Introduction: Refugee histories, refugee concern, transnational histories

For more than a decade historians have been rewriting the history of human rights, decolonisation, international aid, economic development and health, in the belief that focusing on decisions taken by individual states or as a result of bilateral diplomacy can get us only so far in understanding how these big issues were framed and addressed. At its most general level *Free World?* is a contribution to scholarship that examines 'the transnational circulation of emotions and ideas, people and publications, knowledge and technologies.'[1] German scholars use the evocative term *Verflechtungsgeschichte*, or 'entangled history', to describe these various interconnections.[2] The entanglement of institutional networks and campaigns on behalf of displaced persons in the modern world constitutes the core of this book. Guided but not bound by the insights represented in this scholarship, I seek to understand how and by whom refugees came to be conceived as a 'problem' at a particular juncture, and what solutions were devised and implemented.

The chronological boundaries of my book are roughly marked by the Hungarian refugee crisis in 1956 and by the onset of new global campaigns in the early 1960s. My aim is to examine the interaction of national and international agencies, including non-governmental organisations, and the alliances they forged in addressing population

[1] Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4. See also Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds.), *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2005); Thomas Risse-Kappen (ed.), *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Mark Mazower, 'The strange triumph of human rights, 1933–1950', *Historical Journal*, 47, no. 2 (2004), 379–98; Patricia Clavin, 'Defining transnationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 14, no. 4 (2005), 421–39; C. A. Bayly *et al.*, 'AHR conversation: on transnational history', *American Historical Review*, 111, no. 5 (2006), 1441–64.

[2] Karen Schönwälder, 'Integration from below? Migration and European contemporary history', in Konrad Jarausch and T. Lindenberger (eds.), *Conflicted Memories: Europeanising Contemporary Histories* (New York: Berghahn, 2007), 156–63 (here p. 158).

displacement. NGOs have attracted attention from scholars but there is still a long way to go before we fully understand their historical practices and dynamics.[3] A growing body of work is exploring the history of the UN and the specialist organisations that operate under its aegis. However, little attention has been paid to national and transnational networks that were created to meet the perceived needs of refugees, and how refugees in turn engaged with external agencies.[4] Nor can this be a history that neglects local campaigns: efforts to raise money to assist displaced people took place at the grass roots even though the programmes themselves were directed from centres of power such as Geneva, London or New York. What seem at first sight to be parochial initiatives turn out on closer inspection to be part of a dynamic interplay with national and transnational visions and practices.[5]

An exclusive focus on transnational or supra-national networks will take us only so far in understanding how refugee politics operated. In the sphere of migration, including responses to forced emigration, individual states have held most of the cards. To this extent, solutions to 'the refugee problem' could not (and cannot) escape what Gérard Noiriel characterised as 'the tyranny of the national'.[6] The 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of refugees gives them the 'right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution', but does not oblige an individual country to admit them. However this does not mean that a transnational approach falls at the first hurdle. As Kevin

[3] Paul Weindling (ed.), *International Health Organisations and Movements, 1918–1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton and James McKay (eds.), *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state Actors in Society and Politics since 1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[4] Sunil Amrith and Glenda Sluga, 'New histories of the United Nations', *Journal of World History*, 19, no. 3 (2008), 251–74. The United Nations Intellectual History Project, www.unhistory.org/, focuses on economic and social ideas without addressing refugee crises, but see the important contributions by Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: a Perilous Path* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Cecilia Ruthström-Ruin, *Beyond Europe: the Globalization of Refugee Aid* (Lund University Press, 1993); and Jussi M. Hanhimäki, 'UNHCR and the global Cold War', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27, no. 1 (2008), 3–7.

[5] Michael Kearney, 'The local and the global: the anthropology of globalisation and transnationalism', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), 547–65; Sally Engle Merry, 'Transnational human rights and local activism: mapping the middle', *American Anthropologist*, 108, no. 1 (2006), 38–51; Jeffrey A. Engel (ed.), *Local Consequences of the Global Cold War* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2007).

[6] Gérard Noiriel, *La tyrannie du national: Le droit d'asile en Europe 1793–1993* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1991). See also Claudena Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: the Emergence of a Regime* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 212, 277–8; Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 188–91; Linda Kerber, 'The stateless as the citizen's other: a view from the United States', *American Historical Review*, 112, no. 1 (2007), 1–34.

