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## Concluding remarks

*Pertti Ahonen*

At the end of this ambitious and far-ranging volume, it seems appropriate to reflect on the book as a whole and to ask what it adds to the considerable amount of high-quality literature that already exists on the history of forced migrations in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Why, in other words, should historians of forced migrations pay attention to this study? And what new impulses could it offer for the future development of this thriving field of scholarship?

I would like to highlight five areas in which *A Transnational History of Forced Migrants in Europe* enhances the existing historiography in significant ways. First, the editors' emphatic focus on the transnational is important in itself. Few phenomena are as inherently transnational as cross-border migrations and their manifold consequences. However, as Palacz and Willems point out, forced migrations have often been harnessed to serve nationally defined narrative frameworks, typically as stories of either singular victimhood or exceptional integrative success – or indeed both, with the latter following the former once the forcibly uprooted victims have settled into the nation state to which they purportedly belong, due to their ethno-national characteristics. In keeping with this paradigm, much of the scholarship on forced migrations in twentieth century Europe has also been nationally focused. However, as a welcome corrective to that long-term trend, important studies that view these migrations and their consequences through a transnational lens have started to appear in recent years.<sup>1</sup> This book makes a major contribution to that emerging corpus of literature, a contribution that is made all the more notable by the volume's additional, distinctive merits.

A significant one of these derives from the book's contextualization of forced migrations within what the editors label a 'longer arc of European history', stretching from the First World War and its antecedents to the Second World War and its aftermath. Most previous studies have adopted a considerably narrower timeframe. The Second World War and its temporal hinterland, a period which Peter Gattrell and Nick Baron have aptly called 'violent peacetime', has caught the lion's share of scholarly attention, as could be expected, given the unprecedented scale of the brutal uprooting of European populations that took place during this era.<sup>2</sup> To a lesser but still considerable extent, the forced migrations that unfolded around the First World War have also been analysed insightfully, not least from the perspective of the precedents and models that they helped to set for later cases of expulsion.<sup>3</sup> However, studies that incorporate the two world wars and their consequences into a single framework that also includes the interwar years have remained very few, and one of this volume's notable contributions is to have provided a model for this kind of integrated analysis.<sup>4</sup> In theory, the 'longer arc of European history' could be extended further in both directions: into the forced removals and demographic re-engineering projects that began on Europe's southern and eastern periphery in the 1870s – launching what Donald Bloxham has labelled 'the great unweaving' of populations – and also into the different kinds of forced migrations that took place during and after the Cold War, both within Europe and between Europe and other parts of the world.<sup>5</sup> However, an overly wide chronological scope would have undermined the coherence and analytical depth of this volume, and the editors' decision to frame the book around the era of the two world wars is sensible and convincing. It is to be hoped that their work will provide impetus for further comprehensive, long-term histories of European forced migrations.

The volume's third significant contribution to the historiography is closely linked to the previous point; the editors have aimed for a broad scope, not only in the time periods covered but also in the types of forced migrations and personal experiences addressed. This is quite atypical of the field as

a whole. For instance, in the area in which I have done most of my own empirical work – post-World War II Central Europe in general and Germany in particular – different types of forced migrants have usually been studied separately. The sizeable literature on ethnic German expellees has remained largely distinct from that on displaced persons (DPs) of other nationalities, for example, and more generally, too, works that ‘look at the many different kinds of refugees and dislocated people in the same context’ have been lacking, as Jessica Reinisch has observed.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the rare studies that have focused specifically on the postwar interaction of distinct population groups, such as Adam Seipp’s local-level study of the relations among DPs, ethnic German expellees, American occupation forces, and local German residents in the small Bavarian garrison town of Wildflecken, have been particularly valuable in highlighting complex societal and transnational dynamics.<sup>7</sup>

