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The United States and the Forty Years' Crisis

Carl J. Bon Tempo

In the wake of the Great War, one of the most admired men in the United States and around the world was Herbert Hoover. He earned this appreciation largely through his efforts to help the Europeans displaced by the conflict. Hoover, of course, entered the history books mainly for other reasons, and while his countrymen and women were aware of the population pressures and problems that wracked Europe in the decades after 1918, they never viewed them as vital to, or determinant of, their country's future.¹

Yet, Europe's mid-century population problems of refugees and displaced persons – making up what this book calls 'the forty years' crisis' – ultimately played a decisive role in the history of the United States' policies towards newcomers. This chapter first explores three larger themes – immigration affairs, foreign policy and domestic politics – that set the background to American engagement with the forty years' crisis. It then addresses how the United States confronted the Continent's population problems, arguing that the United States' history with the crisis occurred in two eras: 1919–1945 and 1945–1959. Finally, it interrogates the relationship between the United States and the forty years' crisis by answering two questions. First, how did the forty years' crisis influence American policies towards newcomers? Second, how did the United States shape the course of the forty years' crisis?

The answer to the first question is more readily apparent. In the decades after 1945, the United States birthed a formal refugee aid and resettlement policy regime, a development that largely grew from the country's experiences with the forty years' crisis. Quite simply, there would not have been an American refugee regime without the European refugee problems of the mid-twentieth century.

The second question is trickier to answer, in large part because the United States had so little interest in Europe's population problems from the 1920s through the early 1940s. But after the Second World War, the United States determined that it could no longer afford such inattention. In those years, in subtle and not so subtle ways, the United States did influence the forty years' crisis. First, through its leadership and resources, the United States did much to shape the physical, legal, diplomatic and ideological architecture of the post-war refugee crisis. Second, the United States' central role in the Cold War and in the refugee crisis helped meld those two phenomena together, with the former exerting incredible influence upon the latter.

Historical background to American engagement with the crisis

A few larger factors formed the background to the American response to, and engagement with, Europe's refugee crises between 1919 and 1959.

The first, and most important, element was the politics of newcomers in the United States. The onset of Europe's population problems coincided with the United States constructing the most restrictive immigration laws in its history. During the 1920s, the US Congress passed a series of laws that limited both the numbers of newcomers entering from the Eastern Hemisphere (to about 150,000 annually) and the countries from which they could emigrate. This new system greatly favoured the entry of migrants from north-western Europe while severely restricting those arriving from eastern, central and southern Europe. Immigrants from the rest of the Eastern Hemisphere faced even higher barriers to entry.²

This opposition to newcomers – and these laws – reflected deep concerns with the ethno-national origins of immigrants. Opponents of newcomers in the 1920s assumed that the immigration to the United States in the preceding three decades – coming increasingly from outside north-western Europe, which prior to 1890 had been the region that supplied the most immigrants – endangered the nation's identity. Restrictionists contended that only immigrants from north-western Europe could become true Americans who honoured the nation's past and built a worthy future. 'There is little or no similarity between the clear-thinking, self-governing stocks that sired the American people,' asserted Representative Fred Purnell in the early 1920s, 'and this stream of irresponsible and broken wreckage that is pouring into the lifeblood of America the social and political diseases of the Old World.'³ While ethnicity and national origins formed the basis of anti-immigrant sentiment, it was backstopped by concerns about the arrival of political leftists (communists and socialists) and anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic sentiments. The economic troubles that consumed the United States in the 1930s and periodically reappeared in the 1940s and 1950s added further fuel to the restrictionist fire.

The restrictionist fever only broke in the late 1940s, but in peculiar and incomplete ways. On the one hand, the laws of the 1920s remained on the books until 1965, so the fundamental intent and structure of American immigration law remained the same. Moreover, even as political and policy elites in the mid-1960s launched the successful drive to reform those immigration laws, public opinion polls showed one third of the public supporting a decrease in immigration to the United States – indicative of an ardent restrictionist core in American politics.⁴ On the other hand, the xenophobia of the 1920s and 1930s receded, replaced in part by a more pluralist and frankly cosmopolitan conception of the American nation that welcomed immigrants from all of Europe, and even parts of Asia.⁵ Nobody better summarized this change than President Harry Truman, who in 1952 decried the laws of the 1920s as 'utterly unworthy of our traditions and our ideals'. He went on to assert that Italians, Turks, Greeks, Poles and Asians all deserved a chance to come to the United States and that they would all make fine citizens.⁶

The second vital factor was the United States' changing place in global politics during the mid-twentieth century. In the decade after the Great War, the United States was powerful, but not deeply engaged in global political, diplomatic or military affairs. (American participation in the global economy did not retreat, it should be noted.) The Americans never joined the League of Nations, despite its birth at the hands of President Woodrow Wilson. American observers did participate informally in almost every major League discussion in the 1920s and 1930s, and were sometimes energetically involved when it came to social, humanitarian or scientific issues. But this was not the same as assuming leadership on pressing global concerns. Likewise, as Europe's fragile peace collapsed in the second half of the 1930s, the Americans remained on the sidelines. Indeed, Congress passed a series of laws – the so-called Neutrality Acts – designed to limit American exposure to the combatants. Public opinion, President Franklin D. Roosevelt learnt, needed to be educated and cajoled into assuming global burdens, a task the White House took up with some alacrity and increasing effectiveness as the 1930s came to a close.⁷

The Second World War, and the Cold War that followed, changed the United States' posture in international affairs. Rather than retreat from the stage, as in the aftermath of the Great War, US diplomats constructed a post-war order. American foreign policymakers began judging their country's interests in the light of events in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, of course, but their attention in the decade after 1945 never wavered long from Europe. American efforts like the Marshall Plan helped rebuild the continental economy. The US-led North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) embedded American military power in Europe. Through methods fair and foul, the United States supported its political allies in Europe. Finally, American consumer goods flooded European markets and American corporations were held up as models of economic development. From the American point of view, the goal was clear: a stable, democratic, capitalist Europe serving as a bulwark against the Soviet Union and communism.⁸ Creating a stable Europe meant working to solve Europe's population problems – a relationship that policymakers understood acutely in the post-war years. In this sense, American engagement with global politics begot engagement with the forty years' crisis in the post-1945 period.

