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Writing Refugee History – Or Not

Tony Kushner

In summer 2000, a retired newspaper executive provided his response to a directive from the social anthropological organization, Mass-Observation. The topic was 'Coming to Britain' and the volunteer writers were encouraged to reflect on a heated contemporary issue through their own life stories, enabling a consideration and juxtaposition of 'then' and 'now': 'Back in 1905, a young Jewish man left his village in Poland, tired of pogroms and persecution, and set sail for America. I don't know much of the details, but his ship was wrecked in the English Channel and he was able to swim ashore.'

And this remarkable narrative of survival and personal endurance did not stop there: 'He landed in Plymouth and, after a few days for recuperation, started the long walk to London. He had lost all his possessions, was virtually penniless and spoke very little English.'

Settling and prospering in the East End of London, he married a young Jewish woman also from Poland and they had four children, the oldest of whom was the mother of the Mass-Observation. He notes that, while he never met them, 'I don't remember hearing of any special difficulties that my grandparents had in being accepted into this country, although today they would have been undoubtedly described as asylum seekers.'¹

At the turn of the twenty-first century when this family vignette was scripted, a moral panic was in place in Britain concerning asylum seekers with large sections of the media and politicians of different hue attacking those coming into the country as 'bogus'.² Yet rather than his background providing a bond with those attempting to find refuge, the Mass-Observation desired to create a distance between those entering Britain at the start of the new millennium compared to his ancestors a hundred years earlier: 'Unfortunately, these two words [asylum seeker] have taken on an unwelcome significance in recent years, largely because of the comparative few who have taken advantage of the system to such an extent that they seem to be raising two fingers to the nation that has taken them in.'³

But typifying many of Mass-Observation's directive respondents, having put forward a more reasoned argument – criticizing only 'the comparative few' – as the response developed, restraint and nuance faded. Indeed, his antagonism gained momentum: 'The trouble is that Britain seems to have become a "honeypot" for asylum seekers from all over the world. ... In the politically-correct times in which we live,

the government seems determined to be lenient with potential immigrants, no matter how weak their case for “asylum” or whatever devious and often clearly illegal means of entry they use.’

It was thus not surprising that the ‘indigenous population’ was upset when these newcomers went to the top of the housing list and received ‘massive benefits’. He concluded in a flourish that ‘the only way to stop asylum seekers flooding in is for the government to take an extraordinarily strong hand and allow in only a few “genuine” people.’⁴

A close reading of this directive has been necessary in order to reveal the importance and instrumentalization of ‘history’ in understanding the experiences of and responses to refugees in the modern era. It is easy to dismiss the Mass-Observer’s account of his family origins in Britain as sheer invention. No such ship carrying immigrants sank in the English Channel in the early 1900s – although others did elsewhere, including the *Norge* in 1904 off Rockall. Of its 635 largely immigrant victims, 200 were Russian Jews.⁵ The *Norge* has been seen as the maritime disaster predecessor of the *Titanic*, a ship that was also carrying many hundreds of immigrants and refugees who made up, along with the Southampton-based crew, the vast majority of those who drowned.⁶

But the heroic journey of the Mass-Observer’s grandfather swimming to safety and walking to London as an ‘alien Dick Whittington,’⁷ while blatantly fictitious on one level, is permeated with meaning on another, exposing the importance of myth in the construction of individual life story. As Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel noted, myths ‘have an extraordinary power to rally, whether at the ballot box or on the battlefield.’ At a national level, therefore, myths ‘raise fundamental questions of just who belongs and who does not ... in rallying solidarity they also exclude, and persecute the excluded.’ Thompson and Samuel suggest that it is for this reason ‘for minorities, for the less powerful, and most of all for the excluded, collective memory and myth are often still more salient: constantly resorted to both in reinforcing a sense of self and also as a source of strategies for survival.’⁸

Returning to our Mass-Observer and his juxtaposition of ‘then’ and ‘now’: if contemporary and undeserving ‘asylum seekers’ conspire and cheat their way to Britain in order to partake of its benefits (and thereby defraud the innocent and too trusting local population), it is necessary to create a myth of origins that distances his forebears from these ‘bogus’ and therefore ‘undeserving’ immigrants. He thus embellishes his family story to emphasize danger (persecution in the place of origin in the form of pogrom) but also in flight (the emigrant ship that sinks en route to America). But rather than reach the ‘Promised Land’ of the *Goldene Medina*, his grandfather arrives purely by accident – he is literally washed up on England’s shores. Even so, this refugee possesses great strength – mental and physical – and the desire to succeed by honest means in his adopted home. He thus contrasts to the ‘undesirable alien’, frail, diseased and dishonest, whose entry leads to the physical deterioration of the British race, as depicted by late Victorian and Edwardian popular press and literature.⁹

