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INTRODUCTION

The Refugee Political in the Age of Imperial Crisis, Decolonization, and Cold War, 1930s–1950s

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Abstract

The three decades spanning the 1930s, '40s, and '50s witnessed the birth of the modern global state system, characterized by a protracted and tortuous transition from a world of empires to a world of nation-states. The demise of Nazi, British, and Japanese empires emancipated millions of people across the world. However, as old empires dissolved, new post-imperial states continued older colonial-origin forms of ethno-religious discrimination and ruling-class dominance, or invented novel hierarchies. Hence, this epoch was marked by catastrophic outbursts of racial violence, sectarian war, and genocide. If majoritarian nation-states were the privileged offspring of this transformation, then refugees were the unwanted issue. The national citizen and the refugee were co-created. Against their forced displacement and sub-alternization, refugees re-politicized their selves. We define this as 'the refugee political': refugees constructing themselves as political beings and building wide-ranging alliances – with churches, politicians, and entrepreneurs; with peasants, industrial workers, and feminists. They became 'subaltern internationalists', linking the Dachen Islands to the United States, and maritime Southeast Asia to India; connecting central European Jews to Australian women, or impoverished Indians to Soviet and Chinese communists. They created new forms of 'refugee polis' – political communities which were simultaneously local and daringly transnational.

The birth of the modern global state system can be traced, in important ways, to the three decades spanning the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. These years saw the climax and dissolution of continental empires within Europe – notably, the Nazi German and Fascist Italian empires – as well as across large stretches of Asia and Africa, including the British, French, and Japanese empires. Out of their debris emerged nation-states: the modern forms of Germany, Austria, Italy, and China, as well as entirely new nation-states, among them India, Pakistan, and Israel. With the emergence of the Cold War by the late 1940s, these states confronted new waves of imperialism, emanating from the American and Soviet blocs.

Recent years have seen an explosion of global history scholarship focusing on these decades. Instead of examining the histories of (say) India, China,

Israel/Palestine, and West Africa in isolation, historians have been increasingly connecting these different theatres of imperial crisis and dissolution. As a result, they have drawn into question traditional narratives which took for granted the transition from a world largely dominated by empires to a world largely dominated by nation-states. Some have argued that the transition was by no means certain or inevitable. Significant sections of colonial ruling classes, as well as colonized elites, reposed faith in various forms of imperial federalism and composite polity that would devolve power to the colonies, without altogether separating them from the metropolitan European countries.[1] Euro-American powers forged international institutions such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods system to retain global dominance in the face of rising waves of anti-colonial militancy and, eventually, decolonization.[2] Well into the 1950s, federalist multilateral internationalism seemed to offer as viable a political future as unilateral nation-state separatism from empire.

Simultaneously, historians have underlined that, for many Asian and African political actors too, nation-state hegemony was not the most desired outcome of decolonization. Since at least the first decades of the twentieth century, anti-state anarchism had been a central pillar of anti-colonial Indian politics.[3] From China and Malaya to the Arab world and France, anti-colonial activists often put their faith in socialist/communist internationalism, pan-Islamism, or feminist internationalism as more emancipatory alternatives to elite nationalism. Black radical solidarities connected political actors across the Atlantic. The interwar years had been, in many ways, a golden age for such internationalisms, assembling actors across large stretches of Afro-Asia in shared anti-colonial rebellion. The eventual transfer of political and military power from colonial ruling classes to Afro-Asian elites, and the resultant consolidation of postcolonial nation-states, rendered almost impossible the translation of these internationalist solidarities into actual forms of polity. Internationalist solidarity was often subsumed and co-opted into solidarities between nation-states – the Non-Aligned Movement offering a case in point.[4] As Jane

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[1]Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between empire and nation: remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ, 2014); Or Rosenboim, *The emergence of globalism: visions of world order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton, NJ, 2017); Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Post-imperial possibilities: Eurasia, Eurafrica, Afroasia* (Princeton, NJ, 2023).

[2]Mark M. Mazower, *No enchanted palace: the end of empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ, 2009); Mark M. Mazower, *Governing the world: the history of an idea* (London, 2013); Giles Scott-Smith and J. Simon Rofe, eds., *Global perspectives on the Bretton Woods Conference and the post-war world order* (Cham, 2017).

[3]Maia Ramnath, *Decolonizing anarchism* (Oakland, CA, 2011).

[4]Cemil Aydin, *The politics of anti-Westernism in Asia: visions of world order in pan-Islamic and pan-Asian thought* (New York, NY, 2007); Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko, eds., *The birth of Chinese feminism: essential texts in transnational theory* (New York, NY, 2013); Michael Goebel, *Anti-imperial metropolis: interwar Paris and the seeds of Third-World Nationalism* (Cambridge, 2015); Nico Slate, *Colored cosmopolitanism: the shared struggle for freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2017); Milinda Banerjee, *The mortal god: imagining the sovereign in colonial India* (Cambridge, 2018); Michele L. Louro, *Comrades against imperialism: Nehru, India, and interwar internationalism* (Cambridge, 2018); Anna Belogurova, *The Nanyang revolution: the Comintern and Chinese networks in Southeast Asia, 1890–1957* (Cambridge, 2019); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire: the rise and fall of self-determination* (Princeton, NJ, 2019); Ali Raza, *Revolutionary*

Burbank and Frederick Cooper succinctly observe: 'There was a tension between an Afroasianism of people and political movements and an Afroasianism of states.'[5]

Thus, the age of decolonization and Cold War was marked by a tragic paradox. On the one hand, there was an unprecedented burst of internationalist solidarities. A recent essay defines this age in terms of 'subaltern histories of internationalism'.[6] David Featherstone sharply explores the stakes of such subaltern internationalism. He acknowledges that scholars associated with subaltern studies have tended to focus on British India, and on local and ethnographic details. However, he shows that, across the twentieth century, subaltern actors did, in fact, co-operate with each other across long distances. They were never merely local actors. Featherstone demonstrates the depth of internationalist solidarities connecting white and non-white working-class actors, spanning across the Black Atlantic to maritime Asia. These subaltern internationalists boycotted colonial products, organized marches, sang songs, and raised funds in support of the racially oppressed.[7] While such vibrant subaltern or popular internationalisms could never be completely bridled, by the end of our period, the political saddle was gradually but firmly occupied by the postcolonial nation-state. State socialism, as in the Soviet Union and China, often revealed itself to be a crude tool for imperial ambitions, rather than a real force of emancipatory internationalism.

