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CHAPTER

2 Histories of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies

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Abstract

This chapter examines the history of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies and asks why the field is so often considered ‘ahistorical’ and subject to neglect by historians. It first provides a brief overview of the historiography of refugees and forced migration, focusing on continuity and change in refugee and forced migration history. It then traces the evolution from Refugee to Forced Migration Studies within the framework of a debate over the appropriate labels and their methodological implications. It also explains and challenges the claim of ‘ahistory’ before concluding with a powerful case for more historical research.

Keywords: [history](#), [Refugee and Forced Migration Studies](#), [historians](#), [historiography](#), [refugees](#), [forced migration](#), [ahistory](#), [historical research](#)

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Introduction

Refugee and forced migration studies have always involved a multiplicity of academic disciplines. Yet many believe the role of historians has been weak and poorly defined, history being ‘notable by its absence’ (Marfleet 2007: 136). This is partially explained by the discipline’s focus on practical and current issues as well as its intimate connections with policy developments, notwithstanding critical approaches. In contrast, history has largely remained estranged from or unappealing to policy circles which ‘rarely show interest in migrations of the past’ (Marfleet 2007: 137–8) and tend to reinvent the wheel continuously (Loescher 2001: 33–4).

Consequently, the field is often believed to be deeply ‘ahistorical’. Most strikingly, historians such as Tony Kushner and Peter Gatrell seem to concur, considering refugee history as an ‘emerging field’ sometimes best represented by ‘amateur’ historians, which has yet to produce its own specialized journal. Non-historians have

demonstrated an ‘inability to see history and refugees as linked or relevant,’ whereas historians have shown ‘actual resistance rather than simple apathy’ in their engagement with the theme (Kushner 2006: 40; Gatrell 2007: 43–5).

In this context, how can one write about the histories of an ‘ahistorical’ field? Is there really such a general lack of historical studies on refugees and forced migrants or should we understand that historians have failed to address important aspects rather than the whole field? To be sure, historians and history are not totally absent. More accurately, historians have addressed refugee and forced migration issues without necessarily identifying their work with the field. They often situate their work within other (related) historiographical debates, such as the history of the slave trade, the two world wars, genocide, the Cold War, humanitarian interventions, transnational history, and so on. Histories have been written and debates, trends, or even historiographical schools can therefore be identified and discussed. However, there are undoubtedly much less general reflections on the historiography of refugees and forced migration. The objective of this chapter is to briefly provide such an overview, while explaining and questioning the claim of ‘ahistory’.

An Overview of the Histories of Refugee and Forced Migration

Academic inquiry, including historical research on refugees and forced migrants, started long before the ‘birth’ of the discipline in the 1980s (Skran and Daughtry 2007: 15). Over the 1920s and 1930s scholars discussed the mass refugee movements produced during the First World War, thus announcing publications of the immediate post-Second World War era (e.g. Holborn 1939). This period is characterized by a richness of works on refugees, including voluminous studies (not necessarily written by historians) of the refugee camps left after the two world wars (e.g. Kulischer 1948; Proudfoot 1956).

In the immediate post-war years historians also focused importantly on the international organizations created in the 1920s–1930s and the 1940s–1950s. These legal-institutional accounts continued to dominate the literature during the 1960s–1970s as attested by Louise Holborn’s influential history of UNHCR (1975). Despite claims to universality, the main focus remained for a long time on Western European issues. The study of the history of forced migration in Europe peaked in the 1980s, with publications such as Michael Marrus’s overview of Europe’s *Unwanted* (1985) and national perspectives akin to Wolfgang Jacobmeyer’s major study of ‘Displaced Persons’ in Germany (1985).

Michael Marrus focused his attention on the masses of refugees in Europe, with the objective of tracing the emergent consciousness on the refugee phenomenon in a critical manner (Caestecker 2011). Also notable was Gérard Noiriel’s *La Tyrannie du national* (1991). During the late 1980s, a number of studies appeared looking at non-European issues, or from non-European perspectives, often linked to the opening of national archives. Thus, Gil Loescher and John Scanlan’s *Calculated Kindness* (1986) presented the first comprehensive critical survey of the US government’s post-war policies toward the admission of refugees. Benny Morris’s work on the *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1989) also marked the historiography of this sensitive area.

