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# Negotiating the Aftermath of Forced Migration: A View from the Intersection of War and Migration Studies in the Digital Age

*Christoph Rass & Ismee Tames\**

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**Abstract:** »Aushandlungsprozesse infolge gewaltinduzierter Migration. Perspektiven an der Schnittstelle von Kriegsfolgenforschung, Migrationsforschung und digitalen Methoden«. This introductory essay revisits the handling of mass displacement caused by Nazi Germany and the Second World War during the 1940s and 1950s from the intersection of three corresponding perspectives: reflexive migration research, war studies, and digital methods. Whereas "displaced persons" simply seem to be a given in much of existing research, we propose to reflect on categories, terms, narratives, and approaches to gain a refined understanding of how migration and mobility are negotiated. To this end, the article applies spatial, normative, and chronological models used in forced migration studies, adopts the concept of migration regimes, and opts to deconstruct the production of meaning within institutions created to regulate the aftermath of forced migration. At the same time we engage in the discussion of digital methods and "big data" in historical migration research to explore new ways to use digitized sources in innovative ways to both reconstruct lives and pathways, patterns in decision making and the cultural translation of "migration" into personal files, statistics, and textual as well as visual accounts.

**Keywords:** Forced displacement, reflexive migration studies, mixed methods, migration regimes, refugees, displaced persons, Second World War, forced migration, big data.

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## 1. Introduction

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In 1943, one last attempt for a coordinated rescue effort to save Jewish victims of Nazi Germany collapsed when talks held in the Bahamas on a coordinated rescue operation to deal with the survivors of World War Two utterly failed to formulate a plan (Musch 2018, 111). When the Allies closed in on Nazi Germany from the beaches of Normandy and the plains of Belarus in mid-1944, intel-

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ligence experts anticipated that troops would come across thousands of deported survivors of Nazi genocide, persecution, and exploitation. The humanitarian catastrophe caused by the “Third Reich” and the expectation that something had to be done to care for surviving victims could no longer be avoided. With victory widely anticipated and preparations for the invasion of Western Europe in full swing, planning began in earnest. This was the moment when a new category emerged to describe those who had been uprooted by war and terror, and were now about to be liberated and saved far away from their pre-war homes: displaced persons (DPs) (National Planning Association 1944, 1).

When Germany capitulated in May 1945, experts estimated that between 9.6 and 15 million surviving victims remained in Germany, Austria, and Italy, as well as formerly occupied neighboring countries.<sup>1</sup> When trying to define “displaced populations,” US experts such as Eugene M. Kulischer had originally envisioned a narrow definition centered around forced laborers (Kulischer 1948, 169). However, the gruesome reality of postwar Europe and the actual diversity of those displaced by war and violence made ‘displaced persons’ into the very broad category of those who found themselves outside the boundaries of their home countries and needing assistance to begin rebuilding their lives when returning home or settling elsewhere (Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces 1945). Organizations such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) were created to actively manage humanitarian relief operations. In 1944, it was expected that up to 12 million displaced persons, consisting of “forced labourers in Axis countries, civilian prisoners, war fugitives, and concentration camp internees,” would come under their mandate (Holian 1944, 11).

In order to regulate the consequences of violence-induced mobility and forced migration, “displaced person” became a category distinct from that of “refugee.”<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we distinguish between *being* a refugee or displaced as a consequence of the war and Nazi persecution on the one hand, and *being categorized* as a “refugee” or a “displaced person.” This allows us to focus on the actual process of recognition in which officials matched people’s biographies with status definitions and decided whether a

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates on the number of “displaced persons” vary widely. Susanne Flörke gives numbers between 9.6 and 13.6 million “displaced persons” within the borders of the German Reich and occupied territories. Mark Spoerer calculates that up to 13.5 million people were deported to Germany between 1939 and 1945 as prisoners of war, forced laborers, or inmates of concentrations camps. However, he points out that individuals might have been counted several times in contemporary statistics. Susanne Flörke, “Das DP-Camp Inventory Des International Tracing Service (ITS), Bad Arolsen,” <[https://dpcampinventory.its-arolsen.org/fileadmin/hilfsmittel/Floerke\\_ITS\\_DP-Camp-Inventory.pdf](https://dpcampinventory.its-arolsen.org/fileadmin/hilfsmittel/Floerke_ITS_DP-Camp-Inventory.pdf)> (Accessed July 23, 2018); Spoerer 2001, 211. Holian points out that 55 million people were displaced in Europe alone during 1939 and 1947 (2011, 29).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gatrell puts this in context in chapter three of his seminal monograph (2013, 89-97).

person would fall within the mandate of UNRRA or later the International Refugee Organization (IRO). We also have to ask why a new category was created in the first place; what this change in terminology implied; and how status definitions as well as the practices of categorization changed while the displacement crisis was managed.<sup>3</sup>

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## 2. Repatriation or Resettlement?

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After the end of hostilities and drawing upon the experiences of dealing with forced migration during the interwar years, the Allies first tried to apply pre-war protocols to the handling of “refugees.”<sup>4</sup> One prevalent idea was that refugees would return to their places of origin once the forces that had driven them away were gone. Simultaneously, however, earlier major groups of recognized refugees, such as the “Russian refugees” or the “Armenian refugees,” had not been able to return, and had instead integrated into the societies of their host countries. Similarly, whether or not the “German refugees” of the 1930s would actually return to Germany after the war was still open to question (Gatrell 1987; Ther 2018). Thus, rather than repatriation, resettlement became the dominant experience of refugees (Skran 1998, 185-9; Steiner 2017, 21-31).

In light of these earlier experiences, there was a will not to allow the same to happen at the end of the war. Indeed, many nations had spent a decade fending off those fleeing Nazi persecution, so allowing them to immigrate now would make all those efforts seem at best worthless, and at worst simply wrong. Instead, a rapid process of repatriation was intended to quickly solve the problem (Proudfoot 1957, 189-90; Steiner 2017, 28-9). It was this paradigm that was to profoundly impact which categories, definitions, norms, and practices were introduced and how they were to change over time between ca. 1943 and 1951. The invention of “displaced persons” thus also represented the production of difference with regard to the already established term refugee and its implications: Refugees might have to be resettled; displaced persons were to go home. The majority of those displaced did indeed return to their former locations or were repatriated in the early postwar years – some voluntarily; some by force to the Soviet Union or other countries under Soviet rule. The repatriation rate, however, quickly fell and in 1947, it became clear that over a million people had stayed in Western Europe resisting repatriation while new refugees flocked across the soon to be closed “iron curtain” (Caestecker 2010, 529-35; Cohen

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of labels and forced migration studies, see Elie (2014).

<sup>4</sup> In this text, we distinguish between being a refugee or displaced, and being formally recognized as a refugee or as a displaced person, on the one hand, and being put into the respective categories on the other. This is indicated in the first paragraphs by quotation marks.

2012; Ginsburgs 1957; Gottfried and Alcorn 2001; Jacobmeyer 1985; Marrus 2014).

Since repatriation would not fully address the situation, it became increasingly important for the Western Allies to review and refine the categories of refugee and displaced person, and to design decision-making protocols to determine who was (or was not) eligible for which status (Reinisch 2017, 167). Categorization thus began to carry enormous weight when repatriation ceased to be the standard protocol and longer stays in Western Europe, with a view to entering a resettlement program, became the norm. The process became more complex, required documentation, and hence began to produce a massive paper trail, not only on the politics of defining norms, categories, and protocols, but also on their implementation on a case-level basis (Persian 2012; Rass, Hennies, and Huhn 2018, 204).<sup>5</sup>

The idea of organized resettlement went back to the time of World War One and despite its limited success was further institutionalized by the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (ICR) at a conference in Evian in 1938 (Epstein and Rosen 1997, 137; Bartrop 2018, 100). In 1945, however, questions were raised in the United States about how to deal with “non-repatriable” DPs (Goodell, Mahoney, and Milton 1995, 190; Bon Tempo 2017, 184). In 1946, the option of resettlement resurfaced. While in the process of the cessation of its activities and shortly after having concluded the first resettlement agreements with various Latin American countries, the ICR worked to extend this option to displaced persons unwilling to return home for political reasons.<sup>6</sup>

However, such resettlement required a transition from the realm of the international humanitarian law that defined and protected “refugees” or “displaced persons” to the sphere of national migration policies at a time when many countries were still not welcoming victims of Nazi persecution. They were not considered refugees or displaced persons, but rather were viewed as “immigrants,” thus falling under the discretion of respective immigration laws and policies, which almost always included selecting prospective immigrants (Knox and Kushner 2012; McAdam 2014, 203-14).