This special issue argues that refugee history offers us a radically new point of departure to rethink the global history of this fascinating era. For inspiration, we draw on a celebrated essay, 'The formation of new states as a refugee-generating process' (1983), by the political scientist Aristide R. Zolberg (1931–2013). The author argues: 'Following Arendt, but with the modifications indicated, it can be suggested that massive refugee flows are most prominently a concomitant of the secular trans-formation of a world of empires and of small self-sufficient communities or tribes into a world of national states.'[8] Like Hannah Arendt (1906–75), Zolberg was an émigré thinker. Born in Brussels, he had survived Nazi persecution, arriving in the United States in 1948, where he would build a prominent academic career.[9]

Zolberg helps us visualize the global history of the 1930s–1950s in a more tragic light than conventional historiography has allowed. The demise of the Nazi, British, and Japanese empires had undoubtedly emancipatory implications for millions of people across the world. But the same cannot necessarily be said for the ensuing tri-umph of nation-states such as China, India, Pakistan, and Israel. Like their imperial

pasts: communist internationalism in colonial India (Cambridge, 2020); Carolien Stolte, Heather Streets-Salter, Sana Tannoury-Karam, and Michele Louro, eds., *The League against Imperialism: lives and afterlives* (Amsterdam, 2020).

[5] Burbank and Cooper, *Post-imperial possibilities*, p. 9.

[6] Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, 'Manifesto: networks of decolonization in Asia and Africa', *Radical History Review*, 131 (2018), pp. 176–82, at p. 181.

[7] David Featherstone, *Solidarity: hidden histories and geographies of internationalism* (London, 2012); David Featherstone, 'Maritime labour and subaltern geographies of internationalism: Black internationalist seafarers' organising in the interwar period', *Political Geography*, 49 (2015), pp. 7–16.

[8] Aristide R. Zolberg, 'The formation of new states as a refugee-generating process', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 467 (1983), pp. 23–38, at p. 30.

[9] 'Aristide Zolberg', African Studies Program, University of Wisconsin-Madison, https://africa.wisc.edu/staff/zolberg-aristide/ (accessed 10 Jan. 2025).

ancestors, these post-imperial states, too, were characterized by elite dominance. To consolidate and legitimate their authority, ruling elites championed various forms of ethnic/religious identity, manufacturing majorities and minorities. Imperial polities had often been 'ethnographic states'.[10] They classified colonized societies into ethnicities, castes, tribes, clans, and religions; transformed fluid communities into 'enumerated communities'; and actively fostered social polarization and political conflict between the resulting blocs.[11] Tragically, post-imperial nation-states often further entrenched these divisions. Ruling elites and their subaltern agents fostered narrow majoritarian models of national citizenship. They pursued political programmes that, in varying ways, defined ethnic/religious minorities and expelled them as political undesirables. These minorities were claimed to be threats to the political being of the nation. Frequently, majority groups wanted to claim their lands and moveable goods.

The transformation of a planet overwhelmingly dominated by empires to one almost monopolized by nation-state sovereignty, across the three decades from the 1930s to the 1950s, was thus mediated through catastrophic outbursts of racial violence, sectarian war, and genocide. If majoritarian nation-states were the privileged offspring of this transformation, then refugees were the unwanted issue. The national citizen and the refugee were co-created. Refugees were not an accident of twentieth-century history, but the necessary dialectical mediation between imperial state sovereignty and national state sovereignty, between colonial regimes of violence and postcolonial ones.

Over recent decades, scholarship on these forced migrations has rapidly expanded.[12] Scholars have created new conceptual frameworks to juxtapose and connect refugee lives with the actions of nation-states and international organizations. From this vantage point, Christoph Rass and others have written about the 'migration regime', while Peter Gatrell has written about 'refugeedom'.[13] Scholars have focused on the specific dynamics of ethnic cleansing that form the immediate backdrop to forced migrations.[14] Many of these studies concentrate on the Second

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[10]Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 2002).

[11]We take the framework of 'enumerated communities' from Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The imaginary institution of India', in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern studies VII* (Delhi, 1992), pp. 1–39.

[12]Göran Rystad, ed., *The uprooted: forced migration as an international problem in the post-war era* (Lund, 1990); Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in contact: world migration in the second millennium* (Durham, NC, 2002); Matthew Gibney and Randall Hansen, eds., *Immigration and asylum: from 1900 to the present* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2005); Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen, and Patrick Manning, eds., *Migration history in world history: multidisciplinary approaches* (Leiden, 2010); Randall Hansen, Jobs Koehler, and Jeannette Money, eds., *Migration, nation states, and international cooperation* (New York, NY, 2011).

[13]Andreas Pott, Christoph Rass, and Frank Wolff, eds., *Was ist ein Migrationsregime? What is a migration regime?* (Wiesbaden, 2018), pp. 19–64; Peter Gatrell, *The unsettling of Europe: how migration reshaped a continent* (New York, NY, 2019); Peter Gatrell, '"Negotiating resettlement": some concluding thoughts', in *Historical Social Research*, 45 (2020), pp. 290–306.

