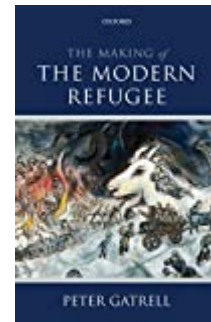


Peter Gatrell. *The Making of the Modern Refugee*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Illustrations. 336 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-967416-9.



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Published on H-Diplo (May, 2014)

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The British historian Tony Kushner in *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (2007) calls refugees “the forgotten of history,” an amnesia, Kushner argues, which has allowed the distortion of refugee policy and the abuse of refugees.[1] Historians bear some responsibility for this state of affairs, since, until recently, they have not paid sufficient attention to refugee history. Peter Gatrell shares this concern that refugee history has too often been neglected and he offers *The Making of the Modern Refugee* as a resource for us to learn about, understand, and remember the history of the world’s refugees.

The Making of the Modern Refugee focuses on the twentieth century. While Gatrell acknowledges that the history of displacement stretches back much further, he argues that “twentieth-century displacement was unprecedented by virtue of being linked to the collapse of multinational empires, the emergence of the modern state with a bounded citizenship, the spread of totalizing ideologies that hounded internal enemies, and the internationalization of response to refugee crises” (p. 2). Gatrell claims to offer a distinctive approach to the study of refugees “by bringing the causes and consequences of global population displacement within a single frame.” He seeks to explore the complex experience and meaning of displacement, and he describes “how refugees came to

be recognized by and beyond the realm of law, including by those who never came face to face with refugees.” Ultimately, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* aims to “answer questions as to how refugees became an omnipresent part of the twentieth-century world, and how they negotiated the turbulent currents of displacement and the conditions imposed by the refugee regime; how, in short, there were many ways to be a refugee” (p. 13).

Gatrell approaches this material chronologically and geographically, drawing on a wide range of secondary sources to construct this history of refugees in Europe, Asia, and Africa throughout the twentieth century. The first of three sections explores the impact of the First World War on population displacement in Europe and the ways in which the collapse of empires and the creation of nation-states was an integral part of “the making of the modern refugee.” In part 2, Gatrell considers population displacement during the Second World War and in its immediate aftermath. The author devotes separate chapters to the refugee crisis in Europe at mid-century; the creation of the State of Israel and the “inextricably linked” experience of Jews and Palestinians; the 1947 partition of India and the experience of displaced people between India and Pakistan; and population displacement and war in East Asia, including Korea, China, and Tibet from 1937

to 1950 (p. 118). Refugees in the global Cold War and its aftermath are the main focus of the book's third section with chapters examining the experience of displaced people from Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma); Africa (with a particular focus on Algeria, the Horn of Africa, the Great Lakes Region, and Sudan); and Afghanistan, Cyprus, Yugoslavia and other former Soviet states following the end of the Cold War.

Gatrell maintains a number of themes across this expanse of place and time. One persistent theme is the close relationship between the creation of the modern state and the creation of the modern refugee. The collapse of empires during and after the First World War and the development of new nation-states created the circumstances for a dramatic increase in the number of refugees. But *The Making of the Modern Refugee* is not only interested in the origins of population displacement. Gatrell also seeks to explain how the modern refugee came to be construed as a problem amenable to a solution, a question that drives his investigation of the origins of an international refugee regime in the aftermath of the First World War and the evolution of this regime throughout the twentieth century (p. 5). A main part of this development involved the creation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the establishment of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. But Gatrell also charts the development and activity of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which, he argues, embraced a humanitarian approach which helped fashion the modern refugee as a passive and traumatized object of intervention (p. 8). Furthermore, according to Gatrell, the main elements of this international refugee regime often understood refugees to be something that they were not: a mass of indistinguishable and timeless people, totally lacking in agency, like corks bobbing along on the surface of an unstoppable wave of displacement (p. 9). For these agents who were most responsible for making the refugee in the public mind, the refugee was imagined to be the victim of unstoppable forces (p. 49).

In stark contrast to the portrayal of refugees as apathetic and helpless, Gatrell presents case after case of refugee activism. It is exciting to encounter evidence of this activism as wide ranging as Belgian refugees protesting against surveillance and confinement by the British government at the beginning of the First World War, Pontic Greek refugees fighting back against an anti-immigrant backlash in 1930s Greece, Indian refugees' direct action against miserable living conditions in the late 1940s, and protests by Vietnamese refugees against

mistreatment at a camp operated by the Malaysian government in the late 1970s. Part of refugees' active response to the experience of displacement, Gatrell shows, involved an engagement with their own history, which they used as a tool to fashion themselves and to shape their prospects for the future (p. 12). For example, Gatrell observes, like Armenian, Jewish, German, Cypriot, and other refugees, Palestinians devoted considerable effort to the creation of village books that commemorate abandoned settlements. This project has gone hand in hand with making a photographic record of sites in order to breathe life into a name (p. 142). Engagement with their history through commemorative projects, Gatrell tells us, are a lament for a world that has been lost—all that remains—not unlike the *yizkor bukhn* [memorial books] that recall Jewish life in the shtetls of Eastern Europe before the Second World War (pp. 142-143). For Jews, Palestinians, and so many others, the past was a tool that could be used to pursue a vision of the present and the future.