Displaced persons thus entered the realm of the selective recruitment of immigrants that did not necessarily afford them humanitarian refugee protection. Instead, recruitment was based on perceived productivity, age, gender, and race, rather than on empathy for the suffering of refugees and their need for safety and a new beginning (von Holleufer 2001; Luciuk 2000; Persian 2012; Proudfoot 1946; Rutland 2014; Urban 2015). Being displaced and being a displaced person thus became two increasingly separate things: an uncertain fate on the one hand; and a recognized and formalized legal category with

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of the different categories of non-repatriable displaced persons, see chapter 4 in Stone (2017).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on the shift of focus from repatriation to resettlement, see Martin (2014).

bearings on future mobility options as well as rights, agency, access to social services, and protection, on the other. In 1947, the first selection missions from Brazil and Venezuela arrived in Europe to recruit immigrants from the pool of displaced persons and soon after the first 861 individuals boarded ships to cross the Atlantic (Clark-Carey 1948; United States Congress. House Committee on Foreign Affairs 1947). The largest resettlement program in modern history had begun (Holian 2011).

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### 3. New Actors, New Policies?

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The task to administer the status and provide care for displaced persons was given to the UNRRA and subsequently transferred to the IRO between 1946 and 1947 (Barnett 2002, 167; Reinisch 2017, 147-76). With a fresh definition of the major categories installed in its founding documents, the IRO was charged with deciding who was a *real* displaced person or refugee, and with making sure war criminals, collaborators, and nationals of former Axis-states did not get protection. These new standards for the registration of displaced persons led to a re-classification of those already registered under the much wider definition applied by UNRRA until 1947.

When major IRO operations wound down in Western Europe in 1951, millions of people had been repatriated, resettled, or were about to be settled in Germany as “*Heimatlose Ausländer*” (“homeless aliens”). Millions of decisions had been made by IRO staff turning people into “displaced persons” or denying them access to this status, and hundreds of thousands of case files had been created to document and administer these proceedings and practices. Institutions emerged that continue to shape the way we think about, and deal with, forced migration today (Gatrell 2013; Malkki 1995).

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### 4. Negotiating Regulation?

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By looking at the actual negotiations between those displaced and those in charge of categorizing and processing “displaced persons,” this volume addresses the normative and institutional framework set up to manage the aftermath of violence-induced mobility in Europe’s early postwar years.<sup>7</sup> By focusing on case files that document how institutions and individuals negotiated categories, categorizations, and access to protection, care, and mobility, we trace the idea of managing migration on the level of individual cases. We propose to enrich research on mass displacement, as developed by refugee studies

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of terminology, see Lischer (2014).

or the study of international migration and refugee law, with ideas and models provided by migration studies as well as war studies, and methods offered by digital history. In doing so, we hope to help unlock the vast holdings of mass data, documenting the largest war-induced humanitarian displacement crisis to date (Kushner 2017, 51-65).<sup>8</sup>

This introduction presents the four entangled topics of this volume: (1) the archives and sources providing mass data on migration gained from individual case documentation; (2) innovative ideas from digital history on how to use such data in new ways; (3) case studies on displacement and its management in the early postwar years; and finally, (4) two papers addressing different subjects from different perspectives to help us avoid essentializing our approach. The mass displacement of the Second World War and its aftermath can be analyzed via models developed in migration studies that differentiate the interwoven layers of the historical process. In our work, we employ three models: (1) the chronology of events; (2) the spatial dimension of violence-induced mobilities; and (3) the legal aspects of managing humanitarian crises.

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## 5. Conceptualizing the Process: Time, Space, and the Law

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### 5.1 A Chronological Model

The production as well as the subsequent handling of mass displacement in postwar Europe can be described in a process-oriented chronological model that, in our case, comprises six overlapping phases (Plesch 2018, 125-40; Rass, Hennies, and Huhn 2018, 193-4). First, the pre-war era consists of (a) the normative categories that evolved in the 1920s and 1930s to define and administer the status of “refugees”; (b) the factors emerging during the 1930s and early 1940s that produced refugees, deportation, and eventually displacement; and (c) the actual events shaping life courses, mirroring individual and collective experiences of displacement.

Second, there is the transition between the liberation of the surviving victims of Nazi persecution between 1944 and 1945, and an emerging postwar Europe. This transition includes changing discourses on victims and perpetrators, as well as the slow decline in war-related hunger, violence, death, and the “movement chaos” of freed survivors (The Royal Institute of International Affairs 1943).<sup>9</sup> During this period, the Allies in Western Europe began to build

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<sup>8</sup> Kushner has argued that the history of refugees has to be included in national narratives. This requires addressing refugee history from many different vantage points, rather than isolating it in “refugee studies.”

<sup>9</sup> The term “movement chaos” actually seems to have originated from the first planning documents created during war time with regard to postwar refugee relief.

a support infrastructure that created physical and normative institutions to deal with the situation (Flörke 2018).

Third, between 1945 and 1946, UNRRA built a more sustainable and powerful infrastructure to care for survivors displaced by wartime events. It also began to fulfill its prime objective of repatriation. Between May and September 1945 alone, it returned more than 30,000 people each month to their pre-war places of residence (Jacobmeyer 1985, 82). Simultaneously, survivors of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, along with those fleeing Communism, began to move West. While approximately 10 million people returned to their pre-war locations, it soon became clear that a significant number of people would resist repatriation as others continued to add to the numbers.

Fourth, this contributed to a policy shift in 1947 from a strategy of repatriation to one of resettlement as a secondary aim of relief operations. In its founding charter, the IRO formally re-defined the categories of displaced person and refugee (The United Nations 1946). Until the end of IRO activity in Europe in 1951, the camp and care facility infrastructure the IRO inherited from UNRRA was expanded and consolidated, livelihoods stabilized, and a routine protocol to deal with those who were granted the status of displaced person became institutionalized. The bureaucracy surrounding the resettlement of displaced persons from Europe across the globe produced data and files on the process itself and on individual DPs. Records were kept, such as the “Care and Maintenance” (CM1) files, shipping lists, and other documents – now preserved in the Arolsen Archives – which were later to be used in historical analysis and legal proceedings.<sup>10</sup> Such documents were created when survivors formally applied for the status of displaced person under the auspices of the IRO – a group of less than 10% of all surviving victims in 1945 (von Holleufer 2001; Flörke 2018).<sup>11</sup> There remains some uncertainty on how many files were preserved and we can only speculate on the factors determining which ones were kept, destroyed, or passed on to other agencies. Although only a fraction of the files survive, this resource still represents the largest single category of case-level sources on the most significant episode of mass displacement in Europe during the 20th century (Stone 2017)

During the fifth phase, active repatriation declined in the early 1950s when the IRO prepared to withdraw from Europe and about a million people had been resettled (Holborn 1956, 433).<sup>12</sup> The IRO’s set of categories and norms were translated into the 1951 Geneva Convention on “refugees.” While the convention was initially created to close the case on postwar refugees and

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<sup>10</sup> See <<https://digitalcollections.its-arolsen.org/030201>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> How many people have to be counted within this group is also uncertain. Von Holleufer speaks of 1.2 million people; Flörke of 1.5 million “displaced persons.”

<sup>12</sup> Holborn gives a number of 1,038,750 individuals who joined the resettlement programs of the IRO.



therefore represented rather exclusive concepts with regard to future refugees and displaced persons, it subsequently provided the basis of the “global refugee regime” of the cold war era (Gibney and Loescher 2010; Goodwin-Gill 2014; Peterson 2017).