[14]Michael Schwartz, *Ethnische 'Säuberungen' in der Moderne. Globale Wechselwirkungen nationalistischer und rassistischer Gewaltpolitik im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2013); Philipp Ther, *Die dunkle Seite der Nationalstaaten. 'Ethnische Säuberungen' im modernen Europa* (Göttingen, 2011).

World War and its aftermath, taking Europe as their point of departure.[15] Others focus on experiences of decolonization, civil war, postcolonial state formation, capitalist exploitation, and class inequalities, tracing continuities between colonial and postcolonial state violence in Asia and Africa, and their cumulative contributions to forced migrations.[16]

Taking inspiration from all this scholarship, our endeavour in this special issue is to rethink the 1930s–1950s not from the perspective of the citizen, as is traditionally done, but from that of the refugee. Paying homage to the lord–bondsman (*Herr–Knecht*) dialectic outlined by the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), we aim to write this global history from the perspective of the *Knecht*, here the refugee, rather than from the standpoint of the majoritarian citizens who were victors in the wars of decolonization.[17] That is our special issue's most significant contribution. Taking a cue from Hegel, and especially from the interpretation of his work offered by the Russian émigré French philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1902–68), we shall suggest that the refugees, from their vantage point of subalternity, evolved new modes of political thought and practice, some more locally oriented and others more internationalist in form. In his celebrated reading of Hegel, Kojève suggested that the *Knecht*, 'possessing the idea of Freedom and not being free, … is led to transform the given (social) conditions of his existence – that is, to realize a historical progress'.[18] For Hegel, as for Kojève, political thinking was inseparable from the labour of political practice. Political theorizing was linked to pragmatic projects of transforming social conditions. Given our focus on refugees, we designate this dialectical relation between abstract political thought and concrete political practice as 'the refugee political'.

Admittedly, not all refugee actors were subalterns in a uniform social (class) sense: that is, peasants and other labouring classes. Inspired by the Indian (East Bengali refugee-origin) historian Ranajit Guha's (1923–2023) programmatic manifesto on the subaltern, we argue that refugees were, however, subaltern in a

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[15] Agnes Bresselau von Bressensdorf, ed., *Über Grenzen. Migration und Flucht in globaler Perspektive seit 1945* (Göttingen 2019); Pertti Ahonen, Gustavo Corni, Jerzy Kochanowski, Rainer Schulze, Tamás Stark, and Barbara Stelzl-Marx, eds., *People on the move: forced population movements in Europe in the Second World War and its aftermath* (London, 2008); Sebastian Bondzio, Christoph Rass, and Ismee Tames, 'People on the move: revisiting events and narratives of the European refugee crisis (1930s–1950s)', in Henning Borggräfe, ed., *Freilegungen. Wege, Orte und Räume der NS-Verfolgung* (Göttingen, 2016), pp. 36–55; Philipp Ther, *Die Außenseiter. Flucht, Flüchtlinge und Integration im modernen Europa* (Berlin, 2017).

[16] Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (Cambridge, 2007); Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The long partition and the making of modern South Asia: refugees, boundaries, histories* (New York, NY, 2007); Yasmin Khan, *The great partition: the making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven, CT, 2007); R. Keith Schoppa, *In a sea of bitterness: refugees during the Sino-Japanese War* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Yuk Wah Chan, ed., *The Chinese/Vietnamese diaspora: revisiting the boat people* (Abingdon, 2011); Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal, and Lex Takkenberg, eds., *UNRWA and Palestinian refugees: from relief and works to human development* (Abingdon, 2014); Uditi Sen, *Citizen refugee: forging the Indian nation after partition* (Cambridge, 2018); James H. S. Milner, *Refugees, the state and the politics of asylum in Africa* (Basingstoke, 2009); Nathan Riley Carpenter and Benjamin N. Lawrance, eds., *Africans in exile: mobility, law, and identity* (Bloomington, IN, 2018); Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, *African refugees* (Bloomington, IN, 2023); Anne Irfan, *Refuge and resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System* (New York, NY, 2023).

[17] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, 2000), pp. 112–20.

[18] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the reading of Hegel: lectures on the phenomenology of spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr (Ithaca, NY, 1980), p. 50.

relational sense: they were subalterns in relation to the citizens of majoritarian nation-states. Guha argues:

> The same class or element which was dominant in one area … could be among the dominated in another. This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants all of whom belonged, ideally speaking, to the category of 'people' or 'subaltern classes'.[19]

Our authors show that once-dominant social groups – Europeans in East Asia, Jewish intellectuals in central Europe, high-caste Hindus in East Bengal – could, in specific historical circumstances, turn into subalterns in this relational sense. Other refugees, such as Chinese fishermen or lower-caste Hindu peasants, may be regarded as subalterns in a more straightforward manner.

Whatever class of refugees we are speaking about, in thinking of the refugee political, we must grapple with mediation. Drawing on the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), the Indian postcolonial feminist thinker Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1942) argues that subaltern voices are always mediated – it is illusory to seek them in unmediated authenticity.[20] For us as historians, the refugee political often needs to be recovered through the mediation of nation-state rehabilitation programmes and associated archives, through the interventions and records of international organizations, or through the writings of civil society activists. The agenda of recuperating refugee voice and agency is thus necessarily a complex one, compounded by gaps in sources and (sometimes) radical incommensurability between the languages of refugee political thought and the state's archival gaze.

In concrete terms, all this implies that scholarship must work through multiple layers of political action. The writings of David Brydan, Jessica Reinisch, and Kiran Klaus Patel on internationalism offer us important insights, particularly in understand how refugee actors negotiate with transnational organizations.[21] Taking a cue from Sandrine Kott, we see these transnational (and) international organizations as active *sites* of internationalization, which bring together many actors with different worldviews and social backgrounds.[22] In short, a history of the refugee political will

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[19]Ranajit Guha, 'On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India', in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern studies I: writings on South Asian history and society* (Delhi, 1982), pp. 1–8, at p. 8.

