

The Battle of Britishness: Migrant Journeys, 1685 to the Present

Review Number:

1566

Publish date:

Thursday, 20 March, 2014

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ISBN:

9780719066405

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

320pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780719066405>

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

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At a time when billboards have been driven around London urging illegal immigrants to ‘go home’, when photographs of the arrests of those suspected of breaching their visas were being tweeted by the Home Office (with the hashtag #immigrationoffenders), and when 39,000 texts stating ‘go home’ have been sent to suspected overstayers, the publication of Tony Kushner's *The Battle of Britishness* is particularly timely. The billboards, tweets and texting powerfully reveal the extent to which the conflict over controlling Britain's borders is as much focused on the hearts and minds of its citizens, as on the bodies of immigrants.

Kushner is one of Britain's leading migration historians, whose extensive publications have focused on the impact of refugees, Jewish migration and racism in British history and collective memory. In *The Battle of Britishness* he shows his mastery of the field through interweaving constant connections between past and present journeys. Such comparisons highlight both the emerging trends in research (such as the exploration of Huguenot, Irish and Jewish refugees as more than forced migration) and the overlaying of different migratory movements in the construction of collective memory (as in the claiming of the Huguenot experience to legitimise the exclusion of Eastern European Jews in the 1890s and early 1900s). Building on Kushner's earlier analyses of the public histories and collective memory of immigration to Britain, the book is a *tour de force* in its balance of breadth and nuance.⁽¹⁾

The Battle of Britishness opens with the debates around immigration, asylum and multiculturalism that marked New Labour at the start of the 21st century. Kushner provides a sensitive discussion of this period, exploring how the positions taken by politicians, intellectuals and activists were often framed within an

imagined past of a homogenous, pre-immigrant England. Charting the conflicts that underlay the invocations of multiculturalism in the early 2000s, the first chapter provides a much needed counterpoint to David Goodhart's recent polemic on post-war immigration.[\(2\)](#)

Chapter two explores how specific historical migrations have been constructed and understood as journeys, ranging from the Irish famine to the exodus of Eastern European Jews to the Middle Passage. In drawing on scholarship from both sides of the Atlantic, Kushner details how these traumatic voyages have been remembered in specific historical contexts. Choosing population movements formed by violence and coercion raises questions about how other forms of migration (such as temporary sojourning, career migration or circular migration) may have different scripts and structures of collective memory than those covered in the text.[\(3\)](#)

The remainder of the book is structured around three pairs of chapters contrasting the celebrated and forgotten journeys of European refugees in the 17th and 19th centuries, of refugees from Nazi Germany, and of post-colonial migrants at the end of the British Empire. Juxtaposing prominent and obscure arrivals provides a powerful window on how the state, broader British society and migrant groups themselves have negotiated debates around inclusion and exclusion. The pairs of chapters work well in allowing the author to connect the historical experience of migrants with the events shaping the construction of their journey as collective memory. Together the three sets of case studies chart how the boundaries of integration in British society have been reconfigured, negotiated and contested by immigrant groups over time.

Chapter three details the physical experience of travel for the estimated 50,000 Huguenot exiles who arrived in Britain at the end of the 17th century. Kushner contrasts the religious narratives of suffering produced at the time with the later visions of their economic advancement and liberal asylum that have been central to their public remembrance as refugees. The 1879 arrival of the mail steamer *Minho* in Southampton opens chapter four, which examines the return migration of 'Volga Germans' from Brazil to the Russian Empire. Despite the intensity of international diplomatic negotiations over their reception in Britain, Germany and Russia, the movements of such transmigrants are rarely visible in public histories that are centred on British tolerance and assistance to elite refugees such as the Huguenots.

In chapters five and six, Kushner examines the construction of refugee identity during and after the Second World War through contrasting the celebration of *Kindertransport* as 'the British scheme that saved 10,000 children from the Nazi regime' (p. 147) with the opposition to receiving the cruise ship *St Louis* which crisscrossed the Atlantic in mid-1939 without being allowed to land its 900 refugees from Nazi Germany. The *Kindertransport* has been the focus for considerable official and public commemoration, which has been powerfully shaped since the 1980s by the changing visions of the Holocaust and by international public memory projects. This prominence is contrasted to the silences over other child refugees (such as the nearly 4000 Spanish children who arrived in Britain in 1937 fleeing the Spanish Civil War) or other Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe. The voyage of the *St Louis* between Latin America and Europe is used to explore how opposition to refugees was institutionalized in state practices of border control and the tensions of its remembrance within the wider narratives of the Second World War. Both chapters highlight the trans-Atlantic movements of refugees and the changing impact of American constructions of the war and Holocaust on British national memory.

