

Conference Report – Refugee History Seminar 2021

The First Annual International Seminar in Historical Refugee Studies was held in Essen on October 12-15, 2021, co-organized by the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE), the German Historical Institute in Washington (GHI) and the National History Center (NHC), 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: Victoria Abrahamyan (University of Neuchâtel), Lennart Bollinger (Humbolt University, Berlin), David De Boer (University of Amsterdam), Mitchell Edwards (Northwestern University, Chicago), Edidiong Ekefre (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg), Dimitra Glenti (University of the Aegean, Lesvos), Nicolás González Quintero (University of Texas, Austin), Salma Hargal (University of Lyon 2), Baher Ibrahim (University of Glasgow), Sarah Knoll (University of Vienna), Olivier Lamon (University of Geneva), Fabrice Langrognet (SciencesPo Paris), Lynton Lees (Columbia University), Charlotte Lysa (Oslo University), Anne Schult (New York University), Ana Joanna Sierra Vergara (University of Minnesota). As guest invitees, Delphine Diaz (University of Reims), Dane Kennedy (George Washington University), and Susanne Lachenicht (University of Bayreuth) brought their extensive expertise on refugees from the early modern period to present times to the sessions. As the keynote speaker, Peter Gatrell (University of Manchester) reflected on the development and current state of the field of refugee history, and provided pointers on what a refugee history made *with* refugees, not just *on* refugees, may look like. Jan C. Jansen (University of Duisburg-Essen), leader of the ERC project “Atlantic Exiles: Refugees and Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1770s-1820s” and co-organizer of this workshop, the “Atlantic Exiles” project members Megan Maruschke, Jannik Keindorf, Thomas Mareite (University of Duisburg-Essen), and Sabine Hanke (University of Duisburg-Essen) also participated to this event.

The purpose of this seminar, hosted by the KWI, was to provide a historical perspective to the study of refugees to overcome the presentist prism through which they often tend to be considered. The seminar gathered a group of sixteen young scholars to give historical depth to the study of refugee populations and diverse “refugee regimes,” which often differed from the contemporary refugee regime born out of the Geneva Convention (1951) and its extensions.

The first session proposed a reflection around epistemological and conceptual issues regarding the notion of “refugee”. **Fabrice Langrognet** stressed some of the problematic implications of an uncritical reliance by scholars on artificial distinctions forged by institutions between “refugees” and “migrants”. Langrognet called for a more active dialog between refugee history and migration history in order to overcome the academic entrenchment of this false dichotomy between the two labels. In so doing, Langrognet explored the tension inherent to the field of “refugee history” between a quest to historicize particular refugee movements and to shed light on what constitutes refugee experiences beyond individual cases. **Anne Schult** explored how, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both academic and popular discourses relied on the widespread use of metaphors of waves, tides, and floods to refer to the arrival of refugee populations in the United States of America. Schult’s contribution underlined how the statistical impulse for numbering and visualizing refugee movements revealed moral panics on foreign

newcomers as a demographic and political threat. Besides, Schult revealed how such desire for quantification underpinned a vision of the “refugee” as an object of policy-making and problem-solving, giving it a deceiving appearance of measurable objectivity.

The second session addressed European refugee experiences and demystifying concepts of human aid and asylum policies. **David de Boer** argued that humanitarian aid and long-distance compassion existed before the so-called Humanitarian Revolution linked to the European Enlightenment. Against the backdrop of religious persecutions and forced migrations of confessional groups in early modern Europe (c.1550-1750), De Boer showed how humanitarian aid connected refugees and non-refugees alike, while overcoming strict confessional and national boundaries. De Boer further argued that an inclusive rhetoric of relief connecting diverse religious groups helped forge a secularized understanding of human suffering. **Olivier Lamon** discussed in his paper the ambivalence of Switzerland’s refugee policies during the 1848 Revolutions. He stressed inconsistencies and points of divergence between cantons and the Swiss central authorities about asylum policies, and especially focused on the control of refugees’ political activities. Lamon showed how occasional group expulsion and common policies of ‘internment’ (relocating refugees away from border areas and settling them down in alien cantons, in terms of language and culture) clashes with the image of a self-styled *land of asylum*.