As a deserving and undeniably genuine refugee, he and his new family are welcomed in England and by hard work they establish themselves as an integral part of the nation. A classic refugee journey is thereby completed – flight from genuine persecution, a perilous journey, innocence in arrival and, to provide closure,

settlement in and contribution to the country of chance arrival. There is gratitude for the asylum afforded matched by welcome and acceptance by the host nation. The wider political significance of this recurring narrative will be teased out later. At this stage it is simply necessary to note, in the words of Peter Gatrell, how refugees (and, I would add, perhaps equally the descendants of refugees) 'have called upon history to explain their displacement and to help negotiate a way out of their predicament'. He adds: 'Refugees were created by violence and governed by regimes of intervention, but they gave meaning to their experiences through engaging with the past. History is a refugee resource.'¹⁰ And the trauma of 'placelessness' and of being a refugee has, as with the Mass-Observer, led to a desire among later generations to prove their right to belong – even if at the cost of denigrating today's asylum seeker: 'The recently arrived immigrant, the last through the door, and now settling down in the new country, can himself be disgusted by the idea of this newer arrival or interloper, the one who could take his place, because this threatening Other does not resemble him in any way.'¹¹

Revisionist scholarship in relationship to the two of the most numerically significant and mythologized mass movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – east European Jews and the Irish – downplays the role of persecution. Instead it emphasizes economic factors and the greater ease and affordability of transportation in the millions of decisions that were made to leave and the seeking of better opportunities in the 'west', especially in North America.¹² Here, current historiography is at odds with popular memory from within and outside these migrant groups. For example, almost every memoir of those of second-, third- or fourth-generation east European Jewish origin will highlight pogroms as a cause of flight from the Tsarist empire, even when ancestors left areas without persecution such as pre-1914 Lithuania. Moreover, places as varied (and as unlikely) as Grimsby, Hull, Liverpool, Glasgow and Swansea where these immigrants arrived in Britain were allegedly mistaken for New York by parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, having supposedly been hoodwinked into being sold false tickets by unscrupulous agents. The list of unlikely ports includes some such as Swansea where no ships carrying east Europeans ever arrived.¹³ Likewise, collective memory of those of Irish migrant background privileges the famine as the primary cause of movement, in spite of the larger numbers that left before and after this catastrophe.¹⁴

The point to be emphasized here is not that professional, university-based historians as voices of authority are needed simply to separate out myth from reality in refugee narratives and thereby pronounce the 'truth'. Whatever be the ethics of such elitist interventions, their status in wider society is not so respected that they will directly influence popular discourse. Indeed, being told what *really* happened can often be resented and rejected at a grass-roots level. Yet critical historical interventions *are* necessary in the wider context of the increasingly negative debates about migration, especially when sensitive questions of identity and belonging are at stake and are being manipulated by politicians and the media. 'Governments,' it has been noted, 'appeal to a history of "generosity" towards refugees ..., but this frequently serves as a justification for maintaining tough controls on admission.'¹⁵ *History*, or rather the instrumentalization of a form of myth-history, *matters*. Ironically, however, 'history' remains the poor relation of refugee studies and historians as a whole, beyond a few

important but isolated specialists, have yet to confront the presence of the ‘refugee’ in both the distant and recent past.

Katharine Knox and myself started our overview, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide* – a pioneer *historical* study of twentieth-century movements to Britain through global, national and local perspectives – by quoting the last speech of Holocaust survivor, Hugo Gryn, which he gave to the Refugee Council and was devoted to the importance of granting asylum:

Future historians will call the twentieth century not only the century of great wars, but also the century of the refugee. Almost nobody at the end of the century is where they were at the beginning of it. It has been an extraordinary period of movement and upheavals.¹⁶

Our book was published in 1999, as Europe witnessed its last internal refugee disaster of the century (though not, as the current crisis in the Ukraine graphically illustrates, its last ever) in the final stages of former Yugoslavia’s disintegration with the Kosovan crisis. But Hugo Gryn was not the first in this era of genocide and ‘ethnic cleansing’ to suggest that there was something unique about the twentieth century. Writing in 1944, when the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau were working at their full capacity, Ariele Tartakower and Kurt Grossman believed that earlier movements of refugees – such as the Huguenots – had been localized, whereas ‘in our generation the refugee movement has spread like wildfire through the continents of the Old World. Refugees from Soviet Russia, from Greece, from Turkey, from Bulgaria, from Armenia, from Iraq, from Italy, from Germany, from Spain, from China – all these before the present war, – such is the long procession of uprooted humanity.’ Acting as contemporary historians (and with their status as recently uprooted themselves, they were close to the events), Tartakower and Grossman added that the Second World War had ‘seen the rise of a fresh crop of refugee problems in nearly all European countries.’ They concluded: ‘Indeed, no other period has had so many refugees as the last three decades, so that ours may truly be called the era of refugees.’¹⁷

Since 1945, of course, rather than slowly dissipating, the refugee crisis has both grown and become truly global. It has shifted the focus of international political debate from a Eurocentric Cold War perspective to one involving a ‘North-South’ paradigm.¹⁸ But as B. S. Chimni has noted, there has been a ‘myth of difference’ in both Western state responses *and* in refugee studies when comparing ‘[past] refugee flows in Europe and [more recently] in the Third World,’ which are deemed to be separated by ‘volume, nature and causes.’ His argument is not to suggest homogeneity in background and experience. ‘Of course there are differences. Indeed, every refugee differs from another in the circumstances which force her to flee.’ He suggests, however, that ‘the differences which have been propagated are self-serving and refugee studies has done little to combat this.’¹⁹