The end of the Cold War, ‘combined with the postmodernist challenge to grand narratives helped unleash a new round of historical research’ (Gatrell 2010: 2). From the early 1990s, many books on refugees appeared, launching a massive interest in the history of immigration and refugee flows. Policies towards immigrants and refugees became part of national histories, with more focused and detailed case-studies highlighting the role and interests of different political actors (particularly in receiving states). A major theme of those publications related to European states’ policies and popular attitudes towards refugees in the 1930s, especially Jewish refugees from Germany (Carron 1999). In line with Marrus and Noiriel these books tended to be critical of the historical record (Deschodt and Huguenin 2001; London 2003). Research now continues especially with comparative endeavours such as Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore’s volume on *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States* (2010).

It was also through the study of the interwar years that the historiography came back on the role of international organizations and the refugee regime with studies by Tommie Sjöberg on the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (1991), Claudena Skran on the emergence of the regime in interwar Europe (1995), and Gil Loescher's work on the global refugee crisis and his excellent although relatively short history of UNHCR (2001). Loescher aptly described the organization's shortcomings and the successive High Commissioners' drives to expand their mandate despite important constraints. He thus developed a useful corrective to Holborn's 'more whiggish approach' which presented UNHCR history as an 'inevitable progression toward an ever-widening realm of humanitarian intervention' (Peterson 2012: 327). More studies on UNHCR followed in connection to improved access to the documentation after the creation of its global archives in 1996 and the celebration of the organization's 50th anniversary (UNHCR 2000; Hanhimäki 2008). Much work remains to be done however as many organizations, particularly NGOs, still do not provide satisfactory access to and preservation of their archives.

The focus on UNHCR has however been questioned by researchers considering that it looms 'disproportionately large' in historical accounts of the early post-war period, especially given its 'modest and uncertain beginnings'. New perspectives should certainly recognize that the refugee regime developing in Europe after the war 'was only one part of a larger picture' (Holian and Cohen 2012: 316). Historians thus recently started looking more closely at other organizations (e.g. Reinisch 2008; Salvatici 2012) and at the significance of interactions between UNHCR and other non-state actors (Elie 2010). An important trend relates to the study of displaced persons as part of the history of humanitarianism and post-war relief and reconstruction programmes (e.g. Cohen 2011).

The diversification of research also led to reassessing heretofore neglected avenues of inquiries such as the history of forced displacement in the Russian and Soviet area (Gatrell 1999; Gousseff 2008), the history of refugee repatriation (Zieck 1997; Long 2013a) and gender dimensions (Schrover et al. 2008). Transnational history also went beyond simple (inter-)national histories, towards accounts of connections and circulations of people, goods, ideas and skills. For example, Peter Gatrell's book (2011) on World Refugee Year (1959–60) focuses on a specific global social movement and the role of multiple actors such as the United Nations, NGOs, and individuals.

Historians not only began to 'redress the Eurocentric bias by writing about other parts of the globe' (Gatrell 2010: 2), but also questioned the distinction between 'classical' refugees who had their origins in Europe and 'new' refugees from other parts of the world. This dichotomy implied that forced movements outside Europe only began after the resolution of the old continent's refugee crisis and forgot the 'already global nature of the refugee question in the early post-war period' (Ballinger 2012: 367). Historians often ignored that there were massive forced movements outside Europe during the 1950s and 1960s and even before. The partition of the Indian subcontinent, 'one of the greatest mass migrations in history' was a case in point, at least until Gyanendra Pandey's book (2001: 41). As argued by Holian and Cohen (2012: 315), although the Eurocentric approach has been questioned, no 'significantly different account of the early post-war period' appeared, displacing Europe 'from the conceptual and practical centre'. Historians are now just starting working in this direction (Peterson 2012; Madokoro 2012). In the process they also underline the causal links between the end of empires, the rise of the modern nation state and the emergence of mass refugee flows (Gatrell 2010: 2).