[20]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 271–313.

[21]Jessica Reinisch and David Brydan, eds., *Europe's internationalists: rethinking the history of internationalism* (London, 2022), including the afterword by Kiran Klaus Patel; Jessica Reinisch, 'Introduction: agents of internationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 25 (2016), pp. 195–205.

[22]Sandrine Kott, 'Towards a social history of international organisations: the ILO and the internationalisation of Western social expertise (1919–1949)', in Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and José Pedro Monteiro, eds., *Internationalism, imperialism and the formation of the contemporary world* (Cham, 2018), pp. 33–57, at p. 34; see also the introduction to the same volume by the editors.

necessarily also have to be a history of how nation-states, international organizations, and civil society groups administered refugees. After all, the refugee political is dialectically formed only in encounter with the structures of the dominant.

How do we understand refugee voices when our sources are often those of dominant national and transnational institutions? In his celebrated essay 'The prose of counter-insurgency' (1983), Ranajit Guha advised that the ideals and aspirations of insurgent subaltern peasants may be recovered through careful against-the-grain reading of colonial counter-insurgency archives.[23] In this special issue, some of our authors recover refugee worldviews through comparable critical readings of official archives – that is, with lamentable frequency, archives of oppression. In other cases, generally relating to culturally privileged refugees, we have substantial bodies of writings. But – with exceptions like Arendt's writings – even these have often escaped the scrutiny of intellectual historians.

Let us not pre-empt our conclusions here. Instead, let us go step by step through the individual articles. Instead of simply summarizing these essays, or even dwelling at length on their empirical and theoretical nuances, this introduction aims to assemble the articles into a formal explanatory structure. This structure commences with an initial acknowledgement of the continuities between imperial and national state structures. It then expands to an awareness of individual and collective politics launched by refugees through self-mobilization, as well as through co-operation with nationally and transnationally influential actors and institutions. This formal explanatory plan is just that: formal. It aims to structurally account for the variegated manifestations of the refugee political. In actual cases, the diverse forms of refugee politics – individual and collective, conservative/reactionary and revolutionary, statist and anti-statist, and so on – often remain thoroughly intermeshed. Finally, in some contexts, the victimization of refugees is so overpowering that we struggle to find refugee voices underneath piles of domination and exclusion. In such episodes, a history of the refugee political must acknowledge the silences: the extreme limits where oppression crushes the possibility of politics.

In comprehending the refugee political, we need to first understand the continuities between imperial and post-imperial state-building in the twentieth century, in terms of dispossessing minority actors. In this special issue, the articles by Kerstin von Lingen, Matthew Craig, and Laura Robson and Arie M. Dubnov demonstrate this essential connection. Von Lingen studies how the Nazi 'Aryanization' programme forcibly robbed Austrian Jews of their citizenship and property. She zooms in on two Jewish actors who fled from Vienna via the Italian port of Trieste to Shanghai. For them, the objects they lost, or indeed retained, were not mere property but cherished tokens of family belonging and identity. In contrast, for the Nazi state, the wealth was loot – pure material value denuded of any sentimental content. The warehouses of Trieste viscerally embodied the imperial state's accumulation of value in commodity form. Subsequently, even as the Nazi empire crumbled, local Austrian and Italian authorities retained control of the loot, and, in fact, continued to sell many of the objects and to make handsome profits. When Austrian Jews returned, they found it nearly impossible to claim back stolen property because of nation-state

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[23]Ranajit Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency', in *The small voice of history: collected essays* (Delhi, 2002), pp. 194–238.

laws that privileged residents over non-residents. The post-Nazi/Fascist Austrian and Italian nation-states and citizens thus continued to enrich themselves by retaining control of Nazi/Fascist-era pillage. Imperial plunder continued to circulate in supposedly post-imperial markets.

Von Lingen emphasizes that it needed sustained transnational Jewish activism to challenge the legal-administrative structure of the nation-state, and to enable descendants of Jewish victims to claim back, very slowly, their ancestral property. Today, some of these looted objects have thus started being replenished with social meaning. These objects are no more signs of coercively extracted abstract exchange value, but markers of kinship. To invoke the celebrated French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), they once more reflect the fact that 'Les choses ont encore une valeur de sentiment en plus de leur valeur vénale' ('Things still have a sentimental value in addition to their commercial value').[24] In this case, these objects incarnate hopes of justice within and beyond the Jewish community, and thus perhaps, to some extent, even become *êtres vivants* (living beings).[25] After all, as the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai notes, 'refugee objects and refugee humans' exist as 'complex and interactive mixtures of stability and dislocation'.[26] Across the Global South, descendants of colonized populations today similarly demand repatriation of looted objects. Decolonization mandates that colonial loot be transformed into embodiments of ancestral memory, kinship, and care.[27]

Matthew Craig offers us a different historical trajectory. Japanese imperial invasion of China led to China-based Europeans losing their earlier privileged status. From European colonial-era commercial and administrative elites, they became interned 'enemy aliens'. Craig admits that these actors cannot be seen as 'refugees' in any straightforward manner. However, there are significant overlaps between them and other categories of forcefully uprooted actors: hence, the necessity of their inclusion in this issue as a special category of coercively displaced actors, whose histories are a central part of mid-twentieth-century imperial dissolution. After all, as Craig underlines, their public humiliation on the streets of China emblematized the crumbling of European empire in Asia. Though the Red Cross and Swiss authorities offered them some succour, they could hardly restore the former elites' lost status and wealth.

