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Refugees and Citizens. New Nation States as Places of Asylum, 1914–1941

Introduction

The three papers published in this section originate from the workshop “Refugees and Citizens. New Nation States as Places of Asylum, 1914–1941” organised by the host editors together with the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in June 2016.¹ By focussing on new nation states created as a result of the First World War in Eastern and Central Europe and beyond, this workshop intended to extend the perspective of refugee studies to a region typically not considered welcoming to refugees. We aimed to examine how refugees influenced the formation of the new states and how exactly the often increasingly nationalist and authoritarian regimes became places of asylum, even if only temporary ones, for many refugees from Nazism. Moreover, we were interested to learn more about the intrinsic relationship between the categories of refugees and citizens. The workshop aimed to take citizenship in the ‘East’, even in its shifting and disputed forms, seriously.

Yet, the workshop also exposed important gaps in our knowledge and methodological perspectives on the ‘East’ as a place of refuge. Both the paper proposals and the papers themselves demonstrated that the examination of such countries as places where refugee protection was provided and negotiated and where refugees were received and categorised is only slowly emerging and that, in many cases, even basic research is still lacking. The picture presented by the state of current research would appear to suggest that connecting East-Central Europe, with its troubled history, to the provision of protection (or asylum) was in many situations beyond imagination, thus preventing historians from engaging with the region’s refugee pasts. This (self-) perception is guided by entrenched ideas about the ‘East’: In this respect, the workshop was also a contribution to the discussion of notions concerning West/East political, social, and cultural divides, Western forms of Orientalism, and Eastern Europe as a part of global history.

With few exceptions, the historiography continues to reflect the unruly history of the region, depicting it as a place to leave rather than to search refuge in. After all, due to its history of mass emigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, freedom and agency might have been more associated with the right to emigrate (see for instance Tara Zahra’s excellent *Great Departure*).² Given the multi-ethnic character of the region, much of the research to date has focussed on ethnic conflicts and forced population transfers, such as the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia and Poland, or the consequences of conflicts in former Yugoslavia. Communist rule over

1 For the full workshop programme, see http://www.vwi.ac.at/images/Veranstaltungen/SWW/2016_Refugees-and-Citizens/Einladung-Refugees_WEB.pdf (7 January 2019).

2 Tara Zahra, *The Great Departure. Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*, New York 2016.

a large part of the region after the Second World War, and the refusal of most socialist states to sign the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, only reinforced the perception of the 'West' as a refuge, in contrast to the 'East'. With global refugee studies newly energised³ and with refugee history becoming increasingly recognised as an indisputable companion of the social science approaches to migration,⁴ refugee history in Eastern and Central Europe remains understudied.

Refugee research in post-communist countries is often framed by nationality and political identity and centred on group exile activism. Refugees tend to be perceived as smaller or larger diasporas waiting to return to their liberated and reconstructed homes. As a result, transnational and comparative approaches still remain marginal and examining protection seems to have little meaning for such a tested region.⁵

Nothing characterises the refugee historiography of the region better than the largely absent debate about the reactions of nation states during the Holocaust.⁶ A critical reflection of the policies of Western liberal democracies resulted in a number of excellent studies driving forward refugee research as well as public debate. Analyses of restrictive policies such as the effects of the US quota system, the strict application of the requirement to prove that the refugees would not burden the social system, or of the Évian Conference exposed what many considered to be failures of the liberal democracies when confronted with genocide.⁷ The turning back of refugees at the Swiss border in 1938 and again during the deportations from France in 1942 dented the celebratory image of Switzerland as a place of asylum.⁸ From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that the widely conceived comparative project on European refugee policies in the 1930s, organised and edited by Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore, covered only Western Europe.⁹

While the moral lessons of these debates were also informed by the a posteriori knowledge of the physical extermination of European Jews and the conclusions were at times overly critical, they contributed significantly to thinking about the nation state with its exclusive citizenship and restrictive border and administrative policies as a source of the twentieth-century refugee experience. Much in the sense of the now celebrated philosophers Hannah Arendt,¹⁰ a refugee herself, or Giorgio Agamben,¹¹ historians have focussed on the processes pushing refugees from Nazi

3 Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford 2013.

4 See for instance the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies*: J. Olaf Kleist, *The History of Refugee Protection. Conceptual and Methodological Challenges*, in: *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30 (2017) 2, 161-169.

