Refugees in Global Transit: Encounters, Knowledge, and Coping Strategies in a Disrupted World, 1930s – 1950s

Workshop held at President Hotel, Mumbai, February 13-14, 2025. Co-organized by the Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies in New-Delhi, the German Historical Institute Washington, the Orient Institute Istanbul, and the Orient Institute Beirut. Conveners: Simone Lässig (German Historical Institute Washington), Sebastian Schwecke (Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies, Delhi), Swen Steinberg (Queen's University, Kingston), Christoph K. Neumann (Orient Institute Istanbul), Maria Framke (University of Erfurt), and Jens Hanssen (Orient Institute Beirut). Participants: Subarno Chattarji (Delhi University), Suchintan Das (University of Oxford), Antara Datta (Royal Holloway, London), Arnab Dutta (University of Groningen), Rosa de Jong (University of Amsterdam), Mohamad El Chaama, Harald Fischer-Tine (ETH-Zürich), Ute Frevert (Max Weber Foundation), Jörg Gengnagel (University of Würzburg), Atina Grossmann (Cooper Union, New York), Julia Hauser (University of Kassel), Pragya Kaul (University of Michigan), Razak Khan (University of Goettingen), Karina Khasnulina (Leipzig University), Friederike Kind-Kovács (Hannah Arendt Institute Dresden), Naina Manjrekar (IIT Bombay), Ninad Pandit (Cooper Union, New York), Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (Bielefeld University), Jörg Zedler (University of Regensburg).

This workshop explored refugee transit experiences and host country responses in colonized societies from the rise of fascism in the 1930s to decolonization after the Second World War. In her introduction, Ute Frevert alluded to the workshop's significance in light of contemporary trends in

forced migration and called for uncovering similarities, continuities, and differences between the interwar and postwar periods. Simone Lässig stressed how this period is the subject of extensive scholarship on global transit, focusing on refugee experiences during flight—a time of uncertainty and dependency that nevertheless fosters ambiguous relationships, knowledge transfers, and complex interactions of otherness, alienation, and belonging. While anchored in the study of Jewish refugee experiences, the field has expanded in multiple conceptual and regional directions, laying the foundation for this workshop. Sebastian Schwecke concluded the introduction with an example of these ambiguous relationships: refugees from Europe, upon entering through the Gate of India, became a *sahib* by virtue of their cultural capital and white privilege. He emphasized the importance of examining the experiences of those who did not become a *sahib*, shedding light on overlooked histories in the context of South Asian humanitarian self-fashioning. This aspect became a recurring reference point when exploring the commonalities and differences in the experiences of, and responses to, refugees discussed in the workshop.

The first panel on "Interactions and Illusions" began with Arnab Dutta reflecting on political thought surrounding immigration, settlement and indigeneity, Hindutva discourse, and imaginaries of postcolonial possibilities in prepartition Bengal, based on the self-description of Hindu Bengali elites as *natun ihudi* [New Jews]. Dutta argued that this comparison with Jewish refugees served an "Asian story" while the authors of this discourse remained ambiguous towards the actual immigration of Jewish refugees to the region. Next, Julia Hauser presented photographs by Georg Goldstein, a Jewish surgeon and semi-professional photographer, illustrating his growing critique of the violent aspects of Zionism in late Mandate Palestine and early Israel. Between his immigration in 1937 and his return to

Düsseldorf in 1953, Goldstein's photography and writings, despite Orientalist tendencies, reveal his disillusionment with corruption, Hebraization, and continuous Jewish immigration. Hauser's work also hinted at the methodological and theoretical implications of "undocumented" photographs. Karina Khasulina presented her paper on the dual role of Russian clergymen who assisted Russian émigrés from China during the Cold War. Influenced by the emerging political divisions of the war, some supported Soviet repatriation, while others facilitated immigration to non-communist countries. The latter case also emphasizes the interaction between religious institutions, international humanitarianism, and Western narratives against communism in a Cold War context.

During the second panel on "Reimagination and Remembrance" Rosa de Jong traced the histories of interned Jewish refugees in the Caribbean, illustrating the imagery of seemingly leisurely experiences despite an underlying state of uncertainty and dependence. Her work also highlighted the divergence between her collection of oral histories and sources from local archives and the official archives, which often bypassed transit periods in the Caribbean and lacked emotional depth. Friederike Kind-Kovács shared the stories of international and personal efforts for family reunifications involving Hungarian Jewish child survivors that were taken to Sweden for physical rehabilitation. Based on surviving letters, she emphasized the resilience and activism of the children on their own behalf while acknowledging that their futures depended on the survival of their relatives. Both de Jong's case study touching on the integration into white elites and Kind-Kovács' study on the intentions and strategies behind the repatriation of Eastern European child survivors explored themes of belonging and race.

Panel three on "Negotiating Precarity" examined the colonial state's responses to various refugee groups in the British Empire, stressing the entanglement of administrative agendas with issues of race and otherness. Suchintan Das described the internment of German civilians, including both "enemy aliens" following the declaration of war and Jewish refugees as humanitarian subjects, during the Second World War in India. He contextualized the strict internment policies not only in relation to the threat of a Japanese invasion but also colonial anxieties about German cooperation in anti-colonial movements and the presence of "impoverished" whites, potentially challenging notions of colonial supremacy. Pragya Kaul focused on the experiences of Polish refugees housed in the Valivade camp in the Princely State of Kolhapur during the Second World War, which were shaped by complex layers of administrative procedures reflecting competition among authorities of power. These administrative practices also stemmed from differing perceptions and expectations of Poles compared to Western European refugees, leading to their deliberate isolation from the local Indian population. Antara Datta discussed the 1941 exodus of Kazakhs from Xinjiang to Bhopal, highlighting the British Empire's complex responses, which ranged from refusal to humanitarian and developmental ideals. These responses were starkly challenged by the way the Kazakhs resisted rehabilitation efforts. She argued that the postcolonial state inherited the conflation of humanitarianism with developmentalism, subjecting refugees to criticism when they diverged from developmental ideals.