Peter Gatrell gave a keynote lecture, “Learning by Doing: Reflections on Refugee History”. Gatrell analyzed the emergence of the contemporary refugee regime and reflected on some of the implications of its extension to the “Global South” from the 1960s onwards. He assessed what state and non-state institutions dealing with refugees ‘learnt’ in the process, and what kind of expertise they gained while expanding and integrating this global refugee regime. In turn, Gatrell also focused on experiences of refugeedom, with a particular emphasis on refugees’ strategies; their own agency in navigating a refugee regime built around the verification of eligibility criteria; as well as their capacity to claim and (re)forge identities beyond the mere label of “refugees”. Finally, Gatrell’s lecture addressed the institutionalization of refugee history over the last three decades, in particular the ways in which the field built on previous work by anthropologists, human geographers, political scientists, and culture studies scholars on refugees.

The third session focused on asylum policies and the settlement of refugees in the Ottoman Empire and mandate Syria. **Salma Hargal** analyzed the status of Algerian refugees in the Ottoman Empire between 1830 and 1914 by exploring the genealogy and usage of the term ‘muhajir / muhācir’. She discussed evolutions in understandings of the term, from designating religious pilgrims to a more secularized figure of the refugee. Hargal thus showed how the Tanzimat reforms of the Ottoman Empire added an ethnic- and class-based principle to the formerly confession-based organization of (re-)settlement of refugees and new subjects through colonization. **Victoria Abrahamyan** focused on Armenian refugees in Syria during the time of the French mandate system (1920-1946). Abrahamyan argued that the French mandatory

authorities' eagerness to host and (re)settle Armenian refugees (viewed by these authorities as Christian and pro-French 'others') in Syria in turn led the Syrian population to form an excluding Muslim-Arabian 'self'. The Syrian host society increasingly perceived that behind such welcoming asylum policies lay a danger to the newly forming Syrian nation.

The fourth session dealt with refugees in African history. **Mitchell Edwards** presented a paper on pre-colonial concepts and practices in North-Central Uganda (c.1720-1850), which incorporated oral histories and interviews. Edwards raised questions about "refugee work" with a focus on local ideas and practices that have become overshadowed by other notions of relief overtime. Though gaps in recovering this past remain, Edwards stressed how these older notions continued to influence local practices overtime and shape responses to asylum seekers today. **Edidiong Ekefre** discussed the child-refugees evacuated out of Nigerian Biafra during the late 1960s. Ekefre emphasized the importance of looking at Africa not only as a source of refugees who flee to Europe but also as the continent that hosts the most refugees from other African societies, and even from Europe during WWII. Ekefre highlighted the weakness of UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and Western aid agencies and the significance of African international refugee networks as other African countries hosted these refugees.

The fifth thematic session focused on refugees across Spanish America during the Age of Revolutions. Contributions by Nicolás González-Quintero and Ana Joanna Vergara Sierra explored the social and political experiences of exiled people seeking refuge from the wars for independence raging across Spanish America in both Spanish and non-Spanish Caribbean possessions. **González-Quintero** highlighted how loyalist refugees settled in Cuba and Puerto Rico sought to shape a broad interpretation of the Spanish nation uniting *Americanos* and Peninsular Spaniards, and mobilized a language of imperial loyalty in order to receive assistance from colonial authorities. **Vergara Sierra** underlined how informal and formal trading networks linking Dutch, Danish and Swedish free ports across the Caribbean to present-day Colombia and Venezuela turned into escape routes for both loyalist and revolutionary refugees from the early 1810s onwards. Vergara Sierra's contribution revealed how both sides of the conflict politicized the experience of exile, and stressed the crucial role played by these refugees in the military and political developments that defined the wars for independence on the Spanish Main.

