the German Hospital in the (then) suburb of Dalston. This was the main place of work for deaconesses, although some pastoral activity within the growing German-speaking Protestant congregations was added towards the end of the century. The German Hospital was founded in 1846 and is a telling case study of a transnationally operating institution. It mostly catered for German-speaking patients who were underserved by the rudimentary British health infrastructure, although the hospital was also open to British patients. Most of the funding came from wealthy members of the German immigrant community, such as the Schröder banking family. Christiane Swinbank has highlighted the hybrid character of the German Hospital as a migrant institution which constantly had to adapt and negotiate its position between two cultures.³

These processes, which often developed in conflictual ways, are also thoroughly analysed by Czolkoß-Hettwer. One example concerns the transnational recruitment channels. In its early phase, nurses for the hospital were exclusively recruited from the 'mother house' (*Mutterhaus*) in Kaiserswerth, near Düsseldorf. Its director, Theodor Fliedner, aspired to keep a firm grip on the practices and behaviour of those deaconesses who had been sent abroad, but his principles were not always compatible with different cultural environments. He criticized, for example, that there was too much socializing between deaconesses and doctors, and that deaconesses accepted small Christmas gifts from hospital board members as tokens of appreciation. This, he suggested, only contributed to their 'vanity'. When he wanted to dismiss the head nurse, Christiane Bürger, in 1857, the hospital board decided to terminate its agreement with Kaiserswerth. The deaconesses took the bold step of separating from their German 'mother house' and carrying on, employed directly by the German Hospital. Thereafter, recruitment agreements

³ Christiane Swinbank, 'Medicine, Philanthropy and Religion: Selective Intercultural Transfers at the German Hospital in London, 1845-1914', in Stefan Manz, Margrit Schulte Beerbühl, and John R. Davis (eds.), *Migration and Transfer from Germany to Britain, 1660-1914* (Munich, 2007), 119-30.

were negotiated with the Elisabethenstift in Darmstadt, and then from the 1890s with the Sarepta Deaconess Institute in Bielefeld.

The number of deaconess nurses at the German Hospital in London rose steadily from four in 1846 to twenty-two in 1914, and then fell to fourteen in 1918. Despite these relatively small numbers, Czolkoß-Hettwer manages to demonstrate the wider significance of the Kaiserswerth model and the German Hospital. The expansion and professionalization of nursing was, indeed, a transnational affair pushed by transnationally operating actors. These included the social reformer Elizabeth Fry, whose Institution of Nursing Sisters, founded in 1840, was in essence a secular version of the Kaiserswerth institute, and Florence Nightingale, possibly the most influential nurse in history. Nightingale was introduced to Theodor Fliedner by the Prussian envoy to Britain, Baron von Bunsen, who was an important facilitator of British-German intercultural transfer. She paid regular visits to the German Hospital in London, joined the doctors on their rounds, and had friendly professional exchanges with the deaconesses. She used all these experiences when she set up her own nursing institute in 1860. In contrast to the Kaiserswerth model, however, her approach was, like Fry's, a secular one. Professionalization rather than religious and social norms stood at the forefront. As her approach spread across the English-speaking world and beyond, the significance of religious sisterhoods for nursing gradually decreased.

As a microhistorical study, Czolkoß-Hettwer's book is much concerned with deaconesses' individual life trajectories and thus successfully differentiates notions of a collective cohort. The women used their 'spaces of opportunity' in very different ways. For those from a lower middle-class background, working as a deaconess granted higher social status and financial independence. Those from a middle-class background were more likely to move into leadership positions, which they often asserted in conflicts with male hospital staff. Spatial distance from the German 'mother houses' lessened the degree of discipline and surveillance. The board of the German Hospital was more interested in pragmatic management than in the normative ideals emanating from Kaiserswerth. When deaconesses left their employment at the German Hospital, some stayed in England and kept on working in their profession, often in leading positions. All the

women covered in the study managed to build a socially accepted – and respected – career outside the traditional female space of family and home, at least for the time they worked at the German Hospital.

The First World War was a major caesura in the history of the hospital. Although the institution and its staff avoided the Germanophobic attacks that swept through Britain, internment and repatriation of German ‘enemy aliens’ decimated the migrant community. In the immediate post-war years, most of the patients in the hospital were actually British. Some rejuvenation came in the early 1930s, leading to a new building in 1936. After the outbreak of the Second World War, however, the position of the hospital proved to be untenable. Twenty-seven of the fifty-six deaconesses returned to Germany and the remainder were interned on the Isle of Man. After the war the hospital was integrated into the National Health Service and finally closed down in the 1980s.

Although the study is generally well researched and written, some critical remarks are necessary. An online data collection which accompanies the book contains a table with deaconesses’ raw biographical data, but no attempt has been made to analyse these with quantitative methods. The author draws broad conclusions from individual biographies whose selection criteria are not comprehensively explained. Cohort data such as fluctuation, income, or the relationship between social background and position within the hospital remain unclear without a quantitative basis. At times, this lack of synthesis renders the author’s arguments less convincing. For a contribution to gender studies, for example, more data-based observations on career trajectories after leaving employment at the German Hospital would have been desirable. Potential gaps in the sources can be legitimately problematized. More synthesis would also have been desirable in the narrative. For what it covers, the book is simply too long at 458 pages. Many passages contain interesting background information but are not stringently framed by arguments or wider points.

These critical remarks, however, do not detract from the overall value of the book. It is the first detailed study of this female group of migrants and manages to link its microhistorical findings to current historiographical trends. The transnational character of institutions (the German Hospital, Kaiserswerth) and individual biographies is

well explained. The book is therefore not only a valuable contribution to German, or German diasporic, history, but also to British history. It is very much to be hoped that the author will publish an article version in English which sums up the main findings.

STEFAN MANZ is Professor of German and Global History at Aston University, Birmingham. Publications include *Constructing a German Diaspora: The 'Greater German Empire', 1871–1914* (2014) and, with Panikos Panayi, *Enemies in the Empire: Civilian Internment in the British Empire during the First World War* (2020). A current AHRC-funded project is entitled 'South Africa World War One'.