Just as he challenges the portrayal of refugees as apathetic and helpless, Gatrell also rejects the portrayal of refugees as an indistinguishable, anonymous, and timeless mass, bringing to bear a historian's attention to important distinctions of time and place. But he is attentive not only to how time, place, and circumstances made the experience of displacement different for different groups, but also to ways in which differences within a single group of refugees shaped their particular experience. For example, Gatrell shows how a refugee's social class was an important factor in determining how they experienced the partition of India, and how a gendered history of displacement can reveal important dynamics in the role and experience of women, showing, for example, how women in the Tamil Tigers participated in the armed struggle and utilized leadership in the area of refugee relief to emerge as political leaders of their communities (p. 286).

Gatrell also lets the refugees speak for themselves, which introduces still more complexity to our understanding of refugees and allows us to hear the voices of people too often portrayed as voiceless. In Gatrell's work, we hear the voices of refugees displaced by the Spanish Civil War, Palestinians trying to find a safe place in the conflict of 1948, Tigrayan refugees to Sudan in 1984, and many more. Gatrell uses sources ranging from refugee testimony to poetry and literature to allow us to hear an impressive range of refugee voices.

While Gatrell's method of challenging the image of

apathetic, anonymous, and voiceless refugees is effective, there is one way in which it could have been more so. In a number of different sections of the book, Gatrell offers a critical analysis of photographs and other images that representatives of the "refugee regime" used to justify their perception and treatment of refugees. For example, to illustrate the centrality of apathy and alienation in the portrayal of displaced persons, Gatrell offers the reader a fascinating interpretation of two photos. According to one "expert" (in this case, H. B. M. Murphy), displaced persons' "apathy or depression is well illustrated in this picture of a group of Estonians singing a national song as they see their compatriots set out for settlement." But Gatrell has a different interpretation, arguing that the photo actually shows "a group of women whose stance could just as well be described as one of defiance and affirmation rather than melancholy." The caption overlooked the solidarity that is evident in the picture," Gatrell says. And, he argues, it "took a heroic stretch of the imagination to interpret this image as conveying depression" (pp. 104-105). This interesting exchange between Murphy and Gatrell leaves the reader wishing to actually see the photos in order to interpret them. We are left wondering why they were not included. The reader experiences the same frustration when encountering Gatrell's examination and interpretation of refugee images, which Gatrell calls an "iconography of predicament," in the Hungarian refugee crisis and elsewhere (p. 114). The chance to interpret the images would have enabled the reader to better evaluate the strength of the author's conclusions.

A more substantive concern about this work is the absence of the Americas in what aims to be a global history of refugees. Gatrell acknowledges having "said virtually nothing about refugees in countries such as Colombia, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala." But his explanation that this was "partly because I did not want my discussion to be dominated by the history of US intervention" is not quite satisfying (p. 13). Throughout this work, Gatrell often does a good job distilling complex scenarios down to succinct summaries, which allow his main conclusions about refugees to emerge clearly. One example of this is in his treatment of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 in which he offers a necessarily short summary while still allowing for complexity and nuance. One wonders why he did not apply this same skill to an analysis of Central America in the 1980s and Latin America more broadly. The absence of the Americas is particularly troubling in the book's third section focusing on the global Cold War and its aftermath. Scholars of the

Americas will frequently see missed opportunities to analyze situations or policies in the Americas that parallel or intersect with those that Gatrell identifies in other parts of the world. For example, it would have been very interesting to see what Gatrell makes of Mexico's Committee for Refugee Assistance (COMAR). Maria Cristina Garcia's *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States and Canada* (2006) has shown how, through COMAR, refugee policy was one of the tools that gave shape to the Mexican state and influenced Mexico's relations with its neighbors, a process that is strikingly similar to that which Gatrell identifies in India, Pakistan, and elsewhere. At other moments too, a fuller consideration of the Americas would have enabled more insight, such as when Gatrell examines the experience of Vietnamese refugees, correctly acknowledging the critical role of the Cold War in the United States's response, but missing the chance to consider the treatment and experience of Haitian, Cuban, Salvadoran, and other refugees to the United States at the very same moment. Still, if some readers might wish Gatrell had stretched his canvas even further to include the Americas (making this a truly global history of refugees), specialists in Latin American and North American history should be assured that there is still much of use here, precisely because, as the author says, his work "shows how the practices and legacies of population displacement were not limited to one particular time or place but extended far and wide" (p. 13).

In his efforts to locate the origins of population displacement throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa, and by offering a persuasive critique of international agencies' portrayal of displaced persons, Gatrell has provided texture and nuance to our too-frequently simplistic and de-historicized understanding of refugees in the twentieth century. This represents a major contribution to an emerging body of literature on refugees, and one that will be useful to historians and those who locate themselves in multidisciplinary fields, such as refugee and migration studies.^[1] One of the most important conclusions to be drawn from this history, Gatrell shows, is that displacement was more than simply a moment of catastrophe and loss. *The Making of the Modern Refugee* helps us see the contested meanings of displacement and the ways in which refugees put forth competing interpretations of the history that they used to advance competing visions for their future. An understanding of the uses of refugee history in the past (by refugees and non-refugees alike) can lend more clarity to contemporary refugee crises and to our current struggles over refugee policy and politics.

And by supplying historical context and specificity, and by examining refugees as historical actors in their own right, Gattrell reminds us that refugees are neither timeless nor helpless.

Notes

[1]. Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and*

Now (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 15.

[1]. Gattrell adds to an emerging body of scholarship which includes recent scholarly contributions that take a similarly global approach to refugees. See, for example, Philip Marfleet, *Refugees in a Global Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

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Citation: Carl Lindskoog. Review of Gattrell, Peter, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2014.

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