This brief overview excludes many more studies because of language limitations. However, it demonstrates that a relatively important literature exists. The meaning of the 'ahistorical' reputation thus remains unexplained. An answer may be found by looking more closely at the ways historians have reflected on this field, particularly with reference to classical issues of continuity and change.

Continuity and Change in Refugee and Forced Migration History

In this field, historiography has made important progress in the last few years. In the process, historians have looked to highlight elements of continuity and change, aiming to date and map the birth of the contemporary refugee phenomenon and determine what is so distinctive about the current era. In essence, historians recognize that the forced movement of people has a long history, but many consider refugees as a distinctly modern phenomenon, which emerged with the world wars. For example, Richard Bessel and Claudia Haake (2009: 3) consider forced displacements as 'hardly something novel or invented' but as a phenomenon whose occurrence and magnitude across the world is 'peculiarly modern'. Similarly, Marrus (1985: 3–5) has argued that people fleeing war and persecution 'have tramped across the European continent since time immemorial,' but that they only became an 'important problem of international politics' in the twentieth century. During this period, modern refugees appeared in greater numbers than ever before with vague legal status and posing problems on a radically new scale. Arguably, early modern tolerance towards displaced persons was replaced by hostile attitudes and policies linked to the development of ethno-nationalism and its links with the modern state, which made outsiders suspicious and undesirable (Marrus 2010).

p. 27 Indeed, as Marfleet (2007: 139) remarks, the 'focus upon nation-states and relations within and among them' largely explains the widespread view that 'refugees did not appear as a meaningful category' until the mid-twentieth century. In this era states felt threatened by foreigners and therefore introduced tools to protect themselves from intruders epitomized by increased administrative control such as alien registration and the passport systems (Torpey 2000). Many factors combined to give the refugee issue a 'quantitatively and qualitatively new character': new modern technology facilitating travel and communication, the new scale and destructiveness of warfare, the expansion of a world capitalist economy, the emergence of modern race thinking and the triumph of national sovereignty (Bessel and Haake 2009: 3). The world wars accelerated these processes exponentially and brought a 'veritable avalanche of refugees' extending later on to other continents (Marrus 2010).

However, for other historians, the phenomenon has a much longer history. Olivier Forcade and Philippe Nivet (2008: 7) agree that the 'refugee fleeing a conflict' became a typical character after the world wars but claim that populations displaced by war have been major figures of European history at least since the sixteenth century. The early modern period saw individual departures or displacements in groups but also large flows. Well-known examples include the departure of more than 170,000 Huguenots from France around the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), but also the expulsion of more than 100,000 Jews from Spain after 1492 or the eviction at least 240,000 Moors from Spain after 1609 (Poussou 2008: 43–6). Those early modern displacements were numerically smaller than twentieth-century refugee movements but nonetheless represented major episodes in the history of Europe, some countries being particularly marked by forced exiles. As Gatrell (2010: 7) argued in reference to First World War refugee movements, 'impressions and proportions' do matter, as does the context in which these occurred. Although 'smaller than in the late 1940s,' the displacements certainly shocked contemporaries, especially in areas where refugees represented a large proportion of the population.

In the early modern era, host states were not always eager to welcome refugees especially in case of massive emigration. A major objective was often to get rid of them. Hostile attitudes sometimes led to suspicion and xenophobic sentiments (Poussou 2008: 54–6), an issue well studied for Huguenot refugees in Switzerland (Sautier et al. 1985). In any case, there was no question of putting refugees on an equal footing with the inhabitants of the host country and their treatment was usually rudimentary. If only because setting-up camps was difficult at the time, the reception of refugees was certainly very different from what it became in the contemporary era. Nevertheless, as noted by Jean-Pierre Poussou (2008: 56), reception conditions have hardly improved in the contemporary era.

Historians however do agree on a few factors that make the post-war era distinctive. At least two themes stand out: the issue of relief linked to the actions of governmental, international, and intergovernmental organizations and the causes of departures.

