

People(s) on the Move: Refugees and Immigration Regimes in 20th-Century Central and Eastern Europe.
Imre Kertész Kolleg, Jena, 09.06.2016–10.06.2016.

Reviewed by Victoria Harms

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2016)

On 9-10 June 2016, about forty presenters, discussants, and guests, many current or former fellows, convened in Jena, Germany, for the Imre Kertész Kolleg's 2016 annual convention. This year was dedicated to: "People(s) on the Move: Refugees and Immigration Regimes in 20th-Century Central and Eastern Europe." In its sixth year, the organizers sought to take a (historical) stand in the ongoing debate: "What is specific about the East European response to the refugee crisis?", asked the Kolleg's co-director, JOACHIM VON PUTTKAMER (Jena), in his opening remarks. Not much, he suggested with a hint at Marie Le Pen's Front National in France. Is Ivan Krastev's comparison of nation-building in the nineteenth century in Central Europe with a painting by Oskar Kokoschka and in Western Europe with one by Caspar David Friedrich an appropriate and sufficient explanation for today's discord? "Democracy in Question," IWM Post, no. 117, Spring/ Summer 2016, p. 4. How far back in history should we go to explain the current situation? Or rather: in how far can history offer new perspectives in and out of the crisis?

After Puttkamer's considerate tour d'horizon of current affairs, the convention's participants refrained from polemicising the divisive rhetoric of Central European leaders, such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, Slovakia's Robert Fico, and the Czechs' Miloš Zeman. Instead, they provided food for scholarly rethink-

ing. The conference sought to correct the warped historical narratives that these politicians have employed: Contrary to their claims, Central and Eastern Europe abound with stories of migration and flight, departure, arrival and return, which organizers, presenters, and guests set out to explore.

The convention's four panels moved chronologically, with day one addressing the interwar period, and day two dealing first with the immediate postwar and then the later Cold War period. All heeded MICHAEL ESCH's (Leipzig) early warning not to reinforce national categories or essentialising characterizations of refugees and host societies, races, religion, and ethnicities – a call that deserves attention well beyond the spatial and temporal confines of this conference.

Common themes were refugees and migrants as labor force (Péter Apor, Alena Alamgir, Tara Zahra), their role in state or nation-state building processes (Ilse Lazaroms, Keely Stauter-Halsted, Leslie Waters, Jerzy Kochanowski, Marcos Silber), and the bureaucratic character of the international refugee and migration regimes (Sara Silverstein, Michael Esch). The majority of scholars, for instance JANNIS PANAGIOTIDIS (Osnabrück) with his case of a German Russian family that spanned three (not four) continents, took a distinctly transnational approach. Generally, research tested the interdependence between macro structures and individuals, an often tense relation

which WŁODZIMIERZ BORODZIEJ (Jena), the Kolleg's other co-director, captured in rephrasing a panel title as: "Facing the challenge: options and choices by individuals."

In what follows, out of a selection of excellent studies, three papers will be highlighted: ILSE LAZAROMS (New York), a former Kertész Kolleg fellow, presented one of the most intriguing studies of the interwar period: She discussed the desolate situation of mostly Jewish migrants to "rump Hungary" after 1920. Although officially glorified as patriots refusing to pledge allegiance to the new states the Paris Peace Treaties had assigned them to, these newly stateless people lingered hopelessly in train wagons at Budapest's Eastern train station. After a wave of anti-Semitic White Terror, the arch-conservative Hungarian regime was in fact more unwilling than unable to assist the needy. Local and international aid organizations, particularly the American Joint Distribution Committee, stepped in.

Additionally, solidarity between the local Jewish communities and the new arrivals did not manifest itself either: Hungary's Jews were among the most diverse in Central Europe. The arrival of Jews from Galicia in previous years had already disrupted the barely contained peace between Gentiles and the capital's assimilated Neologs. Thus, Lazaroms referenced accounts rife with social degradation, utter destitution, an uncontrolled public health crisis, death and starvation. Accompanying visuals recalled not only the extermination of Europe's Jewry twenty years later but also of the refugees in 2015 seeking shelter in that same spot.

