Conference Reports

Fourth Annual International Seminar in Historical Refugee Studies

Seminar held at the University of Tübingen (Tübingen, Germany), July 3-6, 2024. Co-organized by the University of Tübingen, the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI), and the American Historical Association (AHA), in cooperation with the Interdisciplinary Center for Integration and Migration Research (InZentIM), the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI), and the Center for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21). Conveners: Jan C. Jansen (University of Tübingen), Dane Kennedy (George Washington University), Simone Lässig (GHI). Participants: Mathias Beer (Institute for Danube Swabian History and Regional Studies, Tübingen), Cristian Cercel (Institute for Danube Swabian History and Regional Studies, Tübingen), Muhamed Riyaz Chenganakkatil (Indian Institute of Technology), Kathleen Commons (University of Sheffield), Sara Cosemans (KU Leuven), Delphine Diaz (University of Reims), Victoria Do (University of Georgia), Paulina Dominik (European University Institute), Ilana Feldman (George Washington University), Peter Gatrell (University of Manchester), Xian Yu Jee (Royal Holloway/University of London), Panagiotis Karagkounis (University of Manchester), Pragya Kaul (University of Michigan), Jannik Keindorf (University of Tübingen), Susanne Lachenicht (University of Bayreuth), Thomas Mareite (University of Tübingen), Glenn Penny (University of California, Los Angeles), Ulrike Schulze (University of Tübingen), Ryan Cheuk Him Sun (University of British Columbia), Jessica Wehner (University of Osnabrück), Ramon Wiederkehr (University of Neuchâtel), Natalia Woszczyk (European University Institute).

The International Seminar in Historical Refugee Studies brings together early-career scholars from different countries working in the field of refugee history from diverse perspectives. The fourth edition of this seminar, held in the summer of 2024, showed that discussing refugee experiences through an historical perspective, from the seventeenth century to the present, brings to light patterns and continuities in how these experiences have been lived, conceptualized, managed, and negotiated by a variety of actors. Following words of welcome from conveners Jan C. Jansen and Dane Kennedy, the first session addressed early modern refugee regimes, from both a legal and emotional perspective. Discussing the case study of the settlement of Huguenots in England, often described as the country's "first refugees," Kathleen Commons raised the question of what constitutes a refugee regime in the first place. She asked whether the discretionary, contingent, and revocable protections and liberties granted to them by a particular monarch – and compared to what they extended to other foreign migrants – were tantamount to full statutory refugee protection. Commons analyzed the laws and policies applied in pre-modern in England to migrants fleeing violence, questioning whether the term "refugees" is appropriate in this specific historical context. Natalia Woszczyk delved into the Bohemian Brethren's emigration for reasons of faith in 1548, focusing on the seventeenth-century narratives that recounted this historical event and its aftermath in this community. Woszczyk argued for implementing the approaches deriving from the history of emotions into the scholarship on early modern migration, underlining how refugees employed religious metaphors and symbols of martyrdom to narrate and make sense of their experience.

The first day of the conference ended with a keynote lecture by Susanne Lachenicht, titled "Historicizing the Refugee Experience: Some Reflections on Current Research Interests, Paradigms, and Problems in Refugee Studies."

Lachenicht presented a broad panorama of the methodological, epistemological, and thematic underpinnings of historical refugee studies since the 1980s. She contended that this field of studies, rooted in migration history, gradually moved beyond the macro-historical perspective of migration history by adopting a multi-scalar approach and a post-structuralist emphasis on networks informed by microhistory. Lachenicht also highlighted key insights that historical refugee studies have drawn from literary criticism and new historicism, such as a focus on the situational aspects of identity and belonging, along with a renewed attention to the horizons of expectations and spatial-temporal conceptions held by historical actors.

The second session explored the intersection of political exile and imperial politics. Paulina Dominik examined the involvement of Polish political émigrés in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Tanzimat reforms, illustrating how, for many, the Ottoman Empire evolved from a place of exile into a realm of opportunity where they influenced Ottoman imperial governance. Dominik portrayed them as practitioners of informal imperialism, arguing that during their exile in the Ottoman Empire, Polish political émigrés, originally identified as independence fighters, also engaged in various imperial enterprises, serving as intermediaries and skillful builders of the empire. Muhamed Riyaz Chenganakkatil explored exile migrations to the Hijaz region in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arabia. While traditionally seen as a pilgrimage destination, Hijaz also became a refuge for South Asian Muslims exiled by the British Empire during and after the Great Rebellion of 1857. These political exiles included anti-colonial leaders and religious scholars who were deemed threats by British colonial authorities and formed new diasporic communities in Hijaz. Chenganakkatil examined the influence of these exilic networks on the Khilafat Movement and broader global Muslim politics, discussing the connection between punitive mobilities and exile politics in this geographical setting.

The third session zeroed in on refugee resettlement in twentieth-century Europe. Panagiotis Karagkounis discussed the temporal dynamics of humanitarian solutions and refugeedom in post-1922 Greece. Karagkounis argued that discrepancies in the temporal regimes of humanitarian organizations and refugees themselves highlighted underlying power imbalances and tensions between both sets of actors. By drawing upon the concept of "refugee time," Karagkounis demonstrated how refugees continued to identify as such and sought assistance even after the official emergency was considered over, thereby challenging the established "end" point of humanitarian efforts. Ramon Wiederkehr focused on the resettlement of Baltic displaced women under the mandate of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) to Switzerland in the wake of the Second World War. He argued that their admission was shaped by the conflicting interests of international, national, and nongovernmental actors, set against the backdrop of immigration politics and Cold War tensions. Wiederkehr's contribution underscored how refugee resettlement depended on considerations of cultural desirability and economic usefulness, positioning refugees as a captive workforce at the intersection between modern humanitarianism and global capitalism.