One lacuna that Chimni emphasizes is the lack of detailed historical work on earlier movements, including Cold War refugees and the complex reasons and varied reasons why they left. ‘There has been ... no serious exercise to determine whether those fleeing the former Socialist bloc countries were not leaving for mixed motives or simply for a better life in the West.’ He thus quotes with approval the work of Claudena Skran as

one of 'the rare refugee studies scholars who has challenged the myth of difference.'²⁰ Skran, in her 1995 overview of refugees in interwar Europe, insists that 'the notion that the contemporary refugee crisis is unique lacks a historical perspective and neglects this important fact: mass refugee movements are neither new nor exclusive to specific regions. They have been an enduring and global issue throughout the twentieth century.'²¹

In a work written in the early 2000s and published as *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now*, I returned to Hugo Gryn's speech and particularly raised the question of why historians, rather than acknowledging the essence of his intervention, seemed to be even more reluctant to recognize the presence of, and responses to, refugees in the modern era – the challenge that had been made by Chimni appears to have been ignored.²²

In the years since *Remembering Refugees*, there has been both continuity and change, most significantly with regard to the latter in the form of Peter Gatrell's remarkable *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (2013).²³ Covering the twentieth century as a whole, Gatrell's study has a global focus and includes not only Europe but also the Middle East, South and South East Asia and Africa. Its chronological and geographical range is thus far more inclusive than that of its predecessor, Michael Marrus's *The Unwanted* (1985).²⁴ Addressing the current state of historiography in a foreword to the 2002 edition of Marrus's classic work, Aristide Zolberg referred to a handful of monographs and edited collections which had been published since the mid-1980s, most of which were specific case studies. It had taken the return of a European refugee crisis, he added, to foster 'a revival of historical interest in the subject more generally.'²⁵ And what is now a generation on from the original publication of *The Unwanted*, Gatrell could still highlight in the conclusion to *The Making of the Modern Refugee* that 'refugees have been allowed only a walk-on part in most histories of the twentieth century, and even then as subjects of external intervention rather than as actors in their own right.'²⁶ Elsewhere he has lamented that there are still 'yawning gaps in our knowledge and understanding of the history of refugees.'²⁷ It is necessary now to explore at a deeper level the reasons why this is the case and why historians are still hesitant, even resistant to studying refugees. My focus, largely, will be on British historiography and/or British examples, but I believe that while each nation-state has its peculiarities, the comments have a wider resonance.

Perhaps inevitably given the increasingly crowded market, but also reflecting the broadening out of the subject matter and approaches to it, historians have a natural tendency to claim that their area of interest has been previously neglected and is in need of greater attention. And in the case of the study of the marginalized, rather than special pleading, the desire to correct imbalance is often a desire to challenge the bias and exclusions of the past. Path-breaking books including Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (1973) and Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984) are examples of interventions that are as much about contemporary issues as they are about the past. Rowbotham's aim was to turn 'up the top soil in the hope that others will dig deeper. I know already the women's movement has made many of us ask different questions of the past.'²⁸ Similarly, Fryer made clear that 'traces of black life have been removed

from the British past to ensure that blacks are not part of the British future' and that his pioneer study was 'offered as a modest contribution to setting the record straight'.²⁹ Both books notably were published by the radical Pluto Press, founded in the 1970s and which has been at the forefront of socialist, feminist and anti-racist scholarship. Earlier than Rowbotham and Fryer, E. P. Thompson famously justified his *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) as an attempt to rescue his subject matter from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.³⁰

Subsequently, labour history, women's history, black history and immigration history more generally – all with their roots in earlier work before these landmark studies – have become further established, if still not fully part of the historical mainstream, in Britain and beyond. The same has not happened to refugee history, in spite of the equally landmark publication of Michael Marrus's *The Unwanted*. Building on the groundwork provided by contemporary scholar-activists such as John Hope Simpson,³¹ this superb synthesis left many areas still to be covered. The approach was very much from the top down providing a much needed history of the international refugee institutional regime. Its focus was Europe and the chronology from after the First World War to the early years of the Cold War. These were, of course, key decades, especially in constructing international responses to refugees as reflected in the chapters in this book. But if we need to know more about the Nazi era and its aftermath, this is even more so of the prehistory of globalized refugee issues. Peter Gatrell has opened up the crucial study of the First World War and especially the refugee crisis of eastern Europe.³² But we need to go further back, beyond even the Protestant refugees of the early modern era,³³ and to make connections to the ancient and medieval worlds and concepts such as sanctuary and asylum in different religious traditions, as well as legal and cultural constructions of the 'alien' and the outsider in society.³⁴ Likewise, the historical study of refugee movements and responses to refugees post-1950s is still in its infancy.³⁵

Yet rather than simply being a new historical subject requiring, Whiggish style, only a new generation of scholars to fill in the gaps and to engage with existing scholarship, there are – as was and continues to be the case with other marginalized groups such as women, ethnic minorities and GLBTs – reasons behind the absence of refugee history or, more accurately, refugee histories. I want to go through various forms of study – both academic and popular – to explain this lacuna, and how in certain areas there is greater potential for change.

