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The Forty Years' Crisis: Making the Connections

Peter Gatrell

The relationship between history and refugees is an uncomfortable one. In his contribution to this book, Tony Kushner points out that the extensive literature in refugee studies lacks a historical perspective; he adds that refugees remain outside of the historiographical mainstream. Over two decades ago, Liisa Malkki demonstrated that refugees are represented in humanitarian discourse primarily as de-historicized figures and 'speechless emissaries'. In her reading, history is leached out of displacement. Zara Steiner argues that it is difficult to establish a linear connection between successive refugee crises: there is no easily identifiable beginning or end, and no clear thread linking one episode to the next. Each response to a new 'crisis' shows little awareness of what happened in the past. These authors adopt a different take on the subject, but they concur that history and refugees make for uneasy bedfellows.¹

My own work has attempted to make the case for refugee history, but the aim of this chapter is more modest.² I hope to show to what extent and how politicians, international civil servants, relief workers and humanitarian campaigners invoked history in order to frame their response to refugee crises. The argument is developed in relation to a specific case study, namely the United Nations campaign in 1959–60 on behalf of the world's refugees. This campaign, known as World Refugee Year (WRY), targeted non-European as well as European sites of displacement. These crises could have been presented purely as current trouble spots, but history figured in the campaign both as a way of stimulating public interest and support and also as a means whereby participating governments could justify the stance they adopted and what they hoped to achieve. However, governments and campaign supporters alike appealed to history in a selective manner. A closer examination of WRY allows us to trace in what ways the past figured in contemporary policy making and in public aspirations for solving the 'refugee problem' towards the end of the 'forty years' crisis'.

My case study raises a number of general questions. Does history help to inform the issues posed by mass population displacement, or is it more of a smokescreen? The past may indeed be used as a call to action, but it can also justify inaction. For example, governments are never shy of boasting about their readiness to respond to disasters or advertising their 'traditional' hospitality towards 'genuine' refugees, but this is usually a cloak to mask policies designed to deter the mass entry of people seeking asylum

and to allay concerns expressed by voters that their country might ‘capsize’ under the weight of extra numbers. Here, history serves the purpose of salving the conscience of politicians, but politicians are wont to muddy the waters and it requires considerable effort to challenge their smug indifference. As will become clear, the campaign for a ‘refugee year’ did mount such a challenge, albeit with modest results in terms of government policies.³

Refugee crises involve other actors and interests. Here, too, there is some uncertainty as to where history belongs. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organizations usually display little curiosity in the past, including their own history, because attention is consumed on each new emergency. Action here and now, rather than historically informed reflection, is the name of the game. NGOs advertise their past achievements in order to affirm their credibility when governments go looking for operational partners, or to enhance their profile vis-à-vis rival organizations that compete for donations from the public. How are supporters to be galvanized and how might their commitment be sustained? History has a part to play in pointing to a legacy of humanitarian ‘action’ in meeting the needs of displaced persons.⁴

The narrative of action requires a visual accompaniment. Much has been written about the dissemination of powerful images of mass suffering as a means of generating and reinforcing a compassionate sensibility. Deeply embedded allusions to the past are built in to these images, ensuring that culturally recognizable references are familiar to the viewer from whom a sympathetic response is awaited. For the most part, as Malkki recognized, these images of suffering are devoid of political background and historical explanation. The world of suffering humanity is one in which history is absent, save for a superficial implication that these are recurrent disasters, connecting past and present in a cycle of distress. As we shall see, WRY did not avoid that pitfall, because the UN repeated the mantra that the campaign was ‘non-political’, but a close reading of the iconography of displacement reveals a determination on the part of some campaigners to bring history and also politics to the fore.⁵

World Refugee Year

These reflections are developed in relation to an episode that is now largely forgotten – another amnesia to which I return at the end of this chapter – but which at the time sparked considerable public debate about the plight of refugees. In 1959–60, the United Nations launched WRY. This campaign originated in the UK with an appeal ‘to save the world’s refugees’, drafted by a group of socially conscious young Conservatives, including future government ministers Timothy Raison and Christopher Chataway. They bemoaned the failure of governments to find a permanent solution to the prolonged suffering of refugees in Europe, the Middle East and the Far East. With official backing from the British government, the initiative was formally adopted by the United Nations, albeit in the face of objections from the Soviet bloc, on the grounds that the root cause of most of the world’s refugee problems was located in the actions of Western powers (see below). The United Nations hoped with the assistance of NGOs to assist these refugees either to resettle or to ‘integrate’ locally. Nothing on this scale

had been undertaken hitherto. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), operating on a shoestring budget since its formation in 1951, also saw an opportunity to boost its profile on the international stage and to secure additional funds from governments and the general public to support its mandate. By the time WRY came to an end in June 1960, it had raised a total of \$92 million (approximately \$600 million in today's prices) from governments and public donations, including \$57 million from individual contributions. Close to one hundred countries took part, each with a national committee, and so too did around eighty NGOs whose work was coordinated by a small office in Geneva.⁶

Coming at the end of the 'forty years' crisis', WRY invites us to think about forms of domestic and international action in which history was never far from the surface. As Zara Steiner argues, there was no straightforward connection between successive refugee crises but instead a series of ad hoc responses by governments. Nevertheless, there are threads connecting successive refugee crises before, during and after the two world wars: the insistence on the part of states that immigration policy was a fundamental aspect of state sovereignty; the widespread view that refugees had only limited rights that could easily be overridden; and a widespread contempt for refugees, many of whom were deemed 'bogus' or a threat of some kind. Steiner is correct that refugees from the Soviet bloc were generally portrayed as heroic 'escapees' (as in the US Escapee Program, launched in 1952), but by the later 1950s refugees from Hungary and Yugoslavia were being described as 'economic migrants' with a dubious claim to refugee status.⁷ Western governments coupled this stance with pronouncements that refugees from communism included fifth-columnists, echoing remarks made about Russian refugees in the 1920s. So there are connections and continuities even as governments and NGOs lurched from one crisis to the next.

