

In Global Transit: A New GHI Research Focus

Interview with Simone Lässig

Since 2018, the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), together with its Pacific Office in Berkeley, has organized several international conferences and workshops that have used the term “transit” to explore flight, expulsion, and emigration from Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied European countries, focusing on the global dimension of this forced migration. This series of meetings has given rise to a new research focus at the Institute, which GHI Director Simone Lässig discusses in this interview. The interview was conducted in German by Nora Hilgert and translated into English by Casey Sutcliffe.

Nora Hilgert: Let’s begin with a basic question: What does the term “transit” mean to you?

Simone Lässig: The term “transit” stands for phases in the lives of migrants in which they are on the move – mostly unintentionally and without a long-term plan – between different cultural, political, and geographical spaces. In these phases, they leave behind most of what is familiar to them and encounter a great deal that is new. Much of their experience in this phase

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is so fragile, uncertain, and unpredictable that they find it difficult to develop trust in the future or even to plan for it. Transit is a fluid space characterized by tremendous uncertainty and contingency, especially for refugees. Yet it is also distinguished by the limited agency it gives them. The category of “transit” is characterized by the intersection of space and time, two core concepts of historical studies, as well as structure and agency. Therefore, the transit perspective provides an analytical lens that forces historians to more carefully examine the times and spaces after people leave places where they long felt at home and before they arrive somewhere they can settle. This approach encourages historians to view these times and spaces as separate phases of – often forced – migration. The factors that prompt people to move and manage their lives in transit range from poverty, hunger, and environmental disasters to war, persecution, expulsion, and genocide, all the way to voluntary factors such as following labor opportunities or family members or hoping for a better life. Although such motives and circumstances have played a role in all epochs of human history, they reached a new level in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in terms of the number of people moving and the spaces they traversed, often extending across entire world regions. Most recently – and tragically – we can see this with millions of refugees fleeing the Russian war on Ukraine; we saw it already in 2015 with refugees from Syria, fleeing by stages from one point of arrival to another. Transit is, thus, a historical phenomenon that has particular salience and meaning within the history of forced migration and flight.

Before we dig deeper into your perspective and the potential it offers, let’s talk about the activities the GHI Washington has organized under the banner of “In Global Transit.” Could you tell us about them?



Figure 1. Dutch soldiers check the papers of Javanese women in a transit camp of the Seventh December Division near Tandjong Priok (or of another division from Camp Doeri on Batavia), 1946. Photo: C.J. Taillie, Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Wikimedia Commons.

The history of flight and forced migration has been a research focus for the German Historical Institute Washington since 2015. Deepening our study of transit was the logical continuation of research we had already begun. In this context, the GHI, together with external partners both inside and outside of the Max Weber Stiftung (MWS), organized a series of conferences that explored the long-neglected global dimension of the flight of Jews from Nazi Europe and also mapped this out for the regions in which the conferences were to take place. Together with the GHI London and its India Branch Office (IBO), represented by Andreas Gestrich and Indra Sengupta, we held a conference in South Asia – in Kolkata – in 2018 on “Jewish Migrants from Hitler’s Europe in Asia, Africa, and Beyond.” The second conference, “Forced Migration of Jews and Other Refugees (1940s–1960s),” followed in 2019 at the Pacific Office of the GHI Washington in Berkeley. Organized together with Swen Steinberg and supported by Francesco Spagnolo in Berkeley and Wolf Gruner in Los Angeles, it not only brought the U.S. West Coast and the greater Pacific region into our “transit” perspective but also expanded its timeframe and conceptual underpinnings.

Just as we had come up with a concept for the third conference in the series, to be held at the new MWS branch office in Beijing, China, the Coronavirus pandemic disrupted our plans. Therefore, instead of heading to East Asia, we met on Zoom. At that time, two of our own research fellows, Anna-Carolin Augustin and Carolin Liebisch-Gümüş, joined the core group

of scholars working on this topic. In the scholarly exchange that we engaged in via the Internet, we found ourselves confronted with a specific “transit” experience: suddenly and for the foreseeable future, our scope of action had become severely restricted. We soon tried out new strategies that enabled us to resume some activities. We also had to deal with involuntary and random stops along our “path,” which took a form rather different from what we had anticipated. In December 2020, the GHI Washington, with its Pacific Office in Berkeley, held the online workshop “Jewish Refugees in Global Transit: Spaces – Temporalities – Interactions.” We utilized this opportunity to initiate a more general discussion of “transit” and to fully develop the conceptual and theoretical groundwork for this approach. The fourth event in the series – the online workshop “Archives of Global Transit: Reconsidering Jewish Refugees from Nazi Europe” held in October 2021 – built on the previous meetings and continued our discussion of fundamentals, with a focus on methodological issues and available sources for approaching transit; we also emphasized the experience of being “in between.”