The focus of the fourth session lay on diasporas in South and Southeast Asia during the 1930s and 1940s. Pragya Kaul analyzed discourses on the "refugee colonist," the central figure of contemporary British imperial schemes around resettling European Jewish refugees to India. Kaul underscored how Whitehall officials, League of Nations representatives, and Jewish organizations alike advocated for the potential of refugees to foster white settlement in Britain's colonies, thereby aiding in the development of empire. Xian Yu Jee's paper traced the development of the relationship between Malayan *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese) and mainland China in the face of the Japanese occupation. Jee

demonstrated how refugees pragmatically navigated transnational networks: *huaqiao* tapped into preexisting ties with their Chinese "motherland" as they sought refuge, while many of them would return to British Malaya after the war. Both papers emphasized the intersection between refugee relief and political interests. British authorities saw Jewish refugees as prospective white settlers in colonial projects, and the Kuomintang government sought close relationships to *huaqiao* community leaders in order to forge a transnational Chinese identity. The session thus raised broader questions about how political actors both within and outside of communities influence diasporic identity formation.

The fifth session emphasized the role of cultural representations in the postwar refugee migration regime, specifically examining how the desirability of refugee populations was judged based on conceptions of Europeanness and whiteness. Ryan Cheuk Him Sun investigated the interactions between Central European Jewish refugees, Jewish refugee organizations in Hong Kong and Singapore, and British colonial authorities. Exploring the intersection between humanitarianism and gatekeeping, Sun argued that colonial border regimes influenced the type of assistance Jewish refugees received, as they navigated and sometimes resisted these colonial "paper walls" in their efforts to secure shelter. Jessica Wehner investigated the resettlement challenges encountered by Kalmyk Displaced Persons (DP), focusing on how ethnic categorizations and associated racist and culturalist essentializations impacted their postwar experience. The failed resettlement of Kalmyk DPs to Paraguay, Wehner argued, exemplifies how identity constructions can push certain refugee populations into liminal legal spaces and peripheral sites of refuge, while also highlighting their agency in negotiating resettlement options.

Ulrike Schulze gave a special presentation to start the fourth and final day of the conference on the activities of

the University of Tübingen's Refugee Law Clinic (RLC), a university-certified training program founded in 2016 based on the model of law clinics in the United States. The work of the RLC combines theory and practice by helping refugees navigate the German asylum system through counseling, teaching immigration and asylum law to future lawyers and social workers, and by creating awareness of refugee issues among future decision makers.

The sixth and last session of the conference focused on refugee mobility in postcolonial contexts during the second half of the twentieth century. Victoria Do investigated the connections between South Vietnamese pilots, the U.S. military, and the Savannah community during the Vietnam War. The training experience of South Vietnamese pilots in Georgia, many of whom subsequently became refugees, can be viewed as both a chapter in the narrative of American militarism and part of the global history of decolonization and the involvement of foreign allies in imperial counterinsurgency. Do argued that the training programs of the U.S. Vietnamization policy were driven by a distinct type of Cold War imperialism that created a specific space for subsequent Vietnamese refugee community formation that stood in marked contrast to the way so-called "boat people" were regarded after the war. Sara Cosemans looked at the relationship between "freedom of movement" clauses in human rights law and refugee resettlement in the 1970s, when these clauses became legally binding. Cosemans found that Western resettlement states increasingly attempted to circumvent "freedom of movement" obligations to contain unwanted migration from the non-Western world in the course of decolonization. She showed how in this context, refugee resettlement became a tool for managing and limiting mobility.

Covering different geographies and time periods, the papers presented at the seminar spoke to each other on

broader questions concerning the field of refugee history. Among the many points raised during this seminar, the conversation kept returning to three main themes and issues: Firstly, several papers engaged with questions of spaces and scales of analysis. By drawing attention to South-to-South circuits and networks of exiles (in the Ottoman Empire and in South and South-East Asia, most noticeably), they stressed the importance of de-centering Western geographies of refugee migration and paying attention to alternative sites of refuge and hubs of political modernity. In a similar vein, these papers revealed the frequent overlaps between empire and nation-state as mutually constitutive and not necessarily exclusive units of analysis. One common theme that emerged was the importance of refugee migration for fostering or sustaining the emergence of imperial sub-metropoles, thereby respatializing empire. Secondly, many contributions addressed connections between refugee protection and relief, capitalism, and settler colonialism. The discussion brought to light that a common thread shaping the refugee experience across time periods was a utilitarian, transactional, and competitive approach to refugee management that linked "productive" and "moral" dimensions. Refugee relief can therefore be both a humanitarian enterprise and a practical means to an end: by improving a "benevolent" nation's public image, establishing a work force, or (re-)settling refugees within projects of nation or empire building. At the same time, refugees can and have made use of these avenues of "usefulness" to negotiate access to relief and resources by self-fashioning and constructing narratives that correspond to utilitarian expectations of host states and societies. Finally, the discussion pointed to the baggage and limits of the "refugee" category as a lens of analysis. On the one hand, the prevalent essentialization of refugees as victims tends to obscure their agency and the multiple and complex roles they can have beyond being refugees: as settlers, political experts, aid-givers to other refugees, or, in colonial settings, oppres-

sors of others. On the other hand, several papers brought other concepts and terms to the conversation (exile, emigrant, displaced person, or non-English terms like *huaqiao* and *muhācir*). A core question was whether the primacy of the "refugee" category limits the scope of analysis in the field, and what such other categories can describe that the term "refugee" may not. The fifth iteration of the International Seminar in Historical Refugee Studies, scheduled for July 2025 at the University of California, Berkeley, will continue the conversation around these questions and themes in the field of refugee history.

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