First, refugee studies itself: this is a relatively new discipline, or matrix of disciplines, and one itself that is undergoing a critical internal debate. Should it be subsumed under forced migration studies, broadening its subject matter and approach, or should it remain as a distinct, but related, field of endeavour? For legal scholar James Hathaway, a proponent of the latter school, the methodologies are fundamentally different. Refugee studies is 'centred on studying particular persons ("refugees")'. In contrast, 'Forced migration studies scholarship focuses on analysis of a phenomenon ("forced migration" – notably, not "forced migrants")'.³⁶ Given their numerical marginality within the much larger category of forced migrants in the contemporary world, there are clearly dangers for those concerned with the specific dynamics affecting refugees if academic absorption takes place. This runs alongside the dilemma of losing the individuality of refugee stories and contexts as feared by Hathaway.

Yet even within the narrower field of refugee studies, the discipline of history remains marginal. I have highlighted how the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, formed in 1988, and linked to the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford, first did not include history in its areas of potential interest, describing its remit to be in the fields only of 'anthropology, economics, health and education, international relations, law, politics, psychology and sociology'.³⁷ Subsequently, history has been at the bottom of its list of submitted (and published) articles at just 4 per cent of the total.³⁸ Law, anthropology and sociology continue to dominate the journal and research as a whole. If refugee studies is still relatively marginal within academia, then the *historical* study of refugees continues to suffer a double liminality.

So, why is history so peripheral to the major journal and institute of refugee studies in the UK and beyond? The most blatant answer is that it is seen as at worst irrelevant, and at best, of minor interest in explaining and dealing with *current* refugee crises, which are at the forefront of academic research. 'History' is even possibly an irritant for those who want the focus to be on the developing world and not on Western refugees who are seen to be relegated to the past. Furthermore, as Peter Gatrell has suggested, for humanitarian activists, there is a focus purely on the present and a reluctance 'to thinking about the root causes of displacement'. It leads to a temptation to treat refugees 'with no history, past experience [and] culture'. From such a perspective, 'This is a field where history dare not speak its name'.³⁹ More theoretically, the anthropologist Liisa Malkki argues that 'in universalizing particular displaced people into "refugees" – in abstracting their predicaments from specific political, historical, cultural contexts – humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees'.⁴⁰

For those more sympathetic to considering history within refugee studies, it might fall into the 'nice to know' category, but not essential as those constructing census questions would put it.⁴¹ Apart from the academic shortcomings of this ahistorical position, there are also political implications. This is neatly illustrated by former British prime minister Tony Blair in his autobiography, *A Journey*. There are numerous negative references to asylum seekers in the index to this book, but none to refugees. In fact, there is one explicit reference to refugees in the text, and it is revealing of both Conservative and Labour handling of asylum issues since the early 1990s and the new wave of legislation on the subject: 'Essentially, Britain, like all European countries, had inherited the post-war, post-Holocaust system and sentiment on asylum. The painful story of refugees fleeing from Hitler and the Nazis and being turned away produced a right and proper repulsion. The presumption was that someone who claimed asylum was persecuted and should be taken in, not cast out.'

Blair adds, however, that while it was 'an entirely understandable emotion in the aftermath of such horror' that 'unfortunately, it was completely unrealistic in the late twentieth century'. He adds – his conviction politics obviating the need for any evidence to support his statement – that 'the presumption was plainly false; most asylum claims were not genuine'.⁴²

As Louise London and Peter Gatrell have illustrated, the past has been instrumentalized in current campaigns, largely for and only occasionally against restrictive policies against those seeking asylum.⁴³ Rather than promote empathy, reference to past refugees, as with Blair's comments (which could be replicated through

the words of so many politicians), is instrumentalized to denigrate contemporary asylum seekers. As London concludes, awareness of historical responses to refugees ‘can help us be more generous’. But knowledge, she adds, is ‘double edged’:

What we know about the past will be an obstacle to present and future asylum-seekers if we let it deceive us into assuming that the persecution that this year’s applicants face will correspond exactly to what earlier refugees were fleeing, or if we are slow to respond to this year’s refugees because they aren’t sufficiently similar to those who were helped in previous years.⁴⁴

Gatrell notes how Prime Minister Harold Macmillan at the time of World Refugee Year used the example of past generosity to justify contemporary exclusion: ‘Precisely because in our small country we have welcomed so many, we cannot raise further hopes in this direction.’⁴⁵ There is a wider significance and practical relevance to London’s and Gatrell’s observations. Those supporting refugees, especially in the public sphere and including within academia, simply cannot afford to avoid the past. It is not a luxury or self-indulgent pursuit.

But in explaining the absence of the past in refugee studies, we also need to turn to the history profession itself. One reason for the low publication rates in the *Journal of Refugee Studies* inevitably relates to the paucity of historical submissions: thus there has been a mutual and mutually reinforcing disinterest from both sides. I have attempted, following Liisa Malkki, an explanation of *why* historians have been slow to grasp questions relating to refugees by reference to the approach that has dominated the field – that of the study of the nation-state.⁴⁶ A case study from the world of British television heritage-history illustrates the wider point.