A third factor worth considering, though not as important as the first two, were changes in American politics. While Congress led the turn towards immigration restrictionism during the 1920s, power in the political system generally began to shift towards the president in the next decade. Roosevelt's New Deal invested the Executive Branch and the White House with new prerogatives and strength, a trend that only accelerated with the crises of the Second World War and the Cold War. One manifestation – though certainly not the only one – was presidents more willing to craft immigration legislation and policy, and even to bend the immigration bureaucracy (traditionally fairly responsive to Congress) to their wills. In short, empowered presidents took a more active role in immigration and refugee affairs after 1940.⁹

At the same time, white European ethnics became more important to, and more active in, American politics. The onset of mass immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth century brought large numbers of ethnic Americans into the political system, a trend that led both major parties to develop nationality divisions to court

those voters and their leaders. While these divisions began their work in the 1880s, it only became very apparent how important these voters were in the 1930s, when FDR integrated them into his powerful democratic coalition. (In turn, this political acceptance surely helped produce the cosmopolitanism described earlier.) By the 1940s, both the Democratic and Republican Parties were fighting hard for these white ethnic voters – and immigration and refugee legislation was one way to appeal to them. These ethnic groups, moreover, had developed powerful political organizations, complete with sophisticated leadership and finely tuned lobbying efforts, educational outreach, and large and cohesive memberships. All of these advances allowed them to more effectively make their case for the entry of newcomers in the post-war years.¹⁰

A tale of two eras

The historical development of immigration affairs, US foreign policy and domestic politics, if viewed in concert, suggest that American involvement in the forty years' crisis should be understood as occurring in two distinct time periods: 1919–1945 and 1945–1959.

In that first era, the European population problem arose out of the First World War, its aftermath and the reconstruction of the European state system. War and nationalism transformed the political geography and state structures of Europe and the Near East, resulting by the mid-1920s in somewhere between ten and twelve million refugees.¹¹

During the war's early years, private American funding underlay the efforts of the Committee for Relief in Belgium (CRB) to help those in France and Belgium, whether they were refugees or those harmed by the war. Once the United States officially declared itself a combatant in 1917, the American government offered nearly \$100 million in cash and supplies to CRB. In the wake of the war, President Wilson created the American Relief Administration (ARA), led by Herbert Hoover. The ARA distributed over a billion dollars of relief supplies (mainly agricultural products) to the hungry and desperate in over twenty countries. When the government stopped funding the ARA, it soldiered on as a private aid organization, though Hoover had to work miracles to win what private support he could. American policymakers, as well as some of the public, supported the ARA programme as much out of self-interest (it found markets for excess agricultural production, which in turn stabilized farm prices in the United States) as from any sustained interest in European reconstruction or deep concern with population pressures. The CRB and ARA were joined by other groups – like the American Red Cross and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee – who had much the same mission.¹²

It is important to recognize that the United States' efforts were of a peculiar character: often organized, financed and implemented by private actors (rather than the US government) and often focused on offering aid to the suffering and hungry in Europe (rather than offering entry to the United States). As such, this aid did not target refugees per se, but the larger populations wrecked by the war. Yet, the acclaim that Hoover and others received were just rewards. All in all, during the war and in its immediate aftermath, the United States played a vital role in ameliorating the tremendous suffering in Europe and the Near East.

In other areas, and as the war became more of a memory, the American record was not as strong. This point becomes clearer when one considers the United States' peripheral participation after the war, and throughout the 1920s, in the League of Nations' efforts to solve Europe's population problems.¹³ Fridtjof Nansen, the organization's High Commissioner for Refugees, made herculean efforts to address the Russian, Armenian and Greek refugee flows (even as the League offered him only administrative assistance). Hoover and Nansen both searched for solutions to the Russian problem, while the Armenian genocide and refugee catastrophe eluded any solution. The Americans provided help at the margins in both cases. In a different vein, the Greek refugee flows of the early 1920s garnered the most American attention and action. Americans energetically contributed to Greek refugee aid in the early 1920s and the Harding White House helped secure funding for the Greek Refugee Settlement Commission, a League operation headed by the American Henry Morgenthau Sr. that sought to resettle Greeks fleeing upheaval in Turkey. Morgenthau came to the effort through a long background in humanitarianism – both in the United States and while he was ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during the Great War and witnessed the persecution of the Armenian population. The public's attachment to the plight of Greek refugees is harder to explain, though advocates for Greek refugee aid were well organized and well connected. More important, they proved quite adept at generating sympathy and support through a variety of public efforts.¹⁴

The League's efforts in each of these cases were, in reality, not as great as the task at hand, and American assistance was minimal, except in the case of the Greeks. To a great degree, the Continent's population problems and the European and international efforts to solve them ran headlong into the United States' post-war desire to remove itself from foreign entanglements and seemingly intractable global challenges. The larger point, though, is clear: at the birth of the forty years' crisis, the Americans offered financial aid – though it decreased dramatically once the immediate post-war years passed – rather than active and engaged leadership aimed at solving the burgeoning refugee crisis.