To be sure, significant changes took place in international refugee law after 1945, particularly when the 1951 UN Refugee Convention enshrined the concept of protection for individuals who suffered persecution. The post-war refugee regime imposed a strict chronological and geographical demarcation, because signatory states feared that an open-ended definition of the refugee would write a blank cheque that their successors would be obliged to honour. States retained control over immigration policy, including control over claims to asylum, and this underscored the fact that the post-war system provided for a selective rather than systematic approach to the 'refugee problem'. It also kept the UNHCR at arm's length. To all intents and purposes, Convention refugees were supplicants with only a thin veneer of rights.⁸ Other displaced populations came under the aegis of regional or local refugee regimes in which the writ of UNHCR did not run. In these instances, improvised responses were fashioned by the governments most directly affected, often drawing upon the resources of national and international NGOs.⁹

This mixed regime provided part of the context for WRY, which directed public attention to enduring situations of population displacement and canvassed the means to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of refugees. Its initial proponents, Raison and Chataway, did not hesitate to connect different refugee crises. They identified four groups of refugees where international action was urgently needed: first, the so-called 'hard core' of refugees and Displaced Persons (DPs) who had been forcibly conscripted

by the Nazi war machine and who remained in Germany and Austria, fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, having refused to repatriate and having been refused permission to resettle, usually because of a question mark over their health or 'character'. In 1959 around 32,000 registered DPs were still housed in camps and a further 100,000 lived outside camps as 'unsettled' refugees. The wretched condition of this so-called 'hard core' was largely hidden from public gaze, but they remained the responsibility of UNHCR under its mandate.¹⁰ The second group comprised Palestinian refugees who fled to the West Bank (under Jordanian administration), the Gaza strip, Lebanon and Syria after the 1948 war that culminated in the creation of the state of Israel. Their numbers had climbed to around 915,000 in the late 1950s. The United Nations had accepted responsibility for them by creating the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), but ten years after their exodus no long-term solution seemed likely. The third group was made up of around 700,000 Chinese refugees who fled to the British colony of Hong Kong following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Here, too, a decade had passed with little sign of progress, and their numbers continued to grow. UNHCR had no mandate to intervene here.

World Refugee Year derived its inspiration from a general sense that history had been unkind to these refugees. Cold War politics constituted a key element, particularly in the United States where some journalists and State Department officials were keen to hammer the point harder than their British counterparts.¹¹ Of course, antagonism between Western governments and the Soviet Union stretched back to 1917–21, when revolution in Russia, civil war and Allied intervention culminated in a mass exodus of Russian opponents of the Bolsheviks. Those who made their way to the Far East subsequently became trapped by revolution in China in 1949.¹² They too were earmarked for support during WRY. The United Nations hoped to assist these elderly survivors to emigrate, with the help of the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) and the fresh funds made available by WRY.

At the same time, the campaign's supporters acknowledged that responsibility for this state of affairs could not be laid entirely at the Soviet bloc's door. Public opinion in the West included a strong sense of the need to atone for its past action, or rather inaction. Here the issue was not about the forcible repatriation of DPs to the Soviet Union – this only became a cause célèbre later on – but about the fact that those who refused to return to their homes had in effect been abandoned by governments in the First World. Granted, many of them had been resettled in the West, although the recruitment of able-bodied workers was widely criticized, not just in the Soviet bloc, as a kind of slave market or an attempt to 'skim the cream'. In any case, the selective admission of former DPs left sick and handicapped relatives to an abject fate in squalid camps in Germany and Austria. Thus to alleviate their situation was simultaneously to draw attention to the fact that the 'free world' had treated them callously. It was widely believed by advocates of WRY that surviving DPs had become apathetic and alienated human beings whose psychological condition was a function of the injury inflicted on them, not by Hitler, but by the free world after 1945.¹³

Something similar emerged in the case of the Russian refugees in China. Here, too, Soviet repatriation officers had been hard at work at the end of the Second World War, appealing to their 'patriotism and nostalgia', and indeed several thousand refugees had

taken up the offer of Soviet passports. The determined anti-communist, Pastor Karl Stumpf, who worked with refugees in Hong Kong, ascribed this to 'confusion' brought about by the wartime alliance with the USSR and by cynical Soviet propaganda designed to reassure them of a warm welcome.¹⁴ He lobbied hard on behalf of those who remained in China. By the late 1950s there was little enthusiasm on the part of the British government to admitting any of these 'hopeless White Russian cases', the more so as any publicity would likely draw unwelcome attention to the plight of Chinese refugees in Hong Kong. Yet, as Stumpf recognized, their very age and their adherence to Russian Orthodox Christianity turned them into a 'deserving' case that should prick the West's conscience. Pictures of elderly and dignified men and women making their way down the steps of aeroplanes were calculated to reassure WRY's supporters that past neglect could now be translated into current rescue.¹⁵

Relief workers in Hong Kong portrayed Chinese refugees as victims of communism and official abandonment alike. Having entered the colony to escape the People's Republic of China, they became the direct responsibility of the British authorities, who regarded them as immigrants looking to improve their economic prospects and in so doing added to an already overcrowded population. This mealy-mouthed stance did not go down well with local relief agencies, which counted on the UNHCR to use its 'good offices' to support them, but to little avail.¹⁶