On day two, LESLIE WATERS (Williamsburg) presented interesting parallels to Lazaroms' research in a study of the post-1945 population resettlement from Czechoslovakia to Hungary. Like Panagiotidis, Waters confirmed earlier remarks by PETER GATRELL (Manchester), the keynote speaker, that "states both produce and accommodate" refugees. Sometimes, however, Waters con-

cluded, "it is simply more difficult to integrate people than to expel them." In late 1946 Czechoslovakia and Hungary signed an agreement to exchange their minority populations. Little did they know what they had bargained for. Hungarian officials hailed the new arrivals as experienced in democracy and a boost to the new democratic Hungary – but did not grant them the right to vote. Too late did the state realize it lacked the means to provide for the resettled. Neither aid from the UNRRA nor placing the arrivals in the vacated homes of relocated Slovaks and expelled Swabian Germans alleviated the dire situation. The task overwhelmed hosting municipalities as well as the Hungarian Relocation Commission, which was in charge of the process. The relocated, who were used to better living standards, did not acquiesce. Quoting from angry complaints and fervent demands to the editorial office of *Új Otthon* and party officials, Waters demonstrated the weakness of a state on the brink of Stalinism.

The most junior presenter gave one of the most compelling presentations: SARA SILVERSTEIN (Yale) used the wondrous life of Oskar Metz to discuss the work of UNRRA officials (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, founded in 1943), German medical personnel and DPs in camps in post-war Germany. Many such sites evolved from temporary shelter to long-term care facilities. Needs, provisions, quality and the level of interaction between the various actors involved varied between occupation zones. Necessity drove a transnational encounter that – later rather than sooner – laid the foundations for a slowly emerging international standardization of health care services for the displaced. Key became the DPs themselves, not just as needing care, but as trained, skilled, and adaptive caregivers.

In the keynote speech, Peter Gatrell (Manchester), whose 1999 monograph "A Whole Empire Walking" set milestones in the study of "refugeedom," testified to the significance of the region. He declared that the modern international

refugee regime was in fact born in East Central Europe, the twentieth century's "mega site of population displacement." The bureaucratic mind, with which for instance the UNRRA sought to manage refugees, laid evidence to the modern belief in expertise: the technocrat claims to know the refugee better than s/he him/herself. HOLLY CASE (Cornell) later seconded such forlorn faith in bureaucracy, speaking of a "choreographed zeal" to balance populations and direct people's movements that just never eased into a dance.

With regards to the Nansen passport for stateless people, Gatrell suggested that "once upon a time there was still imagination." TARA ZAHRA (Chicago) later echoed that sentiment: She, too, declared that of late international organizations and states had lacked ambition and visionary foresight. At best, they devised patchwork policies. Zahra's paper elaborated on the continuities between Nazi and post-war immigration policies. She highlighted parallels between East and West in the Cold War: Both sides exploited migrants and refugees for propagandistic purposes and "ultimately saw migrants as 'human material' with which they would construct Socialist and Capitalist societies." Thus, she articulated skepticism towards such claims as "we need refugees" to counter Europe's demographic decline, because of their stigmatization of human beings as material and useable resource.

Despite such references, presenters mostly abstained from engaging contemporary arguments. Holly Case proved the exception to the rule. In her commentary to panel IV, she returned to questions she had already raised after Gatrell's keynote: current attitudes and perception in, not of, Hungary. "Why is it that they (the refugees) don't like us (Hungarians)?", she imitated worried voices and thus inverted the debate. The divisions in the EU, she suggested, signaled not just a post-choreographed but an anti-choreographed era. The modern dream of social engineering and bureaucratic control as Alexander Bogdanov had

imagined in his 1908 novel *Red Star* had come to an end. Central European leaders today exuded an anti-modernist air: they refuse existing rules and do not believe in common solutions, Case attested. To them the EU, the epitome of a modernist, supranational organization, has become obsolete.

During the concluding roundtable discussion the senior scholars STEFAN TROEBST (Leipzig) and ATTILA PÓK (Budapest) shared stories from their own lives and personal encounters with refugeedom and refugees. Troebst for instance recalled his childhood in Bavaria in the late fifties, where the expellees from the former German East were strictly separated from the locals: although ethnically one, religion became the dividing line. MARCI SHORE (Yale) contributed observations from a recent trip to Kyiv, where she had visited a shelter for refugees from the Donbas region. Shore concluded that in fact "in Eastern Europe displacement has been the norm." Alienation and the loss of home, she argued, have characterized the modern age.