The United States did even less in the critical area of refugee resettlement. The key factor explaining America's failure to offer refugees entry during the 1920s was changes to immigration law: just as the population problem exploded in Europe, the United States began to shut its doors. In 1924, the year the most restrictive immigration law passed Congress, over 706,000 immigrants came to the United States. Through the rest of the decade, annual arrivals never topped 336,000 – and they collapsed below 100,000 per year throughout the 1930s. Even more insidious, those Europeans who would have benefited most from admission to the United States were precisely those nationalities that the new laws excluded. In this political, policy and cultural environment, as regular immigration channels narrowed considerably, proposals for special admissions of refugees independent of immigration quotas had no chance of passage.¹⁵

As Zara Steiner notes in her chapter, the European population and refugee crisis entered a new phase in the 1930s with the rise of fascism. Hundreds of thousands of Germans fled the Nazis (and many more undoubtedly wanted to) as the regime's policies became more virulent in the mid-to-late 1930s. Hitler's conquest of the Continent led millions more Europeans to look to escape. The outlines of the most

notorious refugee catastrophe are well known, as is the failure of a global response. The nascent international refugee regime proved no match for the growing numbers of homeless and helpless. The League set up the High Commission on Refugees in 1933, led by an American, James G. McDonald, to expedite departures from Germany and find resettlement opportunities. By all accounts, the hardworking and humanitarian McDonald acquitted himself well in a nearly impossible situation. The League limited the High Commission's mandate and powers, and Germany unsurprisingly had little interest in cooperating with McDonald. In the United States, McDonald's contact with the State Department and representatives of the Roosevelt White House revealed the American government's fears that cooperation with the high commission would have one result: the arrival of at least tens of thousands of Jewish refugees. McDonald's high commission, then, produced few results and he resigned in 1935, but not without making his signal contribution. In a public letter announcing his departure, McDonald called attention to the Nazis' frightening abuse of minorities, warned that the situation in Germany would doubtlessly worsen and strongly called for the League of Nations to press for modification of Nazi policies. Writing with morally charged language that left little doubt as to the stakes, McDonald identified the dynamics at work all too well, and in some ways predicted the tragedy that ensued in the coming years.¹⁶

McDonald's countrymen, of course, paid as little heed to his warning as the rest of the world. The triumph of immigration restriction in the 1920s was the single most important factor that foretold American inaction. Year after year in the 1930s, supporters of European refugees sponsored legislation in Congress to admit those fleeing the terror. Those efforts failed every time, brought low by objections that a refugee programme would denude the national origins quota immigration system, further harm the economy and bring un-American newcomers to the United States.

With no special programme to admit refugees, regular immigration procedures were the chief avenue for entry. The law allowed only 25,957 Germans to enter annually, a relatively large number compared to the quotas for other countries falling under the Nazi yoke; the Austrian quota was just over 1,400 and the Czech quota was about 2,800. In any event, those quotas soon were not large enough to accommodate all who wanted to come. Equally problematic, State Department officials had little interest in admitting refugees. Motivated by anti-Semitism and xenophobia, they argued for a continuing the Hoover administration's strict enforcement of the 'likely to become a public charge' clause in immigration law, which effectively blocked the entry of refugees from Germany. President Roosevelt, concerned with domestic politics, a restrictionist Congress and surging anti-Semitic attacks on the New Deal, left the State Department to its devices during his first term. Only in 1937, safely re-elected and with some new faces in the State Department such as Sumner Welles, did FDR order the bureaucracy to admit more Germans. From 1938 till 1940, the quotas were substantially filled, but key years had been lost and by that late date the line of Germans, Austrians and Czechs hoping to come to the United States had lengthened considerably. Ultimately, the opposition to newcomers so powerful in American politics and culture in the first half of the twentieth century, and embedded in key portions of the government, helped determine the weak American response to the crisis of the 1930s.¹⁷

Foreign policy concerns also played a role. Those in Congress who wanted to help refugees, as well as President Roosevelt, who sympathized with their plight, were loath to challenge isolationists who contended that any aid would ensnare the United States in Europe's accelerating conflict. Such thinking was part of the State Department's justification for leaving the quotas unfilled, and it was especially important in scuttling special legislation that would have admitted European refugees outside the quotas. The constraints of US foreign policy also hamstrung efforts to craft diplomatic solutions. The Americans brought together dozens of states for a conference at Evian, France in 1938 – where good intentions led to paltry results. The Americans pleaded that they wanted to help resolve the European population problem, but refused to take concrete steps that would have admitted refugees. It should be noted that the other attendees at Evian followed the same line.¹⁸

After the United States entered the war in 1941, immigration from Europe slowed to a crawl. Between 1941 and 1945, a total of just over 53,000 Europeans came to the United States. This figure is somewhat misleading and overstates American contributions to offering aid when one considers that 13,000 of those arrivals were of English descent.¹⁹ There was a well-publicized effort to bring almost 1,000 Jewish refugees from camps in Italy to the United States in 1944, but this programme was obviously of little consequence given the flood of displaced in Europe as the war began to wind down.²⁰ In any event, the United States seemed most concerned with winning the war rather than admitting refugees. Yet, there were signs that the Americans would be more interested in population policy and the fate of refugees after the war: the United States took the lead in 1943 in forming the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), tasked specifically with tackling the post-war problems of refugees and the displaced that were sure to arise.²¹