Grant and colleagues suggest, 'the study of transnationalism need not be a distraction from the realities of nationalism and national power, but can inform a more realistic understanding of the changing power and problem of the nation when placed in the context of transnational networks of power and identity'.[7] Focusing on a prominent phenomenon in contemporary history, namely international migration and in particular the circumstances of refugees, *Free World?* traces the arguments made from different standpoints around the figure of the refugee and 'displaced person'. How did refugees become a focus of attention, as a 'problem' to be measured and 'solved'? Did the accumulation of knowledge about refugees contribute in turn to the specification of other problems? These questions retain their importance.[8] At the same time I seek to contribute to an improved understanding of the historical experiences of displaced people in the modern world. There are limits to this aim, imposed in part by a relative dearth of first-hand testimony by refugees that was in turn a consequence of the tendency of external agencies and relief workers to speak on refugees' behalf. Instead of bemoaning this state of affairs, however, this provides an opportunity to establish the contours of 'refugee history'. Part of the experience of refugees was precisely their encounter with non-refugee officials and observers. A bureaucratic or top-down approach should not be derided: it can be immensely productive if one keeps in mind the prevailing relations of power.[9]

The UN decision in 1959 to sponsor a World Refugee Year (WRY) – a unique gesture – makes it essential to examine the interplay between the UN, individual states and NGOs, all of which had a stake in the 'refugee problem'. WRY did not subject government policies, including those of refugee-producing countries, to detailed scrutiny. Rather its purpose was to raise funds in order to provide better assistance to four nominated groups of displaced people – a 'hard core' of refugees in Europe, Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, Chinese refugees in Hong Kong

[7] Kevin Grant, Philippa Levine and Frank Trentmann (eds.), *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire and Transnationalism, c. 1880–1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 14.

[8] Michael Barnett, 'Humanitarianism with a sovereign face: UNHCR in the global undertow', *International Migration Review*, 35, no. 1 (2001), 244–77; Emma Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: between Sovereigns* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[9] In *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (forthcoming), I deploy the term refugeedom to draw attention to what Stoler and Cooper envisage as a 'single analytic frame' for transnational histories of empire. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, 'Introduction: tensions of empire', *American Ethnologist*, 16, no. 4 (1989), 609–21. See also Barbara Harrell-Bond, 'Counting the refugees: gifts, givers, patrons and clients', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 5, no. 3–4 (1992), 205–25.

and a rump of Russian refugees in the People's Republic of China – and to improve public awareness of the scale of suffering in these and other locations. With the participation of close on a hundred countries, the campaign led to the accumulation of substantial sums of money – around $620 million in today's prices – that swelled the resources of leading NGOs and enabled them to develop additional leverage. The campaign also enhanced the profile of the UN and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Some supporters of WRY even maintained that transnational action had the potential to clip the wings of the modern state in the interest of humanity as a whole.[10]

Various interests constituted themselves in relation to refugees including voluntary agencies, private foundations and churches. These bodies did not operate in isolation. In his recent history of the transnational politics of 'family planning', Matthew Connelly speaks of an 'interpenetration of public and private agencies'.[11] This interpenetration characterised relief efforts during the 1950s and beyond. Some NGOs became adept at fundraising and drew upon growing financial resources to despatch agents to the 'field' who provided material assistance to refugees. They worked with governments to identify 'suitable candidates' for admission to third countries. The most omnipresent organisations developed transnational networks that advocated alterations in government policy in ways that have become a familiar part of the political landscape.[12] But WRY did not stop at enlisting NGOs. It also took on aspects of a hybrid social movement, unleashing 'fluid and fragmented' activism that challenged the mainstream even while it enlisted the political and cultural establishment.[13]

In choosing as my title *Free World?* I aim to do several things. One is to examine debates in the 1950s about the mainsprings of migration.

[10] Kenneth Cmiel, 'The recent history of human rights', *American Historical Review*, 109, no. 1 (2004), 117–35; Daniel Maul, '"Help them move the ILO way": the International Labour Organization and the modernization discourse in the era of decolonization and the Cold War', *Diplomatic History*, 33, no. 3 (1999), 387–404. On 'new internationalism' and global hunger in the inter-war period see Frank Trentmann, 'Coping with shortage: the problem of food security and global visions of coordination, c. 1890s–1950', in Trentmann and Flemming Just (eds.), *Food and Conflict in the Age of the Two World Wars* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13–48.

[11] Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: the Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 199.