All in all, these events brought together more than sixty international scholars and helped them form a network. A third of them took part in two or more events in the series that the GHI Washington organized with various partners, which included, for example, the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life at the University of California in Berkeley and the USC Shoah Foundation Center for Advanced Genocide Research in Los Angeles.

Now, with a variety of researchers from numerous countries having participated in these events, a Standing Working Group has formed, consisting of scholars with a predominantly historical focus, to regularly discuss various aspects of “global transit.” How do you explain the remarkable response that this GHI-initiated topic has generated?

I see several reasons for this: Although most of the scholars we have brought together work on similar topics, they often feel committed to different research areas – specifically, Jewish Studies or refugee and exile research. The “transit” perspective, that is, focusing on migrants’ phases of in-betweenness, has enabled participants to rethink their topics and, above all, consider their sources in a new and different way. In addition, our new conference and workshop formats have enabled innovative forms of scholarly exchange that have made the development of this new field of research truly collaborative, sometimes extending beyond disciplinary boundaries. And participants have taken up these new formats with great enthusiasm. Many first met others through our conferences, and these connections were reinforced when particular researchers repeatedly joined in. A whole series of events fosters deeper connections and more sustainable scholarly exchange than individual large conferences do – many people had not had such experiences before.

The positive response to this concept, which we have refined during the pandemic, can also be explained by the breadth of our approach: From the beginning, we were not only interested in the well-researched escape routes in the northwestern hemisphere but also in lesser-known ones, especially in the Global South. In addition, we wanted to discuss the subject of transit broadly with a view to the sources available for researching it. In our events, for example, museum and collection curators took part alongside historians, and historical images and objects figured prominently, as did methodological challenges related to oral history and the memory of transit. Moreover, we sought to go beyond the research boundaries of Jewish history and Holocaust studies, which, for pragmatic reasons, tend to be narrower.

Last but not least, I interpret this positive response as a consequence of how closely the subject of transit relates to our current global realities and the different refugee movements of our time. After all, as historians, we investigate the past

again and again as if looking in a mirror and realize that a large number of our questions about history also derive from our present.

In your first answer, you spoke more generally about the importance of your perspective on transit for the history of flight and forced migration. Transit, you said, points to open questions, especially in historical migration research. How does your research focus fit into this?

We want to reconsider existing findings – for example, those in historical Migration and Mobility Studies but, above all, in the relatively new field of refugee history – by concentrating on phenomena and representations of life in “in-between” or “liminal” spaces. These spaces have not yet been adequately studied because migration research long remained stuck in the dichotomy of emigration and immigration or in the concept of the nation-state, where people without status or papers were simply not visible, often due to the available sources. Although approaches to historical migration research based in macrostudies or systems theory addressed people in transit, they merely gathered quantitative data. Exile research, for its part, did indeed deal with people in these “liminal spaces” but only focused on specific social groups, especially intellectual ones – also due to the available sources. Diaspora research, in turn, always looked at “liminal spaces” but usually only those where migrants had arrived or settled down, and less those from before or after.

Yet it was precisely in these physical and mental “liminal spaces” that migrants found it difficult, if not impossible, to figure out where they belonged; in them, people were forced to come to terms with “transitions” of all kinds – biographical, cultural, economic, geographic, generational, and social. Migration rarely ever proceeds in a linear fashion from the point of departure to the point of arrival. Tony Kushner has pointed out that, both legally and practically, transit was an

ever-recurring part of migrants' experiences. This applied especially to refugees in the twentieth century, who were confronted with unprecedented uncertainty and contingency, fear and confidence, hopelessness and new opportunities; they also had to redefine questions of belonging and identity. Refugees, until today, navigate within these different political, legal, and cultural frameworks but continue to face similar sorts of challenges and opportunities.

What are some of the concrete research questions and research spaces that you have addressed in your Standing Working Group?

Older exile and diaspora research focused primarily on countries of emigration that were among the most attractive to those forced to emigrate – if one can speak of attractiveness at all in this context. Above all, these included the United States, the United Kingdom, and Palestine. Aside from Shanghai, a relatively well-researched place of refuge, which provided around 18,000 Jews with a safe haven, we know surprisingly little about transit experiences in countries like Australia, India, and Kenya. In these countries, Jews who were racially persecuted in Germany were seen as “whites” – or obliged by the British to behave as such. That is, they looked like the European colonial elite and thus were construed as part of a privileged race and culture. This, in turn, fueled reservations, resistance, and antisemitism among long-established but socially disadvantaged groups in British India and British Kenya, for example. After the war began, Jews who had found refuge among the Allies suddenly found themselves identified as “Germans” again and, thus, as potential enemies classified as enemy aliens; some were interned, for example, in Australia and India. And the situation was different again for those who found themselves in nations under the influence of Western powers or in the context of anti-colonial movements – as in Shanghai.