Post-war planning during the war proved tragically accurate. The Second World War produced a human catastrophe across the globe, and just as surely in Europe. The Continent's population problems in the wake of the war were as great – if not greater – as they had been at any time in the twentieth century. Anywhere between 7 and 11 million Europeans were displaced. Estimates held that of that population, around 225,000 were Jews in Germany, Austria and Italy, the vast majority victims of the Nazi extermination campaign and in extremely dire straits. The problem was not static, either. As the homeless made their way back home, or to new homes, others took their places – often fleeing the imposition of Soviet control in eastern Europe or the anti-Semitic pogroms that flared after the war. Thus, the population problems long outlasted the conflict and even its immediate aftermath. With the Continent's political and economic institutions wrecked, and the social fabric sundered completely, care for the refugees fell to the United States, its allies and a series of infant international organizations.²²

The Americans responded with a substantial set of programmes to aid the homeless and to resettle them in the United States. It is important to make a distinction, however. Any frank assessment would admit that the Americans could, and perhaps should, have done more in light of the immensity of the suffering and the population problems. This judgement is more powerful when one considers the unmatched economic and material resources the Americans possessed. But, even with this caveat, the US post-

war efforts were remarkable, viewed against the historical record of the 1920s and 1930s. They also were of a certain cast and type, which illuminated their shortcomings.

In terms of aid delivered to Europe and helping refugees 'on the ground', the Americans backed – sometimes quite significantly – several international organizations. The first was the aforementioned United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Three Americans led UNRRA and the United States contributed about 70 per cent of its budget. During its five years (1943–8), it rebuilt infrastructure, provided food and shelter to the hungry, constructed and staffed refugee camps, and repatriated the displaced. This last mission of repatriation put the United States in open conflict with the Soviet Union (another UNRRA member) when the Americans and British decided to halt the return of those Soviet citizens who desired to remain in the West.²³ Despite this controversy, UNRRA managed to shrink considerably the refugee and DP population to something on the order of 1–1.5 million persons.

The International Refugee Organization (IRO) succeeded UNRRA from 1947 to 1952 – though without the participation of the Soviets. Formed by 25 nations and the United States, the Americans contributed just over \$237 million to its budget, about half of the IRO's total expenditures and played key roles in its leadership. Much like UNRRA, the IRO ran refugee camps and organized and assisted in resettlement, but it also made stronger efforts to rehabilitate the displaced through an extensive set of social welfare programmes such as job training. Besides American participation in the IRO's management, a multitude of US-based non-governmental organizations helped care for and resettle the displaced.²⁴

Finally, out of the ashes of the IRO came the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which began operations in 1951. According to historian Louise Holborn, the UNHCR offered refugees legal and political safety but, at the United States' insistence, no material help. As a result, the UNHCR was vital in expanding definitions of 'refugee' and studying the global refugee problem, but less effective at ameliorating refugee flows and populations. The American objections to an expansive UNHCR mission symbolized the country's lack of interest in funding large-scale refugee assistance programmes (like the IRO) by the early 1950s, though US dollars continued to be a key part of the organization's budget through the Cold War.²⁵

Instead, the Americans increasingly concentrated on bringing select refugees to the United States. On its own, this decision represented a turning point. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Americans provided material and financial aid to refugees massed in Europe and the Near East, all the while largely blocking their entry to the United States. This financial and material aid continued to a degree, as we have seen, in the post-1945 era. But the new emphasis on refugee admissions was clear, as a series of ad hoc policies and programmes brought hundreds of thousands of European refugees to the United States, beginning in the late 1940s.

Shortly after the conclusion of hostilities, American military officials made President Harry Truman aware of the population problems in Europe, and especially the camps that housed hundreds of thousands of Displaced Persons and refugees. By the end of 1945, Truman ordered that half of all immigration admissions from Europe go to refugees, and that immigration officials ease their standards to expedite entry. The immediate effects were paltry – about 5,000 Europeans entered via the programme

– but that failure led Truman to push for his more ambitious Displaced Persons legislation.²⁶ After a long battle, Truman won Congressional passage of the Displaced Persons Act in 1948. Straightforward in the sense that it provided for the admission of 200,000 refugees over two years, it required that those admissions count against future quotas and that refugees had to be registered in camps by 1945 (which had the effect of lowering the number of Jews and eastern Europeans eligible for the programme). In 1950, Congress renewed the programme for two more years. When the DP Program ended in 1952, about 400,000 Europeans had come to the United States – the vast majority of whom arrived from IRO camps.²⁷

Clearly, the first five years after the war were a departure in the United States' engagement with the European crisis. But why? The vital change came in American foreign policy. As the war ended, a sense developed among US leaders that the country would have to be involved in rebuilding Europe. UNRRA – followed by the IRO and the UNHCR – signified recognition of this reality. In this sense, UNRRA (and its successors) arose from the same impulse as the welter of post-war international and American-led agencies and organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which set out to reconstruct Europe. It also explains – along with a sense of humanitarianism and justice – Truman's motivation for his December 1945 order. By 1948 and the Displaced Persons programme, the impetus to be engaged in Europe had a new powerful rationale: the Cold War. Policymakers believed the admission of refugees and the displaced would bolster American allies on the front lines of the battle against communism. Equally important, it would serve as a demonstration of American values and munificence in the face of Soviet oppression, and thus constitute a major propaganda victory. In a sense, the DP Program was both backward- and forward-looking. It was inspired both by the desire to ameliorate the suffering created by the Second World War and the perceived post-war threat of the Soviet Union and communism.²⁸