It was not so easy to locate Palestinian refugees in the framework of the Cold War, but this did not stop some vocal advocates from advertising the historic and current challenge from communist 'subversion'. Edgar Chandler, a senior official in the World Council of Churches (WCC) wrote 'the fact is surely obvious that the communist penetration of the Near East is serious, and Moscow has never in history had the indirect influence it now enjoys there.' In his view, Palestinian refugee camps served 'as hotbeds of Communism' and it behoved Western governments to address the needs of Palestinian youth through education and vocational training. Henry Labouisse, outgoing director of UNRWA, likewise argued that 'in many cases the attitude of the refugees is influenced by the work of unscrupulous agitators and troublemakers.'¹⁷ In this interpretation, what mattered was the ongoing challenge from communist subversion whose antecedents could ultimately be traced back to 1917. It is revealing that at this stage very little attention was devoted to the history of 1948 – the *Nakba* was not yet the defining moment that it would later become in Palestinian politics and historiography.¹⁸

There were, of course, other histories to take into account. Non-mandate refugees included ethnic Germans who had been expelled from Czechoslovakia and Poland under the terms of the agreement that the Allied powers reached at Potsdam; and Germans who crossed from East Germany to the West. Elfan Rees, the outspoken authority on refugee affairs in the World Council of Churches and chairman of the executive group of the international committee for WRY, called the decision by the Allies to expel the *Volksdeutsche* a 'massive crime against humanity', and urged that something now be done to provide for their needs.¹⁹ Others excluded from the provisions of the Refugee Convention included 420,000 Karelian refugees who fled to Finland from the Soviet Union in 1940 and in 1944 and some 175,000 members of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria who found asylum in Turkey after having been expelled from Bulgaria. Hungarian refugees crept in to the orbit of UNHCR thanks to some

clever footwork on the part of the high commissioner. Much greater in number were refugees in India and Pakistan, as well as others in Korea, Vietnam and Tibet. The WRY team in Geneva issued short publicity newsletters that supplied a brief historical background to these sites of displacement.²⁰

WRY coincided with a particularly troubled time in the history of Algeria, where the refugee crisis resulting from the war between the French state and the FLN freedom fighters was difficult to ignore, although the French government did its best to limit what they saw as damaging publicity. France issued a 'solemn' declaration in June 1959 announcing that it 'assumed entire responsibility for its citizens amongst whom there is a large number of women, children and old people whom the rebellion had forced across the border'. This was a pre-emptive strike against any attempt to link WRY to a crisis that France regarded as its internal business. However, the small publicity machine in Geneva drew attention to the magnitude of Algerian suffering, as did several international NGOs, and the UNHCR high commissioner offered his 'good offices' to assist displaced Algerians who had sought sanctuary in Morocco and Tunisia.²¹

Other histories found little or no resonance during WRY. No one mentioned the fate of refugees from the civil war in Spain (1936–9), doubtless because the exiles were assumed to be making the best they could of life in France or Mexico, and maybe because no one in the First World wanted to ruffle France's feathers. France, in particular, had no wish to draw attention to the harsh conditions that Spanish refugees endured in French concentration camps in the late 1930s that were subsequently used by the Vichy regime to incarcerate French Jews.²² The mass displacement that accompanied the civil war in Greece (1944–9) warranted barely a mention, and the same is true of the consequences of the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923, although both governments hoped that some residual funds might be found to improve the conditions of these 'national' refugees as well as newcomers who arrived from Bulgaria.²³ WRY ignored the Holocaust, save for occasional references to the 'rescue' efforts of Western powers.²⁴ Armenian refugees, so much the focus of international attention during the 1920s, were virtually absent from WRY, presumably because they were assumed to have successfully resettled in the West – and it would have been inopportune to mention the fact that some had resettled in Soviet Armenia.²⁵ In these instances, amnesia was the order of the day.

The 'plan to save the world's refugees' did not extend to supporting the ongoing relief efforts on behalf of displaced persons in the Indian subcontinent. This omission was consistent with the response of most countries to the events of Partition. More than ten years on, and having invested heavily in relief and rehabilitation measures for at least fifteen million refugees, the governments of India and Pakistan bemoaned the fact that they had largely been left to address the consequences of mass displacement on their own. Other countries deemed the refugee crisis to be fundamentally a domestic issue of helping 'national refugees' to resettle. Bar the involvement of several foreign NGOs, this was a history of international neglect, as India did not fail to point out. As WRY began, the government announced that India would not take an active part in the campaign, because it had 'a staggering refugee problem of her own'. Indian officials wished it to be known that India nevertheless contributed to UNRWA, because 'the Palestinian refugees form an integral part of the Arab community with which India

and her people have had close relations for many centuries,' and that India and the Arab peoples 'are both engaged in the great task of building their countries in peace and in freedom'. Acknowledging these historic connections served to make a political point about India's place in the post-war world.²⁶

Different countries, therefore, had their own rationale for taking part in the campaign (or not) and for marking the limits of their commitment. Western European governments subscribed to the British view that there should be a division of labour, whereby 'countries who could be most encouraged to increase their visas would be those who could not give substantial financial help.' This was clearly aimed at Latin American countries that had contributed to the resettlement agenda since the days of the International Refugee Organization. The leading American Catholic layperson James Norris summed it up when he described South America as a highly suitable destination for Europe's overcrowded population, allowing 'people without land' to move to 'lands without people' – a neat if simplistic way of connecting the past histories of refugees and countries of potential settlement.²⁷

