

The Refugee Crisis: Historical Perspectives from Europe and North America, 1945-2000. Washington DC, 17th March 2016

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On 17th March 2016, the German Historical Institute (GHI) at Washington DC hosted a one-day symposium entitled ‘The Refugee Crisis: Historical Perspectives from Europe and North America, 1945-2000’. Through the analysis and comparison of some of the refugee crises of the last seventy years, the aim of the symposium was to provide with a historical basis from which to better understand the current Syrian refugee crisis, the largest of its kind since the end of World War Two. In doing so, the event organisers also hoped to respond to the ahistorical nature of the ongoing public debate, which often portrays this humanitarian crisis as an unprecedented historical singularity.

The symposium consisted of two panels comprising a total of five presentations that were arranged chronologically. Under the title of ‘Refugees or Returnees?’, the first panel included two presentations: ‘The German Expellees during and after the Second World War’, by Pertti Ahonen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland); and ‘A Matter of Definition? The Flight from Failing Empires and European Legacy Today’, by Andrea L. Smith (Lafayette College, PA, US). The second panel, entitled ‘Refugees during the Cold War and Beyond’, consisted of three presentations: ‘The Hungarian Revolution and the 1956/57 Refugee Crisis in Europe and North America’, by Christopher Adam (Carleton University, Canada); ‘US Responses to the Salvadoran Refugee Crisis, 1980-90’, by Patrick Scallen (Georgetown University, DC); and ‘The Bosnian Diaspora in Central Europe and the USA in the 1990s: Some Comparative Observations’, by Barbara Franz (Rider University, NJ, US). After the symposium, several migration experts joined in a panel discussion entitled ‘Learning from the Past? The Refugee Crisis in Historical Perspective’, in which they examined the current refugee crisis in light of the previous presentations.

Prof. Pertti Ahonen’s opening presentation addressed the expulsion of ‘ethnic Germans’ (*Volksdeutsche*) from various parts of Europe and their reallocation to Germany

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and Austria already from summer 1944. During these years, a total of twelve million German expellees were driven out of regions of the former 'Greater German Reich', such as the *Generalgouvernement* (Poland), and the *Sudetenland* (Czechoslovakia); as well as from more distant areas such as Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. As Prof. Ahonen pointed out, this forced migration was not unprecedented, as illustrated by the population exchanges between Turkey and Greece stipulated in the Treaty of Lausanne (1923); as well as by Hitler's social engineering schemes for the 'Germanisation' of Eastern Europe, such as the *Generalplan Ost*, and the policy of *Heim ins Reich* ('Back to the Reich'). In relation to the expellees' assimilation experiences in the host societies of Germany and Austria, Prof. Ahonen was very critical of the mystified narrative of fast and successful process of integration assisted by the 'economic miracle' in 1950s West Germany. Instead, Prof. Ahonen depicted a much slower and traumatic assimilation process that lingered into the 1960s, and was driven by conflicts between the newcomers and the local German population.

Moving beyond Europe's borders, Prof. Andrea L. Smith examined the decolonisation process and the 'return migrations' from former French, Dutch, and Portuguese colonies. In the years following the end of World War Two, between 5,5 and 6,8 million people 'returned' to Europe from former colonial territories around the world. As opposed to the previous case, these expellees were not seen as refugees or outsiders by their host societies, but rather as national repatriates 'coming back' to their original metropolis. As a consequence of the relatively smooth assimilation of the newcomers, the European metropolis also benefited culturally and linguistically from this experience in what scholars call the 'post-colonial bonus'. In her concluding remarks, Prof. Smith pinpointed the various similarities between these migratory phenomena and today's Syrian refugee crisis. As to the main point of divergence between these two experiences, Prof. Smith referred to the importance of definitions, which is crucial in deeming today's refugees as 'undesirables', in sharp contrast with the experience of those 'returning' to their national communities.

Opening the second panel, Dr Christopher Adam delivered a presentation on the Hungarian diaspora that followed the October 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the most violent uprising in the history of the 'Eastern Bloc'. Following the fall of the Hungarian government and the Soviet occupation of Budapest, thousands of Hungarians fled massively into Austria, which saw its population increase in 1,6%. Soon after, 37 countries agreed to take in Hungarian refugees under the leadership of the United Nations. From amongst the host countries, Canada stood out particularly as it conducted an unprecedented airlift to bring refugees out of Hungary, at the same time Canadian authorities waived health screenings to speed up the inflow of refugees. According to Dr Adam, the explanation for the successful and rapid resettlement of Hungarian refugees in Canada and other Western democracies is twofold. On the one hand, there was great public pressure to take in more refugees, as fast as possible. On the other hand, Western

governments were eager to welcome these refugees since the events in Hungary severely weakened the Soviet Union's image and legitimacy over the 'people's republics' of Eastern Europe.