The DP Program, though, also grew from changes in American politics. Jewish groups launched an impressive campaign to win the legislation, one that might not have been possible in the first half of the twentieth century before the ethno-national discrimination of national origins policy – and overt and virulent anti-Semitism – had been discredited by Nazism. Working largely behind the scenes – to avoid opening the legislation up to anti-Semitic attacks (which came in any event) – Jewish organizations assembled a broad coalition of support that stretched across religion, ethnicity and class. Equally important, they couched their support of the DP Program in new ways. They made clear the Cold War benefits of admitting European refugees and emphasized the anti-communism of newcomers. At the same time, American Jews framed refugee admissions as a 'social justice' issue, in the words of historian Maddalena Marinari, that gave the campaign a universalist appeal while also thwarting attacks that the programme would only benefit one or two religious or nationality groups. It was a sophisticated effort that bore fruit and showed how ethnic and religious organizations had become vital and effective players in immigration politics and drivers of immigration policy.²⁹

The Cold War cast of American engagement with the forty years' crisis only deepened in the 1950s. In that decade, the Americans launched two signature

refugee programmes. The Refugee Relief Program of 1953 brought just over 200,000 refugees to the United States. The rationale for the programme was distinctly Cold War-coloured. President Eisenhower lauded 'escapees who have braved death to escape from behind the Iron Curtain' and asserted that those 'searching desperately for freedom look to the free world for haven'.³⁰ The programme privileged refugees who were victims of communism – even defining an 'escapee' as a person who fled the Soviet Union or communist-dominated territories. Finally, the programme aimed to help 'friendly' European nations burdened by refugees, who were described as an 'economic and political threat of constantly growing magnitude'. Unsurprisingly, then, the vast majority of admissions came from Germany and Italy.³¹

As the Refugee Relief Program ended in late 1956, another refugee crisis began as Hungarians started pouring out of their country, following the failed anti-Soviet revolution of that summer and fall. With great public support, Eisenhower launched an emergency programme that admitted nearly 40,000 Hungarians over the next few months. The Hungarians were hailed as brave 'freedom fighters' whose dreams of democracy and freedom had been crushed by Soviet armed force. These victims of communist aggression deserved a new life in the United States, Eisenhower and others contended.³²

In each of these cases, the Cold War and foreign policy prerogatives pushed the United States to admit refugees. But it was also clear that particular political and cultural conditions eased the acceptance of these policies and programmes. Advocates of immigration reform backed refugee admissions as a way to subvert the nation's restrictive immigration laws; if they could not overturn what they believed were overtly discriminatory and harsh laws, then they believed refugee admissions would chip away at the edifice of restriction. Moreover, as with the DP Program, ethnic and religious groups pushed hard for the 1953 admissions – so hard that it earned the moniker 'the church bill'.³³

These admissions, tellingly, came in the era of the Red Scare, when muscular anti-communism dominated American politics. Supporters of refugees harnessed anti-communism as a powerful rationale for refugee admissions. (It should be noted that opponents of refugee admissions were equally vociferous in their contention that refugee entry would risk the arrival of communists and Soviet saboteurs.) Advocates like Representative Manny Celler painted newcomers in 1953 as 'refugees streaming in across the line into West Berlin ... from East Germany, coming in from Czechoslovakia, from Poland, and from other subjugated countries'. Celler continued: 'They understand the meaning of liberty' and 'they would be only too happy to come here and understand, know, appreciate all the more, freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of religion'.³⁴ In short, Celler made the case that these refugees deserved admission because of their opposition to communism. It was not the politicians and policy experts alone who picked up this thread. In describing the Hungarians, the popular weekly magazine *Look* declared that the Hungarian refugees would be 'New Americans' in no time. The key to this easy transition was not only political, but also their embrace of American material and consumer culture – again the antithesis of life behind the Iron Curtain.³⁵ Those explaining why the United States should admit refugees had never before possessed such resonant arguments.

The end of the forty years' crisis in Europe coincided with one final push by the United States. In 1957, Congress passed the Refugee-Escapee Act, aimed at bringing thousands of victims of European communist regimes to the United States. A few years later, Congress enacted the 'Fair Share' Refugee Act of 1960. Designed to show American sympathy with the United Nation's World Refugee Year (one of whose goals was closing the European camps that housed hard-core refugees), the law provided for the entry of about 5,000 Europeans, an amount that the United States determined a 'fair share', considering the size of admissions offered by other states.³⁶

By many accounts, the forty years' crisis came to a close in 1959 – and that year marked something of a new era in American refugee affairs as well. The catalyst was the Cuban Revolution and the rise of Fidel Castro. As refugees began fleeing Cuba and pressing to come to the United States, they became the centre of American refugee policies. About one million Cubans came to the United States in the fifteen years after 1959. As the Cuban flow slowed in the early 1970s, Indochinese refugees fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos emerged as the focus of American refugee efforts. None of these refugees was from Europe, obviously, and American attention would never again be focused so intently on the problem of European refugees as it was in the 1940s and 1950s.

The crisis and the shape of American engagement with refugees

The largest and most important legacy of the forty years' crisis, in regard to the United States, is crystal clear: the American refugee regime. That regime emerged with two distinct parts, and at two distinct times, but altogether in response to the forty years' crisis.

In the decade after the Great War, the Americans began – mostly with private money – to aid refugees in Europe. Those private groups stayed deeply involved in refugee aid ventures during the Second World War and the early years of the Cold War. But in the post-1945 era, the American government assumed a huge financial responsibility, as well as an important leadership role, in refugee aid efforts. The American government emerged as the financial engine behind international refugee aid programmes.

The other part of the regime – refugee admissions – came fully into view in the post-war years. The United States had no coherent entry policies, other than shutting them out via immigration procedures, towards refugees in the 1920s or 1930s. Yet, during the next two decades, the United States developed a series of ad hoc programmes and policies that allowed certain refugees to enter. In the decades that followed, those ad hoc measures transformed into an annual pledge to bring refugees to the United States. That transformation took place in two stages: in 1965, as part of immigration law reform, the United States permitted about 10,000 refugees to enter annually; in 1980, under the Refugee Act, that number grew to about 50,000.