David Baddiel is a prominent comedian and writer of Jewish origin. His mother was born in Nazi Germany, a family background he has used in his fictional work.⁴⁷ In 2004, Baddiel took part in the extremely successful BBC genealogical television series, *Who Do You Think You Are?*⁴⁸ He perceptively noted that ‘one of the things I felt very acutely during the film [and researching for it] was how ephemeral, how rootless, refugee history is: how quickly it moves’.⁴⁹ Here Baddiel differentiated himself from television journalist, Moira Stuart, and actress and writer, Meera Syal – of Afro-Caribbean and Indian backgrounds, respectively, – who had appeared in the same series: ‘[They] are the immigrants, but my family, to my knowledge, are the only ones who arrived here as refugees.’⁵⁰ Baddiel personalizes a theme opened up in *Remembering Refugees*. In Britain – and elsewhere – there is a growing move in both history and heritage to incorporate immigrant and minority history. In the process, refugee history has yet again been marginalized. I have argued that it is the impermanence and fluidity of refugees that make them hard to incorporate in historical narratives, popular or academic, which rely on the fixity and security of the nation-state’s borders to give themselves a sense of coherence, of a place called ‘home.’

On one level, the lacuna in history writing and representation reflects an everyday reality – those permanently on the move and who are marginal in society leave less evidential trace. I will close with a brief case study of one such example of this problem, which reveals not only the truly global nature of refugee journeys but also how they can be so easily forgotten because they require extra detective work on behalf of the

researcher. On another, more fundamental, level, studying refugees can be unnerving. First, refugee experiences can be and often are traumatic. As Bosnian refugee, Vesna Maric, in her powerful memoir *Bluebird* starkly comments with ironic understatement: 'It's not easy suddenly becoming a refugee.'⁵¹ Second, unlike immigrants as a whole, refugees are, as Baddiel notes, especially ephemeral and rootless, and hard to define. They are, as Liisa Malkki so astutely reminds us, 'liminal in the categorical order of nation-states' and, as people who do not 'fit,' treated, in Mary Douglas's timeless phrase, as 'matter out of place.'⁵²

It is significant, therefore, that those refugees whose stories have been incorporated have had their experiences and responses to them shaped, or reshaped, to fit certain narrative conventions and expectations. As Peter Gatrell notes, during World Refugee Year governments 'tended to keep refugees at arm's length – that is to say they were seen (and very frequently too), but not heard'. He adds that this did not stop NGOs from 'including personal histories in the campaign [but] these biographies had a formulaic nature.'⁵³

More generally, some refugee stories have been easier to exploit than others. Chief among the groups chosen for special, positive consideration are the Huguenots in the late seventeenth century and Jews in the first half of the twentieth century, especially those from Nazism, and, emerging as a third possibility, Ugandan Asians from the 1970s. The narrative has to be constructed on the following lines: persecution from an obviously evil regime with an obviously evil leader (preferably one whose religion and/or politics are fundamentally opposed to the country of refuge); a life or death flight from oppression that should be dangerous and uncertain; arrival in the country of freedom greeted with sympathy and understanding; and permanent settlement and later economic or cultural contribution and everlasting gratitude to the nation of refuge. It is one, as noted, that has been made to fit the family origins of the Mass-Observer whose story was analysed at the start of this chapter.

In all three historical cases of Huguenots, Jews and Ugandan Asians, the reality was more complex, especially the initial welcome, but anything that does not fit the comforting and redemptive story line has to be air brushed out of the picture. A neat version is provided by Robert Winder in his beautifully narrated *Bloody Foreigners: The Story of Immigration to Britain*, written in 2004 and partly as an answer to the extremely negative rhetoric in the British media to asylum seekers. It was, as he noted, 'a torrent of abuse, often based on absurd figures.'⁵⁴ Here Winder is describing the arrival of the Minet family who escape terror after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, fleeing to Dover having been captured and tortured a year earlier when their boat was intercepted:

Isaac Minet immediately set up shop in ... London. In 1690 he returned to Dover, where he helped establish the family insurance firm (and a line that led unbroken to John Minet, a leading light at Lloyd's in the twentieth century). He also, in a poignant tribute to the sea-crossing that had saved his life, set up a packet-boat service between Dover and Calais. For the rest of his life, 1 August – the date of his arrival – was a sacred festival in the Minet family, observed with fasts and prayers.⁵⁵

In spite of the thousands of individuals, and scores of groups who have been excluded, deported and returned, historians have been hesitant to acknowledge and recognize their stories. Their experiences fail to confirm – in fact, negate – the goodness of the nation-state, especially important as the concept of offering asylum is often central, as Liza Schuster highlights, to the self-mythology of many countries, even if in reality it often means in practice ‘admitting a [small] number of (carefully selected) refugees’.⁵⁶