As part of his ongoing PhD research, Patrick Scallen has studied the American response to the Salvadoran refugee crisis of the 1980s. Nearly one million Central Americans sought shelter in North America as a consequence of the civil wars in Guatemala and El Salvador, where the acute polarisation of society allowed for a ruthless and violent repression at the hands of the elites. Unfortunately for the escapees, the Ronald Reagan administration did not recognise Salvadorans as neither political nor war refugees. In order not to undermine the friendly relations between the US and the Salvadoran government, the US government regarded these refugees as mere 'economic migrants' whose irregular situation in the US made them 'illegals' in the eyes of the law. Consequently, Salvadorans were not eligible for federal funds, and their situation was only aggravated by the 'cuts' in social services of the Reagan administration. The single most significant response to the tragic situation of the Central American refugees came from the so-called 'Sanctuary Movement', a grass-roots organisation comprising several hundred religious congregations from almost every denomination.

During the fifth and last of the presentations, Prof. Barbara Franz discussed the Bosnian diaspora of the 1990s, and compared the Bosnian exile experiences in the American and Austrian host societies. This time, Washington's policy vis-à-vis the Bosnian refugees was significantly more integrative, as the US government engaged in an efficient 'outsourcing process' involving both NGOs and churches. On the other hand, the less welcoming Austrian government stripped Bosnians of their refugee status and consequently of the right to work, thus hindering the refugees' capacity to become self-sufficient. In spite of the initial difficulties, Bosnian refugees generally managed to integrate within the American and Austrian societies to various degrees. In order to quantify this integration process, Prof. Franz proposed five ideal-type categories product of her own analysis of the Bosnian exile experiences in New York and Vienna. These categories, which could well be applied to any of the other cases discussed, range from those who were more attached to their Bosnian identity found it harder to assimilate; to those with a more multicultural background and 'cosmopolitan' outlook, who willingly assimilated to the American and Austrian societies.

What conclusions can we draw from the comparison of similar historical events? To what extent is it really possible to 'learn from the past'? Can our understanding of the current Syrian refugee crisis benefit from the study of similar experiences in our recent history? Although most historians are sceptic of the idea that history repeats itself, identifying recurring patterns across similar historical events can indeed be a way to improve our understanding of the present. After all, while historical events might not repeat themselves, they sometimes do rhyme with one another —as Mark Twain is often reputed to have said. Based on a comparative analysis of

these five refugee crises, and in spite of the obvious differences between them, it is possible to identify several historical constants that seem to play an important role in every humanitarian crisis of this kind.

Arguably, the question of definitions is one of the most crucial factors in the handling of a refugee crisis by the international community. For instance, the US reaction to the Salvadoran refugee crisis of the 1980s clearly shows how a simple matter of definitions can deprive the escapees from the very basic refugee rights, and even burden them with the stigmas of the 'illegal immigrant'. On the other hand, the readiness of the European metropolis to repatriate their 'nationals' from their crumbling colonial empires can be seen as further proof of how definitions can so crucially affect the fate of the refugees. As opposed to the case of the Salvadorans, these refugees were not just provided for, but also welcomed as equal members of their national community.

Whereas the way we see and define the refugees can be determining to the unfolding of a refugee crisis, there are still questions to be raised in relation to the causes that lead both governments and public societies to react so dissimilarly. On the one hand, Governments tend to make their stance towards a given refugee group dependent on national security considerations, as well as on their political and ideological proximity to the regime those refugees are fleeing from. In this sense, the fundamental differences between the Western democracies and the Soviet Union would account for the solidarity shown to Hungarian refugees fleeing from Soviet occupation in late 1956.

On the other hand, public society has, at least in theory, the potential to influence, oppose, and even contravene national policy towards a certain refugee group, as it was the case of the 'Sanctuary Movement' in the US during the 1980s. This movement, however, was marginal if we take into account the American public society's general indifference towards the refugees. At a national level, it would appear that the predisposition of a host society to empathise a given refugee group depends on the degree to which they share ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic, political, and ideological affinities. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the most moral criteria to define the refugees, who should be rather granted asylum on the basis of their perilous situation, and irrespective of their personal, religious, or socioeconomic background.