Similar observations about discrete categories and literatures for particular kinds of uprooted people also apply more broadly across the period covered in this volume. There are strong and vibrant historiographies on many of the specific population groups addressed in the individual chapters: WWI evacuees and internees, political émigrés of the interwar years, refugees from fascist rule, populations targeted by Nazi resettlement schemes, and so on, but little in the way of integrative studies that seek to examine these categories together, or at least to draw explicit connections between them. Against this background, the editors’ decision to adopt a very broad definition of forced migrants, a definition that makes it possible to bring a wide range of unwilling nomads under one analytical umbrella, is laudable. On this point, Palacz and Willems deserve to be quoted at some length: ‘It is generally accepted now that the boundary between “forced” and “voluntary” migration is often blurry and that the experiences of people on the move can be better represented as a spectrum rather than as a dichotomy. We have therefore adopted a broad category of involuntary migrants that includes all people in Europe whose movement across and within state borders in the first half of the twentieth century was primarily caused by war, persecution, and

political upheaval. The case studies presented in this volume range from deportees and refugees with limited agency whose displacement was caused by forces beyond their control to political émigrés who consciously chose exile in order to continue their struggle against a repressive regime.’ (p. 4).

This expansive, yet clearly delineated definition of the term ‘forced migrant’, in turn, underpins the book’s fourth major source of strength: its exceptionally wide scope in general and the inclusion of enlightening cases and approaches that do not necessarily jump to mind when thinking of twentieth century forced migrations in particular. Here it will suffice to single out two examples of the fresh perspectives on offer, starting with Katrin Sippel’s chapter on the cultural impact of female refugees from National Socialism who passed through Portugal between the late 1930s and the mid-1940s. Although the vast majority of these women stayed in Portugal only briefly, in transit between their original abodes and more permanent places of exile, and therefore typically did not even try to adjust to the host society and its very conservative gender roles and other behavioural norms, they nevertheless became highly significant agents of long-term cultural change in Portugal. However, contrary to what the reader might expect, it was not their ‘political activism’ but rather their ‘day-to-day behaviours that proved to have a much greater long-term effect on Portuguese habits and national mentalities’ (p. 220). Refugee women defied and altered prevailing local norms in public behaviour, dress, culinary habits, and other areas of daily life, thereby opening up new possibilities for local women and initiating major transformation processes in Portuguese society. All of this is highly enlightening as a case study in the gendered, transnational interaction between refugees and local populations in mid-twentieth-century Portugal, but, on a more general level, it also exemplifies how complex – and ultimately unpredictable – the dynamics between forced migrants and host societies can be.

Another chapter worthy of a special mention is Jill Meißner-Wolfbeisser's close reading of the role of one particular Austrian émigré, Stefi Kiesler, as a largely forgotten but highly influential cultural and linguistic mediator within the German-speaking literati community in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. In a study that accentuates the potential of microhistorical approaches to illuminate broad historical processes, Meißner-Wolfbeisser shows how Kiesler, a long-term public librarian in the German-language section of the New York Public Library, became a pivotal bridge-builder among German-speaking émigré intellectuals in New York. On one level, therefore, the chapter provides a study of personal networks among forced migrants struggling to find their footing in a host society. At the same time, it also underscores the multi-dimensional socio-cultural importance of the physical space of the library, at least for certain types of forced migrants: as an entrance point to a new culture and language, as a bridge to the mother-tongue, 'as a place of encounter both with members of the host society and with old acquaintances from the homeland' (p. 170), and even as a 'multicultural gathering place' that can bring together together local residents and émigrés of many different backgrounds and nationalities (172).

Meißner-Wolfbeisser's multi-level analysis of the German émigré intellectuals' interactions with each other, with the surrounding society, with the old homeland, and with other exile groups also links directly to this volume's fifth and probably most notable contribution to the historiography of forced migrations and their consequences: 'the four-dimensional model of diasporic relationships' (p. 8) laid out in the introduction and applied, with varying levels of explicitness, in the individual chapters. As Palacz and Willems explain, the model draws on a long tradition of historical and social science research on diasporic communities, an approach that is highly suitable to a volume like this, with its transnational focus on 'the experiences of different types of forced migrants' (p. 5), especially the processes through which the migrants adjust to their new, post-migration circumstances. However, whereas scholars have generally analyzed diasporic relationships through

a three-fold model comprising the lost homeland, the new host society and the diasporic community forcibly transported from the former to the latter, Palacz and Willems develop this model further. They propose to apply it with heightened flexibility, ‘as a spectrum that varies from one individual to another, changes over time and is mediated by age, gender, psychosexual identity, ethnic background, religious beliefs and socioeconomic class’ (p. 8). More innovatively, they also ‘suggest adding a fourth dimension to the triad of homeland, host society and diaspora: interaction with other diasporas’ (p. 9). With this extra dimension, the editors accentuate the often complicated relationships among different national and ethnic groups that find themselves in exile, relationships that can fluctuate between ‘coexistence, cooperation or conflict’ (p. 9).