The selective focus on the 'hard core' in Europe (and to some extent newly arrived refugees from Yugoslavia), in the Middle East, in Hong Kong and China did not prevent the United Nations and member states from recognizing the extent of suffering brought about by fresh crises, in Tibet, Rwanda and Congo, as well as the ongoing conflict in Algeria. But these crises raised difficult diplomatic issues since in most instances they involved European imperial powers whether, like Belgium, they sought to abandon its possessions in Africa or, like France and Portugal, they attempted to retain such control. WRY also implicitly asked questions of the Netherlands, which embraced WRY as enthusiastically as anyone, without addressing the consequences of its retreat from empire in Indonesia.²⁸ In the case of Tibet, the imagination of First World countries was seized by the drama of the Dalai Lama's flight from Chinese occupation in March 1959, accompanied by 100,000 refugees. Tibetan exiles in India and Nepal were portrayed as 'deserving' refugees who suffered for their faith and whose civilization needed to be secured.²⁹

History also intruded into the campaign through the recurrent emphasis by national governments of a 'tradition' of hospitality towards refugees. This rhetoric served different purposes. It might explain why a country was willing to support WRY, but it also served as justification for doing only so much and no more. According to British prime minister Harold Macmillan:

Some people may think that the best contribution that we can make in the WRY is to take in a large number of the refugees ourselves. They may say that the life of our country has been enriched because 80,000 refugees the majority of whom were Jewish came here before the war, and because we have taken in about a quarter of a million other refugees since then. But precisely because in our small country we have welcomed so many, we cannot raise further hopes in this direction. Essentially our contribution must be in money.³⁰

Activists expressed disappointment at the cautious stance adopted by the British government, and used the familiar trope of generosity to take the government to task for not doing more. One local newspaper remarked that 'English history is full

of examples of this country providing a refuge. We think of the Belgian families of World War 1 in Guildford, Jews who escaped from Nazi tyranny before 1939, and the many after World War 2, like the Poles who have been absorbed into our community', adding that 'yes, this country can act again and do something better than 200 families'. A constituent used a different historical tack to ask his MP what William Wilberforce would have made of the government's offer to give no more than £100,000 to WRY.³¹

Other governments joined the chorus of countries advertising their humanitarian past, usually as a preface to avoiding an extensive commitment to resettle refugees. King Olav of Norway told his subjects that 'we are a small nation. We can undoubtedly by the power of example make it quite clear where we stand. I think it is in the humanitarian field where Norway has so many fine traditions that we may do something that counts.'³² Mexico announced its willingness to admit up to twenty-five 'specially selected refugee families,' having assisted many more refugees from Spain and Poland in the 1930s and 1940s.³³ The shah of Iran boasted that 'my country has a long historical record of affording shelter to refugees and homeless persons', and in the Dominican Republic the appalling president Rafael Trujillo did not hesitate to publicize his 'rescue' (much overblown, as it eventually turned out) of Jews from Nazi Germany in 1940.³⁴

The rhetoric of humanitarianism came in different guises. Israel's national committee for WRY pledged to help 'in the resettlement of the Arabs who left this country at the time of the Arab war against Israel,' adding that 'the solution of that problem depends essentially on the readiness of the Arab states to facilitate such resettlement.' The pledge to provide technical assistance neatly deflected politically sensitive questions about Israel's share of responsibility for the Palestinian refugee problem. Picking on a different strand of history, the country's president announced that 'it is no exaggeration to say that a very substantial sector of its population has a refugee past,' including half a million Jews from Middle East and North Africa.³⁵

History could thus be troubling for governments as they contemplated the extent and shape of their participation in the campaign. Germany hoped to earmark for expellee families up to half the funds donated by the public during WRY. The past intruded in other uncomfortable ways as well. The German national committee expressed misgivings about anything that smacked of a 'massive propaganda' effort, explaining that 'since 1933 the public is extremely suspicious of large-scale propaganda. The committee therefore do not wish to be associated with the unhappy recent past experience in this respect'. It did not help that the Federal Minister for Refugees Dr Theodore Oberländer had come 'under severe attack in Germany and abroad. It is undisputed that in 1941 he was a major in the SA. He arrived in the Polish city of Lwów [Lviv] at a period when 31,000 people were massacred. What is in dispute is whether he took part in the massacre or arrived afterwards.'³⁶ Like Germany, Japan had unfinished business of its own. The government wanted to use WRY to get the United Nations to acknowledge the burden it had shouldered following the repatriation of 6.3 million citizens from Formosa, Korea and Sakhalin since the end of the Second World War. The repatriants included soldiers who had survived incarceration in Soviet prison camps. Japan hoped to find out what happened to those others who were unaccounted for.³⁷

Other countries too went out of their way to explain what they could and could not do as a result of previous episodes of displacement. The government in Rome

responded that 'Italy had many refugees within her own borders and these imposed a considerable financial burden.' Finland wanted it known that it supported the proposal in principle but excused itself by referring to the influx of refugees from Karelia who imposed an 'indirect cost to the economy [thanks to] high agricultural subsidies, which have to be paid to enable them to make a living on their small uneconomic agricultural holdings.' For this reason it would be unable to match the commitment shown by its Scandinavian neighbours.³⁸

Something of the difficulties in signing up to WRY emerged in discussions about suitable iconography, particularly in relation to the issue of stamps to commemorate the campaign. Here, too, history became a means of framing the issues around displacement. The most interesting example is France, which made a point of revisiting the Second World War, with an image on its postage stamp of a distraught young girl standing amid a ruined urban landscape, as if to reinforce the fact that the main point of reference for its citizens should be the consequences of Nazism in continental Europe rather than its own actions in Algeria. France thus portrayed itself as a historic victim, not the perpetrator of displacement. Austria, unsurprisingly, chose to commemorate the arrival of refugees from Hungary in 1956, with a stamp that depicted a refugee family escaping through the snow, the mother clutching her child, and the father holding on to the family's suitcases. Austria portrayed itself as a place of recent refuge, a country that now belonged to the democratic European mainstream.³⁹