Finally, displaced persons began to settle and integrate into the receiving countries and worked to develop and stabilize their postwar lives as immigrants in Australia, Canada, Venezuela, and other countries around the globe. However, a significant share of the DPs, called the “hard core,” as well as some who for various reasons chose to stay, settled in Germany, Austria, or elsewhere in Europe (Harding 1994, 183-4).

## 5.2 A Spatial Model

This process-oriented model indicates the spatial dimension of the process. On an abstract level, being a refugee or being displaced can be conceptualized as taking place within three different spaces. The first is the space of origin and/or belonging where future displaced persons reside prior to the events that either take them or drive them out (Weima and Hyndman 2019). Usually, it is assumed that this space equals a nation-state and that displacement constitutes movement across an international border. This perception of course originates from the nation-state paradigm governing migration policies and is reflected in the current category of “internally displaced persons,” which cuts all refugees not crossing international borders off from international protection (Hansen 2014, 257-8; Jacobsen 2014; Kälin 2014; Lee 1996; Maley 2003).<sup>13</sup>

As can be seen from Nazi-instigated aggression and deportations, as well as the killing programs from 1938 onwards, national borders can become obsolete when politics, violence, and war distort geopolitical power structures. However, borders may be reinstated into the *status quo ante* or modified as an outcome of war and/or peacemaking. Subsequently, they may determine in unexpected ways who is perceived as a refugee or as displaced, and who is not.<sup>14</sup> Often, the ambiguities of reality defy the seemingly unambiguous categories and protocols defining the status of groups within migration policies and law. Thus, spaces cannot be regarded as static containers, but rather must be treated as produced and changeable when events causing violence-induced mobilities unfold (Vieira and Nunes 2020).

Outside of their space of origin, displaced persons are foreigners and do not enjoy the rights of nationals or the protection the state offers to its citizens.

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<sup>13</sup> Lee argues that the crossing of an international border was not a formally required element to become a recognized displaced person at first: “Even during the early years of the United Nations, the term ‘refugees’ included also the meaning of internally displaced persons” (1996, 31). A formal definition stating that victims of forced migration became refugees only after they crossed an international border was installed by UNHCR in 1953.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of borders in refugee and forced migration studies, see Hansen (2014).

Being placed into camps for the purpose of detention, extermination, or exploitation within the former borders of the victims' home countries, now under Nazi rule, or elsewhere in the sphere of German occupation, was a key element of the initial displacement. Subsequent liberation still left them displaced, albeit framed differently. The space of displacement – as the space in which the violence causing the displacement is absent due to geographical distance or changing conditions – can thus be described as an *in-between*: a space without direct persecution, but also without sustainable protection or permanent rights of residence (Maley 2003). People who evade threat through mobility and are labeled “refugees” are often thought to cross into such spaces, where they tend to be seen as unwanted intruders and a burden. “Displaced persons,” however, are imagined as brought or moved into these spaces by force (Wetzell 2018). Refugees or displaced persons are only meant to stay in the *in-between* for as long as the reasons for their flight persist. This idea paves the way for the concept of repatriation after the grounds for displacement have disappeared (Cohen 2008).

Of course, *in-between* spaces are burdened with the care and protection for refugees, while at the same time refugees may aspire neither to return home nor to stay in such spaces. The third spatial category, therefore, can be described as a place providing options – even if only imagined – for more permanent settlement. These spaces are often labeled *receiving societies*. The transfer into such spaces is represented by concepts such as resettlement and asylum. *In-between* and receiving spaces often come into conflict, as the former want to rid themselves of refugees while the latter are reluctant to admit them (Holian 2011). Moreover, governments in the spaces of origin can demand the return of their subjects, as the Soviet Union did when negotiating mandatory repatriation for its citizens with the Western Allies (Bernstein 2019; Eschebach, Hammermann, and Rahe 2016). To sum up, it seems easier to forge coalitions favoring repatriation than sustainable resettlement.

This setting contributes to the prolonged presence of victims of violence-induced mobility in the *in-between* spaces where camps are often set up to control, administer, or manage stasis and movement. Additionally, it can result in settlement *sur place* outside camp infrastructures when the *in-between* host turns into a receiving society. While this model suggests that the three spaces are clearly separated, they are not distinct. Institutional, organizational, normative and social links, networks, and processes reach across them and the negotiation of movement or stasis almost always links various places and actors within different spaces (Weima and Hyndman 2019). The specific case discussed here is rather unique, in the sense that the area of displacement covered the territory of several countries, which had fallen under German occupation or dominance. After liberation, this space changed its character and those areas in which most survivors were located – the former Axis-heartlands Germany, Austria, and Italy – became the *in-between* space.

The decision-making process regarding to which of the three spaces the refugees or displaced persons are to be sent or kept, is thus always important to the regulation of displacement and always includes elements of mobilization and de-mobilization. However, decision making is also central to migrants attempting to negotiate their safety and future being. Camps, for instance, do not only bear significance as places for immobilization and control – or care and safety. Camps are also places in which crucial negotiations often physically take place between individual migrants or groups of migrants, the institutions of displacement management, and a diverse set of third parties (Gatrell 2013, 107-15). Flows of knowledge within organizations and within groups and networks of displaced persons link distant actors across time and space to these negotiations. Simultaneously, people will be constantly trying to leave displacement behind in search of more permanent options to settle and rebuild their lives (Rass, Hennies, and Huhn 2018, 230). Casefiles such as the CM1-documents created by the IRO thus provide a case-by-case record of the sequence of events and negotiations of status and mobility, including the spatial dimension of both processes.

However, camps and camp infrastructure should not be essentialized as the spaces assigned to refugees or displaced persons. A fair share of them will temporarily or permanently reside outside of camp infrastructures and/or live outside the protocols and paths set up by international organizations, national bureaucracies, or the law (Grossmann 2009). Camps, moreover, can only be fully understood in their complex interconnectedness and contexts, constituted by institutional frameworks and social interactions. We need an integrated approach if we are to understand the interplay between movement and the spatial stasis of “refugees” or “displaced persons,” the politics and practices of mobilization and immobilization, migrants’ aspirations to move or stay, and the corresponding ideas about moving people or keeping them in a place present in organizations managing refugees or displacement (Hoerder 2013). This centers around the conflict between the aim to govern or manage violence-induced migration in accordance with policies put in place by dominant power structures versus the autonomy of people on the move trying to better their lives under the threat of violence.

### 5.3 A Legal or Normative Model

The legal or normative model of forced migration is intertwined with the temporal and spatial models outlined above. The management of displacement takes place across three major spheres of law: individual human rights; international humanitarian law; and national law (Goodwin-Gill 2014). At this point, we will focus on how reactions to violence-induced mass displacement on the level of international norms and institutions evolved and how they framed categories such as “refugee” and “displaced person.” Significant changes in the

normative framework and their translation into policies and practices during this crucial period can be pointed out on two levels: a smaller timeframe between 1945 and 1951; and the longer period ranging from the interwar years to a prolonged postwar period. In these two timeframes, three major developments had transformed international refugee policies.

First, as discussed above, repatriation shifted to resettlement and finally settlement by the beginning of the 1950s (Frank 2017).<sup>15</sup> The United Nations had not only taken up the League of Nations' responsibility for refugees and displaced persons; it had also learned that active intervention into humanitarian crises required a much larger resource base and degree of institutionalization of relief operations than deemed necessary before the war or in its immediate aftermath. The transition from situational reaction to a permanent responsibility to deal with the plight of refugees and displaced persons finally materialized (Gibney and Loescher 2010, 6).

