

# Knowledge Production in Displacement and Forced Migration

Workshop at the University of California, Santa Barbara, April 17–18, 2023. Co-sponsored by the Pacific Office of the German Historical Institute and the University of California, Santa Barbara. Organizers: Joshua Donovan (GHI, Pacific Office), Vitalij Fastovskij (GHI, Pacific Office), Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky (University of California, Santa Barbara). Participants: Evren Altinkas (University of Guelph), Roy Bar Sadeh (Yale University), Nadezhda Beliakova (University of Bielefeld), Barbara Henning (University of Mainz), Rustam Khan (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Jan Lambertz (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum), Charis Marantzidou (Columbia University), Nour Munawar (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies), Martin Nekola (Independent), Phi Nguyen (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne), Benjamin Tromly (University of Puget Sound), Nino Vallen (GHI, Pacific Office), Ramon Wiederkehr (University of Neuchâtel), Ani Yeremyan (Jawaharlal Nehru University).

In recent years, the focus of the German Historical Institute Washington on knowledge in transit has initiated fruitful dialogues between the history of migration and the history of knowledge. Taking its cue from these conversations, this two-day workshop brought together historians from Asia, Europe, and the United States to discuss knowledge production in displacement and forced migration. Historical research about refugees and forced migration has been booming in recent years. Yet, as the workshop organizers underscored in their opening remarks, existing scholarship tends to concentrate on the production of knowledge about displaced persons rather than the knowledge they them-

selves use and produce. Shifting the perspective toward the latter can contribute to changing our understanding of the ways in which those who were displaced grappled with the myriad challenges they faced because of their displacement and contributed to the societies where they arrived, either temporarily or permanently.

But the study of knowledge production among refugees and displaced persons also raises a series of theoretical and methodological questions. What do we mean when we talk about knowledge? How do we preserve a meaningful distinction between knowledge, information, and experience? What knowledge did displaced persons preserve, produce, and transmit, and how was it shaped by their experiences of being relocated? In what ways did different actors use this knowledge? What archival resources can be used and how do we deal with diverse epistemological and ontological positions? These questions resurfaced again and again over the course of the two-day workshop, in which pairs of participants presented two of the other pre-circulated papers.

In the first panel Ani Yeremyan and Benjamin Tromly discussed papers by Martin Nekola and Phi Nguyen. Nekola's research explored the experiences of Czech refugees in Bavarian refugee camps after the Communists took control in Czechoslovakia in 1948. In addition to discussing the challenges and hardships, Nekola zoomed in on refugee newspapers and education programs established to foster communal sentiments and increase the chances to acquire a visa. Phi Nguyen's work examined the urban and mnemonic landscape of the Vietnamese city of Hue, focusing on the role of the River Hương in the creation of a consecrated landscape that was shaped by the different migrant groups that had arrived in the region over the past millennium. Although the papers dealt with different topics, they prompted a lively discussion about the tensions between nation-making and migrant knowledge, inter-generational

transfers of knowledge, and the challenge of presenting to broader audiences the knowledge about refugees academics produce.

The second panel focused on the role of refugees in different modernization projects. Jan Lambertz and Nour Munawar commented on papers written by Evren Altinkas and Charis Marantzidou. Altinkas's paper studied German scholars of Jewish origin and their role in the formation of the Turkish higher education system. According to Altinkas, the arrival of refugee professors like Ernst E. Hirsch, Fritz Neumark, and Ernst Reuter in the Turkish Republic contributed strongly to the efforts of the Turkish government to modernize scientific education and research. Marantzidou's paper explored the involvement of Russian refugees fleeing the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War in Bulgaria's educational and professional world during the 1920s and 1930s. Marantzidou argued that these refugees' knowledge and expertise, together with the prestige they enjoyed as former agents of the Russian empire, allowed them to negotiate their role in Bulgarian society. The papers raised questions about the performative nature of expertise, collisions between distinct knowledge traditions, and the kinds of knowledge that gave some refugees advantages over others.

The third and final panel of the day produced a discussion about distinct types of migrant knowledge production, with Martin Nekola and Rustam Khan commenting on papers by Roy Bar Sadeh and Barbara Henning. Based on a study of Soviet *muhajirs'* (refugees) ideas about "minority rights" during the early 1930s, Bar Sadeh argued that muhajir activism and knowledge production were a means for Muslim thinkers to reconsider the premises of global governance in the Middle East. Through the legal category of "minority rights" muhajirs shaped solidarity as well as anti- and pro-Soviet sentiments in the Middle East. Henning's paper explored a different knowledge regime, created around the century-old tradi-

tion of members of the Ottoman imperial elite tracing their origins back to the Prophet. Henning contended that families that were displaced as a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire used this regime to cope with far-reaching and multilayered shifts that characterized this period of conflict. Ancestral knowledge, embedded in narratives and genealogical archives, provided anchors for continuity as borders were being redrawn and new orders produced new epistemologies. A conversation ensued about the interaction between displacement status and knowledge production, the typification of the knowledge produced by muhajirs at the General Islamic Congress in Jerusalem (1931), and the role of women as producers of genealogical knowledge.