[12] Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

[13] William F. Fisher, 'Doing good? The politics and anti-politics of NGO practices', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26 (1997), 439–64 (p. 451). Compare Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the Emergence of a Global Civil Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 8–9.

Some refugees had been displaced in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Others were of recent vintage: new crises in Algeria, Tibet and Rwanda, and shortly thereafter in Congo and Cuba, gave rise to mass forced emigration. The now familiar distinction between 'political' and 'economic' migration was an organising principle for the UN, which argued that 'political movements were the product of exceptional circumstances and in most cases were sweeping and precipitate, their momentum quickly spent'. This distinction was delineated and reaffirmed in this period even while 'political' migration was assuming a 'steady and even predictable' form.[14] The other conventional distinction between protracted refugee situations and emergency crises also had a familiar ring at the time: three of the four adopted refugee groups had been displaced for more than a decade and in one case far longer. Contemporary discussion entertained solutions including lifting restrictions on resettlement or local integration; in short, creating the conditions for greater freedom of movement. How the UN, UNHCR, governments and NGOs understood and addressed the needs of refugees must be explained.

The second theme that threads itself through this book is the geopolitics of the Cold War and decolonisation. In part this is a story of ideological warfare between the 'free world' and the Communist bloc, raising questions about the objectives of each. In addressing the refugee crisis in Hungary in 1956, Western powers responded urgently in the light of Cold War rivalries. Their actions affirmed a commitment to assist people who faced persecution, a stance that avoided acknowledging their belated and inadequate reaction to the plight of Europe's Jews in the 1930s. Practical lessons were drawn from the actions of Western governments and NGOs in the light of the unexpected events in Hungary. Meanwhile arguments around 'captive nations', 'slavery' and 'backwardness' also circulated in various forums, including those established by émigrés from Eastern Europe. These arguments were given added spice by the presence in several European countries of strong Communist parties, but even without this factor the Cold War loomed large, particularly in the United States whose Escapee Program became an instrument to advance the 'mutual security of the free world'.[15] But Cold War rhetoric worked both ways. While anti-communists in the USA denounced Soviet totalitarianism for 'imprisoning' non-Russian

[14] *International Migration, 1945–1957* (Geneva: ILO, 1959), 1; Anthony T. Bouscaren, *International Migrations since 1945* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 4.

[15] J. Bruce Nichols, *The Uneasy Alliance: Religion, Refugee Work, and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 85; Susan Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape, and Brainwashing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

nations and curtailing inter alia freedom of movement, speech and conscience, Soviet authors pricked the conscience of the First World by alluding to the hypocritical practice of admitting able-bodied refugees and displaced persons to boost the capitalist labour market whilst allowing others to languish in camps.[16] Nor did this point go unnoticed in Western Europe and the USA where critics acknowledged that the 'free world' could not always claim the moral high ground.

Arguments about freedom of movement drew upon a reservoir of language of human rights and citizenship. Totalitarian programmes, including the use of forced labour by the Nazis, were an important point of reference, but debates about displacement were also informed by colonial rule and its after-effects. During the long drawn-out struggle to bring such rule to an end, ideas of freedom served as a mobilising device among 'local forces of change'.[17] Liberation struggles implied uprooting, partly because colonial masters would be displaced and partly because of struggles between rival factions for control of the resources of the post-colonial state. There were other aspects as well. Economic change created a migrant population that transformed the urban milieu, for example in sub-Saharan Africa, and invited new forms of collective action that signalled a readiness to deploy arguments about freedom and human rights.[18] This strand culminates in a discussion of the way in which economic and social development came to be regarded as the appropriate vehicle for addressing long-term refugee crises in the late 1950s and 1960s, and how this was linked to a realisation that the relationship between north and south in the wake of decolonisation mattered at least as much as the division between west and east.

Context therefore matters. The Hungarian revolution followed the epoch-making Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at which Khrushchev delivered his famous 'secret speech' that presaged a more liberal climate in the Soviet Union. A few months later the Soviet invasion of Hungary dashed many of those hopes. In Washington DC, President Eisenhower peppered his second Inaugural Address in 1957 with the words freedom, peace, justice and equality,

[16] The Soviet perspective deserves separate treatment. A start on Soviet debates around decolonisation and human rights is being made by Julie Hessler, Jennifer Amos, Eleonory Gilburd and others.

