THE REFUGEE CRISIS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA, 1945–2000

Symposium at the German Historical Institute Washington, March 17, 2016. Co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute, KNOMAD/The World Bank, Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany. Conveners: Simone Lässig and Jan C. Jansen (GHI). Participants: Philipp Ackermann (Deputy Head of the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, Washington DC), Christopher Adam (Carleton University, Canada), Perti Ahonen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland), Cathleen S. Fisher (American Friends of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Washington DC), Barbara Franz (Rider University, NJ), Leo Lucassen (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam), Kathleen Newland (Migration Policy Institute, Washington DC), Patrick Scallen (Georgetown University), Kirsten Schüttler (The World Bank, Washington DC), Andrea L. Smith (Lafayette College, PA).

In the wake of the war in Syria and other crises in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa, the world is currently witnessing some of the largest movements of people seeking refuge since the end of World War II. Although politicians in Europe and North America tend to stress the singularity of the current “refugee crisis,” the situation is by no means unprecedented. Over the course of the past seventy years, Western Europe and North America — not to speak of non-Western societies — have repeatedly experienced the arrival of massive numbers of refugees and other forced migrants within short time spans. The symposium, jointly organized by the GHI, the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) and the German Embassy in Washington DC offered historical perspectives on the current situation. It did so by examining responses by the nations of North America and Western Europe to several instances of large movements of refugees and forced migrants. How did governments and societies react to the refugees? How did social, economic, and cultural integration happen? What were the prerequisites and the impediments of successful integration? Under which circumstances did international cooperation work? What were the short-term and long-term consequences for the host societies?

The first panel examined two specific instances of involuntary migration: the German expellees after the Second World War and migrants, in most cases former settlers, leaving the collapsing European colonies in the 1960s and 1970s. Even though both cases comprised massive...
population movements of several millions of people, they tend to be treated as a separate phenomenon in the national memories of immigration. This is closely linked to the particular status that these groups had, since they were officially not labelled as “foreigners,” but as members of the nation they migrated to. In his paper, Pertti Ahonen examined the case of the expellees in postwar Germany, numbering at least 12 million. First, he argued that the expulsion of Germans from the eastern territories has to be seen as part of a much wider and longer history of forced migrations, in which Nazi Germany played a major role during the war. In a second part, Ahonen stressed that the speed and ease of the expellees’ social integration in western Germany has often been exaggerated, in part due to a tendency to assume a sense of ethnic and national unity between the local populations and incoming expellees. In the lecture’s third part, Ahonen addressed some of the legacies and consequences of the expulsions, particularly the ambiguous role of expellee associations (the so-called Vertriebenenverbände). In his concluding remarks, Ahonen reflected on how the general tendency to over-emphasize the expellees’ ethnic homogeneity contributed to the long-lasting myth of “Germanness” as an ethnically homogenous and exclusive category, in spite of the country’s actual transformation into a multi-ethnic society of immigration. He argued that the expellees, ironically, were part of this development towards immigrant multiculturalism.

As European powers lost colonial wars and relinquished colonies in the half century following World War II, people living or stationed there migrated to Europe en masse. Andrea L. Smith provided an overview of these migrations of decolonization, discussed their legacy, and offered points of comparison with today’s refugees. Despite the migrants’ ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity and the fact that large numbers were involved (approximately five to seven million people, most of them coming to France, Portugal, and the Netherlands), these postcolonial migrants were viewed as having nearly completely integrated into the host societies. These migrants shared multiple features with contemporary refugees. There was, however, one notable difference: Defined nearly from the start as full-fledged members of the host country they were migrating to, migrants of decolonization typically received advantages unmatched by most other migrants of the postwar period, including today’s refugees. Because they were defined as members of the receiving societies, they more easily became members. Most of the migrants of decolonization also
brought with them a certain linguistic and cultural familiarity with the host society which also facilitated their integration.

The second panel compared three refugee movements in the context of the Cold War and its aftermath. In 1956, the short-lived Hungarian Revolution was the bloodiest and most radical of the uprisings in the former Eastern bloc. It may have also been, as Christopher Adam pointed out in his paper, the world’s first fully televised uprising. Adam portrayed the critical role that the media played in sensitizing North Americans and western Europeans to the crisis of the more than 200,000 Hungarian refugees who fled Hungary in the roughly two-month period after the Soviets crushed the revolution on November 4, 1956. In fact, it was often pressure from the public and from civil society groups that compelled governments to act and accept large numbers of refugees. In early 1957, the more than 180,000 Hungarian refugees who had arrived in Austria were resettled to 37 different countries, with Canada accepting proportionally the largest number of asylum seekers. While the Canadian government had not initially planned for such an emphatic response, it was largely public and media pressure that convinced it to act. Although the Hungarian refugee crisis was framed in Cold War narratives — the Soviet “empire” attacking a small, “helpless” Eastern bloc country —, some officials in the national security agencies feared that communists might be insidiously lurking among the refugees. These fears, however, were drowned out by media stories that sensitized the broader public to those fleeing oppression.