Of course, there was another kind of history that hardly dared speak its name. Seeking grounds on which to limit the admission of refugees to the UK during WRY, officials appealed to the history of the British Empire, which obliged the government to accept 'British subjects from overseas [who] have a prior claim upon our hospitality.'⁴⁰ Nor was this the only intrusion of Britain's imperial legacy. Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd explained privately that the UK government declined to support a UN resolution on Tibetan refugees, because it would have led to accusations about its human rights record in Kenya and Nyasaland.⁴¹

The rhetoric of historic humanitarianism was not confined to governments. NGOs also appealed to the past in seeking to persuade potential donors that their money would be well spent. The Canadian Jewish Congress advertised its 'considerable experience in the settlement of refugees following the First World War and in large numbers in assisting in the rescue, relief and rehabilitation of victims of concentration camps after the liberation of Europe' (as well as from Shanghai). It was happy to associate itself with 'the world wide plans to bring succour and relief to those who deserve and will appreciate it'.⁴²

A more personal history emerged in the accounts of individual refugees who periodically intruded into the campaign. One particularly vivid example emerged during a radio broadcast prepared by the UN information office. It is worth quoting at length, because it illustrates the way in which the UN information office sought to dramatize displacement and connect it to Cold War politics:

My name is Mitetich, Nicholas Mitetich. It is written on the cover of many files, on the papers inside these files; name, age, profession, health, personal history. And these files rest in consulates, in immigration offices, and with people who have

been trying to help me – in many filing cabinets marked under the letter M. But in the country where I come from, the name Mitetich stood for something. ... For centuries there had always been a Mitetich to attach his name to some work for our people. ... I was a man with solid career who could one day hope to hold high positions. I married, bought a house, and had servants. The world in which I lived, which had grown on traditions hundreds of years old, which from my boyhood I saw as an order of society so natural as leaves on a tree, exists no more, except in the memories of those who remember. Now it is a name written in indelible ink on a grey piece of cardboard which I have nailed on the door of my room. There it has been for the best part of the last 15 years.

The narrator of the broadcast continued that ‘stripped of everything [Mitetich] grew sick and finally died a prisoner in a cage, swept into a refugee camp by the currents of history’.⁴³ Here, WRY publicity made Mitetich the tragic symbol of the outcome of war and the political division of Europe. But he also embodied a failure of will on the part of the ‘free world’.

A different kind of biography framed the history of humanitarian relief work during WRY.⁴⁴ Prominent examples included figures in Christian Aid (Janet Lacey), Aid to European Refugees (Richard Russell) and the Ockenden Venture (Françoise Rigby) whose involvement stretched back to the Second World War. The executive director of the newly constituted US Committee for Refugees, Edward B. Marks, had worked with Displaced Persons in post-war Europe on behalf of the International Refugee Organization and the International Office for Migration, including being sent to Yugoslavia in 1957 to deal with the Hungarian refugee crisis. Others too gained extensive experience in humanitarian relief work on behalf of refugees. Kathleen Regan, a native of San Francisco, studied social work at Columbia University before working for the UN on behalf of DP children and refugees from Czechoslovakia. Afterwards she was posted to Korea. At the time of WRY she was working for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Yugoslavia.⁴⁵ According to a newspaper profile, WCC’s resettlement officer Mollie Rule ‘has dealt with more refugees than any other woman, anywhere’. She worked in Greece during World Refugee Year, but her career took in stints in Rhodesia, Tanganyika and the Philippines, where she dealt with victims of disasters; and in 1956 the WCC sent her to Yugoslavia to support Hungarian refugees. Interviewed in 1960, she lamented the recurrent flow of refugees (‘I see no end to it’) but affirmed the benefit of long years of experience in resettling refugees: ‘You can’t learn it all from books.’⁴⁶ In this way the life story of relief workers who contributed to WRY’s programmes was connected to the ‘forty years’ crisis’.

As WRY came to an end, UNHCR was confronted with fresh manifestations of mass population displacement. Supporters of the campaign were anxious about what the 1960s had in store. Would the Soviet bloc extend its influence across the globe, filling the gap left by retreating colonial regimes and helping to inspire revolution among the peasantry and emerging working class in the Third World? Democratic societies faced a potential crisis of citizenship. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Auguste Lindt spoke apocalyptically of the potential dangers of creating a ‘race of camp dwellers’, should Western countries fail to address the needs of refugees. The US Committee for Refugees, mindful in part of the consequences of revolution

in Cuba, pointed to millions of people 'trapped' as stateless persons, half of them 'escapees from communist-controlled countries ... a needless waste of humanity [that] may have a powerful and dangerous impact on the society which has failed to assimilate them.'⁴⁷

By the early 1960s, the 'refugee world' was already being re-conceptualized. In the course of that decade the emphasis shifted to local integration rather than mass resettlement, and to 'development' rather than 'relief'.⁴⁸ Ageing European DPs and Russian refugees dwindled in number as death took its toll. Small contingents were allowed to resettle in a third country. German expellees benefited from the prolonged *Wirtschaftswunder* in the Federal Republic, and expellee organizations found themselves marginalized politically. Similarly, Chinese refugees in Hong Kong capitalized on the rapid economic growth of the colony. Palestinian refugees disappeared from the humanitarian radar, at least until the Six-Day War in 1967 and the rise to international prominence of the Palestine Liberation Organization, inspired by the victory of the FLN in Algeria. Algerian refugees made their way home from Morocco and Tunisia after France granted independence. The focus shifted to sub-Saharan Africa where refugees were often regarded as a product of 'tribal' conflicts; their displacement could not be fitted into the rhetorical framework created by WRY. Even so, it was clear that the root cause of conflict was located in the struggle to shake off the shackles of colonialism in Algeria, Angola, Rwanda and elsewhere.⁴⁹

