

The Danger of Cultural Erasure in Inter-Ethnic, Inter-Religious, Trans-National Rescue During Genocide: A Comparison of the Shoah and the Bosnian Civil War

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Abstract: *International genocide intervention strategies that involve the extended evacuation and/or displacement of refugees often save the physical lives of would-be victims at the expense of psychological and social trauma and cultural erasure. Through a comparison of the international rescue efforts of the Kindertransport program in Great Britain prior to and during the Second World War and the refugee caravans organized by La Benevolencija in Sarajevo during the Bosnian Civil War, the benefits and dangers of inter-ethnic, inter-religious rescue in times of mass violence are examined, along with how the social dynamics of racialized religious identification influenced the occurrence of these intervention strategies. The implications gleaned from this comparison offer guidance for current and future genocide intervention programs, where great care should be taken, whenever possible, to keep family groups intact and together, provide necessary psychological and social services for refugees, and allow for the continued practice of communal cultural and religious traditions without forced assimilation. The moment of physical rescue is only the initial component of a successful intervention into religio-ethnic violence; to truly prevent the genocidal destruction of a people and culture, those people's ability to identify with their traditions and maintain their way of life is of equal and vital importance.*

Keywords: Holocaust, Shoah, Kindertransport, Bosnian Genocide, La Benevolencija, International Intervention

The Danger of Cultural Erasure

On the eve of World War II, a young Jewish girl was shipped via train and boat away from the life she had known with her family in Germany to the British Isles, alone. Of her new life, she said, “When we arrived

in London they took us to a lady who took kids in Folkestone. She was a wicked lady. She made us go to church; she made me go to church. She had a son, I guess he was my age, and a girl. And when I didn't listen then she used to hit me.”¹ Two years later, on the other side of the same war, an orphaned four-year-old Serb girl named Milica Philipovic was taken in by a Catholic woman named Manda Krpan, who raised her and who Milica called her ‘other mother.’² Two more years after that, in yet another corner of this worldwide war, a Jewish baby was born to parents imprisoned in an Axis concentration camp. Of his later boyhood in Yugoslavia, he said, “I was born Jewish and brought up in a Jewish family. I had a Jewish childhood with Jewish friends. Usually we know each other just by nicknames and I don’t know the real name or a person’s nationality or religion. First of all, we are human beings.”³

All these children’s parents were targets of various genocides. Their testimonies, intertwining between place, time, and conflict, illustrate both the altruistic and harmful sides of inter-ethnic, inter-religious rescue in times of mass violence and atrocity. When well-meaning bystanders and foreign sympathizers intervene across national identity lines in the midst of crimes against humanity, they might save a victim from explicit violence, but, especially when that victim is a child and especially when the method of intervention is long-term evacuation, they might also enact an implicit violence through geographic displacement and forced cultural assimilation. By reviewing the ethical and moral implications of rescue through the case studies of the Kindertransport program during the Shoah and La Benevolencija’s refugee convoys during the Bosnian Civil War, as well as analyzing how ethnicity, religion, nationality, and other aspects of identity were socially constructed in each context, this investigation will engage the question of unintended cultural erasure in inter-ethnic, inter-religious, trans-national cooperation. Although ambitious and admirable, unless done with careful and thorough cultural sensitivity, these efforts merely mitigate victims’ immediate, physical danger while at the same time furthering the social destruction, in whole or in part, of victims’ cultural heritage and identity that their perpetrators set out to do in the first place.

¹ Angel and Evans, “Why are we not doing more for them?,” 39.

² Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force*, 136.

³ Rock, “Sarajevo and the Sarajevo Sephardim,” 905.

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Violence in Art

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