Second, how the international community reacted to mass displacement after the Second World War – at least in Europe – may be viewed as the major transformation in international refugee policies of the 20th century. The initial set of refugee policies on national and international levels (Manasek 2017, 68-9) had grown out of the experience of the First World War and its aftermath (Marrus 2002; Petrovic 2015). These policies pondered ideas of population exchange and resettlement, and defined – in a series of conventions under the auspices of the League of Nations – the status of a refugee in reaction to major humanitarian disasters such as the Armenian Genocide, the Russian Civil War, and eventually the political and racial persecution in Nazi Germany (Gatrell 2005, 83; Petrovic 2015, 114-9).

However, as the third and final development, this system failed to solve a key issue of refugee policies: the conflict of interest between those states that provided immediate shelter to refugees in the vicinity of war zones or persecution, and those countries further away that tried to keep refugees away rather than to offer places of settlement. This coincided with the notion that refugees would only find shelter abroad temporarily, but would be repatriated or return to their home countries after the end of the immediate crisis or conflict. The system finally broke down when more and more countries closed their doors when confronted with the growing number of refugees from Germany during the late 1930s (Metzger 2017).

In 1938, the conference at Evian marked the end of that process when all but two of the participating nations declined to help.<sup>16</sup> This breakdown, combined with the growing number of refugees from Nazi-held territory, left neighboring countries with a “refugee-problem” and blocked major escape routes from

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<sup>15</sup> For a broader discussion of these three concepts, see Hammond (2014); Hovil (2014); van Selm (2014).

<sup>16</sup> For a brief survey, see Levene (2017).

Germany and Europe (Bartrop 2018). This failure to react to the inhuman and murderous policies of totalitarian regimes – together with the shocking realities of genocide, mass murder, and mass displacement in Europe and beyond as a consequence of the war – did not prevent the failure of the Bermuda Conference of 1943 as another attempt for a coordinated response. Finally, however, it did prompt Western Allies to develop their multi-level approach at the end of the war: hands-on humanitarian relief and the normative as well as organizational building of international institutions (Ruthström-Ruin 1993, 17).

Once the mass displacement of the Second World War was considered to have been largely dealt with, the Geneva Convention on Refugees of 1951 was intended to close the case (Scher and Scherschel 2019).<sup>17</sup> The general framework of the convention called upon the international community to adhere to principles of family unification, the procurement of travel documents, and cooperation with regard to asylum, resettlement, and welfare for refugees and stateless persons (Steiner 2017, 22-3). However, the actual convention only defined the refugee as a category in relation to events that occurred before 1951. It thus marked a leap backwards into the pre-war logic of refugee policies (Gibney and Loescher 2010, 9-10). While the persistence of social and political circumstances created further refugees, the transformation of the IRO into the UNHCR and the development of the initial convention into a more open, normative definition of refugee status in international law led to a “global refugee regime” deemed fit to address future crises (Loescher, Betts, and Milner 2008). However, it was not until 1967 that the UN “Protocol relating to the status of Refugees” finally eliminated the temporal and spatial restrictions of the recognition of refugees (Davies 2007).

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## 6. Defining Categories: Practicing Categorization

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A review of the pre- and postwar definitions of “refugee” and “displaced person” can reveal the transformation of what qualified an individual to be recognized as a refugee. The term “refugee” as defined by the League of Nations after the First World War referred to displacement that had already happened, and had resulted in forced migration. The “Armenian Refugees” were survivors of the Armenian Genocide who had managed to flee and raise the attention of Western powers. The “Russian Refugees” of the interwar years had moved away from the revolution, the civil war, violence, and starvation in Russia and had become a significant group of victims of forced migration in many European countries. During the 1930s, the status and rights of “Refugees

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<sup>17</sup> For a broader discussion of statelessness after 1945, see Edwards and Tennant (2014); Edwards and van Waas (2014).

from Germany” had to be regulated when more and more people moved out of the “Third Reich” (Jaeger 2001). In each case, not a general definition of what constituted refugee-status emerged. Rather, each group was identified, recognized, and labeled separately. Both in documents by the League of Nations and in broader legal discussions, refugees were considered to be individuals without the protection of their home states or other countries.<sup>18</sup>

It was not until 1938 that a more inclusive and forward-looking definition gradually appeared. In February 1938, the “Convention Concerning the Status of Refugees coming from Germany” cited persecution as a defining criterion of refugee status, excluding those who left “for reasons of purely personal convenience.”<sup>19</sup> Later, at the conference in Evian in July the same year, the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (ICR) tried to include *future* refugees in their definition, pointing at those “who must emigrate on account of their political opinions, religious beliefs or racial origin” – a resolution that remained largely ineffective.<sup>20</sup> Both lines of thought constructed refugees as actors who set themselves in motion and crossed international borders as a result of persecution by their home government. A broader approach, defining refugees as those in distress because of persecution inside *and* outside their home countries, questioned the older principle of regulating only specifically defined cases of forced migration after people had already fled across international borders.<sup>21</sup>

In the closing weeks of the Second World War in Europe, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) adopted its own definitions of “refugees” and “displaced persons.” Refugees were defined as “civilians not outside the national boundaries of their country” on the move due to wartime events and circumstances. As these refugees had never crossed an international border, they would neither have to be repatriated, nor become an international concern. Displaced persons, however, were defined as “civilians outside the national boundaries of their country” due to wartime events who were “desirous but unable to return home or find homes without assistance.”<sup>22</sup> The term refugee was thus very narrowly defined, while displaced person served as a broad category for surviving victims of Nazi persecution all destined for repatriation (Knox and Kushner 2012, 10). The problem of about 11 million

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<sup>18</sup> See Marrus (2002).

<sup>19</sup> This instrument thus foreshadowed the distinction between “true” and “false” refugees or asylum claims that continue to haunt us today (see Poutrus 2019).

<sup>20</sup> The resolution was adopted by the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR) in Evian on July 14, 1938 (see also Wyman 1985).

<sup>21</sup> For instance, the FDR Resolution at Evian, in Marrus (2002, 298).

<sup>22</sup> Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, Memorandum No. 39, Revised Version of 16.4.1945, S. 2. Internationaler Suchdienst / International Tracing Service, Bad Arolsen (ITS) 6.1.1/82495540/ITS Digital Archive.

uprooted ethnic Germans and a large number of internally displaced Germans was sidelined.<sup>23</sup>

When the IRO took over from UNRRA in June 1947, the new agency brought with it its own set of definitions (The United Nations 1946). The constitution of the IRO defined a refugee as “a person who has left, or who is outside of, his country of nationality or former habitual residence,”<sup>24</sup> on the condition that the respective person was either a non-German victim of the Nazi regime and its allies, a victim of the Spanish Falange recognized as a refugee prior to the Second World War, or an unaccompanied minor. Former inhabitants of Germany were only to be recognized as refugees if they were of Jewish origin, foreigners, or had become victims of Nazi persecution and were thus unable to return to their postwar lives. Conversely, the category “displaced person” was narrowed to imply those deported or otherwise actively moved out of their home countries by the Axis powers as forced laborers or as part of political or racial persecution. The standard protocol for displaced persons was still repatriation unless a DP could offer a valid objection to being sent home (The United Nations 1946).

The Refugee Convention adopted in 1951 finally abandoned the category of “displaced persons” and spoke of “refugees” as those “forcibly displaced during the Second World War.” Although it only referred to events prior to 1951, the Geneva Convention established the groundwork for our current understanding of a refugee as a person who,

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2020)

As a legal category, the displaced person thus became consigned to the past,<sup>25</sup> the term “refugee” in this definition essentially covering both former definitions. However, during the 1980s, the term “internally displaced person” emerged to create a category for refugees who stayed within their home country (Juss 2006; Orchard 2018).

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<sup>23</sup> “UNRRA is not expected to liquidate the refugee problem [...], its work is charity.” (Stefansky 1945, 72).

<sup>24</sup> The treaty repository of the United Nations Organization provides a true digital copy of the Constitution of the IRO, <[https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1948/08/19480820%2007-01%20AM/Ch\\_V\\_1p.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1948/08/19480820%2007-01%20AM/Ch_V_1p.pdf)> (Accessed September 23, 2020). The quote is located on page 12 of the document (see also Tiedemann 2016).