In general, these extremely fluid colonial and postcolonial spaces of transformation seem to us to be especially important for the phenomenon of transit in the 1930s and the following decades. Interesting alliances were formed in this context: Refugees who, for example, were grateful for their survival in India nonetheless vehemently rejected British colonial rule. They had drawn political conclusions from their own experience of injustice. Naturally, they were limited in the extent to which they could translate these conclusions into political action because their legal status was precarious, and some of them were interned and thus immobile. This shows how transit functions as a lens that can shed new light on the entanglement of migrant and colonial or postcolonial history.

In the conferences, workshops and the resulting Standing Working Group, you concentrated primarily on groups of people who had fled from National Socialist Europe. Why did you focus on this specific period and on these actors? How do you think this focus uncovers the scope and potential of the new research field?

Our “In Global Transit” conferences and workshops fit within recent global historical studies that have researched people who were forced to live (or survive) in transit situations from different spatial, temporal, and methodological perspectives. Our discussions focused on Jews and political exiles who found refuge in colonial regions or countries of the Global South. Turning to still little-known emigration countries such as Iran, India, China, Mexico, Colombia, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Kenya inspired us to assume new points of view on several levels: First of all, in researching transit to these countries, historians rarely encounter prominent emigrants – such as artists, scientists, or entrepreneurs – whose careers are already well researched nearly as frequently as in Western countries. Therefore, this perspective lends itself better to exploring the “exile of the ordinary people” and their everyday experiences.



Figure 2. "Refugees who had been refused permission to stay in England figured in a distressing scene at Croydon airport yesterday. They were so distraught that the pilot of their plane thought it unwise to leave, and they will be sent to Copenhagen by train and boat." *The Guardian*, 31 March 1939, p. 10, Photo: AP/World Wide Photos, Wikimedia Commons.

Second, it was precisely the refugees who made their way to these far-off countries who had to live in transit for a particularly long time. While young Jews like Guy Stern, Stefan Heym, and Henry Kissinger returned to Europe in 1944/45 as American citizens and as part of the Allied troops, those who were stranded in Shanghai or India or who had been deported to the East by the Soviet occupiers of Poland had to start all over again in many respects. They were far from truly arriving: They had to look once again for countries that would accept them; this search, in turn, had a global dimension for many of them. In this respect, the historical actors you mentioned in your question provide a good analytical lens for our purposes. They inspired us to cross fixed historical turning points such as that of 1945.

What does this "crossing" look like, and what is its appeal for scholarship?

The end of the National Socialist dictatorship and of the Second World War is undoubtedly a significant turning point in world history. However, the experience of Jews who had found refuge in the Soviet Union or in countries of the Global South and had to renew their search for a home in 1945 shows the relevance of their biographies. In 1948, about 10,000

Jews were still stuck in Shanghai, for example. Some of them made it to the U.S., either permanently or on their way elsewhere; others had to return to those European countries they recalled primarily as places of horror, so they largely experienced them as places of renewed transit.

We find the temporal and spatial dimensions of our research focus on “transit” particularly appealing for historical scholarship. For one thing, as some refugees had to traverse several continents to find a home, they spent a prolonged period in a liminal space or even in several transit spaces. Many Jews who emigrated as children only found a firm footing as adults. Against the background of current challenges, we are enormously interested in the implications this had and the knowledge they absorbed, translated, and generated themselves in this long and specific migration situation.

The second aspect is that Jews and political refugees fleeing National Socialism were no longer the only ones living in global transit: After the end of the war, more people than ever before were homeless and migrating between very different geographical and political areas. The displacement of ethnic, religious and/or national groups that had begun in the interwar period now became a global phenomenon. In Europe millions of people were living in transit – estimates suggest up to 60 million – but not only there. Territorial shifts and subsequent population transfers, refugee movements, and expulsions shaped postwar history in other, mostly colonial regions of the world as well; Palestine and India/Pakistan are among the best-known examples. And only after the Holocaust and under the impression of these large refugee movements did a system of international refugee policy emerge. We are interested in the role Jewish actors played in this context, but beyond this, we are concerned with the question of how suitable the history of Jewish emigration is for addressing *fundamental* questions of transit. I am thinking here, among other things, of

how migrants dealt with contingency and uncertainty and of how knowledge formed in the “liminal spaces” of their movement later became socially significant – the development of concepts for dealing with statelessness is just one of many examples. The ambivalence migrants felt between simply wanting to survive, on the one hand, and planning for the future in new, unknown, and sometimes uncertain contexts, on the other, is another experience that was likely shared by other groups in addition to the Jewish refugees.