Barbara Franz’s presentation focused on differences and similarities between the Bosnian diaspora in Austria and the U.S. since the 1990s. She began by pointing out that the U.S. and Austria responded to the refugees from the Yugoslav Wars with different resettlement schemes. Franz then used the methodological tool of ideal types to describe differences in transnational “in-between-ness.” The majority of Bosnians, she argued, were able to develop behavioral strategies, professional trajectories, and identity formations that set them apart from other segments of immigrant populations in both host societies. Franz distinguished four ideal types of migrants: the translocal traditionalist, the transitional hybrid, the ethnic urbanite, and the cosmopolitan. To be sure, Franz explained, there were substantial overlaps between these ideal types and many refugees moved through more than one or two types while adjusting to their respective settlement countries. Migrants and refugees often saw themselves as
transnationals, creoles, and hybrids — pointing to a “plural identity” rather than a clear-cut definition of one’s self. Franz argued that labor trajectories, job careers, and education and, above all, gender and the age at the time of settlement contributed significantly to identity building as well as to the adaptation to new environments.

In his paper, Patrick Scallen portrayed how, during the 1980s, the United States faced a political and humanitarian dilemma. Hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans, fleeing death squads and civil strife, sought refuge in the very country that was sponsoring their military. The administration of U.S. President Ronald Reagan, allied with the government of El Salvador, denied Salvadorans refugee status and rejected the vast majority of their applications for political asylum, arguing that Salvadorans traveled to the United States solely in pursuit of economic opportunity and faced no persecution at home. This galvanized North American civil society, particularly progressive religious groups and secular social service organizations, into providing material and political support for these new refugees and debunking the Reagan administration’s claim. As the decade unfolded, legislative actions and judicial decisions facilitated the integration of undocumented Salvadoran war refugees by providing some with a path to U.S. citizenship. In spite of this, their question-able legal status has, according to Scallen, hampered the Salvadorans’ ability to attain social prestige and political clout in the United States during the past three decades.

The symposium closed with a well-attended panel discussion during which four migration and policy experts discussed whether, and to what extent, these historical case studies provide lessons for the current refugee crisis. Moderated by Cathleen S. Fischer, the discussion provided both analytical and practical follow-up to the case studies presented in the afternoon panels. The panelists stressed the need to bring historical comparisons and perspectives into the current debate which tends to be largely ignorant of past experiences. Leo Lucassen, of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, pointed to the interplay of state and society in countries receiving a large influx of refugees. He highlighted the importance of how state actors define and categorize refugee movements. As historical evidence shows, such definitions have a strong impact both on public perceptions and on the tools of integration policy. While in the cases of the expellees in Germany after 1945 and the postcolonial migrants to Western Europe state reactions were mostly inclusive — integration programs
were in place almost immediately and government actors stressed commonalities between the incoming refugees and the host society more than differences — most states have taken a more exclusive stance in the recent refugee crisis (enhancing, for example, negative public perceptions of Islam). Kathleen Newland, of the Migration Policy Institute, emphasized the crucial impact that definitions of refugee and migratory movements had for the states’ legal obligations toward them. She delineated European governments’ practices of defining refugees into sub-categories, attempting to “define-down” certain groups of people in order to dispense with certain legal obligations to them. While the practices of defining refugees were highly variable and subject to frequent changes, Newland pointed out that the majority of currently accepted refugees are, ironically, refugees from war zones (as compared to refugees from personal persecution). One group that had been “defined-down” since the start of the refugee crisis were Eritreans, who were fleeing from persecution and the prospect of possible forced labor under a brutal regime. While their plight ought to be recognized as a legitimate ground for seeking asylum under the 1951 refugee convention, they, as Newland summed up, could be regarded as the first casualties of the fluid political stance towards certain refugee groups.

Kirsten Schüttler, of the World Bank, assessed short- and long-term economic consequences for those states that have accepted large numbers of refugees, focusing on Europe and the United States. She pointed to possible trade-offs between certain short-term burdens and disadvantages — like the stepping up of financial efforts to accept and integrate the refugees into the labor market and into society — and advantages in the long run, as refugees are enabled to contribute to the economies of their host states more quickly. According to Schüttler, the way these long-term consequences play out depends to a large extent, on the policies that are developed. She also pointed out that the consequences are experienced differently, and that not everyone was on the winning side. It would thus be crucial not only to look at the overall welfare impacts but also at the distributional impacts, and to design policies accordingly in order to buffer negative effects on specific social groups. Schüttler stressed the importance of public perceptions, since subjective wellbeing and perceived impacts may differ from objective data and official definitions of refugees and how they are perceived do have an impact on how the actual integration plays out. Philipp Ackermann, of the German Embassy, outlined ways in which German perceptions of being an immigration society
and integration policies had changed over the last twenty years. With regard to the current situation, he saw the possible open-endedness of the refugee influx as one major reason for the success of right-wing populist parties in the 2016 state elections in Saxony-Anhalt, Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg. While certain political milieus still deny Germany’s actual dependence on immigration, Ackermann stressed the positive evolution of German public attitudes since the last major refugee influx in the 1990s. He stated that — in contrast to the 1990s — there was a growing public consensus that Germany is — and has, in fact, long since been — a country of immigration. As an indicator of these changes in public opinion, he pointed to the crucial role of German civil society in dealing with the reception of refugees since 2015.

By bringing historical case studies and today’s policy debates into dialogue, this symposium demonstrated how critical historical scholarship can contribute to reflecting on the pressing challenges of the present.

Sascha Brünig (GHI) and Jan C. Jansen (GHI)