<sup>25</sup> For more information on the usage and concept of the term “displaced persons” outside of Europe, see Fuchs and Epstein (2016).

UNRRA as well as the IRO thus operated in Europe and elsewhere during the late 1940s with rather different definitions of the categories of the people they were supposed to serve. While both sets of definitions initially seem concise and pertinent, on closer inspection they prove to be loaded with ambiguities and blurriness. UNRRA applied the category of “displaced person” rather broadly, possibly because its task was to organize transport and care for survivors only for shorter periods between registration and repatriation. The category of “refugee” as defined by SHAEF was of no concern to UNRRA since Germans were outside its mandate.

The IRO’s definitions were equally ambiguous, albeit with a new operational paradigm: The decision of who “would be within the mandate” of the organization would not be summarily and loosely applied, as was the case with UNRRA. Instead, each individual case would have to be decided based on the norms laid down in the IRO charter and explained to case handlers in a detailed handbook. The whole process of assessment and decision making was to be thoroughly documented and checked. This required the production of case files and marked the advent of individualized decisions on whether refugee status was granted or denied. Each case turned into a complex negotiation between visible and invisible actors within a political, legal, institutional, and often deeply personal framework (Ruthström-Ruin 1993).

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## 7. Governance vs. Autonomy: Negotiating Status

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The decisions reached by IRO eligibility officers were monitored by team leaders; revised if contested; documented in CM/1 files; and sometimes discussed between the eligibility officers on the ground and their superiors within the organization. This practice meant that decisions often departed from the normative mandate and sometimes even the guidelines for their interpretation, as provided in the handbook written for the field officers (The International Refugee Organization 1951). An analysis of large samples of individual CM/1 case files might very well unveil patterns and trends formed by the practices of decision making that differed from the ground rules laid out by the normative framework of the IRO. Simultaneously, applicants for DP status learned how to read the IRO and their case officers. Individuals, families, and communities learned how to align their biographies with “the mandate” of the IRO. Organizations intervening on behalf of specific groups of DPs not only used such knowledge, but also actively disseminated it.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ongoing research by Lukas Hennies from Osnabrück University looks into institutional knowledge production by eligibility officers and their negotiations with applicants for DP status. See <[https://www.geschichte.uni-osnabrueck.de/hennies\\_lukas/profil.html](https://www.geschichte.uni-osnabrueck.de/hennies_lukas/profil.html)> (Accessed September 25, 2020).



It became an important skill to be able to navigate the written and unwritten rules when applying for DP status or trying to reach a specific destination during resettlement. This held even more true if applicants stemmed from a group formally placed outside the mandate of the IRO, such as ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) or collaborators – for instance, former members of the foreign units of the Waffen-SS (*Fremdvölkische Verbände der Waffen-SS*). “Learning the language” and spotting loopholes could dramatically alter one’s chances of success: Soviet citizens from Azerbaijan learned to avoid mandatory repatriation by presenting their biographies in such a way that it made them pass as Turks.<sup>27</sup> Former members of the “Latvian Legion” (the 15th and the 19th Divisions of the Waffen-SS) entered the mandate of the IRO as “anti-communists,” thus avoiding repatriation (Klemp 2014; Michaelis 2009; Wezel 2016).<sup>28</sup> Refugees from Czechoslovakia who came to Germany for the first time after the communist coup of February 1948 were soon granted DP status with little scrutiny, even though formally, they were clearly “not within the mandate” (Cohen 2012, 46-7; Comte 2020). Traces and echoes of this complex negotiation process can be found in the vast numbers of case files produced by UNRRA and the IRO as well as ego-documents from displaced persons and staff members alike.

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## 8. A New Reading of Document

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In the almost 75 years of research that now exists on the matter, two perspectives have become established with regard to providing survivors of Nazi persecution and deportation as well as refugees newly arriving in “the West” from now communist Eastern Europe with places to rebuild their lives. On the one hand, some of the early research relied on documents and sources of the organizations and political institutions involved, but not on the actual case files.<sup>29</sup> This created a top-down perspective that was corroborated by books, articles, and reports authored by a number of leading figures from the organizations involved and published during the 1950s and 1960s (Holborn 1952; Dresden Lane 1952). On the other hand, the individual or collective experiences of DPs themselves have become important in telling the story of postwar displacement. This approach includes autobiographies and biographical studies, as well as collective and individual accounts.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the history of DP camps became embed-

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<sup>27</sup> CM1-File Abdulchalik Aleskerow, 3.2.1.1 / 78872004/ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

<sup>28</sup> For a rather one-sided survey that does not mention issues of collaboration, see Tegeler (2007).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Cohen (2012).

<sup>30</sup> For example, Luciuk’s testimony as articulated in his *Searching For Place* became well-recognized and widely used in research settings while discussing the compensation of former forced laborers coerced by Nazi Germany, which became more prevalent in the early

ded in the German tradition of regional or local historiography, often including the settlement of former displaced persons as “*Heimatlose Ausländer*” (“homeless aliens”) (Dölger 1996; Jacobmeyer 1985; Seipp 2009; Wagner and Kenkmann 1997). At the same time, the origins of displaced persons abroad have become part of the historical narratives of receiving societies that accepted displaced persons as immigrants after the war (von Holleufer 2001).

In these lines of research, case files were mostly read to gather information on their protagonists.<sup>31</sup> Yet, there is also recent research on displaced persons that does not mention the Arolsen Archives or the case files at all (Böhler 2020). The question thus remains open as to what these hundreds of thousands of case files, documenting how the IRO and other organizations processed displaced persons, can tell us. Such files record life-event data and autobiographical accounts, as well as the judgements of field officers when they tried to decide cases. As such, they reveal how institutions and individuals negotiated status, options, and chances; the practices of decision making; the pathways opened or closed; the choices and outcomes; and who would move on to resettlement or would be left stranded.

How can we approach this trove of documents with fresh ideas, perspectives, and questions? What tools are necessary to unlock the potential of those archives as historical research becomes increasingly digital? How can a dialogue between those creating tools for digital research and those in neighboring disciplines also working on displacement or forced displacement contribute to a field that, thus far, has mainly focused on people on the move as victims of Nazi persecution?

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## 9. From Documents to Digital Data

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In 1948, the International Tracing Service (ITS) began to collect and store individual case files and other related documents in an internationally coordinated attempt to institutionalize the systematic documentation of the suffering and fates of victims in order to provide information on and for the survivors as well as evidence against the perpetrators. Over the decades, the ITS gathered one of the largest archives on Nazi victims (Borggräfe 2019). Moreover, the ITS was an early adopter of new technology, converting large card file indexes of victims’ names as well as other documents into digital formats to improve its

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2000s (Borggräfe 2014). Prominent examples are the Zwangsarbeit Archiv (see <<https://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/>> [Accessed September 25, 2020] and von Plato, Leh, and Thonfeld 2010). Of course, most interviewees would have been “displaced persons” at one time, and many do indeed also have CM1 files at the Arolsen Archives. Within the context of von Plato’s research, however, they were framed as “forced laborers.”

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Feuchert et al. (2015).

workflow.<sup>32</sup> The ITS – renamed the Arolsen Archives in 2019 – has more recently begun to put a substantial part of its vast collection online, building one of the largest free access online archives on Nazi persecution and its aftermath.<sup>33</sup> Unconstrained by any national archival laws, the archive continuously expanded its Digital Collections Online program. In 2019, for instance, it uploaded hundreds of thousands of case files created by UNRRA and the IRO on displaced persons during the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>34</sup> This program is a cornerstone of a wider movement to digitize historical sources on the Holocaust, refugees, and displaced persons, as well as other victims of Nazi persecution, led by key institutions such as Yad Vashem, the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum, NIOD, and the Wiener Library.<sup>35</sup> It has also been part of the EU-funded European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI), which started to build tools for improved access to archival holdings and digitization, data extraction, and analysis of historical documents (Vanden Daelen 2019). An increasing proportion of the Arolsen Archives' material is available as digital scans enriched with machine readable meta-data. Data extracted from the files are collated in machine-readable formats by the Arolsen Archives and various research projects.<sup>36</sup>

This massive drive towards the digitalization and online availability of historical documents opened a wide range of possibilities in research and education. First, information on individuals can be gathered from a vast and growing number of sources ever more efficiently. Documenting an individual's fate by piecing together various snippets of evidence with the help of interlinked databases and archives improves research and remembrance. Second, when scrutinized via the data- or text-mining tools that these vast new digital history machine-readable datasets on people, places, and events provide, new insights into structures, path dependencies, and patterns of the past emerge.<sup>37</sup> Thus, documents on Nazi victims can be used not only in various new and innovative ways to reconstruct biographies, but also to build complex dynamic models of historical processes based on the processing of life-event data extracted from machine-readable historical sources.<sup>38</sup> Combined, these two levels of analysis support multidimensional views on micro- and macro-histories of the manifold

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<sup>32</sup> The central name index alone contains well above 50 million entries.