From the late fifteenth century private charitable initiatives and religious congregations provided relief to displaced persons. Later on, during the nineteenth century, the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire became genuine laboratories of humanitarian experiences (Forcade 2008: 337–8; Rodogno 2011). Public action gradually replaced private initiatives and the First World War acted as a powerful accelerator of this evolution. From this perspective, the ‘real break, which led to a changeover in the figure of the refugee, certainly happened in the nineteenth century, before the First World War’ rather than after any of the world wars (Forcade 2008: 332).

p. 28 For Peter Gatrell (2010: 11–12), the important new dimension of the post-Second World War era was the ‘emphasis on “rehabilitation” as something other than the restoration of physical capability’ and a ‘flurry of professional expertise’ which had ‘little or no counterpart in the interwar period’. He also identified elements of continuity and change in the refugee regime: while the interwar order had ‘operated with a gradually evolving concept of a collective loss of protection,’ the post-Second World War system, embodied by the 1951 Refugee Convention, established the individual ‘well-founded fear of being persecuted’ as the main criterion for legal recognition of the refugee status. Nevertheless, the *modus operandi* of the main refugee relief agencies bore similarities, especially in ‘the dearth of resources at the disposal of both UNHCR and the League of Nations’. Both had very limited budgets and ‘relied heavily on a number of non-governmental organisations to operate refugee relief programmes’ (Gatrell 2010: 8–9; Elie 2013).

The second significant element of change relates to the causes of refugee flights, although the turning point seems to have happened again in the nineteenth (or even the late eighteenth) century. Although between the fifteenth and the nineteenth century, many displacements were caused by war, the bulk of refugee movements were linked to religious clashes. The early modern era has been ‘particularly marked by the religious dimension of the forced movements’ even if it could be mixed with other factors. Starting with the French Revolution, political dimensions took precedence as revolutionary France ‘launched the phenomenon of mass exile for political reasons’. Throughout the nineteenth century, political refugees have been numerous although never on a comparable scale. Arguably, the process of purification implemented under the French Revolution had similarities with past searches for imposed religious unity but those never had the same organized character and ideological element. Those factors were to be found again later on, during the Russian Revolution and in Nazi Germany’s actions (Poussou 2008: 68–9).

Finally, the examination of the causes of departure reminds us that the early modern era also witnessed waves of people moving ‘internally’ or for ‘environmental’ and socio-economic reasons, such as droughts, famines, and epidemics. This has relevance for this chapter since it indicates that historians have considered categorization as well as the analytical consequences of labels.

Historians and Labelling

p. 29 To a large extent, the evolution from refugee to forced migration studies has revolved around a debate over the appropriate labels and their methodological implications (Zetter 1988). From the outset, the field of refugee studies has been ‘dogged by terminological difficulties’ and the relatively ‘uncritical use and recycling’ of a policy-based definition of refugees (Harrell-Bond 1998: 3; Black 2001: 63). According to Chimni, the ‘legal definitions of “refugee” have always been partial and designed to serve state policy’ and ↪ academia has failed to address this issue (Chimni 2009: 16). Historians did not necessarily position themselves within this debate but they developed their own reflections and efforts at defining their object of study.

One important (although basic) risk of the uncritical use of legal categories by historians is that of producing teleological and anachronistic studies. In this perspective, the historian's role is rather to question the categories adopted at different periods by states and international organizations and highlight the evolutions and modes of transformation of those labels over time. It is indeed critical to produce 'detailed accounts of the complex debates over eligibility in a wide range of contexts' (Ballinger 2012: 379). One way historians have tackled this challenge has been to suggest new or alternative terminology (Gatrell 2007; Bessel and Haake 2009) and show that some of the 'new' terms were actually used in the past and have a history. Thus, Alf Lüdtke reminded us recently that the term 'forced migration' was included in the fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in the 1970s (2009: 16–17). Others have questioned the novelty of categories such as internally and environmentally displaced persons, so popular since the 1990s, by reminding readers that those were used before, even administratively. For example, Forcade and Nivet note that when the 'French Ministry of Interior established a refugee service during World War I or when Robert Schuman was appointed as Deputy Secretary of State for Refugee in 1940, it was to deal with "national refugees"' (Forcade and Nivet 2008: 8–9). This approach also includes the study of the origins and development of those 'new' categories (e.g. Weiss and Korn 2006).