“Experience” seems to be a crucial concept for you. How far can such a subjective approach really take us?

Researching structures in the historical process remains an important task for historical scholarship – no question about it. With our approach, however, we are trying to get closer to the everyday life of long-term migrants by turning to their experiences. We are particularly interested in which coping strategies people found in transit and how they transformed them into knowledge and passed them on. In other words, we see not only the states and the societies that took them in but also the migrants themselves as historical actors endowed with agency. They used their agency – often curtailed from the outside – individually in different ways. We ask how migrants dealt with insecurity and hardship: What kind of knowledge, for example, did they need to master the many bureaucratic hurdles they faced? Sometimes these hurdles were ordinary, but sometimes they were life-threatening, and the migrants initially had no approach nor cultural capital for overcoming them. We are also interested in how migrants used structures or created them to maintain their capacity to take action in their exceptional circumstances: they utilized and built up family networks, often with transnational mobilization strategies, refugee self-help organizations and non-governmental organizations, as well as informal, sometimes clandestine or illegal structures of refugee assistance,

which always generated winners and losers. In general, people in transit were confronted with specific relationships of dependency and power; at the same time, however, one can always find examples of self-empowerment and mutual support among people who meet in transit. Pictures and objects also bear witness to this. Whether photographs or drawings, letters, diaries or calendars, everyday objects and mobility infrastructures – material artifacts, together with the people who created and used them, are part of the knowledge and migration history that we want to write.

The knowledge history and migration history of migrants points to some of the potentials and synergies that the transit perspective presents for our work here in North America. I already mentioned that the history of flight and forced migration has been one of the GHI's fields of research since 2015. The international network "Migrant Knowledge" initiated at our Pacific Office in Berkeley also connects the history of knowledge with the history of migration, with the transit aspect naturally playing an important role. Consequently, our research focus "In Global Transit" fits not only into historical research on people in migrant transition phases but also further develops the research interests of the GHI Washington. At the same time, however, it also benefits from medium-term reorientations and expansions we made in 2021 – toward historical Mobility Studies and, within this field, specifically toward researching infrastructures that enabled, promoted, or thwarted migration and mobility. This orientation opens up new questions and networks that stimulate our research focus on transit and vice versa.

**What further plans do you have for "In Global Transit"?
What is next?**

I don't want to give everything away just yet, but we do have some promising ideas and plans. I can say this much already: We will expand the purview of this research focus and turn to



Figure 3. Examination room in the U.S. Immigration Station at Angel Island in San Francisco, probably before 1914. Photo: Hart Hyatt North, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Public domain, Wikimedia Commons.

the global transit of other refugee and migrant groups from other time periods. This broadened perspective has considerable potential to bring historical refugee research into dialogue with new approaches in historical mobility research but also with disciplines close to history. I am thinking, for example, of sociology, literary studies, political science, or ethnology because in these fields, too, researchers study the phenomenon of “being in-between” – just with different methods, questions, or sources. In addition, as I already hinted at in some of my answers, we have classified the transit experiences already identified in our intensive international discussions as very long-term. For this reason, we can relate the transit experience in refugee camps in the 1940s to that in the 1960s or compare experiences different refugees or other migrants had in specific transit locations or with specific transit infrastructures. In the second half of the twentieth century, airplanes and airports gained importance alongside ships and ports, to name just one example. How did spatial and structural shifts, but also changed national and international legal frameworks and knowledge resources, impact forms of transit and the people acting within it? These are some of the questions we address in our international “In Global Transit” Standing Working Group and in our GHI research fellows’ projects. We wish to pursue these questions with the community of international experts in the field in the future – for

example, in summer schools, on conference panels, and joint publications. Initiating and continuing this dialogue and conducting basic research from a historical perspective will be the core elements of the research focus “In Global Transit” at the GHI Washington in the coming years.

Simone Lässig is director of the German Historical Institute Washington and Professor of Modern History at Braunschweig University (currently on leave). Her main fields of research are modern Jewish history, the history of knowledge, digital history, and biography as a historical genre. Her publications include *Refugee Crises, 1945-2000: Political and Societal Responses in International Comparison* (co-edited, Cambridge UP, 2020), *The World of Children: Foreign Cultures in Nineteenth-Century German Education and Entertainment* (co-edited, Berghahn Books, 2019) and *Jüdische Wege ins Bürgertum: Kulturelles Kapital und sozialer Aufstieg im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2004).

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