The key period in this story was the 1940s and 1950s, as the European crisis entered its third decade, and American policymakers and politicians determined they could no longer avoid the forty years' crisis. As we have seen, a volatile and historically contingent mix of foreign policy, immigration and domestic political concerns produced an

environment conducive to action. The policymakers' politicians' and public's response – an increased financial and resource commitment and refugee admissions – truly birthed the policy regime that exists to this day, and thus stands as the United States' entry point into global migration issues.

Constructing and implementing a set of refugee policies required moulding the American state to those purposes. This state-building project was multifaceted and another long-term legacy of American engagement with the crisis. Both the State Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), often with input from the White House officials charged with the immigration and refugee policy portfolio, established the mechanisms by which refugees would be selected, interviewed, admitted, transported and resettled. Two examples of this state-building stand out. First, American officials designed a set of security checks designed to prevent the entry of politically dangerous refugees. In the Cold War era, this meant denying entry to communists or socialists through rigorous background checks, interviews, and investigations of a refugee's personal and political history. During the Refugee Relief Program of the early 1950s, the barriers to entry were quite high. Those standards lowered in the decade that followed, but they remain a part of American refugee policies today, as can be witnessed in the challenges faced by refugees trying to enter from the Middle East or Africa in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.³⁷ Second, the US government developed a fruitful relationship with private sector non-government organizations, especially religious groups, to help with the admissions and resettlement of refugees. These groups worked in Europe to prepare refugees for the admissions process – a sort of pre-screening clearance – and helped resettle them with jobs and homes once in the United States. This public-private partnership continued in the 1960s and 1970s, as the Cubans and Indochinese arrived and refugee law and policy moved from ad hoc commitments to guaranteed annual admissions.³⁸

The American experience with the forty years' crisis created a peculiar refugee regime in two important respects. First, it gave American refugee admissions policies a Euro centric focus. In many ways, this focus was bound to occur, given American racial and ethnic attitudes at mid-century; the public's and policymakers' tendencies towards racial and ethnic discrimination assured that non-European refugees would not find succour in the United States. But discrimination was not the only impediment. The fact that a European crisis birthed a set of refugee policies and policy goals had the effect of cementing, at the creation, a bias towards offering help to European refugees and to providing less help to (and sometimes neglecting) non-white refugees. Only in 1965, with the civil rights movement in full swing and the national origins quota immigration system of the 1920s disgraced, did this Euro centric focus in admissions waver.

The second peculiarity, anti-communism, proved even harder to shake. American involvement in the forty years' crisis – and the development of admissions policies – accelerated just as the Cold War deepened. This confluence created a link at the heart of American refugee admissions, one that assumed a refugee worthy of entry to the United States had to be a victim of communism and sometimes even an active opponent of communism. Of course, domestic factors – such as the rise of the Red Scare, anti-communist politics, and particular anti-communist notions of national identity in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s – also account for

this link. But, again, the forty years' crisis – as a refugee problem in the heart of the European Cold War – offered fertile ground for these associations, which far outlasted the crisis itself. Thus, the Cubans, and to a lesser extent the Indochinese who followed them, were understood and defined by the United States as victims and opponents of communism. In this, at least in American eyes, they were much like their European predecessors of the post-war period. One could go so far as to argue that one important reason why the Cubans and Indochinese were welcomed with relatively open arms was that they cleared the anti-communist benchmarks established by European refugees after 1945.³⁹ Only in 1980, and with the human rights revolution in full swing, did the United States approve an apolitical and a non-ideological definition of refugee that was not grounded in anti-communism.

The United States and the shape of the forty years' crisis

In the broadest sense, and unsurprisingly, the vital American imprint on the forty years' crisis came in the Second World War era and beyond, when the United States committed substantial resources and political and diplomatic capital to refugee affairs. Of course, however, the Americans did influence the European crisis in the earlier period. American resources were vital in the war and immediate post-war years in helping to ameliorate suffering. In the 1920s and 1930s, American passivity shaped the European refugee crisis. The end of European mass migration to the United States cut off a major resettlement opportunity, one that Zara Steiner notes had served Europeans – refugees or not – in the centuries before. Put another way, the immigration policy and law changes of the 1920s put the United States on the sidelines of the forty years' crisis for about two decades – and that position did contribute to the perpetuation of the crisis.⁴⁰ It is not difficult to imagine a different narrative to the European population problem if the United States maintained its open door in the 1920s. In that scenario, the United States obviously would not have provided the solution to the Continent's refugee problems, but it likely would have lessened them to a decent degree – and an important life-changing degree for those migrants able to resettle in the United States.

In the post-war years, the Americans did admit hundreds of thousands of European refugees, most importantly 400,000 through the Displaced Persons Act, 200,000 through the Refugee Relief Act, and another almost 40,000 in the wake of the Hungarian crisis. (Other programmes, of course, admitted smaller numbers.) These numbers were startling in light of the 1920s and 1930s – and minimal in light of the population crush in post-1945 Europe. Surely, the American post-war refugee admissions did shape the dimensions of the Crisis, but not so profoundly.

In two other areas, though, one might argue for a more forceful influence. First, to a large degree, the architecture of post-war aid and resettlement was devised and funded by the US government. The camps that arose in the immediate wake of the war owed much to the American military, the dominant – and most resource-rich – partner among the Allies. UNRRA and the IRO, the two international agencies tasked with alleviating the refugee problem, were led by Americans – and received much American government funding, resources and staff support. Moreover, as historian

Daniel Cohen notes, American religious, ethnic and social welfare groups between 1943 and 1948 provided immense resources – in addition to what the US government was delivering.⁴¹ American leadership of international refugee aid organizations – and financial and economic support as well – was nothing new; James McDonald headed up the High Commission in the 1930s, after all, and the American government and public contributed resources to the refugee aid campaigns of the 1920s.