Whereas Pók identified 1956 as the one constant reference on either side in the Hungarian debate, MACIEJ DUSZCZYK (Warsaw) added 1981 for the Poles. As the latter scanned the latest opinion polls in his home country, he critically pointed out that 80 percent of the population has never had contact with refugees. They only "know" them from the media. Real scrutiny, therefore, should be directed towards representations of refugees on TV and in the press. Meanwhile, Pók articulated his surprise that the one "success story" from Hungary, namely, migrant workers from China, has remained obscure: they integrated into the labor market fairly smoothly, he argued, were hardly the target of prejudices, mostly spoke Hungarian, and have founded their own social, if not political, organizations.

At the end of day, the impact of the Central and East European responses to the current crisis on the international refugee regime remained un-

resolved. One is left to wonder after this conference whether or not we have come full circle: If said regime originated in Central and Eastern Europe after World War I, as Gatrell and several presenters declared, we might actually be witnessing the end of it. More than ever a conference like this impresses its significance: the unceasing hyperbole in today's debates, often uninformed and ignorant of the region's history, needs a corrective. The papers made clear that there is no such thing as "the refugee." Refugees, migrants, and the displaced in all their multitude and state attempts at social control and containment are inherent to modernity. Such nuanced and enlightening studies as presented in Jena provide the context for re-thinking European history and may offer lessons for reforming a floundering international refugee system.

Conference overview:

Panel I: Refugees and Resettlement in the Aftermath of the First World War

Chair: Joachim von Puttkamer (Imre-Kertész Kolleg, Jena)

Michael Esch (GWZO Leipzig): Transnational Migration in the Interwar Period. Conditions, Structures and Agencies

Keely Stauter-Halsted (University of Illinois, Chicago): Return Migration and Social Disruption in Postwar Poland

Ilse Lazaroms (Center for Jewish Studies, New York): Blown out of Empire: Jewish Itineraries in Post-Trianon Hungary

Discussant: James Ward (University of Rhode Island)

Keynote Lecture

Peter Gatrell (University of Manchester): Eastern Europe and the Making of the Modern Refugee

Panel II: Displaced Persons in the Mid-1940s

Chair: Attila Pók (Budapest)

Tara Zahra (University of Illinois, Chicago): "Work Will Set You Free": Displaced Persons, 'Economic Migrants' and Population Politics in Post-

war Europe

Leslie Waters (William and Mary, Williamsburg): Communities of Resettlement: Integrating Migrants from the Czechoslovak-Hungarian Population Exchange in Postwar Hungary

Sara Silverstein (Yale University, New Haven): Doctors and Refugees: Transnational Health Services in Eastern Europe in the late 1940s

Discussant: Holly Case (Cornell University, Ithaca)

Panel III: Closed Societies? Immigration into the Socialist World

Chair: Marci Shore (Yale University, New Haven)

Jerzy Kochanowski (Historical Institut, Warschau): "Aliens Under Bierut": Foreign Inhabitants of Warsaw, 1945–1956

Alena Alamgir (University of Oxford): "They Knit Sweaters and Refuse to Follow the Foreman's Orders": Female Vietnamese Workers' Labour Disputes in 1980s Czechoslovakia

Péter Apor (Institute of History at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest): Socialist Mobility, Post-Colonialism and Global Solidarity: The Movement of People from the Global South to Socialist Hungary

Discussant: Michal Kopeček (Institute for Contemporary History, Prague)

Panel IV: Political Emigration After 1956

Chair: John Connelly (University of California, Berkeley)

Jannis Panagiotidis (University of Osnabrück): Russian Germans on Four Continents: Towards a Global History of the Periphery in the 20th Century

Marcos Silber (University of Haifa): Migrations and Nation-Building: On Migrations from Poland and Eastern Europe to Israel in the 1950s

Jasna Čapo Žmegač (Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb): Forced Migration Across the Borders of Post-Yugoslav States: From Ethnic Homogenization to Transnationalism

Discussant: Włodzimierz Borodziej (Imre-Kertész Kolleg, Jena)

Round Table: Eastern Europe and the Refugees: Historical References in Current Debates

Participants: Stefan Troebst (GWZO, University of Leipzig), Maciej Duszczek (Institute of Social Policy, University of Warsaw), Attila Pók (Budapest), Marci Shore
Chair: Joachim von Puttkamer

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Victoria Harms. Review of *People(s) on the Move: Refugees and Immigration Regimes in 20th-Century Central and Eastern Europe*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48082>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.