Unsurprisingly, those working on behalf of the displaced and the groups themselves want to present refugees in a positive light, countering negative sentiments that pervade society and culture, whether in the past or in the present. This process has a long history. The Huguenot Society of London and the Jewish Historical Society of England and their transatlantic equivalents were formed in the last decades of the nineteenth century, coinciding (though not accidentally), with the rise of anti-alien sentiment in Britain that was to result in the 1905 Aliens Act and the opening in 1892 of the Ellis Island immigration processing and detention centre in New York.⁵⁷ Moreover, through historicization, group worth can be strengthened for both an external *and* an internal audience. It can also be therapeutic for the individuals concerned, both the refugees and their supporters. In the words of Peter Gatrell: ‘History directs our attention to the way in which refugees have been valorized by non-refugees and how they valorized themselves in order to negotiate a way out of their predicament’.⁵⁸

One historiographical change that *has* occurred lately is that more recent groups, including those from the developing world, have been covered in the heritage industry, most notably in the British context in a landmark exhibition at the Museum of London, ‘Belonging’ (2006). Based partly on the testimonies collected through the Refugee Community History Project, ‘Belonging,’ as its title suggested, documented the experiences and contributions of refugees to London. Somewhat weak on deeper history, it focused on recent arrivals and what they had added to the capital’s economy and cultural life. It would be wrong to simply label such history/heritage as celebratory, but it is a self-conscious effort to emulate the prestige associated with the earlier, idealized refugees whom I have highlighted. If nothing else, raw material is being produced for future historians, but with the danger perhaps, as was the case with the early historical societies of Jews and Huguenots, that anything regarded as unsavoury, threatening or non-conforming is in danger of being swept under the carpet.⁵⁹

Responding to the wave of xenophobia in the twenty-first-century Europe, the writer Hanif Kureishi despairs that ‘it is impossible to speak up for the immigrant or, more importantly, hear him speak for himself, since everyone, including the most reasonable and sensitive, has made up their mind that the immigrant is everywhere now, and he is too much of a problem’.⁶⁰ Refugees and asylum seekers, being harder to place in terms of ‘home,’ are especially prone to ‘speechlessness’ and great effort is needed to hear their multifarious voices. It remains true that ‘such first-hand testimony as is available from refugees must be interpreted carefully’.⁶¹ To quote again Peter Gatrell: ‘Whose experience counts, and why? ... For every voice that speaks loudly there are dozens that are suppressed’.⁶² His comments are salient in relation to ‘Belonging’ and its strengths and limitations as a path-breaking exhibition. Nevertheless, as at the Museum of London and at new museums on immigration in Paris, Bremerhaven, Hamburg, Melbourne, Adelaide and elsewhere, recent refugee movements *are* being

represented and their testimony incorporated (if somewhat uncritically). It is to be hoped, at least, that this grass-roots approach to everyday experiences might inspire critical historical studies to follow suit.⁶³

Lastly, with regard to the attempt to write a history of refugees, the question of periodization is clearly crucial. This book explores and critiques the concept of a forty-year refugee crisis in Europe from 1919 to 1959. Earlier in this contribution, I have suggested that the prehistory of modern refugee movements requires more attention both in carrying out the detailed research and in making comparisons with later movements. Yet even for the latter, there are still huge gaps in our knowledge. In moving towards a conclusion and further reflecting on chronology, I will refer to a group of refugees who have so far escaped any scholarly attention. Their story, from the late 1870s, is one of tragicomedy – they were, even in their own estimation, one of the most inept group of refugees in the modern era – but it is also one that predicted the world of anti-refugee restrictionism to come.

It is a story that has been recoverable through archival accident – a file has been somewhat misleadingly but tantalizing catalogued in the local records office as ‘Brazilian Refugees in Southampton, 1878’.⁶⁴ The group were in fact Volga Germans who left Russia for a mixture of economic reasons and also to avoid military conscription as the Tsarist regime attempted to impose Russification on its nationally, ethnically and religiously diverse subjects. These particular Volga Germans were enticed to Brazil as agricultural colonists. Used only to wheat cultivation they managed to destroy what fruit crops they had by harvesting them by cutting the trees off at their base. Impoverished, they returned to Europe, but rejected at Antwerp as unwanted immigrants, they were dumped at Southampton. In the course of a few weeks, they were transformed from refugees, to immigrants and then to unwanted foreigners in local, national and international discourse. Unwilling to set a precedent of looking after them, the English south coast port town sent the Volga Germans back to Russia where they underwent harrowing treatment in Hamburg in a forerunner of what would be the most clinical transmigrant processing centre in Europe before 1914.⁶⁵

Eventually, through the goodwill of the Tsar and pressure from the British Foreign Office, they were returned to the Volga region. En route, they were the subject of intense international negotiation and diplomacy, in spite of numbering just ninety-one individuals.⁶⁶ Subsequently their story, as well as that of the thousands of other Volga Germans who tried their luck in Brazil, has been forgotten in various different national and local historiographies and heritage work, and it does not feature in any history of refugee movements more generally. Here is a small example showing the need to examine the local, the national and global and their interrelations. It is why refugee history is not only fascinating and important but also complex and difficult. It is a challenge that few historians have been willing to take on board.