This revised, four-dimensional model of diasporic relationships is a very useful analytical device that has a good deal of potential for explorations of the experiences of forced migrants, on both the individual and collective levels. Palacz and Willems themselves describe its value as follows: ‘The proposed conceptual model of diaspora can be used by transnational historians as an analytical tool that offers the possibility of looking at the formation of migrant communities as a phenomenon in itself, and not only in relation to the national histories of the respective homeland and host society, as implied by the traditional paradigm of linear assimilation’ (p. 9). That evaluation seems apt, and the chapters of this book go a long way towards validating the editors’ expectations.

In taking stock of this volume and its contributions, it seems appropriate to finish by asking how it could help to develop and renew the field in the future. Which issues addressed on the preceding pages could perhaps be examined further by other scholars of forced migrations, and how? One intriguing possibility, raised explicitly by Cristian Cercel in his contribution on the transnational arrangements through which around 2,500 ‘ethnic Swabians’ came to be resettled in Brazil in the early 1950s and echoed implicitly in Chelsea Sambells’ chapter on European cross-border child

evacuation schemes before and during the Second World War, is the addition of a fifth dimension to the proposed model of diasporic relationships. As highlighted by Cercel and Sambells in their respective chapters and acknowledged by the editors in the introduction, international humanitarian organizations have frequently played a key role in the resettlement of modern-day forced migrants, providing aid and relief, developing employment opportunities, facilitating cross-border relocation schemes, and engaging in a panoply of other activities. In the context of twentieth century Europe, the relevant actors have been many and varied, ranging from such international juggernauts as the American Relief Administration (ARA) of the post-WWI era or the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and its successor, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) of the 1940s and early 1950s, to many smaller entities, including the Schweizer Europahilfe examined by Cercel or the WWII era Swedish voluntary refugee committees explored, in part, by Sambells.

The case studies by Cercel and Sambells provide concrete examples of how the activities of international organizations have frequently had a major impact on the life trajectories of forced migrants and their communities. They also accentuate some of the ways in which humanitarian organizations have tended to ‘engage in ethnic politics’, to borrow Cercel’s expression (p. 322), helping to draw and re-draw boundaries between perceived ethno-national groups and to valorize particular groups over others. Furthermore, these two chapters cast light on the complicated dynamics between humanitarian organizations, the states to whose interests they are linked -- politically, economically or administratively -- and the wider national and international contexts in which they operate. The systematic inclusion of relevant international organizations into the diasporic nexus outlined in this volume, potentially as its fifth dimension, alongside those of the homeland, the host society, the primary diaspora and other diasporas, would therefore seem well worth considering, given the additional analytical breadth that such a move promises to deliver.



Another area in which the new avenues for investigation opened up in this book could still be developed further by other scholars has to do with questioning and partly deconstructing concepts and analytical categories that are sometimes taken too much at face value in the relevant literature. To be sure, to a considerable extent the volume does precisely that. The transnational emphasis throughout is an important achievement in itself, as already discussed, given the prevalence of nationally focused approaches in much of the previous historiography. The model of diasporic relationships applied in the volume, with its four or potentially even five dimensions, offers enhanced analytical purchase in several directions. At the same time, the constituent elements of that model come under perceptive scrutiny in a number of the contributions. In his penetrating analysis of population movement, evacuation and internment in Habsburg Galicia during the First World War, for instance, Sergei Choliy stresses that the resulting diasporas ‘proved to be a short-lived phenomenon’ that ‘rapidly disappeared after the collapse of imperial regimes’ (p. 35). Cristian Cercle echoes the same point about the contingent character of diasporic categorizations on a more general level, emphasizing ‘the fluid, constructed, contested and negotiated character of identity ascriptions and identifications’ that apply to the concept of “diaspora” (p. 340). Cercle also helps to disaggregate the other two dimensions of the diasporic model introduced by Palacz and Willems. Through his examination of the complicated journeys of some 2,500 ‘Danube Swabians’ from multiple points of origin in south-eastern Europe to Austria and subsequently on to Brazil, with the assistance of the Schweizer Europahilfe organization, he concludes that ‘far from being bounded, straightforward or unchanging’, categories such as ‘host society for or a homeland of a particular group’ can themselves be ‘fluid, contextual and plural’ (pp. 322, 340). These kinds of probing insights about the diasporic model and its constituent parts offer plentiful opportunities for future investigation, both empirically, in particular case studies, and more generally, on the level of the model itself and its potential transnational and comparative applications.