<sup>33</sup> <<https://digitalcollections.its-arolsen.org/>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

<sup>34</sup> <<https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/archive/3-2-1/?p=1>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Such questions were discussed at the conference "Tracing and Documenting Victims of Nazi Persecution: History of the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Context" held in Bad Arolsen in October 2018. See <<https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8071>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> An example here is the Project Transnational Remembrance of Nazi Forced Labor and Migration, jointly conducted by NIDO, IMIS, and the Arolsen Archives, see <<https://transrem.arolsen-archives.org/>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> For a broader discussion, see Manning (2013).

<sup>38</sup> This includes documents produced before as well as after 1945.

processes triggered by forced migration and its aftermath (Bondzio, Rass, and Tames 2016).

Combining process-generated sources from before 1945 (which document persecution, deportation, and killing mostly from the perpetrators' perspective) with material generated post-1945 by institutions dealing with the consequences of such crimes achieves another change of perspective: from a focus on the time of the persecution itself, to linking historical processes across the watershed of 1945, often perceived as a "zero hour" (Chin and Fehrenbach 2009). For Holocaust studies, this entailed looking at biographical and intergenerational processes of coping with loss and survival (Kushner 2006; Pagenstecher, and Wein 2017). Historical research moved away from reconstructing war crimes, deportation, and slave labor, to a more holistic view focused on victims, perpetrators, accountability, and reparation after the war and the end of Nazi rule (Borggräfe 2014). The study of war and violence began to take the long-term effects of trauma and suffering into account, as well as the multitude of institutional and biographical continuities across 1945 (Fulbrook 2011; Withuis and Mooji 2010). Research on international law and justice has not only scrutinized how postwar societies dealt with war crimes and genocide – as well as the guilt and responsibilities of perpetrators, collaborators, and bystanders in Germany and Europe – but has also placed findings in the global context of coping with unprecedented atrocities of the 1930s and 1940s (von Linggen, Gestwa, and Wegner 2014). The study of deportation, displacement, and its aftermath garnered renewed attention from refugee studies and migration research when scholars in both fields began to look at the 20th century as a "century of refugees" and forced migration spanning the chronological, geographical, and cultural divides that structure conventional historical narratives (Gatrell 2013; Oltmer 2019; Ther 2018).<sup>39</sup>

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## 10. Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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Inspiring exchanges at the intersection of the various disciplines looking at displacement and refugees in Europe and beyond have induced new momentum and fresh perspectives, with institutions such as the Arolsen Archives becoming hubs for the study of violence-induced mobility and subsequent further migration as part of resettlement or repatriation (Bondzio, Rass, and Tames 2016). Building upon this momentum, this volume discusses two interdisciplinary perspectives:

- 1) How can current theoretical debates within the field of migration studies contribute to research on displaced persons? Obviously, the history of

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<sup>39</sup> See also, for instance, Siedler and Mindler-Steiner (2017).

displacement during and after the Second World War has long been part of refugee and forced migration studies, and has been widely discussed as a formative period of the “global refugee regime.” We will thus focus on more recent trends that are part of the reflexive turn, questioning the construction and use of categories in migration studies and its potential impact on how we understand displaced persons, the management of mass displacement, and the negotiation of its aftermath.

- 2) How can the digitization of archives and research methods impact the study of forced migration? Digital methods are well-established in the closely related field of Holocaust studies, and data-driven research has become part of many disciplines. What happens if such methods and tools meet the digitized and/or machine-readable historical sources now available to the study of displaced persons?

Among others, Nina Glick-Schiller points out that the nationalistic and ethnocentric epistemology that had become an unquestioned framework for the study of migration was fundamentally flawed and only served to reproduce established power hierarchies. As Glick-Schiller demonstrates, migration studies have begun to leave their “methodological nationalism” behind (Glick Schiller 2018). Taking a “realist” stance and studying human mobility in a setting dominated by the “nation-state” prevents a systematic questioning of the legal and political categories produced within this setting (Rass 2020). Contemporary refugee studies have, in part, strongly contested such settings.<sup>40</sup> In historical migration research, the deconstruction of terms and their meanings has also been firmly established (Nair 2013, 31). All three trends taken together have led to a growing strand of research that analyzes the production of categories as a social practice in order to better understand how mobility, migration, and belonging are produced and negotiated (Poutrus 2019).

In the broader field of migration studies, the strong drive to thoroughly question key sociological concepts such as “migration,” “culture,” or “integration” has, starting around 2014, ushered in the reflexive turn. Janine Dahinden has argued that migration studies reproduce differences rooted in the concepts of the nation-state, thus perpetually excluding those categorized as the “migration-other” (Dahinden 2016, 2207). Boris Nieswand and Heike Drotbohm urged for renewed empirical research that breaks the cycle of reproducing the “migrant-other” (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014). While Anna Amelina calls for a combination of social constructivism, praxeology, and the study of knowledge and culture to understand the production of “migrants” (Amelina 2017). Similarly inspiring research uses the concept of cultural translation to better understand the transfer of cultural concepts between languages or socie-

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<sup>40</sup> For instance, see the contributions to TRANSIT MIGRATION Forschungsgruppe (2007); Tsianos and Hess (2010).

ties, and the translation of concepts between different systems, such as law, politics, public discourse, and/or science (Kaufmann 2017; Rass and Huhn 2018; Robertson 2019). They all aim to deconstruct the relationship between the study of migration and the politics of migration, thus fostering a growing sensibility for the difference between the deconstruction and the reproduction of legal/political categories (Dahinden 2016). A next step could draw from anthropological perspectives, explaining the cultural sedimentation of ideas of “belonging” or “mobility,” or of being a “refugee,” offering “refuge,” or being “displaced” (Dahinden, Fischerm, and Menet 2020; Junuzi 2019).

This turn in migration studies could open a clearer path toward understanding the impact of categorization on human lives as well as the distribution of power and agency between those categorizing and those categorized, the logics and casualties, as well as the consequences of such labeling. Moreover, it may inspire scrutiny of the production of migration in the production of knowledge, meaning, categories, norms, cultural framings, and social practices as a precondition of any outright empirical or positivist reconstruction, description, or narrative of migration. It also urges us to accept societies as units of observation, rather than “migrants,” “refugees,” or “displaced persons” on the one hand, and organizations, institutions, governments, and states on the other. It calls for a fresh perspective on societies and individuals confronted with human mobility and migration-induced social change. The reflexive turn in migration studies can thus help bridge the divide between state- and/or policy-centered research on the one hand, and migrant-centered research on the other.

When we take into account the social translations that occur as stasis, mobility, belonging, exclusion, and the rights that are negotiated in migration regimes, we create new dynamics in the search for alternative approaches and critically revisit long-established paradigms: think of the term international migration, which makes all migrations and mobilities not crossing international borders not a concern of migration studies; definitions of the refugee and the internally displaced person that create devastating differences between how we think and act towards humans thrown into this or the other category; the global hegemony *per se* of Western concepts of migration, refugeedom, belonging, or rights, legal and illegal migration. We need to develop an understanding of migration as negotiated between complex sets of actors in layered frameworks and contexts. Only then can we rethink earlier notions of “migration regimes,” not as existing regulatory institutions, but rather as an arena of negotiation in which people on the move are not just objects of policies, but subjects with agency. Migration regimes are thus understood as a mode of observation, rather than as a system built to regulate mobility (Pott, Rass, and Wolff 2018).