Caribbean and African immigration to Britain amidst the mid-20th century crises of decolonization are the subject for chapters seven and eight. Kushner analyses the diversity of routes, migrants and experiences which have been marginalized by the memorialization of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948 as marking the origin of mass Caribbean migration. The symbolic power of *Windrush* has come from its being claimed for different purposes by both the state and by migrant groups, evading the more problematic representation of the violence and forced repatriation experienced by pre-1945 black communities in Britain, or the double political crises of immigrant exclusion and Caribbean decolonization in the early 1960s. Chapter eight explores the killing of Nigerian David Oluwale by police in Leeds in May 1969 within a much broader periodisation of black history in Britain that examines the black communities in British ports during the early 1900s through the 1919 race riots and the 1920s racial policing of black sailors. The tragedy of

Oluwale's murder reveals the extent to which traumatic episodes of racial violence are powerfully seared within the local memories of ethnic groups in Leeds, Cardiff and Liverpool.

A core strength of the book is the way in which Kushner brings together a broad mix of sources in exploring narratives of migration including autobiographies, television documentaries, academic texts, literature and government reports. The depth of these sources enables a sensitive close reading of their narratives, as in the analysis of how child refugees from Nazi Germany described the *Kindertransport* in terms of the personal traumas of family separation rather than through the encroaching shadow of the Holocaust that defines its public memorialisation. Kushner's nuanced juxtaposition of migrant remembering, state accounts, literary texts and contemporary descriptions reveals the dynamic nature of collective memory and the range of forces shaping its remaking.

This history of journeys represents a powerful correction to the repeated exclusion of immigrants in British historiography and the contemporary mythologisation of the nation's past as migrant-free. *The Battle of Britishness* is an intervention in national history, and so its archival and textual evidence are overwhelmingly based in Britain. This raises methodological questions as to how the trans-national experiences of migration are conceptualized through the lens of 'collective memory' (which tends to be used far more often in local and national histories than for global processes). The collective memories of these journeys were constructed not only in countries of arrival, but also in countries of origin and transit, and so it is the shifting relationships between these different sites of memory production that is worthy of much more investigation by future research.[\(4\)](#)

Given the upsurge in interest in how the historical experience of immigration is represented in European collective memory, *The Battle of Britishness* needs to be read as more than a contribution to diversifying British history. By conceptualizing journeys and their remembrance as processes of change and contestation, Kushner's study represents a profound challenge not only to historians, but also to contemporary policy-makers and museum practitioners that tend to construct migrants as discrete, stable, cultural groups (or 'communities'). Whereas European museums have tended to focus on memories, objects and visual representations that are seen as embodying ethnic difference or enabling 'participation' by migrant communities, the narratives analysed by Kushner reveal that such identities are always in process and shaped by both the political projects of the migrants themselves and other groups in British society.[\(5\)](#)

Notes

1. Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester, 2006); Tony Kushner, 'Great Britons: immigration, history and memory', in *Histories and Memories: Migrants and Their History in Britain*, ed. Kathy Burrell and Panikos Panayi (London, 2006), pp. 18–34; *The Jewish Heritage in British History: Englishness and Jewishness*, ed. Tony Kushner (London, 1992).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Goodhart, *The British Dream: Successes and Failures of Post-War Immigration* (London, 2013).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (London, 1997).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Abdelmalek Sayad, *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, translated by David Macey (Cambridge, 2004).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/projects/unesco-iom-migration-museums-initiative/> [2]; <http://www.mela-project.eu/> [3]; <http://www.migrants-moving-history.org/documentary.htm> [4]> [accessed 1 March 2014].[Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

H-Net

<https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [5]

History and Cultures

<http://historyandcultures.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/jhac3-nasar-review-of-kushner.pdf> [6]

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[3] <http://www.mela-project.eu/>

[4] <http://www.migrants-moving-history.org/documentary.htm>

[5] <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40695>

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