NGOs found it relatively easy to adjust to the new era. They were not constrained by the 1951 Refugee Convention, whose mandate imposed a time limit on those deemed to be recognized refugees:

When governments set out to relieve the distress of refugees by officially supported programmes they can and must define both the refugee and the problem in such a way as to limit their commitments. The voluntary agencies do not and cannot draw such lines. Their mission is to help even those refugees who are left when the governmental or international programmes cannot do so.⁵⁰

WRY advanced the claims of numerous NGOs, secular and faith-based alike. The UN continued to rely heavily on organizations such as the WCC, Catholic Relief Services, the AFSC, CARE and the National Catholic Welfare Conference. Something of their historical consciousness emerged in a call made by the Standing Conference of Voluntary Agencies Working for Refugees, which advocated an international conference to 'take place twenty years after the Evian Conference of 1938 [that] would usefully illustrate the permanency of the world refugee problem.' Yet this was a muted appeal, and it failed to drive home the point about the limitations of Evian.⁵¹

UNHCR made a bit more of an effort, acknowledging its own prehistory when it instituted a medal to be awarded to people or organizations in recognition of outstanding service to the cause of refugees. Known as the Nansen Refugee Award, UNHCR awarded it in 1960 to the British quartet who devised WRY. But Nansen belonged to a rather remote past, and the poster boys for WRY were deliberately cultivated because of their youthful and dynamic personalities. The extensive UN paperwork left behind when WRY came to an end in 1960 makes no mention of predecessor organizations such as the League of Nations' work on behalf of refugees,

as if to say that the clock of humanitarianism was reset after 1945. Whatever Nansen's achievements in the 1920s, its well-documented failures in the era of Nazism seemed to make it embarrassing to mention the League.⁵²

All the same, WRY itself belongs to a history that stretches back to nineteenth-century humanitarian efforts and forward to Band Aid and Comic Relief. Selwyn Lloyd, the British foreign secretary, described it as 'the most universal short-term humanitarian enterprise the world has yet seen.'⁵³ Yet the campaign all but disappeared from view in the years that followed. Why? The United Nations as well as participating countries hid the history of WRY from view, as if to stifle any demand for the initiative to be repeated as refugee crises multiplied. But that does not tell the whole story. Many campaigners believed that WRY's achievements should not be exaggerated. As Elfan Rees put it, 'The United Nations has been singularly obtuse in thinking that the refugee problem could be solved by "crash programmes" and time-limited agencies. Even now there are too many governments and too many people who imagine that WRY is the panacea to all these ills.'⁵⁴ It was imperative, he added, that local and national committees continue, 'not necessarily as fund-raising bodies but as watchdogs' that can bark and bite. They should 'bark at "we the people" and bite governments, in case they should lapse back into the disquieting indifference they have shown towards refugees for so many years.'⁵⁵ In fact the national committees soon vanished from the scene, but most of the NGOs that helped maintain the campaign's momentum lived to fight another day, even if they found little or no space for WRY in their documentation. The caravan of humanitarian concern had moved on.⁵⁶

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how history intruded in the UN campaign for World Refugee Year in 1959–60 and helped justify the stance taken by governments and relief agencies, and how supporters were partly galvanized by a sense that past failures could be turned into success stories. But the appeal to history also entailed obfuscation and amnesia. As a humanitarian initiative, WRY invoked history in ways that were recognizable and comforting, but also less familiar and disquieting. In the UK, for example, the government argued that Britain's participation fell squarely within a tradition of humanitarian concern, but that previous commitments to refugees meant that it had no obligation to accept fresh numbers, including among the 'hard core' admission of DPs. On the other hand, public support for the campaign rested on the argument that the 'free world' had a historic obligation to those who remained in the DP camps.

However, the campaign reached beyond ideas of atonement for past errors towards DPs in Europe. It encompassed Russian refugees in China whom the world had more or less forgotten; their elderly status and Christian faith struck a chord in the West at a time of growing Cold War antagonism. More controversially, WRY turned the spotlight on the unresolved 'problem' of Palestinians and on Chinese refugees in Hong Kong, and in so doing implicitly directed attention to the colonial past and present. In Hong Kong, campaigners helped cajole the colonial authorities to acknowledge a duty

of care for refugees who arrived from the mainland. Having renounced its mandate in Palestine in 1948, Britain bore some responsibility for leaving Palestinian refugees high and dry, and although campaigners did not press the point very firmly WRY broached uncomfortable questions about colonial rule as well as how to manage the process of decolonization. This emerged most clearly in respect of the French Empire, which had shed its possessions in East Asia but regarded Algeria as an integral part of the metropole. By confronting the issue of mass displacement in Algeria and in Morocco and Tunisia, the United Nations placed French policy in an embarrassing position. This was the nearest it got to acknowledging the politics of displacement.