The sixth thematic session focused on the contemporary Mediterranean and Middle East. **Dimitra Glenti** showed how Lesbos, a place synonymous with refugees since 2015, has a long history as a site of refuge – at least since the massive influx of refugees fleeing persecution in 1922, a decade after Lesbos was annexed to Greece. Glenti showed how the local reception of refugees and their integration took place against the backdrop of new forms of societal organization, that is, from imperial to national frameworks, without losing sight of the local nature of the settlements. She further reflected on what the memory of having been a site for hosting refugees means in Lesbos under the current "refugee crisis." **Charlotte Lysa** explored the governing of refugees in Saudi Arabia in a *longue durée* historical perspective. To do so, she used a variety of written sources as well as interviews to understand the Saudi approach to

refugee protection and its relationship to labor needs. Lysa further discussed historical legacies of asylum practices from Islam to territorializing empires in the region to nation-state-based policies. Both papers demonstrated the necessity of *longue-durée* approaches to understanding current asylum policies and practices of refugee assistance.

Egemen Özbek (KWI Essen) presented the work of the Academy in Exile, a joint initiative of the Institute for Turkish Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen, the KWI Essen and the Forum Transregionale Studien Berlin. The Academy in Exile offers scholars coming under threat in their home countries because of their academic or civic engagement the opportunity to resume their research abroad. Özbek highlighted the possibilities offered by the initiative as well as the struggles it faces, especially regarding the selection process of the applicants, in which their status of political persecution needs to be evaluated, and administrative challenges related to the uniqueness of the German university system.

The penultimate session put a focus on the role that institutional expertise played in constructing an administrative refugee category. **Baher Ibrahim** discussed interpretations of refugeedom in the mental health profession after the Second World War and highlighted how uprooting, confinement, and trauma became central psychopathological themes for defining a “refugee”. The paper showed how this interpretation became the cornerstone of mental health programs during the “refugee crises” of the 1990s, while social and cultural aspects were not taken into account. **Sarah Knoll** presented a paper on the interconnections of aid organizations with states. Focusing on UNHCR in Austria during the Cold War, Knoll showed how international aid organizations influenced the government’s asylum and refugee policy, thereby contributing to Austria’s self-perception as a humanitarian country. However, the paper underlined the contested nature of the refugee category as the Austrian government changed its policy and increasingly sought to prevent refugees from entering the country.

The last session of the seminar investigated the relationship between refugee relief and the management of refugees for geopolitical or territorial interests. **Lynton Lees** presented a paper on how the British government and charities tried to train and resettle Jewish refugee children as agricultural workers in settler colonies during the Second World War, echoing older, imperial approaches to solving refugee crises. At the same time, however, the rise of new forms of individualist child welfare saw the refugee children challenging these imperial forms of humanitarian intervention and refugee management. **Lennart Bollinger** showed how the militarization of societies conquered by African military units extended to refugee women and children. Bollinger’s contribution examined the experiences of refugees who came under the authority of the South African Defence Force (SADF) during the apartheid era. The unique situation in which the military became a humanitarian actor of sorts saw the formation of a militarized refugee community shaped by gendered, racialized, ranked, and nationalized relationships.

The discussions resulting from this dynamic conference that spanned world regions and several centuries raised big questions. First, the contributions asked us to reevaluate the relationship between the past and the present. Refugee movements are often described in relation to short

term crisis that require rapid responses. However, the papers showed how the past shaped later receptions of refugees and how long-term challenges lead people to flee; we must therefore reevaluate the ruptures and continuities in refugee history to ask to what extent histories are useful for thinking through current challenges. Second, the papers called into question a range of terminologies and categories not only to describe people on the move, such as in the distinction between *refugees* and *migrants*, but also types of societal organization (types of empires, states, communities, cities) and the shifting meanings of borders. That is, it was also necessary to talk about space and the multiple geographies of asylum. This attention to categories and terminologies is vital to make the distinction between the terms used in historical sources and case studies and the analytical terms used by the historian. But the term *refugee* is very often loaded with moral questions. This raised the third point about moral imperatives in the field. Categories like refugee and migrant have frequently been deployed to differentiate distinct types of mobilities with shifting positive and negative connotations. The terms often relate to concerns about class, race, and gender, too. Many participants felt that one of their important contributions was to humanize their subjects, many of whom were labelled refugees in the past but also do not fit clearly into sympathetic categories: French planters fleeing Saint-Domingue; Huguenots discriminating against Irish Catholics; Holocaust survivors who become settler colonists; and the militarization of some refugee communities. Though the field refugee history seems to have an ideological component, when sticking to the complexity on the ground in various case studies of the past, this history is perhaps less ideological than we thought, even while addressing moral arenas of debates both in the past and the present. These reflections sparked cooperation among this year's participants and will lead to a fruitful continuation of the Refugee History Seminar with its second annual meeting in Washington DC in 2022.