This prompts us to look at human mobility and its construction as migration as two facets of the same process. Within this process, various actors, including the researcher and the migrant, claim presence and relevance to maintain or achieve positions of power via which to gain agency in the processes of catego-

rization and regimentation. One important part of this process is the negotiation of the meaning of migration for societies. For research, the challenge lies in centering on interactions; their forms, forums, and formats; their cultural and normative framings; and finally, the distribution of agency as the core component of the migration regime. The migration regime in turn is conceived of as an arena shaped by conflicting communications and negotiations as well as power asymmetries. We suggest turning this agenda into a methodologically sound research design by focusing on core actors and layers of practice across time, space, and institutions. This allows us to structure and limit a potentially endless constellation of interactions, as well as to render a balanced analysis of inherently unbalanced power relations (Rass and Wolff 2018).

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## 11. A Reflexive Turn in Historical Migration Studies

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As discussed above, the attempts of governments, societies, and international institutions – as well as non-governmental organizations and the millions of people uprooted by war and persecution to cope with displacement on unprecedented scales while none of the protocols established to deal with refugees appear to work – provides an urgent impulse to try seeing these events from a perspective inspired by the reflexive turn in migration studies. We have seen how politics, definitions, categories, and practices can, via processes of enquiry, change learning and policy making within a matter of months or a few years. We have seen how this process fits into, but also fundamentally alters, the path-dependencies that govern the policies that evolved and were directed at coping with the consequences of forced migration throughout the 20th century. We are aware that learning processes, knowledge production, interactions, and social practices within organizations as well as in communities were an important factor in the negotiation of mobility options for “displaced persons,” as were the interactions between the parties involved. We are also aware that the production of categories, terms, and meanings in the medium of interaction – the spoken and the written word – deserve renewed research attention.

The papers collected in this volume take up such questions on two levels. First, several contributions start from a close reading of qualitative sources related to individual incidents of violence-induced migrations of various types. They deal with case files and bureaucratic proceedings, the negotiation of status, options, and chances, but also with migrants’ self-representations, memories, and narratives. The observation of practices within a migration process or a migration system unites this rather varied set of essays. Another group of papers point out ways to move on from qualitative observations toward the use of mass data. These contributions thus address the consequences of digitizing sources and research practices, urging a renewed debate about the relationship

between the qualitative search for meaning and the structural analysis of patterns hidden in mass data (Manderscheid 2016).

Second, the reflexive turn challenges (or may indeed be challenged) by the growing importance of “big data” in migration research.<sup>41</sup> The challenge faced here stems from the long-established tradition to construct or reconstruct “migration” – again understood as a cipher for a multitude of things – via statistical data.<sup>42</sup> Critics maintain that when working with statistics, producing maps and graphs, we are simply visualizing how a powerful actor makes his world, be it in tables and numbers or maps and infographics (Risam 2019). The belief in the objective character of figures is deeply entrenched, yet their political character is less often discussed. As critical migration studies deconstruct the statistical production of migration and its categories, digital and digitized data become even more relevant, latterly as “big data” paired with “artificial intelligence” (Ajana 2015).

In the future, researching migration and society based on big data generated by social media or “the Web” will be the reality.<sup>43</sup> Simultaneously, text mining in vast vaults of digitized documents and sources promises to open insights into the cultural production of meaning that have thus far remained hidden. So, paradoxically, as we begin to question data production as another social translation that leads us to reproduce political categories in our research, we are faced with yet more data that seemingly allows us to model social processes in more detail than ever (Rass and Bondzio 2020). The advent of big data in migration studies not only confronts us with the opening of a “digital divide” in research – who is able to handle and afford to work with such sources. Rather, it also requires that we are not seduced by it and, as a result, view it uncritically. As Rob Kitchin or Fluvio Mazzocchi recently noted, in order to work with big data, we always need to consider both the visible and hidden paradigms that create it. It does not allow us to do empirical research in a perfect and authentic “data double” of reality (Kitchin 2014; Mazzocchi 2015).

Re-thinking how we can work with mass or big data in migration research may be worth the effort. Seeing this from a historian’s vantage point and adopting a relative definition of big data, the ways now open to us to work with digital or digitized resources may enable a dual use of data. The 19th and 20th centuries have left us with a yet-to-be salvaged trove of data produced in bureaucratic processes connected to the production of migration. While we have only been able to use such data in small samples or for qualitative research before, new methods of digitization and data extraction now permit us to build complex,

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<sup>41</sup> Patrick Manning discusses “historical big data” as part of global history (Manning 2013).

<sup>42</sup> The politics of quantifying migration or diversity are strongly questioned in recent research. See, for instance, Egbertsen and Kennedy (2020); Heller and Pécoud (2020); Kunz (2020); Rocha and Aspinall (2020).

<sup>43</sup> Consequences for the study of history are discussed in Milligan (2019).



machine-readable models based on such data at reasonable cost, both in terms of budget and time. Such models are not merely records of facts; they are also records of the production of meaning and knowledge on micro- and macro-scales. In short, we can break free of the statistics produced and instead analyze the knowledge production itself that brings about those statistics (Rass and Bondzio 2020). Personal files or card file indexes, for instance, can now be scrutinized on the level of time-stamped individual acts of datafication, knowledge, or meaning production. This may improve reflexive and critical attempts to reconstruct those social processes from which the data or files stem. It also provides us with new micro-level information on how categories are formed, applied, and negotiated, and how they change through the recorded practices – even when, on the normative level, nothing seems to change at all (Bondzio and Rass 2018; Rass and Bondzio 2019). Data then is about knowledge and meaning, and not only a seemingly objective description of reality.

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## 12. A Mix of Methods in This Volume

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This is what drives the research group People on the Move to develop mixed-method approaches in the field of forced migration studies focused on the displacement crisis of the mid-20th century (Bondzio, Rass, and Tames 2016). Mass data from large samples of case files constitute a much improved foundation from which to analyze structures and patterns in the negotiation of the mobility options related to status categories in varying situational settings and for the actual movement – or stasis – of people.<sup>44</sup> Such research uses conventional databases and Geographical Information Systems (GIS), and can increasingly rely on the conversion of scanned documents into machine-readable data extracts based on artificial intelligence and machine learning.<sup>45</sup> The analysis of mobility of migration does then not have to rely on process-generated descriptions, reports, or statistics – often prepared by dominant actors or institutions. Rather, it can draw from large sets of very heterogeneous event data that represent practices and cultural, normative, or institutional frameworks. Thus, digitized mass data extracted from case files not only provides a basis for reconstructive research, but also provides insights into normative or discursive formations within migration regimes.<sup>46</sup> Findings can be related to the results

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<sup>44</sup> <<https://transrem.arolsen-archives.org/maps/>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Two projects using AI-based data extraction from digitized card file indices – one focused on the datafication practices of the Gestapo; one on the datafication of immigration at the municipal level – are currently being conducted at Osnabrück University under the direction of Christoph Rass. See Bondzio and Rass (2018).

<sup>46</sup> Sebastian Huhn currently works on a research project under the title "Negotiating Resettlement. Negotiations, processes and long-term development of violence-induced migration

gained by qualitative analysis in order to generate a reflexive and scaled view of how migrants negotiate mobility while regulatory frameworks try to produce desired policy outcomes. This opens up new perspectives on the entanglements of the “autonomy” and the “governance” of migration (Schwenken 2018). Rethinking sources and methods, archives and disciplines, and conventional and digital history – centered around issues of forced migration as well as qualitative and quantitative data – unites the authors of this issue along the lines of rather different research questions.