As China threw off the Japanese yoke, the Chinese nation-state benefited immensely from the Japanese-period regime of expropriation of Europeans. Nationalist China formally ended the treaty port system that had, for a century, guaranteed European commercial privilege in the country. To realize the full significance of Craig's article, we can dialogue it with recent scholarship, which has shown how imperial Japanese expropriation was preserved and stabilized by the Chinese nation-state to create a bourgeois-nationalist political

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[24]Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques', *L'Année sociologique*, 1 (1923–4), pp. 30–186, at p. 160.

[25]Ibid., p. 145.

[26]Arjun Appadurai, 'Museum objects as accidental refugees', *Historische Anthropologie*, 25 (2017), pp. 401–8, at p. 407.

[27]See, for example, Cressida Fforde, C. Timothy McKeown, and Honor Keeler, eds., *The Routledge companion to indigenous repatriation: return, reconcile, renew* (Abingdon, 2020).

economy. This transformation liberated Chinese industry and commerce from European and Japanese control, but (despite the communist revolution) preserved many of the colonial-origin modes of commodity production across the ensuing decades.[28] In the spirit of this scholarship, Craig, too, underlines the continuities between imperial Japanese and post-war Chinese trajectories of aggressive state-building, coercion, and accumulation. Interned enemy aliens played a vital role in mediating the translation of aggressive state sovereignty from empire to post-colony.

The article by Laura Robson and Arie M. Dubnov demonstrates how imperialism shaped nation-state formation across the Mediterranean world, including Greece, Turkey, Palestine/Israel, and Algeria. As older empires in the region, among them the Ottomans and the Habsburgs, went into terminal decline, newer imperial polities – most notably, the British, the French, and the Americans – stepped into their shoes. European and American great powers wanted to 'stabilize' the region. They undertook large-scale demographic transfers to 'manage' local populations. However, refugees were not inert objects of imperial intervention. Jews as well as Palestinians carved out their own autonomous politics in dialogue and contestation with colonial and neocolonial state interventions.

These struggles are emblematized in the contested vocabulary of 'return'. Anglo-American views of Jewish 'return', Hebrew discourses about *shiva*, and the Palestinian assertion of the right of return (*haqq al-ʿawda* or, sometimes, *al-haqq fi -lʿawda*) express radically different political models for the region. Though Euro-American imperialism moulded the birth of nation-states across West Asia and North Africa, these imperially shaped nation-states could not immure subaltern conceptions of home. Many Palestinian refugees remember their villages of origin even today and advocate for a concrete (*malmus*) politics of return. Many Jewish actors refuse to completely identify with the nation-state politics of Israel. The article poignantly discusses an Israeli Jewish artist who makes an ancestral claim on Poland. Clearly, across large stretches of Eurasia, nation-state sovereignty and majoritarian citizenship regimes have not devoured older non-state passions of belonging. As imperial states transform into nation-states, the political grief of the excluded, of the re-colonized (exemplified by Palestinian refugees), continues to haunt the nation-state.

As states rob people of citizenship and property, divorce them from their kin and friends, and expel them from their homelands, they truly turn these human beings into solitary 'individuals'. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (b. 1942) went back to Roman law to retrieve the category of *Homo sacer*: the accursed and exiled man, who can be killed at will. Agamben drew a continuity from the ancient Roman state, which thus periodically subjected its citizens to expulsion and murder, through medieval European polities, which similarly put some of its people under the ban and rendered them killable, to the Nazi state, which reduced Jews

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[28]Recent 'global history of capitalism' scholarship has begun to highlight many of these continuities. See Andrew B. Liu, *Tea war: a history of capitalism in China and India* (New Haven, CT, 2020); Victor Seow, *Carbon technocracy: energy regimes in modern East Asia* (Chicago, IL, 2021).

and disabled people en masse to 'bare bodies'. For Agamben, modern states are heirs of a very ancient paradigm when they slaughter or expel their people.[29]

Against this individualization and de-politicization, refugees have sought to re-politicize their selves. Here we see the birth of 'the refugee political': refugees constructing themselves as political beings. Dina Gusejnova studies select Baltic German aristocrats who fled to Germany (and neighbouring parts of western Europe) in the aftermath of the First World War. Her case-study marks the anterior temporal limit of this special issue – the post-First World War transition from empire to nation-state in continental Europe that prefigured and cast its shadow on the post-Second World War globalization of this transition. Hence the peculiar value of her contribution, and the rationale for its inclusion as a limit-case into this special issue which, otherwise, focuses on the 1930s to 1950s.

In the eyes of the central-east European nation-states which rose from the ashes of the Russian and German empires, these aristocrats were singular individuals who ought to demonstrate singular loyalty to whichever post-imperial nation-state they chose to live in. In their own eyes, however, they were embodiments of ancient lineages with immemorial ties to their estate lands. They were proud of having plural loyalties: to the Russian monarchy which their ancestors had served, to the German ethno-linguistic community to which they belonged, and to their territorial homelands in the Baltic countries. They hated the manner in which the new nation-states had removed their noble status and expropriated their ancestral property.

One such aristocrat, Mikhail Aleksandrovich Taube (1869–1961), resorted to the figure of Antigone. For Hegel, the conflict between Antigone and Creon in Sophocles' play embodied a classic conflict between family/kin loyalty and loyalty to the state.[30] The Baltic nobles found themselves in a similar predicament, and asserted their belief in a politics of family and kinship that predated the nation-state. Many of them invoked ancient civilizational ideals against the Western modernity which, they felt, had subalternized them. Hermann Keyserling (1880–1946) thus referenced the political thought of the Chinese thinker Ku Hung-ming (1857–1928) and the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941).