One key issue in need of additional exploration and disaggregation in future studies is the tension between collective ethno-national and political categorizations of forced migrants, imposed by national and other authorities, and subjective perceptions of belonging and group identity among the migrants themselves. In much of the historical literature, particularly the more general literature, in which forced migrations typically feature only in passing, there is a tendency to employ seemingly precise ethno-national categories when discussing their victims: so many million Poles uprooted here, that many ‘ethnic Germans’ expelled there, and so on. However, upon closer examination, such apparently neat classifications frequently break down, revealing much more fluid and ambiguous realities, especially at the grassroots level.

Several contributions in this volume highlight these kinds of complexities. Sergei Choliyu, for example, argues that ‘[t]he most important factor that influenced the fate of those persons who moved or were removed from Galicia during the First World War was their categorization by the host societies, either Austro-Hungarian or Russian’, categorizations that were often quite arbitrary and failed to ‘correlate with a person’s behaviour or political views’ (p. 32). Bradley Nichols, in turn, reminds us of how porous the boundaries separating ethno-national in- and out-groups could be, even – or perhaps especially – in Nazi Germany, where pseudo-racial classification schemes were supposed to create strict dividing lines between desirable and undesirable elements. In his insightful analysis of the Third Reich’s so-called Re-Germanization procedure (*Wiedereindeutschungsverfahren*), a wartime policy aimed at ‘reclaiming’ select foreign nationals from across Europe on the basis of their alleged Germanic heritage, Nichols stresses the ambiguity and fluidity of ethno-national classification criteria. As he points out, ‘the long history of cultural syncretism’ in many of the regions targeted by the Nazis, along with ‘the frequency with which they had changed hands, made it incredibly difficult to figure out who was who’ (p. 253). The editors of this volume, then, are undoubtedly right in concluding that ‘migrant identities in the first half of the

twentieth century were hybrid, individualised and constantly reconstructed in response to socioeconomic forces and political pressures' (p. 15).

Examinations of forced migrants' hybrid identities and the external pressures under which they were (re-)formed and (re-)drawn can be developed further in the future, building on what has been accomplished in this volume and elsewhere. The interaction of the twin processes of attempted categorizations from above and reactions and responses from below can be explored in any number of forced migration contexts. After all, the division of target populations into discrete groups, defined by degrees of perceived belonging and exclusion, and the drawing of boundaries between them are key elements in the planning and implementation of any involuntary migration, and the practical consequences of these policies have almost invariably been very complicated. There already exists some excellent literature on the tensions between official categorizations and subjective experiences in particular cases of forced migration. Highly perceptive recent studies have explored ethno-national ambiguities in the borderlands between Germany and Poland during and after the Second World War, for example.<sup>8</sup> However, much more work of a similar kind is still needed, both regional case studies and, even more acutely, broader transnational and comparative analyses.<sup>9</sup>

To close these brief remarks, I would like to widen the perspective beyond the specific remit followed by this volume's editors and contributors by suggesting that the book's most far-reaching potential contribution to migration history may lie in encouraging the further dismantling of walls and fences that still tend to separate different branches of the relevant historiography. As shown above, this study does transcend many conventional dividing lines in the literature: the time period and the types of involuntary migrations covered are both commendably broad, and the proposed model of diasporic relationship promises to bring together disparate strands of scholarship.