In the first two contributions, *Henning Borggräfe* and *Filip Stubbe* look at the topic of forced migration from the perspective of archives – the Arolsen Archives and the State Archives of Belgium respectively. In his contribution Borggräfe outlines how the specific documents on DPs in the Arolsen Archives can be used to explore pathways of (forced) migration, resettlement, and DP agency. Especially the digitized CM/1 files created in the early postwar years suit these purposes. Projects such as “Transnational Remembrance of Nazi Forced Labor and Migration” (TransRem), which Borggräfe uses as an example, have explored how these complex digitized sources can enable the use of new approaches to DP agency and resettlement.<sup>47</sup> Reflecting on similar issues of digital accessibility, in his contribution, Stubbe emphasizes the importance of a very clear understanding of the context in which these archives were created and (re-)organized, in the past as well as the present. Drawing links with the reflexive turn, Stubbe states that “these archives have a dynamic of their own.” His contribution shows how changes in refugee mobility and Belgium’s asylum policy are reflected in the process of archive production itself, thus pointing our attention to the fact that archives are not passive witnesses of the past.

The next two articles open up questions of positioning the phenomenon of forced displacement in the context of war and mass violence. By looking at people other than DPs, these contributions function as points of reference to the main focus of this issue. *Frank Wolff* highlights a very specific and often overlooked aspect of refugee agency: that of collective practices of safeguarding a community’s cultural heritage. Through the example of the General Jewish Labor Bund, he explores how looking into the practices of saving Yiddish culture helps us understand the significance of the collective or communal aspect to refugeedom as an addition to an individualized perception of the refugee.

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after World War II” – funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) from 2020 to 2022 – where he looks at such questions regarding resettlement operations to Venezuela.

<sup>47</sup> Transnational Remembrance is a joint project of NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies; the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies (IMIS) at Osnabrück University; and the History Workshop Minsk and the Arolsen Archives – International Center on Nazi Persecution. The project was financed by the Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ) foundation. See <<https://transrem.arolsen-archives.org/en/>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

*Peter Romijn* takes another unexpected perspective and positions the experiences of Dutch soldiers sent to fight in the Indonesian War of Independence in the context of Europeans, Eurasians, refugees, and post-colonial migrants by looking at the transformative experience of being transported overseas. He examines how identities were reshaped within the dynamics of official policy, individual agency, and expectations, and later the experience of colonial warfare. This perspective also points toward issues addressed in the abovementioned TransRem project connected to the transformative experiences of “being moved.”<sup>48</sup>

The next four contributions constitute the heart of this issue. In all cases, the authors use and reflect upon person-related mass data on DPs in the context of the Second World War. In their contribution, *Regina Grüter* and *Anne Van Mourik* take the example of Dutch DPs who at first sight might seem to be a rather straightforward group, but when looked at more closely, highlight some specific problems and dynamics. Dutch camp survivors and forced laborers had to be repatriated while the Netherlands itself was not yet (or was only just being) liberated, still struggling with the war and facing immense shortages and famine. Within this context, planning and organization became chaotic and relief organizations struggled in the margins. Combined with poor diplomacy in the enfolding Cold War, this meant it took many years before also the last compatriots returned to the Netherlands from behind the Iron Curtain.

The combination of wanting to get away from communist-ruled territory also takes central stage in *Jannis Panagiotidis*' contribution, where he explores the agency of so called *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) within the system of resettlement. Although IRO assistance was not open to Germans, some tried to convince the system that they were in fact not German at all. Panagiotidis shows how in individual cases, this proved difficult. However, a “collective conversion” could work out, as the example of the Mennonites showed: Backed up by the influential international Mennonite relief organization, they succeeded in explaining themselves as not being Germans, but being of Dutch heritage, thus opening up the possibility of resettlement across the Atlantic.<sup>49</sup>

In the next contribution, *Sebastian Huhn* adds the perspective of a receiving country, thus shifting the focus when looking at DP agency, highlighting the complexities of the position DPs found themselves in when negotiating their status and options with the IRO on the one hand and with potential receiving countries on the other. Venezuela was open for resettlement within the context

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<sup>48</sup> See <<https://transrem.arolsen-archives.org/en/story-maps/>> (Accessed September 25, 2020). In particular, see the story map on the experience of traveling overseas: <<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=917d768aeb2d458b99204edd7689a012>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> See <<https://transrem.arolsen-archives.org/en/story-maps/>> (Accessed September 25, 2020). In particular, see the story map on claiming Dutch nationality: <<https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=fe0b87de3cb9418b986aae0120988cca>> (Accessed September 25, 2020).

of “populating” and “colonizing” the country, and was therefore interested in the so-called ‘surplus population’ of Europe. Nevertheless, not all DPs were equally welcome, nor did all DPs envision a future for themselves in this Latin American state. The effects of war and mass violence thus combined with the ideas of the domestic elite regarding economic development, and the desired social and cultural makeup of the country.

A very specific element within the postwar dynamics around DPs is addressed in *Christian Höschler’s* contribution. By exploring the care, repatriation, and resettlement of unaccompanied children who had survived war and persecution, he outlines how policy intentions (and their blind spots) clashed with the day-to-day reality in children’s homes. Being among the most vulnerable groups of survivors, these children often experienced this period in a completely different way to the adults around them. Thus, in order to get closer to the experience of the children, Höschler pinpoints the importance of combining various sources and (micro-history) approaches: A focus on institutional archives may leave the experience (and agency) of the children invisible.

The last two contributions depart precisely from the idea of dealing with the (digitized) sources on post-Second World War DPs. In *Edwin Klijn’s* contribution, he outlines the possibilities of linking data in order to open up mass data by exploring semantic web technologies: Linking names and places – for instance to the same names and places mentioned in other digital sources – may help researchers make sense of the material. Since these developments are still in their infancy, he also stresses the importance of various specialists working together in this field: It cannot be only the domain of archives or technological experts to experiment with semantic web opportunities. For example, experts in the field of war and displacement need to reflect on ways in which to “enrich” digital data as well.

This final point is taken up by *Olaf Berg* who, in his contribution, stresses the importance of keeping in mind that data is never “found,” but always created: Creating machine-readable data is a process riddled with moments of interpretation and decision making. The need to abstract, to normalize, and to transcode are all necessary acts of interpretation in order to make digitized information fit for the algorithms. Berg emphasizes this interpretative work instead of the “reconstruction” of the past. Berg also raises the important and often underestimated question of how to deal with ambiguous data. Exploring new mixed methods for digital approaches and, for instance, close reading and other more qualitative approaches, are his suggestions for the various specialists in the field to work on. The importance of close collaboration and deep understanding of the archives, the consequences of digitization, and of the phenomena of (the experience of) war and forced displacement, thus comes to the fore as one of the central challenges in the years to come.

In the final contribution, “Negotiating resettlement”: some concluding thoughts, *Peter Gatrell* from the University of Manchester and in many ways

the inspirer of the topic of this special issue, contextualizes the articles within the broader body of current research in this field and points out various elements to keep in mind and further build on. For instance, it should be stressed that the focus in this issue on Europe is a point of departure not of destination. As Gatrell writes: “this is emphatically not a purely European story: although the international refugee regime had a Eurocentric bias, the refugee regime had important regional and local incarnations.” (Gatrell 2020, 291; Chimni 1998; Peterson 2012)

Furthermore, by focusing on his own research on the confidential case files of the UNHCR archives some interesting elements with regard to not (yet) digitized sources come to the fore: whereas the abundance of the material is obvious, equally obvious is the fragmentation of the information researchers can retrieve from these files. He therefore concludes that while researchers are often looking for ‘the refugee experience’ they more likely find the result of UNHCR procedures and practices. However, these results do in various ways give us an insight into, as Gatrell puts it, “how individual refugees understood and framed their experience of displacement and how they asserted and sought to establish claims for protection and assistance, often with admirable patience and determination.” (Gatrell 2020, 302) Thus underscoring the importance outlined in this special issue to focus on the element of negotiation: the interplay of and the power-relations between the various actors, namely those on the move, those in service of state institutions, and those working for international and other non-state organizations.

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# Historical Social Research

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