Participating countries could not amend the original agreed targets for WRY, but they could and did publicize the extent of the 'refugee problem' on their own doorstep and its historical antecedents. The situation of expellees in Germany is a case in point, and activists such as Elfan Rees urged the need to put right a historic injustice. Likewise, India and Pakistan drew attention to their ongoing commitment to millions of Partition-era refugees whose history matched in duration the plight of Europe's DPs. The United Nations refused to get involved, and the refugee crisis in the subcontinent – which was current as well as historic – failed to generate much heat beyond the countries directly affected. But to list the groups of refugees who were excluded from WRY rather misses the point. As a British official rightly pointed out, the campaign 'meant different things to different people.'⁵⁷ History mattered. The campaign drew attention to the career trajectories of leading humanitarians whose claims to intervene rested on their past engagement with refugees and the experience they acquired. Citizens in the First World came to 'know' refugees as a condition of helping them – not all refugees admittedly, but at least some. To be sure, the history did not run very deep, and in truth relatively little attention was devoted to the root causes of displacement. But no thoughtful supporter could conclude that the past did not weigh heavily on the present.

Governments invoked history as humanitarian tradition, but this too could not be pursued very far, lest it direct attention to some uncomfortable truths about the limitations of action at the time and in years gone by, and about the history and the current repercussions of colonial rule. For governments seeking to limit damage to their reputation, it was important to recognize that WRY offered what amounted to recompensing for wrongs done to displaced people in the past. Yet there were limits to this kind of self-flagellation. In general, governments pointed to history as evidence of the 'burden' that they had shouldered previously, and therefore why they imposed conditions on their participation.

Governments tended to keep refugees at arm's length – that is to say they were seen but not heard. This did not stop NGOs and the United Nations from including personal histories in the campaign. These biographies had a formulaic nature, but this too shows how the past was called upon to sustain public interest. The irony is that the history of WRY itself disappeared from view. Only a cynic would regard this as an appropriate outcome for a bold if inherently short-lived campaign that made the connections, keeping the world's refugees firmly in the public eye. Inflected though it was with a patronizing tone, the World Refugee Year offered them at least a glimmer of hope. This is more than what can be said for most political leaders today.

Notes

I am very grateful to Eleanor Davey for her helpful comments on a draft of this chapter.

- 1 Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), see also Kushner, this book; Liisa Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and De-historicization', *Cultural Anthropology* 11 (1996), 377–404; Steiner, this book; Anna Holian and G. Daniel Cohen, 'Introduction', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25 (2012), 313–25, special issue on 'The Refugee in the Post-war World'; Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch, 'Refugees and the Nation-State in Europe, 1919–1959', *Journal of Contemporary History* 49 (2014), 477–90.
- 2 Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). In this book I devote some space to a discussion of the various ways in which refugees themselves invoke history to account for their circumstances and to make claims for recognition under international law. See also Philip Marfleet, 'Explorations in a Foreign Land: States, Refugees and the Problem of History', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 32 (2013), 14–34.
- 3 Gil Loescher and John A. Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945–Present* (New York: Praeger, 1986); Klaus Neumann, *Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004).
- 4 Eleanor Davey and John Borton, 'History and Practitioners: the Use of History by Humanitarians and Potential Benefits of History to the Humanitarian Sector' in Pedro Ramos Pinto and Bertrand Taithe (eds), *The Impact of History? Histories at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2015), 153–68; UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).
- 5 Peter Gatrell, *Free World? The Campaign to Save the World's Refugees* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Heather L. Johnson, 'Click to Donate: Visual Images, Constructing Victims and Imaging the Female Refugee', *Third World Quarterly* 32 (2011), 1015–37.
- 6 'A Plan to Save the World's Refugees', *Crossbow* (March 1958), 1–4; for other details see Gatrell, *Free World?*, 79–84, 201–10.
- 7 This was also true of refugees from communist China who fled to Hong Kong. Gatrell, *Making of the Modern Refugee*, 112, 154; Susan L. Carruthers, 'Between Camps: Eastern Bloc "Escapees" and Cold War Borderlands', *American Quarterly* 57 (2005), 911–42. See also Laura Madokoro, *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).
- 8 Claudena Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: the Emergence of a Regime* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: a Perilous Path* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Irial Glynn, 'The Genesis and Development of Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25 (2012), 134–48. See also Reinisch, this book.
- 9 B.S. Chimni, 'The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies: a View from the South', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 11 (1998), 350–74. See also Peterson, this book.
- 10 Robert Kee, *Refugee World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945–1951* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998);

G. Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Post-War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