5 Michael G. Esch, *Migration. Transnationale Praktiken, Wirkungen und Paradigme*, in: Frank Hadler/Matthias Middell (ed.), *Handbuch einer transnationalen Geschichte Ostmitteleuropas. Band 1: Von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg (= Transnationale Geschichte 6)*, Göttingen/Bristol, CT 2017, 131-187.

6 Only few studies deal critically with the reception of Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. See for instance Kinga Frojimovics, *I Have Been a Stranger in a Strange Land. The Hungarian State and Jewish Refugees in Hungary, 1933-1945*, Jerusalem 2007; Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Auftakt zur Vernichtung*, Osnabrück 2002; Kateřina Čapková/Michal Frankl, *Unsichere Zuflucht. Die Tschechoslowakei und ihre Flüchtlinge aus NS-Deutschland und Österreich 1933-1938*, Cologne 2012.

7 In lieu of a much more extensive historiography, see Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died. A Chronicle of American Apathy*, Woodstock/New York 1998; David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls. America and the Refugee Crisis 1938-1941*, Amherst 1968; David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews. America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*, New York 1984.

8 Alfred A. Häslar (ed.), *Das Boot ist voll ... Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge, 1933-1945*, Zurich/Stuttgart² 1968; *Die Schweiz und die Flüchtlinge zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, Bern 1999.

9 Frank Caestecker/Bob Moore (ed.), *Refugees from Nazi Germany and the Liberal European States*, New York 2010. The editors of this volume originally wished to include Czechoslovakia, as the only 'liberal democracy' east of Nazi Germany.

10 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1973.

11 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford 2004.

Germany into illegality, statelessness, or the state of exception. More broadly, however, the studies in Holocaust-era refugee policies marked a departure from or extension of such exile studies that often foregrounded group identities, national and/or political.

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This section of S:I.M.O.N brings together diverse contributions which are all, however, unified by a sense that we gain much by examining refugeedom from below rather than through the national and political categories which often inform the existing historiography. By focussing on specific cases and with attention to detail, these three studies help to thematically and methodologically expand refugee studies in the region. The transnational, after all, often materialises in the form of a detail, or microhistory. The three authors probe refugeedom from three perspectives: through terminology, the microhistory of a border, and a hospital; or, put more broadly: through language, space, and welfare.

Alina Bothe approaches the subject through the power of the word. Building on *Begriffsgeschichte*, or conceptual history, and noting that the term “refugee” was in fact absent in the celebrated work *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*,¹² she analyses the uses and meanings of the labels deployed by contemporaries and later commentators for the expulsion of Jews with Polish citizenship from Germany. An intriguing variety of terms were applied to the ‘Polenaktion’, such as deportation (or first deportation, in the words of later historians) and expulsion. Were those who were abruptly imprisoned, handed expulsion orders, and put on trains towards the Polish border to be labelled as deportees, expellees, or refugees? By documenting the terminological fluctuation, Bothe manages to capture the dramatic shift which these events encapsulated, as well as the radicalisation of persecution and exclusion from society.

Yet, semantic differences notwithstanding, the terms were also complementary in that they captured different perspectives on the same set of events and actors. Max Karp, one of those driven out of Berlin, for instance reflected on how the physical deportation was accompanied by a semantic shift: from “arrest” and “transport” to “refugees”. By entering Poland, the deportees turned into refugees – and by implication into people in search of protection. However, accepting the refugee status as identity can have a different effect: instead of empowerment, it can – as expressed for instance by Hannah Arendt – stand for the loss of rights and freedom. Bothe’s article demonstrates how refugees grappled with terminology, consciously or not, to re-establish their position as useful members of human society and to reconfirm their agency.

Wolfgang Schellenbacher relocates the story of Austrian social democratic refugees to Czechoslovakia in 1934 from a political plane to its microhistory. Instead of focussing on the programme and political activity of the leadership of the Austrian exiles, he pays attention to the everyday struggle of ordinary refugees: how to cross the border, to maintain contact, to make ends meet, and to persist in the absence of a meaningful (not only political) activity. He shows the demoralising effect of the prolonged stay in camps run with military-style discipline and a lack of perspective. While some aspects of this story have previously been documented, the integration of Czechoslovak and Austrian archival materials and the close reading of sources result in an innovative perspective.

¹² Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhart Kosseleck (ed.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Stuttgart 1975.