Reviewing my *Remembering Refugees*, Philip Marfleet has commented that the exclusion of refugees from national narratives has a wider currency than just Britain, pointing to South Asia and the Partition of India in 1947 as particularly acute examples of the process of forgetting.⁶⁷ Likewise, in elections held in 2010, Klaus Neumann applied its findings to Australia and suggests this tendency is even more acute: in spite of ‘all the talk about the need for transnational histories ...’, most Australian historians are

still wedded to the national framework, which is unsuited to analysing most refugee issues.⁶⁸

The comments of Marfleet and Neumann could be applied to official and popular memory work in many other national contexts. Peter Gatrell has illustrated the tendency towards ‘silence’ of many different nation-states in World Refugee Year when confronting (or failing to confront) their past role in either failing to help refugees or in generating refugee movements themselves. They still managed to provide a ‘rhetoric of historic humanitarianism’ as did many non-governmental organizations.⁶⁹ Such collective myth-making and amnesia have hindered the writing of critical studies of refugees over the *longue durée*, especially as the historical profession has too rarely challenged the assumptions on which they rest. In this respect, Zara Steiner rightly points out in her challenging overview that ‘to speak of a beginning and end of the European refugee crisis suggests a linear development which neither was nor is the case’. She adds that the book as a whole reveals ‘the erratic nature of the refugee problem in Europe, its reappearance when reformers thought it would vanish, and the various forms this re-appearance has taken’.⁷⁰

There is, of course, a danger in rejecting all periodization. More detailed and sensitive research could lead to history becoming ‘one damned refugee crisis after another’, to rewrite Toynbee. The *nature* of refugee movements and responses to them (local and global as well as from state, NGOs and public) have undoubtedly changed. Each one has its unique dynamics. Even so, there is, I would argue, more continuity than change, especially with regard to the refugee experience, regardless of place of origin, the oppression leading to flight and treatment in places of transit and asylum. But we are still hindered in making nuanced and authoritative comparisons because of the marginalization and abuse of the past when confronting the refugee. For this to change and for history of refugees to become mainstream, the historical profession at a global level requires transformation. So far, historians have been part of wider tendencies towards refugees (including within refugee studies itself) in which, some notable exceptions apart, the dominant mode has been one of ‘remembering to forget’. The refugee, as Liisa Malkki noted in 1996, ‘remains curiously, indecently, outside of history’.⁷¹

Notes

- 1 Mass-Observation Archive, The Keep Archive (hereafter MOA), Sussex University: D1602, Summer 2000 Directive ‘Coming to Britain’.
- 2 Greg Philo, Emma Briant and Pauline Donald, *Bad News for Refugees* (London: Pluto Press, 2013); Liza Schuster, *The Use and Abuse of Political Asylum in Britain and Germany* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); Liza Schuster, ‘Common Sense or Racism? The Treatment of Asylum-Seekers in Europe’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 37, 3 (2003), 233–55, and this special issue as a whole devoted to ‘Racism and Asylum in Europe’.
- 3 MOA, D1602, Summer 2000 Directive ‘Coming to Britain’.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Per Kristian Sebak, *Titanic’s Predecessor: The SS Norge Disaster of 1904* (Laksevag: Seaward Publishing, 2004).

- 6 Tony Kushner, 'Cowards or Heroes? Jewish Journeys, Jewish Families and the *Titanic*', in James Jordan, Tony Kushner and Sarah Pearce (eds), *Jewish Journeys from Philo to Hip Hop* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010), 281–313.
- 7 Benjamin Lammers, "Alien Dick Whittingtons": The National Imagination and the Jewish East End', *Jewish Culture and History*, 1, 1 (1998), 41–53. Lammers takes this phrase from S. Gelberg, 'Jewish London', in George Sims (ed.), *Living London*, ii (London: Cassell & Co, 1906 [1901]), 30: 'Why do they labour so? ... Unlike the Gentile, they are in the East-End, not of it – strangers and sojourners in its midst; alien Dick Whittingtons in side curls and ... long coats'.
- 8 Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, 'Introduction', in idem (eds), *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990), 18–19.
- 9 David Glover, *Literature, Immigration, and Diaspora in Fin-de-Siècle England: A Cultural History of the 1905 Aliens Act* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 10 Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), vii.
- 11 Hanif Kureishi, 'The Migrant has No Face, Status or Story', *Guardian Review*, 31 May 2014.
- 12 For further discussion of the construction of such narratives, focusing especially on Jewish and Irish migrations, see Tony Kushner, *The Battle of Britishness: Migrant Journeys 1685 to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), chapter 1.
- 13 David Cesarani, 'The Myth of Origin: Ethnic Memory and the Experience of Migration', in A. Newman and S. Massil (eds), *Patterns of Migration 1850-1914* (London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1996), 247–54; Gemma Romain, 'Who Do You Think You Are? Journeys and Jewish Identity in the Televisual Narrative of David Baddiel', in Jordan et al. (eds), *Jewish Journeys*, 345.
- 14 Patrick Fitzgerald and Brian Lambkin, *Migration in Irish History, 1607-2007* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).
- 15 Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 283.
- 16 Hugo Gryn, *A Moral and Spiritual Index* (London: Refugee Council, 1996); Katharine Knox and Tony Kushner, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 1. There are only a small number of other such *national* studies of refugees/asylum, the most outstanding of which is Gérard Noiriel, *Refugies et sans-papiers: la République face au droit d'asile XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Pluriel, 2012 edition [1991]). See also Klaus Neumann, *Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004).
- 17 Arie Tartakower and Kurt Grossman, *The Jewish Refugee* (New York: Institute of Jewish Affairs, 1944), 1. Both men left the continent for the United States in 1939.
- 18 B. S. Chimni, 'The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies: A View from the South', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 11, 4 (1998), 350–74.
- 19 Ibid., 357, 360 and 368.
- 20 Ibid., 357, 360.
- 21 Claudena Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 4.
- 22 Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), chapter 1.
- 23 Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*.