[17] Jeremi Suri, 'The cold war, decolonization, and global social awakenings: historical intersections', *Cold War History*, 6, no. 3 (2006), 353–63 (here p. 354).

[18] Daniel Maul, 'The International Labor Organization and the struggle against forced labor from 1919 to the present', *Labor History*, 48, no. 4 (2007), 477–500; Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: the Labour Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

declaring the Soviet project to be 'dark in purpose, clear in practice'. In the same breath he applauded the Hungarian struggle for freedom and the desire of people in less developed parts of the world to be free. The juxtaposition was deliberate: events in Budapest coincided with the Suez debacle, which stimulated a vigorous debate about empire in Britain and especially France, where public opinion was consumed by Algeria's struggle for independence. In Gamal Abdul Nasser the 'non-aligned' world found an impressive voice. Third World critics denounced the Soviet invasion of Hungary and complained that Eastern Europe belonged to an empire governed from the Kremlin that curbed freedom of expression and movement. In thinking about future relations between these 'three worlds of development', two leading American social scientists argued that migration was a key battleground: 'the side which proves the most sincere and effective in its promises to remove discrimination, and open the doors of opportunity and independence to the fast awakening Orient, may prove victor, if there are to be any victors, in a possible third world war'.[19]

Lastly, *Free World?* alludes to the fact that non-refugees were able to move much more freely. Massive intra-European and intercontinental migration was a feature of the 1950s. Between 1946 and 1957 some 6.6 million Europeans left the continent to find work overseas. Various agencies, including the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) provided financial and other assistance.[20] Millions of people also moved within Europe: for example, Sweden granted permits to 310,000 immigrant workers while Britain admitted 470,000, Belgium 420,000, France 600,000 and Switzerland 700,000 workers. Germany, which recruited 360,000 foreign workers in 1961 alone, adopted the term *Gastarbeiter* to describe the inflow of 'guest workers'. This flurry of labour migration was accompanied by leisured mobility. The 1950s witnessed a rapid growth of tourism, including trips to destinations where refugees had gathered or from which migrant workers travelled in search of work. Mobility meant freedom to travel. But were tourists merely the embodiment of affluence whose holiday abroad entailed personal gratification, or did they have a broader responsibility to reflect on the circumstances of those

[19] Donald R. Taft and Richard Robbins, *International Migrations: the Immigrant in the Modern World* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), 616; Peter Worsley, *The Three Worlds of Development* (London: Weidenfeld, 1984).

[20] Edward Marks, 'Internationally assisted migration: ICEM rounds out five years of resettlement', *International Organization*, 11, no. 3 (1957), 481–94; Paul A. Ladame, *Le rôle des migrations dans le monde libre* (Geneva: Droz, 1958), 267–96.

who – like refugees – were disadvantaged and now trapped in camps or other settlements? Discussions about mobility and immobility were framed in cultural as well as political terms. Travel companies chose appropriate images to advertise their merits and the desirability of the destinations they served. Likewise, organisations that campaigned on behalf of refugees had to secure funds for their programmes; they too developed a rich iconography.[21] Politics, iconography and fundraising coalesced, as in Holland where a special 'Freedom Card' reminded the supporters of WRY of the advantages of living unconstrained by the restrictions imposed on refugees, to whom a 'debt of honour' was owed by the 'free world'.[22]

How distinctive was this period in terms of refugee crises, relief efforts and public attitudes towards refugees? Scholars frequently draw a distinction between the situation that prevailed before the 1960s and the situation thereafter. At least three related arguments have been advanced. One concerns the aesthetics of representation. According to Edward Said, the figure of the solitary, heroic and contemplative exile gave way to an image of the refugee depicted in racialised terms as a threat to the status quo. Although Said had in mind the nineteenth-century archetype who fled from tyrannical rule in Europe, this figure was also familiar from more recent histories of escape from totalitarianism. Did an aesthetic transformation occur in the way that Said maintained, or were representations of displacement more nuanced? The Cold War certainly exerted a powerful influence, but as we shall see the argument about flight from tyranny was contested.[23] A second argument was put forward by Barry Stein in relation to 'protracted refugee situations' in Africa and the Far East during the 1970s. Stein maintained that Cold War refugees differed fundamentally from the numerous 'new refugees' who were ethnically distinct and lacked an 'existing community' in the West to which they could attach themselves; in his view this posed a new challenge to the UN, to governments and to public opinion. Yet the global dimensions of displacement were already noted in the 1950s and early 1960s; 'new refugees', so to say, had already arrived on the scene. WRY was designed to address a number of durable refugee situations,

[21] Terence Wright, 'Moving images: the media representation of refugees', *Visual Studies*, 17 (2002), 53–66; Michael Ignatieff, 'The stories we tell: television and humanitarian aid', in Jonathan Moore (ed.), *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 287–302.