The novelty of the post-war period came in the size and scope of American intervention, which touched nearly every aspect of the refugee experience in post-war Europe. Whether this intervention produced a distinctly American post-war refugee experience is difficult to determine. The historian Liz Borgwardt has argued that UNRRA embodied a particular notion of economic rights and stability born during the New Deal reforms initiated by President Roosevelt. To be sure, New Dealers played key roles in the American efforts to construct a post-war order, and they just as surely brought their experiences and biases with them. Yet, the liberal and progressive impulses towards social and economic justice and security that underlay the New Deal – and undergirded New Dealers' conceptions of post-war refugee relief and rehabilitation – were not the province of Americans alone. Instead, they were shared by a large swath of refugee experts and advocates across Europe and the globe, and thus likely would have found voice – although perhaps less powerfully – in whatever post-war schemes developed.⁴²

Second, the United States played a major role in giving the forty years' crisis a Cold War-inspired turn and direction. To be sure, European traditions of anti-communism and anti-Soviet policies, as well as the unique geo politics of the post-war moment that pitted West against East, likely would have shaped the population issue even if a Cold War had not developed and even if the United States was not at the centre of it. But, and here Zara Steiner (as well as Peter Gatrell in his grand narrative of refugees in the twentieth century) is on the mark, the whole of refugee affairs in the post-war world took on a Cold War focus – from the legal definitions of refugee, to the public perceptions of refugees, to determining which refugees deserved aid and resettlement, to the perceived diplomatic and public advantages of refugee admissions. The United States was vital in establishing that focus because of the combination of its central role in the coming of the Cold War *and* its essential role in refugee affairs as both a major refugee resettlement destination and a source of aid. In a sense, by being a key player in both arenas, the United States helped wed them.

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Zara Steiner provocatively opens this book, both complicating and approving of the very idea of a 'forty years' crisis' for Europe's refugees and displaced. Her assessment is worth returning to, and especially with this question in mind: does the concept of a forty years' crisis resonate with, and help explain, the American experience with refugees? The answer, of course, is yes, for the multitude of reasons discussed above. And yet, Steiner's instinct to complicate is very useful in the American context as well. That is, from the perspective of the United States, the forty years' crisis is a misnomer. For the United States, it was a fifteen or twenty years' crisis, one that began sometime during the Second World War and ended around 1960. This difference in perspective – the 'Twenty Years' Crisis' – is intriguing on two fronts.

First, the story of greater American action in the field of refugee affairs during and after the Second World War has attained a powerful – and perhaps too powerful – place in how historians write and the public remembers refugee history.⁴³ For good reason, as this chapter argues, the war marked a turning point in how scholars understand the American narrative. Yet, the American narrative cannot and should not become the hegemonic one when writing the history of refugees. To do so would distort the history of refugees in the twentieth century by overly prioritizing Europe's refugees, privileging the influence of American foreign policy and neglecting the longer pre-1940 history of refugees (which might, to borrow from Steiner, benefit from looking to the decades before 1919 to find the origins of modern refugee problems and international and nation-state solutions). Moreover, the American-centred story can dangerously cast the narrative with a triumphalist and moralist tone, something akin to how American memory emphasizes the Second World War as 'The Good War'. To be sure, the war saw a vital effort to aid refugees and some praise is deserved, but those efforts were also curious and limited products of their time.

Second, this understanding of the forty years' crisis is a useful reminder of the importance of history itself. If a continent's suffering and displacement lasted four decades (or more), but it only garnered the attention of a powerful nation like the United States for fifteen years, then one must look to the peculiarities of historical perspective, historical context and contingency to help explain the gap – and thus the shapes and fates of the lives of tens of millions. On this front, the United States played a vital role, along with others, in confronting – and avoiding, at times – a marker of the modern world: the refugee.

Notes

I would like to thank Steve Porter, Ryan Irwin and the editors of this book for their advice on this chapter.

- 1 On Hoover, see his biographers William Leuchtenberg, *Herbert Hoover* (New York: Times Books, 2009), 39, 45–7; Glen Jeansomme, 'The Real Hoover', *Historically Speaking*, 12, 4 (September 2011), 26–9.
- 2 For overviews, see Daniel Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants Since 1882* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).
- 3 Purnell quoted in Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 105.
- 4 Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door*, 233.
- 5 Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 76–86; Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 187–267.

- 6 Harry S. Truman: 'Veto of Bill to Revise the Laws Relating to Immigration, Naturalization, and Nationality', 25 June 1952. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14175> [accessed 25 August 2016].
- 7 On the United States and the League, see Warren Kuehl, *Keeping the Covenant: American Internationalists and the League of Nations, 1920–1939* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 107–64. On the Neutrality Acts, see David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 381–464.
- 8 Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Michael Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, especially chapters 3–6.
- 9 Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 176–218; William Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), esp. 326–48; Arthur Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).
- 10 Maddalena Marinari, 'Liberty, Restrictionism, and the Remaking of Italians and Eastern European Jews, 1882–1965', PhD Dissertation, University of Kansas, 2009; Louis Gerson, *The Hyphenate in Recent American Politics and Diplomacy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1964).
- 11 The classic overview is Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 52–81. For a more recent overview of the period, see Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 12 Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 85–7; Leuchtenberg, *Herbert Hoover*, 41–5; Clements, *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, chapters 1 and 4; Frank Surface and Raymond Bland, *American Food in the World War and Reconstruction Period* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1931), 1–14; Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 13 Scholarship on international governance and refugees and migration – including the League of Nations and its role in population displacement issues – has proliferated in recent years. Some of the best treatments can be found in Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2013); Patrick O. Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace after World War I: America, Britain and the Stabilisation of Europe, 1919–1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Carole Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- 14 Kuehl, *Keeping the Covenant*, 132; Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 96–106. On the chief Greek refugee advocacy group, Near East Relief, see James Barton, *The Story of Near East Relief* (New York: Macmillan, 1930).
- 15 US Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1933* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1933), 92: <http://www.census.gov/library/publications/1933/compendia/statab/55ed.html> [accessed 25 August 2016]; US Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1944–45* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1945), 109. <http://www.census.gov/library/publications/1945/compendia/statab/66ed.html> [accessed 25 August 2016].