Historians have looked at the evolution of labels, especially in connection with the history of the international regime and the work of international organizations. Claudena Skran and Gil Loescher's works stand out but recently a number of articles have also looked at the genesis and growth of the refugee conventions and definitions used in the interwar and post-war years (e.g. Einarsen 2011). In this context, echoing some anthropologists' criticisms about the refugee label, historians have recently questioned the historical foundations of the artificial distinction between refugees and migrants (Karatani 2005; Elie 2010; Long 2013b). Particularly noteworthy is the September 2012 issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, which examines 'how "the refugee" as a distinct category of person developed in different post-war settings' (Holian and Cohen 2012: 317). Pamela Ballinger's contribution to this journal is particularly relevant since she highlights another potential risk of using labels, that of systematically excluding certain experiences and categories from history. Indeed, the omission of certain categories from national and international legal instruments 'should not be mistaken for an empirical reality'. Moreover, historians 'of refugee flows must remain on continual guard not to mistake the object of their analysis...with their unit of analysis' (Ballinger 2012: 367, 379).

This reminds us that it is crucial for research to be grounded in the historical context and reality of the time. Administrative categories rarely correspond fully to the political and sociological reality of displacements. For example, after the Second World War, not all displaced persons were considered as refugees and some were forced to return to their country of origin. On this basis, Frank Caestecker considers that it is imperative to 'go beyond the administrative category of policymaking and use an independent category of "refugee" to understand what happened on the ground'. According to him, the legal category of 'refugee' should 'certainly not discipline our knowledge'. Yet, wondering whether historians can act as 'eligibility officers for the human past,' he identifies one danger linked to the usual lack of 'sources which give us clues on the forced nature of the migration,' especially when officials do not provide relevant information (Caestecker 2011).

Refugee and Forced Migration History ‘From Below’

Since the 1980s, another recurrent theme in critical analyses of the field of refugee and forced migration studies has pointed towards the tendency of depicting displaced persons simply as mute, helpless victims rather than specific persons (see Sigona, this volume; Malkki 1996). As a result, the figure of the refugee or the forced migrant is often forgotten and repeatedly excluded from scholarly research. The field of history is no exception and the absence of the refugee from most historical writing is sometimes considered to be ‘so marked that it constitutes a systematic exclusion’. Indeed, asking for the refugees to ‘be re/instituted on the historical record,’ Marfleet expressed the opinion that historians have ‘ignored most refugee movements and “silenced” those involved’ (2007: 136–8).

This is arguably the real meaning of the term ‘ahistorical’. It is not necessarily that history has neglected themes linked to refugee and forced migration processes but that historians have refrained from studying ‘those involved’. In other words, the refugee or the forced migrant is ‘less an unknown of history than a missing, untraceable and unnameable character of the historiography’ (Forcade 2008: 332). Refugee history is seen as biased towards the history of states and international organizations. According to Kushner the history of refugees has been ‘actively forgotten’ (2006: 47), while for Marfleet, an important factor is also that the refugee voice challenges established national narratives (Marfleet 2007: 144).

Some historians have argued in favour of ‘putting refugees at the centre rather than the margins of historical enquiry’ (Gatrell 2010; 12). One recent historiographical trend is certainly the ‘desire to find explanations for the “doings” of historical actors’ (Lüdtke 2009: 13) and to produce life histories, including of the refugees (e.g. BenEzer 2002). In their book, Knox and Kushner (2001: 1) thus aim at exploring ‘refugees’ experiences and responses to their plight’. In doing so, they ‘attempt to restore the humanity of refugees’ and claim to develop the ‘first social history of refugees’ movements during the twentieth century and the first comparative one’.

p. 31 To develop this kind of history, scholars face familiar dilemmas, related to the relevant methods of investigation and interpretation as well as the (un)availability of sources. Collecting information on individual refugees or forced migrants on the basis of international organizations’ archives is difficult precisely because of staff members’ tendency of ‘talking at rather than talking with—or listening to—refugees’ (Gatrell 2007: 54). Even with the best intentions, the collection of personal testimony is only a secondary activity. Valuable information on groups and eligibility criteria can be found in the UNHCR archives. However, only a small fraction of the individual cases files on refugees and refugee registration forms—likely to represent major sources of relevant data—have been preserved and those files are anyway closed for a period of 75 years to protect personal information (while most other records are available for research after 20 years).