[22] Stukken betreffende het Nederlands Comité Vluchtelingenjaar 1959–60, Box 14, Folder 1.2, Stichting Vluchtelingenhulp, IISH.

[23] E. Valentine Daniel, 'The refugee: a discourse on displacement', in Jeremy MacClancy (ed.), *Exotic No More: Anthropology on the Front Lines* (Chicago University Press, 2002), 270–86.

not all of them recognised under the terms of the 1951 Convention.[24] Finally, Barbara Harrell-Bond writes of an earlier generation of refugees that 'rather than being treated as persons in need of "welfare", from the outset the responsibility for adapting to their new society was placed squarely on them'. She argues that refugee relief organisations since the 1970s disempowered refugees by failing to involve them in decisions affecting their future. But did relief agencies really change their tactics around mid-century or is the story of their engagement with refugees more complex than she suggests?[25] Each of these arguments contains a kernel of truth, without fully engaging with the historical circumstances or accounting for the momentum behind WRY.

History matters: this is partly a question of reflecting upon what has changed and how. It is also a question of asking what consideration was given in the past to alternative courses of action, and why a particular path was followed.[26] It involves asking whether those who are in a more privileged or powerful position can do better in thinking about their responsibilities towards those whom the world designates as refugees. The absence of a strong sense of history among international organisations and NGOs makes it incumbent on historians to provide it, not least because the consequences of past intervention need to be better understood and because history supplies a healthy dose of scepticism in the face of claims to be innovative. There are other yawning gaps in our knowledge and understanding of the history of refugees.[27] *Free World?* seeks additionally to historicise the figure of 'the refugee', as a person who is displaced and simultaneously characterised as devoid of agency. What representations of displacement were most calculated to have an impact on potential donors and on governments? How far did action depend upon treating refugees not as individual men and women but as a 'problem'? If this book goes some way towards addressing these questions it will have served its purpose.

[24] Barry Stein, 'The refugee experience: defining the parameters of a field of study', *International Migration Review*, 15 (1981), 320–30. Compare B. S. Chimni, 'The geopolitics of refugee studies: a view from the south', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11, no. 4 (1998), 350–74.

[25] Barbara Harrell-Bond, 'The experience of refugees as recipients of aid', in Alistair Ager (ed.), *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration* (London: Continuum, 1999), 136–68.

[26] Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (eds.), *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 9.

[27] Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1985); Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester University Press, 2006).

1 Free world?

> We talk of tolerance, justice, and the dignity of mankind, and all over the world we find stagnant pools of humanity, who have been robbed of all these things; who stand behind wire, dragging their uncovered roots, friendless, soil-less, waiting for ground in which they may grow again into citizens. Their presence mocks loud at our pretensions of civilisation. (Christopher Chataway)

Introduction: a 'plan to save the refugees'

In 1958 the political magazine *Crossbow*, the forum of the progressive wing of the British Conservative Party, published an article calling for a 'plan to save the refugees'. Its authors envisaged an 'all out attack on the refugee problem' and a 'concentrated drive towards solving the major international problems'. In a compelling statement, they described refugees as 'the showing sore of the most bitter sickness of our time, the staring proof that when it comes to the science of living together we are as foolish as any of our less mechanically adept ancestors'. The article ended with a call to unleash public compassion for refugees by means of 'some special and dramatic action by the nations of the world'.[1] To dramatise the 'bitter sickness' and to justify what appeared to be a surprisingly militant approach, the editor of *Crossbow* offered his readers a picture of a young girl on the magazine's front cover. In this photograph her face is shown to one side, her dress pulled up almost to her waist and her arms outstretched as she lies on bare floorboards, perhaps the deck of a ship. She is prone. It is unclear whether she is asleep or dead. Where has she come from and where might she be going? Is she alone or accompanied? We do not know and are not told if she has been assaulted. The photograph is unattributed. The girl is not identified.

This is (and was surely intended to be) a shocking image. The young girl is evidently supposed to embody the condition of refugees

[1] Draft statement 9 October 1958, CA/I/17/7, General Papers.