- 24 Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 25 Aristide Zolberg, 'Foreword' to Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees from the First World War Through the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), xii. Zolberg himself was co-author of one of the key studies taking the study of refugees *beyond* the early Cold War and *beyond* Europe. See Aristide Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 26 Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 283.
- 27 Peter Gatrell, *Free World? The Campaign to Save the World's Refugees, 1956-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9.
- 28 Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1973), x.
- 29 Peter Fryer, *Staying Power. The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 399.
- 30 E .P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 12.
- 31 John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem: Report of a Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).
- 32 Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- 33 See, for example, Raymond Mentzer and Andrew Spicer (eds), *Society and Culture in the Huguenot World 1559-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 34 There is useful source material in B. S. Chimni (ed.), *International Refugee Law: A Reader* (New Delhi: Sage, 2000), chapter 2 'Asylum'. See also Schuster, *The Use and Abuse of Political Asylum*, chapter 2.
- 35 Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, part 3 provides case studies from South East Asia and Africa.
- 36 James Hathaway, 'Forced Migration Studies: Could We Agree Just to "Date"?', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20, 2 (2007), 354.
- 37 Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*, 40.
- 38 Roger Zetter, 'Refugees and Refugee Studies – A Valedictory Editorial', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13, 4 (2000), 352.
- 39 Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 284.
- 40 Liisa Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology*, 11, 3 (1996), 378.
- 41 See *Patterns of Prejudice*, 32, 2 (1998), special issue on 'The Ethnic and Religious Questions in the British Census: A Symposium'. See especially 'Second Discussion', 96 which comments from the leading social statistician, Ian Diamond: 'There are things that are nice to know, and things that are needed to be known'.
- 42 Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010), 204–5.
- 43 Louise London, 'Whitehall and the Refugees: The 1930s and the 1990s', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 34, 3 (2000), 17–26.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 26.
- 45 In The National Archives, London (TNA) FO 371/137028, quoted in this book by Gatrell.
- 46 Liisa Malkki, 'National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees', *Cultural Anthropology*, 7, 1 (1992), 22–44.

- 47 David Baddiel, *The Secret Purposes* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), which draws upon his grandfather's internment in the Isle of Man as an enemy alien.
- 48 *Who Do You Think You Are?*, BBC 2, 23 November 2004. More generally on its impact see Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009).
- 49 David Baddiel, 'I pray my children will never have to face the terrors of our family past', *Evening Standard*, 23 November 2004.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Vesna Maric, *Bluebird: A Memoir* (London: Granta, 2009), 38.
- 52 Malkki, 'National Geographic', 34.
- 53 Peter Gatrell's contribution to this book.
- 54 Robert Winder, *Bloody Foreigners: The Story of Immigration to Britain* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), 61.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Schuster, *The Use and Abuse of Political Asylum*, 57.
- 57 Tony Kushner, *The Battle of Britishness: Migrant Journeys, 1685 to the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 90.
- 58 Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 285.
- 59 Museum of London, 'Belonging: Voices of London's Refugees', which was shown from 27 October 2006 to 25 February 2007.
- 60 Hanif Kureishi, 'The Migrant has no face, status or story'.
- 61 Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, 294.
- 62 Ibid., 287, 295.
- 63 An excellent example, including some fine case studies, using especially a reflexive approach to testimony, is provided in Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (eds), *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011).
- 64 It is located in Southampton Record Office, SC/AG 14/15.
- 65 Paul Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe, 1890-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 49-72.
- 66 Tony Kushner, 'The Boys and Girls Not from Brazil: From Russia to Rio and Back Again via Southampton and Hamburg, 1878-1880', in Tobias Brinkmann (ed.), *Points of Passage: Jewish Transmigrants from Eastern Europe in Scandinavia, Germany and Britain 1880-1914* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 148-62.
- 67 *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21, 1 (2008), 134. More generally see Philip Marfleet, *Refugees in a Global Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).
- 68 'Remembering Refugees', an edited version of a talk given on 20 August 2010 at the State Library of Victoria: <http://insidestory.org.au/remembering-refugees> [accessed 20 November 2016]. More generally for the region, see Klaus Neumann and Gwenda Tavan (eds), *Does History Matter? Making and Debating Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Policy in Australia and New Zealand* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2009).
- 69 Peter Gatrell's contribution to this book.
- 70 Zara Steiner's contribution to this book.
- 71 Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries', 398.