The fourth panel explored refugee newspapers and their role in the production of knowledge about and by displaced persons. Roy Bar Sadeh and Phi Nguyen discussed papers by Ramon Wiederkehr and Ani Yeremyan. Wiederkehr's paper studied two Swiss periodicals (*Über die Grenzen* and the *Informations-Dienst für Rück- und Weiterwanderung*) and their role in the dissemination of refugee knowledge. Wiederkehr underscored the importance of these periodicals as an expression of a trans-national refugeedom, opening a transnational space in which information linked to refugee interests and necessities circulated. Ani Yeremyan adopted a different perspective on the function of diasporic newspapers in her paper on identity-making in the Armenian diaspora. Engaging with Jürgen Habermas's idea of the public sphere and Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities, she argued that newspapers written in the vernacular helped shape a new global Armenian diasporic identity grounded in national consciousness, a common cultural origin myth, and the deployment of knowledge in the collective fight for recognition of the Armenian genocide. These detailed studies of refugee newspapers prompted debate about the agency and voice of refugees and the importance of shared outlets in the forging of solidarity.

Participants also reflected on how these cases revealed the significance of collaborations with the (imperial) state in the making of refugee communities, and the role foreign languages played in the process, thereby contradicting common ideas about the relationship between vernacular language and the building of national communities.

In the fifth panel Barbara Henning and Charis Marantzidou commented on papers by Rustam Khan and Nour Munawar. Khan's paper explored the experiences and social struggles of labor migrants in Belgium between the 1950s and 1970s, against the background of the country's energy transition. Khan argued that the increasing dominance of oil over coal and the development of car manufacturing created conditions in which discourses about human rights produced a new alliance between traditional left activists and migrant workers. Munawar's work, by contrast, explored the knowledge that is produced in the making of a sense of home among Palestinian refugees in Syria. Comparing stories of forced displacement provided by a third-generation Palestinian refugee family, media narratives, and autobiographical accounts, Munawar showed how and what knowledge people produce as they reconsider and reframe their conceptions of home and homeland. Grappling with different postcolonial legacies, the papers inspired further reflections on the meaning and racialization of the migrant category as well as the intergenerational and multi-layered constellations of displacement that colonialism produced. The conversation also turned to questions about heritage, both material and immaterial, of displacement, and the kind of knowledge that is invoked when talking about both human rights and home.

The sixth and final panel grappled once more with the instrumentalization of refugee knowledge, with Ramon Wiederkehr and Evren Altinkas discussing papers by Jan Lambertz and Benjamin Tromly. In her work on two

Swedish repatriation ships, the MS *Gripsholm* and the SS *Drottningholm*, Lambertz examined the role of migrants and refugees coming from Japan and Europe in spreading “Holocaust knowledge” across the globe. Although the cataloguing of atrocity stories never was an objective of governmental agencies, and refugees were reluctant to tell them out of fear for retaliation, such narratives did nonetheless find their way to the Americas, contributing to a new kind of knowledge transfer. Tromly’s work explored popular and scholarly discourse on the Soviet general and Nazi collaborator Andrei Vlasov in the United States and Germany in the first two postwar decades. The paper demonstrated how the collective memories of former Vlasovites became the building blocks for narratives that were suited to the new reality of the Cold War. With both papers providing fascinating insights into the ways in which migrant knowledge was instrumentalized in the context of World War II and the Cold War, participants discussed the tension between institutional and refugee knowledge, as well as the agency of refugees in shaping narratives that were subsequently instrumentalized by state actors.

There is no doubt that the use of the migrant knowledge lens opens new perspectives onto the history of specific migratory or refugee movements. The empirically rich papers discussed during this workshop testify to this potential. They revealed the many different forms of knowledge that migrants and refugees produced, often in cooperation with non-migrant actors. They also showed the varying ways in which this knowledge was used by states, organizations, and displaced persons themselves to affect changing realities. Still, some doubts about the uses of this approach remained. During the final round table, participants brought up the necessity to further unpack what is meant when we speak about knowledge. The term was used to speak about different forms of information, stories, rumors, and experiences, but are these truly the same things? Several participants

advocated for more terminological clarity, while others warned that a focus on knowledge could be too restrictive. One way in which these doubts could be addressed would be by paying more attention to the ways in which specific groups themselves understood knowledge and what it was supposed to do. Ultimately, the round table did make clear that these discussions help us understand much better the agency of displaced persons not only in the making of the places to which they arrived but to migratory and refugee regimes as well. I am looking forward to the continuation of these dialogues as the co-organizers proceed with the publication of selected papers.

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