However, there is still room for additional integrative efforts in the future. This seems particularly pertinent at the interface between migrations defined as ‘voluntary’ or ‘involuntary’. While acknowledging that ‘the boundary between “forced” and “voluntary” migration is often blurry’ and casting their net quite wide, the editors of this volume have nevertheless chosen to exclude ‘migrants whose displacement was mainly induced by economic and environmental factors’ (p. 4). That is a perfectly justifiable decision – all successful studies need clear parameters, after all – but in the broader field of migration history one of the main ways forward would seem to consist of increasingly comprehensive works in which all kinds of migratory movements – wherever on the voluntary-involuntary continuum they happen to fall – are addressed within a single analytical and narrative framework. Excellent examples of such integrative approaches have recently begun to appear, on both the national and transnational planes.<sup>10</sup> Hopefully many others will soon see the light of day, as migration historians continue to grapple with what Peter Gatrell has described as their ‘greatest challenge’: the writing of ‘displacement into the larger processes of historical change’.<sup>11</sup> In those endeavours, *A Transnational History of Forced Migrants in Europe* can provide significant inspiration and stimulus, as a concrete example of the kinds of studies that the field needs in order to develop further: broad, transnational and far-ranging books that ask big, ambitious questions and present probing challenges to the received wisdom.

#### ENDNOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> For some key studies that offer transnational perspectives, often in close connection with comparative ones, see ‘Refugees and the Nation State in Europe, 1919-1959’, special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, 49, no. 3 (2014), eds. Jessica Reinisch and Matthew Frank; *Refugees in Europe, 1919-1959: A Forty Years’ Crisis?*, eds. Jessica Reinisch and Matthew Frank (London: 2017); *Refugee Crises 1945-2000: Political and Societal Responses in International*

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*Comparison*, eds. Jan C. Jansen and Simone Lässig (Cambridge: 2020); Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron, 'Violent Peacetime: Reconceptualising Displacement and Resettlement in the Soviet East European Borderlands after the Second World War', pp. 255-268 in *Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in the Soviet East European Borderlands, 1945-1950*, eds. Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (Basingstoke: 2009).

<sup>3</sup> As just one excellent example, see *Europe on the Move: Refugees in the Era of the Great War*, eds. Peter Gatrell and Liubov Zhvanko (Manchester: 2017).

<sup>4</sup> An insightful attempt to provide this kind of a longer framework is *Refugees in Europe, 1919-1959*, eds. Reinisch and Frank.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Bloxham, 'The Great Unweaving: Forced Population Movement in Europe, 1875-1949', pp. 167-208 in *Removing Peoples: Forced Removal in the Modern World*, eds. Richard Bessel and Claudia Haake (Oxford: 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Jessica Reinisch, "Introduction," in *The Disentanglement of Populations: Migration, Expulsion and Displacement in Post-War Europe*, eds. Jessica Reinisch and Elizabeth White (London: 2011), xv.

<sup>7</sup> Adam R. Seipp, *Strangers in the Wild Place: Refugees, Americans and a German Town, 1945-1952* (Bloomington, IN: 2013). On these points, see also Pertti Ahonen, 'Germany and the Aftermath of the Second World War', *Journal of Modern History*, 89, no. 2 (June 2017): 355-387.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: John J. Kulczycki, *Belonging to the Nation: Inclusion and Exclusion in the German-Polish Borderlands, 1939-1951* (Cambridge, MA: 2016); Hugo Service, *Germans to Poles: Communism, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing after the Second World War* (Cambridge: 2013).

<sup>9</sup> One such effort is the project 'Expellees and Ethno-National Categorizations in Europe, 1943-1948', which was launched in September 2021 under my direction, with four years of funding from

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the Academy of Finland. The four-person research team explores the complex ways in the ethnicity and national belonging of select groups of forced migrants uprooted from historically multi-ethnic border regions was defined, perceived and negotiated as a key component of wider projects of nation (re-)building in four European polities – Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Finland – during the transitional ‘postwar moment’ between circa late 1943 and 1948.

<sup>10</sup> For strong examples of such integrative literature, see Jan Plamper, *Das neue Wir: Warum Migration dazugehört. Eine andere Geschichte der Deutschen* (Frankfurt: 2019) and Peter Gatrell, *The Unsettling of Europe: How Migration Reshaped a Continent* (New York: 2019).

<sup>11</sup> For the quotation, see Peter Gatrell, ‘Refugees – What’s Wrong with History’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 30, no. 2, (2017): 184.