- 11 As a Foreign Office official commented after reading reports in the American press: 'We have no wish to see the idea played up on cold war lines; this is in our view a humanitarian exercise pure and simple, designed to bring these longstanding problems nearer a solution.' J. A. Snellgrove, 3 September 1958, UK National Archives (hereafter TNA), FO 371/137029.
- 12 Karl Schlögel, *Der grosse Exodus: Die Russische Emigration und ihre Zentren 1917 bis 1941* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1994).
- 13 Stanley Wright, UNHCR, to Peter Casson, 28 October 1959, United Nations Records and Archives Sub-Unit, Geneva (hereafter UNOG), ARR 55/0088, No. 007; *To Have a Key: a Storybook of Human Drama*, Geneva: UNHCR, 1958, p. 10; Gatrell, *Making of the Modern Refugee*, 89–115.
- 14 Rev. Karl Stumpf to Thomas Jamieson, 25 September 1952, File 425.5.103, Reports, Hong Kong, Pastor Stumpf 1952–55, WCC Archives, Geneva.
- 15 Memo prepared by Patricia Hornsby-Smith, 2 July 1959, TNA, HO 352/133.
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- 17 Labouisse, speech given to the American Committee to Benefit Arab Refugees, 17 November 1958, in Dwight D. Eisenhower Library (DDEL), C.D. Jackson Papers, 1951–67, box 90, folder refugees (1); Edgar H.S. Chandler, *The High Tower of Refuge: the Inspiring Story of Refugee Relief Throughout the World* (London: Odhams Press, 1959), 95–6.
- 18 Ghassan Shabaneh, 'Education and Identity: the Role of UNRWA's Education Programmes in the Reconstruction of Palestinian Nationalism', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25 (2012), 491–513; Gatrell, *Making of the Modern Refugee*, 119, 124–45.
- 19 Elfan Rees, 'The Refugee Problem: Joint Responsibility', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 329 (1960), 15–22.
- 20 Gatrell, *Free World?*, 53; Joseph B. Schechtman, *The Refugee in the World: Displacement and Integration*, New York: Barnes and Company, 1963, 47–67.
- 21 Statement issued by the French government, 12 June 1959, UNOG ARR 55/0088, box 090. See also Gatrell, *Free World?*, 66–9.
- 22 Scott Soo, *The Routes to Exile: France and the Spanish Civil War Refugees, 1939–2009*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.
- 23 In 1958 the Zellerbach Commission, a group of private individuals who visited refugee camps in Europe, spoke of the desirability of 'relieving Greece of her refugee burden [and] greatly strengthening the position of a brave but poor little country which only recently was engaged in a desperate civil war with the communists and whose delicate economic situation the communists have again been able to exploit in the recent national and local elections.' H. Zellerbach, 'European Refugee Problems: Special Report on the European Refugee Problem', unpublished, 1958, 83, copy in DDEL, Robert K. Gray, Records, box 3, folder Zellerbach Commission; Gatrell, *Free World?*, 54–6.
- 24 The UK committee for WRY wanted the government to highlight the admission of Jewish refugees in the hope that it would 'whip up support from the Jewish interests!' Undated memo, exclamation mark in the original, TNA, HO 352/133.

- 25 Joanne Laycock, 'Armenian Homelands and Homecomings, 1945-9: the Repatriation of Diaspora Armenians to the Soviet Union', *Cultural and Social History* 9 (2012), 103–23.
- 26 UN Information Centre in New Delhi to V. Duckworth-Barker, 3 July 1959, and press release 18/59, UNOG ARR 55/0088, box 087.
- 27 Raymond J. Kupke, 'James J. Norris: an American Catholic Life', PhD Dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1995, 192; Louise Holborn, *The International Refugee Organization: a Specialized Agency of the United Nations, its History and Work, 1946-1952* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 365–74. Holborn herself played an active part in WRY as a local organizer in Connecticut.
- 28 Gatrell, *Free World?*, 113.
- 29 Ibid., 72–3.
- 30 Statement to be broadcast on the official UK opening of WRY, 1 June 1959, TNA, FO 371/145387, see also Patricia Hornsby-Smith to David Ormsby-Gore, 31 July 1958, TNA, FO 371/137028.
- 31 *Surrey Times*, 10 December 1959, cutting in TNA, HO 352/133; D.G. Clark to Harold Macmillan, 30 May 1959, FO 371/145388.
- 32 Broadcast by King Olav, New Year's Eve, 1959, UNOG ARR 55/0088, box 063.
- 33 Statement prepared for UN Information Office, undated [1959], UNOG ARR 55/0088, box 063; British Embassy, Mexico, 1 October 1958, reporting the views of the Mexican foreign minister, TNA, FO 371/137031.
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- 37 Addresses delivered at the Conference on Migration and Refugee Problems held in Tokyo on 4 December 1958, in UNOG ARR 55/0088, box 046.
- 38 British Embassy, Rome, memo, 19 September 1958, TNA, FO 371/137029; British Embassy, Helsinki, memo, 24 April 1959, TNA FO 371/145386.
- 39 Gatrell, *Free World?*, 180–90.
- 40 Briefing paper dated 14 November 1958, TNA, HO 352/133.
- 41 Selwyn Lloyd to Dame Irene Ward, 27 November 1959, TNA, FO 371/145404.
- 42 Canadian Committee for WRY, McMaster University, Folder 6.
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- 47 *World Refugee Year*, Washington DC: USCR, 1960, 4, 11.
- 48 Gervase Coles, 'Approaching the Refugee Problem Today', in Gil Loescher and Laila Monahan (eds), *Refugees and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

- 1989), 373–410; Sunil Amrith and Patricia Clavin, 'Feeding the World: Connecting Europe and Asia, 1930-1945' *Past and Present*, Supplement 8 (2013), 29–50.
- 49 James M. Read, 'The United Nations and Refugees: Changing Concepts', *International Conciliation* 538 (March 1962), 5–60. Read, a leading figure in the AFSC, served as the first deputy commissioner of UNHCR until 1959.
- 50 Michael Potulicki, director, secretariat of the International Committee for WRY, 12 August 1960, UNOG ARR 55/0088, box 073.
- 51 Minutes of the Standing Conference of Voluntary Agencies Working for Refugees, 19 September 1958, Christian Aid Archives, SOAS, University of London, CA/I/17/6, WRY Correspondence.
- 52 Alessandra Roversi, 'The Evolution of the Refugee Regime and Institutional Responses: Legacies from the Nansen Period', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 22 (2003), 21–35; Metzger, this book.
- 53 Letter to the UK national committee for WRY, 6 May 1960, TNA, FO 371/153683.
- 54 Rees, 'The Refugee Problem', 22.
- 55 Elfan Rees, Speech to the executive committee of UNHCR, Geneva, 11 April 1960, UNOG, ARR 55/0088, box 073.
- 56 Gatrell, *Free World?*, 246–7.
- 57 J. Dalton Murray, UN Department, Foreign Office, to R. David Scott-Fox, UK Mission, New York, 22 September 1958, TNA, FO 371/137029.