The story of Austrian refugees is deeply embedded in the region of Lower Austria and Southern Moravia – the refugee activists demonstrated an intimate knowledge of what used to be parts of the Habsburg Monarchy, a highly integrated, interconnected, and permeable space. While the phenomenon of “phantom borders” has received much attention in recent research,¹³ this case calls for considering the phantom of non-borders and the persisting connections over the new ‘green lines’ established in 1918. Contributing to current historiography,¹⁴ Schellenbacher illuminates the role of smuggling in both its material and human forms. The same or similar networks that had been developed to overcome the controls of the nation state in order to bypass tariffs were used to bring refugees across the border. The very extent of the smuggling activities also illustrates the degree to which restrictive state policies contributed to the erosion of borders as clear separators which they were supposed to (re)establish in the first place. While playing out in a limited region and with limited means, these networks were part and parcel of the European networks of migration and political activism. Moreover, the refugee landscapes charted by Schellenbacher were also the stage for refugee trajectories and of spatial separation before and after, for instance during the First World War, when camps for Jewish refugees were established in Southern Moravia to prevent them from reaching Vienna.

Kinga Frojimovics documents another, very different, refugee space: a hospital. She explores a unique source: a card file of the Jewish hospital in Budapest including cards of refugees fleeing from Nazi Germany, Austria after the ‘Anschluß’, the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia and from other countries to the relative safety of the authoritarian and antisemitic Hungary. On the larger plane, the article points to the dilemmas attached to providing welfare – for instance, the Budapest Jewish Hospital as well as other Jewish aid bodies were obliged to report supported foreigners to the authorities. More significantly, it shows the role of welfare as a major field in which refugee protection was played out and negotiated, in the context of the growing social obligation of the states, or social citizenship.¹⁵ As elsewhere, Jewish communities in Hungary considered assistance to Jewish refugees a duty and built on existing welfare infrastructure, in particular the Wanderfürsorge assisting poor Jewish migrants. Yet, by doing so, refugees also fell visibly outside of the scope of responsibility of the state, making a possible integration and eventually acquisition of citizenship unlikely. Instead of a spatial separation, or in addition to it, Jewish refugees were set apart through welfare. Finally, Frojimovics’ article illustrates the need to devote more attention to humanitarianism and its local structures in East-Central Europe. Often seen as a largely Western phenomenon, with accounts based on reports of Western refugee workers, this article by implication calls for further research into humanitarian activities and actors in the ‘East’.

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The workshop and the articles in this section make clear the need for a detailed study from below of refugeedom in East-Central Europe, extending the state and/or nation centred research. In fact, since the workshop, spurred among other things by the public debates in the wake of the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’, other promising activities

13 Béatrice von Hirschhausen/Hannes Grandits/Claudia Kraft/Dietmar Müller/Thomas Serrier, *Phantomgrenzen. Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken*, Göttingen 2015.

14 See for instance Gabriele Anderl/Simon Usaty (eds), *Schleppen, Schleusen, Helfen. Flucht zwischen Rettung und Ausbeutung*, Vienna 2016.

15 Thomas Humphrey Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays*, Cambridge 1950.

and publications started to appear.¹⁶ The editors therefore hope to continue an interdisciplinary conversation around the subject in the future issues of S:I.M.O.N as well as in other journals, workshops, and projects.¹⁷

¹⁶ It is not surprising that more attention is devoted to Austria as a country of immigration. See Börries Kuzmany/Rita Garstenauer (ed.), *Aufnahmeland Österreich. Über den Umgang mit Massenflucht seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, Vienna 2017; Philipp Ther, *Die Außenseiter. Flucht, Flüchtlinge und Integration im modernen Europa*, Berlin 2017; see also a special issue dedicated to refugee history: *Hungarian Historical Review* 6 (2017) 3.

¹⁷ The project "Unlikely Refuge. Refugees and Citizens in East-Central Europe in the 20th Century", funded by a consolidator grant of the European Research Council (819461), principal investigator Michal Frankl, will begin in September 2019 and will explore the region as a place of refuge.

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Quotation: Michal Frankl, Refugees and Citizens. New Nation States as Places of Asylum, 1914–1941,
in: S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. 5 (2018) 2, 72-77.

DOI: 10.23777/SN0218/SWW_MFRA01
<http://doi.org/czvk>

Context

Copy Editor:
Tim Corbett

S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.
ISSN 2408-9192

Board of Editors of VWI's International Academic Advisory Board:
Peter Black/Robert Knight/Irina Sherbakova

5 (2018) 2
DOI: 10.23777/SN.0218
<http://doi.org/cztw>

Editors: Éva Kovács/Béla Rásky/Marianne Windsperger
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S:I.M.O.N. is the semi-annual e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies
(VWI) in English and German.

The Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) is funded by:

 Federal Ministry
Education, Science
and Research



 Federal Chancellery

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