Sebastian Musch follows a less ancestry-obsessed train of refugee thought. He studies three Jewish intellectuals who fled from Germany to the United States in the 1930s to escape Nazi persecution. Musch argues that, in variegated ways, these thinkers refused their enforced de-politicization. They insisted that they were political beings – that, whatever their ethno-religious status, they had intrinsic rights and agency. Of these, Hannah Arendt is the most famous. She looked back to ancient Greece to argue that human beings could not be reduced to their private ethnic-biological identity. This would confine them to the *oikos* or household. Rather, they were inalienably public or political creatures, with a vital role to play in the *polis* or political community. This was an assertion by refugees of their intrinsic political beingness.

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[29]Giorgio Agamben, 'Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life', trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, in *The omnibus homo sacer* (Stanford, CA, 2017), pp. 1–159.

[30]Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit*; G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the philosophy of right*, trans. T. M. Knox, ed. Stephen Houlgate (New York, NY, 2008; orig. edn 1820).

Interestingly, recent scholarship has emphasized how Greek discourses on democracy and citizenship had themselves emerged in an ancient Mediterranean–Eurasian world characterized by deportations, carried out by both empires and city-states.[31] Benjamin Gray argues that

> Cynic and Stoic exiles living on the margins of particularist city-states, such as Diogenes of Sinope, Crates of Thebes and Zeno of Kition, some of whom were victims of exclusionary civic unrest, became among the earliest philosophical advocates of cosmopolitanism. … Similarly, in the modern world, modern concepts of universal human rights were developed partly by theorists and citizens anxious to curtail the destabilising and exclusionary tendencies of Classical republican political institutions and norms.[32]

From ancient Greece to the Greek-inspired Arendt, we can thus see a long arc of exile thinkers constructing inclusive political models in opposition to state-enforced deportations.

Among refugees who fled from Nazi-conquered Europe to the United Kingdom and the United States were many central-east European-origin lawyers. Kerstin von Lingen has argued elsewhere that some of them helped shape the Nuremberg principle of 'crimes against humanity'.[33] We may conceptualize this as another manifestation of the refugee political: an attempt to transform international criminal law into a progressive instrument for protecting people from state violence.

If the first step in forming 'the refugee political' is to assert one's political being-ness, then the second step is to ally with organizations which would concretely help in refugee rehabilitation. (We order these steps only in a formal or hermeneutic sense – in real life, these steps may be simultaneous and indeed co-constitute each other.) Some of the most exciting recent scholarship, such as Rana Mitter's work on the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in China, has foregrounded the multi/trans-scalar nature of these operations, linking local, national, and transnational politics.[34] In this special issue, Philipp Strobl shows how German-speaking Jewish refugees in Australia were initially relatively unsuccessful in gaining state help in rehabilitation. 'White Australia', inheriting British antisemitic racial prejudices and racialized models of citizenship, was quite hostile to these foreigners. However, once the refugees started to ally with local Jewish organizations as well as sympathetic civil society groups such as women's organizations, they could form

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[31]Josef Wiesehöfer, 'Deportations', in Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, eds., *A companion to the Achaemenid Persian empire*, vol. I (Hoboken, NJ, 2021), pp. 871–7; Benjamin Gray, *Stasis and stability: exile, the polis, and political thought, c. 404–146 BC* (Oxford, 2015).

[32]Benjamin Gray, 'From exile of citizens to deportation of non-citizens: ancient Greece as a mirror to illuminate a modern transition', *Citizenship Studies*, 15 (2011), pp. 565–82, at p. 578.

[33]Kerstin von Lingen, 'Legal flows: contributions of exiled lawyers to the concept of "crimes against humanity" during the Second World War', *Modern Intellectual History*, 17 (2020), pp. 507–25; Kerstin von Lingen, 'Epistemic communities of exile lawyers at the UNWCC', *Journal of the History of International Law / Revue d'histoire du droit international*, 24 (2022), pp. 315–33.

[34]Rana Mitter, 'Relocation and dislocation: civilian, refugee, and military movement as factors in the disintegration of postwar China, 1945–49', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 193–213.

effective pressure groups, gaining recognition from the Australian state as 'refugee aliens' – an indispensable stage in their rehabilitation in the country. To take a cue from David Featherstone, discussed above, we can see in these solidarities between refugees and women certain elements of subaltern internationalism: actors sub-alternized by race and gender in a white-male-dominated society converging to support each other.

In many cases, however, it was the economic demands of the host country which ensured the relative success or failure of refugee resettlement. Again, scholarship has made important strides in recent years in linking refugee histories to histories of global capitalism. For example, in 1930s and '40s South America, state demand for skilled white labour – as opposed to Asian and Caribbean immigrant labour – often ensured smooth welcome for European Jews. Linda Erker's study of the Austrian Jewish archaeologist Grete Mostny's (1914–91) career in Chile, and Sebastian Huhn's research on the resettlement of European Jews as agrarian and industrial workers in Venezuela, exemplify this nascent scholarship.[35]

In this special issue, Sarah Knoll argues that young Hungarian refugees, flee-ing Soviet invasion of their country in 1956, often settled with relative ease in the United States, precisely because American industrialists needed cheap skilled labour and were willing to pressure the American government to get it. Knoll admits that churches and other civil society organizations also played a crucial role. Here, her scholarship joins growing academic work on the role of religion during the Cold War.[36] However, she underlines that the balance in favour of the refugees was ulti-mately tipped by businessmen rather than clerics. This also meant that elderly and sick refugees, as well as single women refugees with children – people seen as defi-cient in terms of labour productivity – found it much harder to emigrate to the United States and had to stay on in Europe. The 'achievements' of the refugee polit-ical need to be juxtaposed here with the brute reality of capitalist labour markets which disabled the mobility of many refugees.