The challenge is familiar to social historians, who since the 1960s pioneered the use of ‘unconventional’ archives of trade unions or local groups, thus answering E. P. Thompson’s call for a history ‘from below’ (Marfleet 2007: 145; Gatrell 2010; 12). Some historians have actually recently used original sources to write very interesting histories of displacements, such as individual police files on Jewish refugees (Rünitz 2000). There are, however, a number of obstacles and methodological issues associated with the use of this type of sources, such as those linked to memories and recollections. Moreover, written contemporary accounts primarily emanate from educated individuals and social elites, which often represent only a fraction of the population. Thus, rural populations and craftsmen constituted the bulk of Huguenot refugees in Geneva, but they did not leave any memoirs (Poussou 2008: 50, 58). Historians also have to deal with the fact that personal accounts ‘sometimes reach the light of day in unusual circumstances’ (Gatrell 2007: 52) and that we lack an overview of existing testimonies, which may have an impact on the weight and interpretations we attach to those sources (Poussou 2008: 50).

An obvious corrective method has been the use of oral history which may add different perspectives to the research. Urvashi Butalia’s study of the impact of Partition in India (2000) is one of the best examples of how

oral testimony can complement other sources and help consider the individual experiences of displaced persons. It is certainly one way of ensuring that their voice is, for once, being heard. However, this approach also presents difficulties beyond language skills and the relative exclusion of earlier periods of history. There are the classical issues linked to how that voice is registered. Moreover, without reproducing the ‘suspicion’ discussed here, it is important not to over-interpret these testimonies and avoid considering those voices as the absolute and ultimate truth. Finally, the difficulty of approaching the refugees has to be taken into account (Harrell-Bond and Voutira 2007). Many obstacles hinder research, especially when one tries to access archival material or individuals in the ‘South’.

Despite all the difficulties, historians have developed valuable efforts at redressing the imbalance in scholarship towards a better consideration of the ‘refugee voice’. Only with increased initiatives of the kind presented here and with enhanced mixing of sources will the field become less ‘ahistorical’.

Conclusion

History can bring important inputs by shedding light on the ‘manifold ways in which past societies thought about refugees’ (Holian and Cohen 2012: 324). Although still an emerging area of research, the preceding pages demonstrate that a rich body of historical scholarship exists. As attested by a number of ongoing research projects and recent conferences, historians’ contributions to the field seem to represent a flourishing field of study. To be sure, there are still many shortcomings, such as the lack of ‘history from below’. Methodological and archival difficulties may explain part of the research gap but historians have to better address those aspects if they are to shed the ‘ahistorical’ stigma. In doing so, they can certainly count on the interest of and the contribution from other academic disciplines and collaborations with anthropologists is certainly a most promising avenue.

However, for the dialogue to be productive, it is also important for other academics to show more interest in historical studies on refugees and forced migrants as well as more generally. When Philip Marfleet laments that ‘researchers in the field of forced migration rarely undertake historical analyses’ and seem to be ‘averse to history’ (2007: 136), he not only points to the shortcomings in historical studies on refugees and forced migrants but also to a lack of interest in history *tout court*. Refugee and forced migration scholars should engage more with the general historical contexts in which displacements develop. For fruitful exchanges to emerge, it may also be important to realize that more often than not, historians will aim to produce history of forced displacements for its own sake and not just with a ‘utilitarian’ perspective, i.e. to ‘help’ other scholars, as Marfleet requests (2007: 136). Historians will (hopefully) not necessarily select a research topic or an approach solely for the benefit of other disciplines, a specific field of study, or to feed into policy. Despite the inherent difficulties, meaningful engagement with historians has to be based on genuine interdisciplinary projects and consideration for historians’ own perspectives. In other words, as historians move to take refugee and forced migration studies seriously, the wider refugee and forced migration studies community must start taking history seriously too.

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