In Panel four, titled "Refugees, Hosts and Settlers," Mohamad El Chaama recounted the story of the 1939 Beirut Quarantine. He traced the fate of Jewish refugees on board a ship that was denied entry at several Mediterranean ports after an onboard plague outbreak. With the support of Quaker missionaries and local Jewish communities, the

refugees were eventually quarantined in Beirut's port for several weeks. Due to Lebanese reluctance to permanently resettle Jewish refugees, most eventually dispersed, with many of them making their way to Palestine. Jens Hannsen addressed the case that Atina Grossman later referred to as the "looming elephant in the room" – the question of Jewish settlement in Palestine and the implications of the Zionist project. His paper examined different encounters and sites of contestation concerning the future of Palestine during and after the Second World War. Focusing on debates between Khalil Sakini and Judah Magnes in 1942, between Martin Buber, Judah Magnes, and Albert Hourani in 1946, and the post-Nakba discussions on the repatriation of Palestinian refugees, he argued that mainstream Zionism was essentially settler colonialism. The discussion that followed centered on the legitimacy of this label. Some argued that the absence of a homeland calls the designation of colonialism into question while others emphasized the notion of land upgradation as key to defining "settler colonialism" as a sui generis category applicable in the case of Zionism.

The first day concluded with a keynote lecture by Atina Grossmann. Highlighting the wealth of sources from official national, local, and private archives, as well as an extensive list of publications, she portrayed the multi-directional expansion of the field in recent decades. She traced the movement of Holocaust and refugee studies from Germany to Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and finally, colonial contexts, where Jewish refugees often held positions aligned with power without directly participating in the regimes of subordination. Despite this significant expansion, she argued that the discussion has evaded the case of Palestine, leading to a dangerous polarization and stalling progress in the field. She then turned to highlighting sources from her own family archive, shedding light on the afterlives of memories and objects from transit periods, and other aspects of the refugee experience in "the Orient." She underscored how

refugees, while benefiting from imperial cosmopolitanism in unfamiliar cultural environments, still retained the connection to and memory of their lost homes in Europe.

The workshop's second day began with the fifth panel titled "Shalom and Hello Bombay," which focused on the different experiences of German migrants in colonial and postcolonial Bombay (Mumbai). Maria Framke shed light on the migration experience of Ernst Schäffer, a Jewish journalist from Berlin who lived in Bombay from 1933 until the 1960s. She analyzed Schäffer's sympathetic engagement with the city, tracing his observations of the anti-colonial movement in India, his social networks—as well as those he avoided due to antisemitic Nazism within the German diaspora—and the professional benefits he gained from the expertise he accumulated in India. Jörg Zedler presented on Schäffer's acquaintance, Karl Graf Spreti, a trained architect who spent less than four years in India, working in the burgeoning Bombay film industry. Tracing Spreti's personal connections, mostly with Europeans and particularly Germans, Zedler examined his ambivalent stance towards antisemitism. While he distanced himself from racist antisemites and socialized with Jewish Germans in Bombay, he also openly expressed antisemitic notions. Razak Khan took a different angle by examining the history of Bombay cinema and its German contributors, focusing on German cameraman Josef Wirsching, as a history of knowledge paradigm. Scrutinizing the technological innovations introduced by Wirsching's modern use of light, Khan argued that the Islamicate form in Hindi cinema is more of a modern project than a return to the past, positioning Bombay modernism within a broader global history of transnational mobility and expertise.

The sixth and final panel on "Internationalism and Anticolonialism between the Local and the Global" focused on the global transfer of communist and anti-colonial ideas and practices through different actors. Ninad Pandit examined

the workshop's theme by using the cases of refugees both *of* and *from* empire. He studied political émigrés from the Left – those who escaped British India to the West, and Europeans who came to British India – initiating and facilitating the circulation of communist ideas and union mobilization in cities like Bombay during the interwar period, in a political climate hostile to communism. Naina Manjrekar's paper analyzed how subaltern experiences of mass transit generated intertwined visions of anti-colonial futures and active resistance beyond mass media and political discourses. Recounting incidents of boycotts, strikes, desertions, defections, and mutinies in three different ports – Surabaya, Sydney, and Bombay – by Indian and Indonesian seamen and soldiers, she argued that colonial subalterns practically supported the anti-colonial solidarities that politicians expressed merely rhetorically.

The final discussion aimed to evaluate the conceptual grasp of transit, identify remaining gaps in the field, and explore possibilities for further expansion. In this context, Sebastian Schwecke raised the question of whether greater emphasis should be placed on colonialism. He and others also raised the question how the granularity of individual case studies could be integrated into a broader conceptual framework. Among the diverse concerns raised by the discussants were political lessons for today, the role of age, and the history of emotions. Atina Grossmann concluded that the workshop's uniqueness in bringing together diverse scholars of Holocaust studies and South Asian history in a city like Mumbai promises further explorations rather than preliminary answers. Simone Lässig reflected on the genealogy of the Global Transit Project, framing this workshop as an overall "productive irritation."

The workshop concluded with a visit to the Magen David Synagogue, built in 1864 by David Sassoon, a leader of the Baghdadi Jewish community, followed by a visit to the

Chinchpokli Cemetery, established in 1878 by the Sassoon family. With over 1,000 graves, the cemetery visit commemorated Jewish lives in Bombay, some of which began in Germany, Czechia, Poland, or Austria.

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