LIVES IN LIMBO: STATELESSNESS AND WORLD CITIZENSHIP AFTER TWO WORLD WARS

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“The passport is the most noble part of the human being. It also does not come into existence in such a simple fashion as a human being does. A human being can come into the world anywhere, in the most careless way and for no good reason, but a passport never can. When it is good, the passport is also recognized for this quality, whereas a human being, no matter how good, can go unrecognized.” Thus wrote Bertolt Brecht in his Refugee Conversations in 1940, still deeply affected by his own experience of exile. His view illustrates the vital importance that a seemingly simple administrative act—the issuance of personal identification papers—could gain. The possession of correct papers legitimated one’s right to be accepted as part of the collective defined through one’s nation-state affiliation. The passport, which has been the most important document for regulating interstate movement of people since World War I, very quickly became the most obvious symbol of this belonging, offering proof and recognition of one’s status.

The reverse was also true: the lack of valid papers expressed one’s lost link to society. Brecht’s dark observation thus highlights the logical conclusion of a longer historical process. The stateless person emerged as a sort of byproduct of the nationalization process that began in the nineteenth century with the rise of European national movements. Belonging had become synonymous with possessing the correct nationality, verifiable through proper documentation. Statelessness thus became a state of legal limbo, a non-status, often temporary, of not belonging to any of the modern national frameworks that the nation-states constitute. Whether the result of voluntary or coerced action, stateless always meant a marginalized existence at the edges of society. Hannah Arendt famously described the exclusion of a stateless person from a community of citizens as a violent act that denies him even the “right to have rights.”

My research traces how statelessness arose and how people and institutions came to grips with this challenge in Europe after each world war. It focuses on how these developments shaped international relations and on the framework within which they were
addressed. I focus on the historically and culturally specific practices of actors who experienced or dealt with statelessness. Supranational organizations such as the League of Nations, the Red Cross, and, after World War II, the United Nations were among the institutions to react to the problem of statelessness on a large scale. However, the supranational decisions made there then had to be applied within the different nation-states, thus my project concentrates on comparative case studies of Germany (West Germany in the post-World War II era) and the United States.

Within the project, I try to look at stateless people from two different points of view: as the victims of the development of strong nation-states who experience statelessness as displacement and as a loss of rights and security, but also, in some cases, as groups and individuals who understood the dissolution of their connection to a state as a welcome opportunity to escape narrow categories of belonging.

In a three-step approach, I focus first on the supranational level, that is, the discussions of the League of Nations and later the United Nations that eventually led to broad changes in international relations and international law. Next, I analyze the positions of the nation-states in direct interaction with the supranational institutions. Finally, I turn to the implementation of international agreements on the nation-state level, examining the everyday practices and experiences of the actors and groups involved: the stateless themselves, individuals and support groups who worked with them, and national as well as supranational organizations.

This project, by focusing on the moments and forces that challenged rather than strengthened the nation-state system, brings seemingly marginal phenomena to the fore. Although the stateless never constituted the majority of all refugees, their experiences reflected worldwide developments. This view, just beyond the edges and contradictions of nationality, helps us understand the concepts of national identity and the ideal citizen that were then in play. Furthermore, it helps us untangle how individuals and nonstate organizations reconceptualized ideas of belonging on the basis of humanitarian principles. This approach brings conceptions of societal belonging into a picture that clearly moves beyond nation-state affiliation to encompass such ideas as world citizenship and the growing importance of universalist ideals based on human rights.