The third step in the formation of 'the refugee political' occurs when refugees self-organize to structurally transform the politics and economy of host societies. Dominic Meng-Hsuang Yang's article in this special issue focuses on fishermen who traditionally lived in self-governing communities in the Dachen Islands. They were forced to flee to Taiwan in the mid-1950s. The United States as well as the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan celebrated this as a Cold War triumph, as a sup-posed rejection of the communist regime by poor Chinese people. But this was more political propaganda than a reflection of objective reality. The forced migra-tion of Dachen Islanders stemmed from wartime conditions of the early 1950s, as well as Kuomintang and American interventions. When the islanders reached Taiwan, American and Taiwanese financial and logistical support did not adequately

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[35]Linda Erker, 'Grete Mostny and the making of indigenous archaeology: European immigration, white racial hegemony, and Chilean nationalism', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 265–82; Sebastian Huhn, 'Rethinking the postwar international migration regime from the Global South: Venezuela in a global history of white immigration', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 214–32.

[36]Dianne Kirby, ed., *Religion and the Cold War* (Basingstoke, 2003); Philip E. Muehlenbeck, *Religion and the Cold War: a global perspective* (Nashville, TN, 2012).

help in refugee rehabilitation. Yang argues that this was because this aid was distributed through a Kuomintang wartime developmentalist logic. The state aimed to rapidly convert impoverished aid recipients into economically profitable workers who would transform sparsely populated remote areas into agricultural and industrial hubs.

The Taiwanese state distributed aid without consulting the refugee communities on how they would utilize these resources to again become self-supporting autonomous collectives, as they had been in the Dachen Islands. In fact, the areas of settlement had poor access to markets and no road or rail infrastructure, thus dooming them. The situation resembled India, where the state often resettled refugees in remote areas, like Dandakaranya in central India, the Andaman Islands, and parts of north-east India, causing widespread misery to the refugees as well as to local tribal/Adivasi inhabitants. Pankhuree R. Dube has recently argued that the postcolonial Indian state thus developed into a settler colonial state.[37]

In Taiwan, Yang shows that it was only when refugees self-organized and repeatedly petitioned the Taiwanese state in the 1960s that the latter opened avenues to train the fishermen as seamen, and thereby give them viable careers. Over the next decades, many of these Dachen Islanders again migrated, this time as seamen to the United States. They formed long transnational networks to bring in more of their compatriots and give them jobs in America, often as cooks and dishwashers. The economic ascendancy of Dachen Islanders in both Taiwan and the United States thus owed much more to the self-organizing capacity and resilience of the refugees themselves than to institutional state help. Yang's article again demonstrates the resilience of subaltern internationalism in the age of nation-states and the Cold War – working classes supporting each other across the Asia-Pacific in the pursuit of better lives.

The last two articles in this special issue turn their attention to refugees and their allies, who, in the process of self-organizing, concluded that their ultimate enemy was nothing less than the brutal nexus between imperial state and exploitative capital. Shuvatri Dasgupta focuses on the biographies of two Indian women, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903–88) and Lakshmi Sahgal (née Swaminathan, 1914–2012), to sketch a broader argument. She shows how Indians who worked and travelled across China, Malaya, and India realized that British and Japanese colonial states worked in conjunction with capitalist classes to exploit Indian and Chinese workers. Hence, they emphasized working-class democratic politics against European and Japanese imperialism. As it happens, many of these workers became refugees due to the Japanese invasion of East and Southeast Asia. Hence, working-class politics also became refugee politics. The Indian National Army was a great expression of this widespread subaltern politics. It embodied powerful intersections between anti-colonial subaltern internationalism across maritime Southeast Asia and elite Indian nationalism, led by figures like Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945) and Sahgal herself.

Once India became independent, however, the postcolonial Indian nation-state clamped down on refugee self-organizing. Where refugees often wanted to form their own 'refugee poleis' – Faridabad, on the outskirts of Delhi, is exemplary –

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[37]Pankhuree R. Dube, 'Theorizing the Adivasi's absence in partition histories: indigenes, refugees, and the settler state in Dandakaranya forest', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 14 (2023), pp. 94–113.

the state desired to subsume refugee settlements into its own bureaucracy of reha-
bilitation.[38] The postcolonial nation-state thus became sovereign only by brutally
suppressing alternative pathways of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle, by
eradicating alternative spaces of political community as well as alternative forms
of co-operative economic ownership and communal labour.

Milinda Banerjee argues that many refugees, therefore, began to see the post-
colonial nation-state as a neo-imperial or neocolonial state. He draws attention to
impoverished East Bengali Hindus who, following the Partition of India in 1947,
migrated to the Hindu-majority Indian state of West Bengal to escape pogroms in
Muslim-majority East Pakistan. They settled in government and *zamindar* (agrarian
landed magnate) lands. The Indian state not only did not offer adequate economic
support to the refugees but also sought to expel them from the lands where they
had 'illegally' settled. In response, refugees built up a large and sophisticated model
of confederal democracy, connecting local camps and colonies to an overarching
umbrella organization. They castigated the Indian state as a colonial polity that
continued the repressive machineries of British imperial rule, in order to pro-
tect capitalist forms of big private property. They saw the postcolonial state as
embodying a capitalist betrayal of anti-colonialism.