- 16 On McDonald, see Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 161–5; James G. McDonald, 'Letter of Resignation', *The Christian Century*, 15 January 1936, 101–4; Haim Genizi, 'James G. McDonald: High Commissioner for Refugees, 1933–1935', *Weiner Library Bulletin*, 30, 43/44 (1977), 40–52; Richard Breitman and Alan Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 81–2.
- 17 The literature on the American response to Nazi persecution of minorities in Europe is immense. My narrative is based on a few of the best accounts: David Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938–1941*, 2nd edition (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door*, 59–97; Tichenor, *Dividing Lines*, 150–67; Claudena Skran, *Refugees in Interwar Europe: The Emergence of a Regime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 122–295. The most recent noteworthy entry into this scholarship is Breitman and Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*.
- 18 Ibid.; Louise Holborn, *The International Refugee Organization, A Specialized Agency of the United Nations: Its History and Work, 1946–1952* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 11–2.
- 19 The 1941–45 figures are from US Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1950* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office), 99: <http://www.census.gov/library/publications/1950/compendia/statab/71ed.html> [accessed 25 August 2016].
- 20 Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door*, 86–7.
- 21 On UNRRA planning during the war, see Ben Shephard, "Becoming Planning Minded": The Theory and Practice of Relief 1940–1945', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43, 3 (2008), 405–19, and Jessica Reinisch's chapter in this book.
- 22 Statistics from Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door*, 98. For a panoramic overview of conditions, see Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 13–62.
- 23 UNRRA has received recent scholarly attention. See, for instance, Jessica Reinisch's chapter in this book, as well as Jessica Reinisch, "We Shall Rebuild Anew a Powerful Nation": UNRRA, Internationalism and National Reconstruction in Poland', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43, 3 (2008), 451–76; G. Daniel Cohen, 'Between Relief and Politics: Refugee Humanitarianism in Occupied Germany 1945–1946', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43:3 (2008), 437–49; William Hitchcock, *Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe* (New York: Free Press, 2009).
- 24 The best recent history of IRO is G. Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Post-War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Still very useful on IRO is Holborn, *International Refugee Organization*.
- 25 The best history of the UNHCR is Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Holborn, *International Refugee Organization*, 561–2; Marrus, *The Unwanted*, 345, 354–8.
- 26 Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door*, 103–4.
- 27 On the DP Program and IRO, see Holborn, *International Refugee Organization*, 410–14. The best histories of the DP Program can be found in Stephen Porter, 'Defining Public Responsibility in a Global Age', PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2009, esp. chapters 4 and 5; Haim Genizi, *America's Fair Share: The Admission and Resettlement of Displaced Persons, 1945–52* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994); Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

- 28 For the clearest analysis of how the Cold War shaped the global refugee problem and the actions of nation-states, international organizations and non-governmental organizations, see Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 85–282.
- 29 Maddalena Marinari, 'Liberty, Restrictionism, and the Remaking of Italians and Eastern European Jews', 190–250. On pluralism in politics in the post-war years, see Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 238–67; Mae Ngai, 'The Unlovely Residue of Outworn Prejudices', in Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin (eds), *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Idea* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 108–27.
- 30 Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Letter to the President of the Senate and to the Speaker of the House of Representatives Recommending Emergency Legislation for the Admission of Refugees', 22 April 1953. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9821> [accessed 25 August 2016].
- 31 Carl Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), chapter 2.
- 32 Ibid., chapter 3.
- 33 Ibid., 40.
- 34 Celler quoted in *ibid.*, 43–4.
- 35 Ibid., 75–81.
- 36 On the 'Fair Share' law, see Linda W. Gordon, 'The Origins and Initial Resettlement Patterns of Refugees in the United States', in David W. Haines (ed.), *Refugees in America in the 1990s: A Reference Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 338–9. On World Refugee Year, see Peter Gatrell, *Free World? The Campaign to Save the World's Refugees, 1956–1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- 37 See Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, chapters 3, 5 and epilogue.
- 38 For the definitive treatment of this private-public partnership, see Stephen Porter, 'Defining Public Responsibility in a Global Age'.
- 39 For this comparison, see Carl Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate*, chapters 3 and 5.
- 40 It is only fair to note that several other nations – including Canada and Australia – enacted similar restrictionist immigration policies in the early twentieth century, and thus also were enmeshed in this dynamic. As the global economic depression set in during the 1930s, other countries too closed their doors, again perpetuating Europe's population problems.
- 41 Cohen, *In War's Wake*, 60.
- 42 Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, 133–4.
- 43 A number of books and articles use the war as a jumping off point for discussions about the international refugee regime. See, for instance, Bon Tempo *Americans at the Gate*. For another perspective that decentres the American experience and expands the chronology – while still seeing the Second World War as a turning point – see Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*.