Seminar Overview

Day 1: October 12, 2021

Welcome

Jan C. Jansen (Duisburg-Essen)

Session 1

Chair: Dane Kennedy (Washington DC)

Fabrice Langrognet (Princeton/Oxford): The Refugee-Migrant Distinction and the Need for Bridging Analytical Divides

Anne Schult (New York): Counting the Countless: Statistics, Demography, and the Modern Refugee, 1920s-1960

Comments: David de Boer and Nicolás González Quintero

Session 2

Chair: Sabine Hanke (Duisburg-Essen)

David de Boer (Amsterdam): Humanitarianism before the Humanitarian Revolution: Transnational Compassion and Refugee Relief in Early Modern Europe, 1550-1750

Olivier Lamon (Geneva): A Republican-Democratic Asylum in the Heart of a Monarchical Europe? The Reception of Switzerland's Asylum Policy towards Refugees of the 1848 Revolution

Comments: Mitchell Edwards and Salma Hargal

Public Keynote

Peter Gatrell (Manchester): Learning by Doing: Reflections on Refugee History

Day 2: October 13, 2021

Session 3

Chair: Delphine Diaz (Reims)

Victoria Abrahamyan (Neuchâtel): The Impact of the Armenian Refugees on the Syrian Hosts during the French Mandate, 1920-1936

Salma Hargal (Lyon): Questioning the Muhâcir Status in the late Ottoman Empire: The Algerian Migrations after the French Conquest (1830-1876)

Comments: Fabrice Langrognet and Charlotte Lysa

Session 4

Chair: Megan Maruschke (Duisburg-Essen)

Mitchell Edwards (Evanston, IL): Cultivating Refuge in North-Central Uganda, 1720-1850

Edidiong Ekefre (Johannesburg): Hosting Refugees. The Nigerian Biafran Child-Refugees and the African Refugee Network System during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967 and beyond

Comments: Lennart Bolliger and Sarah Knoll

Session 5

Chair: Susanne Lachenicht (Bayreuth)

Nicolás González Quintero (São Paulo): “Belonging or not to the Nation”: Loyalist Refugees in the Caribbean during the Spanish American Revolutions

Ana Joanna Vergara Sierra (Minneapolis/St. Paul): Routes of Exile: Trans-Imperial Networks and the Emigrants of the Venezuelan War of Independence in the non-Spanish Caribbean (1780-1830)

Comments: Dimitra Glenti and Olivier Lamon

Day 3: October 14, 2021

Session 6

Intermediate Discussion

Session 7

Chair: Peter Gatrell

Dimitra Glenti (Lesvos): Refugee Experience and Integration in a Historical Perspective. The Case of Lesvos

Charlotte Lysa (Oslo): A History of Refugees in Saudi Arabia

Comments: Edidiong Ekefre and Lynton Lees

Day 4: October 15, 2021

Session 8

Egemen Özbek (Duisburg-Essen): The Academy in Exile

Session 9

Chair: Thomas Mareite (Duisburg-Essen)

Baher Ibrahim (Glasgow): Uprooting, Trauma, and Confinement: Refugees and Psychiatrist, 1945-1993

Sarah Knoll (Vienna): Historicizing International Aid: UNHCR for Refugees in Austria during the Cold War (1956-1990)

Session 10

Chair: Jannik Keindorf (Duisburg-Essen)

Lynton Lees (New York): Rescue and Resettlement: Emigrating Jewish Child Refugees in the late British Empire, c.1938-1948

Lennart Bolliger (Berlin): Militarized Refugees: A History of Angolan Women and Children Associated with Apartheid South Africa's Military, 1975-89

Session 11

Concluding Discussion