Reading government archives and refugee texts through the lens of global intel-
lectual history, Banerjee demonstrates that the Bengali refugees drew vital inspira-
tion from the Soviet Union, China, and the East Berlin-based Women's International
Democratic Federation. Bengali refugees framed their politics through a vocabulary
of Cold War internationalism. They were not just fighting for their own economic
and political rights, but waging a transnationally inspired revolutionary struggle
against the locally rooted but ultimately world-spanning forces of capitalism and
imperialism. These Bengali refugees were, thus, paradigmatic subaltern internation-
alists. As other scholars have shown, East Bengali refugees ultimately succeeded
in allying with West Bengali peasants and industrial workers to bring down the
Congress nationalist government, ushering in communist rule in the state.[39]

Having gone through the individual articles in this special issue, it is time to
ask: where do we place our volume within the broader historiography on refugee
history? Our first response would be a methodological one. After all, although the
mid-twentieth century witnessed waves of forced migrations across Europe, West
Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, for a long time these forced migra-
tions were studied in isolation from each other. South Asianists would study the
Partition of India without referencing events in central Europe, Palestine, or China;
scholars of Nazi Germany would pay scant attention to India or East Asia; and so
on. This has fortunately begun to change in recent years. Increasingly, historians
investigate 'connected histories' of these forced migrations.[40] They have traced

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[38]We owe this term to Shuvatri Dasgupta; it came up as we discussed state suppression of autonomous refugee political communities in postcolonial India.

[39]Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men: the refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal* (Calcutta, 1999; orig. edn 1990); Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge, 2007); Sen, *Citizen refugee*.

[40]On connected histories as methodology, see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories: notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 31 (1997), pp. 735–62.

connections between different world regions at the level of imperial policies of partitioning countries and in the operations of international organizations, as well as in the movements of the refugees themselves. All this has enabled us to make a strong case for placing local refugee histories within wider frameworks of global history.[41]

Peter Gatrell has played an especially impressive role in placing refugee history at the heart of modern global history.[42] He argues:

> The emerging body of work on refugees, refugee regimes and practices of protection nevertheless carries a risk of piling up a series of regionally differentiated and disconnected crises and responses …. Instead, we might ask how and in what terms refugees and non-refugees made connections between one crisis and another.[43]

Gatrell thus impels us to think of refugee global history in terms of dense, connected histories. In a recent essay, he and his co-authors Lauren Banko and Katarzyna Nowak direct 'attention to the co-constitution of refugees and the state, including the dynamics of population displacement and programmes of national (re)construction'.[44]

Various essays in an earlier journal special issue edited by us demonstrated that refugee histories help us rewrite global histories of capitalism, global intellectual history, and transnational medical history.[45] Building on recent trends in refugee history scholarship, we advocated for 'a multi-scalar, or rather trans-scalar, connected history of the [refugee resettlement] regime … bridging local, regional, national, and transnational scales'.[46] These histories ultimately show how refugees were a principal fulcrum in the making of planetary politics in the age of decolonization and Cold War. Mira Siegelberg concludes that the question of statelessness was, indeed, fundamental 'in the creation of the postwar international settlement and in the domestication of the questions entertained in the interwar era about the foundations of political community'.[47] Clearly, no global history of the modern world will be adequate if it ignores experiences of refugee-ness.

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[41] Apart from works cited elsewhere in this article, see Anuradha Bhattacharjee, *The second homeland: Polish refugees in India* (Delhi, 2012); Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a political idea* (London, 2013); Rana Mitter, 'Imperialism, transnationalism, and the reconstruction of post-war China: UNRRA in China, 1944–7', *Past and Present*, 218 (2013), pp. 51–69; Laura Madokoro, *Elusive refuge: Chinese migrants in the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Arie M. Dubnov and Laura Robson, eds., *Partitions: a transnational history of twentieth-century territorial separatism* (Stanford, CA, 2019); Guang Pan, *A study of Jewish refugees in China (1933–1945): history, theories and the Chinese pattern* (Singapore, 2019).

[42] Peter Gatrell, *The making of the modern refugee* (Oxford, 2013).

[43] Peter Gatrell, 'Refugees: what's wrong with history?', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 30 (2017), pp. 170–89, at p. 182.

[44] Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, 'What is refugee history, now?', *Journal of Global History*, 17 (2022), pp. 1–19, at p. 8.

[45] Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin von Lingen, eds., 'Forced migration and refugee resettlement in the long 1940s', special issue, *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 185–303.

[46] Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin von Lingen, 'Forced migration and refugee resettlement in the long 1940s: an introduction to its connected and global history', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 185–92, at p. 188.

[47] Mira L. Siegelberg, *Statelessness: a modern history* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), p. 11.

In this special issue, each author focuses on movements of people and ideas across two or more world regions, to show how refugee history constitutes transnational, or even global, history. Actors and ideas move across China, Malaya, and India; between Austria, Italy, and China; between Pakistan, India, the Soviet Union, and China; between the Dachen Islands, Taiwan, and the United States; and so on. At the same time, these articles, taken together, help coalesce an argument that goes far beyond merely emphasizing the salience of transnational history. It runs as follows.

The triumph of nation-states in the mid- to late twentieth century has its necessary tragic complement in accelerating waves of refugee production. National ruling classes produce refugees for a variety of reasons, while forging monocentric sovereign national states. People may be expelled from their territories to enable capture of their wealth and local natural resources. They may be deported, or deported people may be welcomed, only to exploit their cheap labour. States and companies welcome able-bodied refugees more than elderly or sick people, women, or children. States thus collude with economic elites to convert human and nonhuman beings into economic value, into sources of profit, into pure capital. Forced migrations result in the near extinction of entire lifeworlds and cosmologies – such as those of the Dachen Islanders, East Bengali Hindus, central European Jews, or Palestinians. Bereft of these social worlds, sapped of their resources to resist, human beings are converted with greater ease into helpless subjects of state and capital. States – to speak in terms of historical actors, powerful ruling classes – therefore often find it extremely convenient to centralize sovereignty and accumulate capital by utilizing refugees. Our special issue historicizes this trajectory through thick case-studies ranging from Taiwan and India to Austria, Italy, and the United States. Naturally, recent scholarship has been paying increasing attention to the wider implications of this nexus between statist-capitalist developmentalism and refugee formation.[48] It is becoming increasingly clear that state-making is refugee-making, and that global histories of capitalism inevitably involve the production and consumption of refugee lives.

Hence, to take a cue from the political scientist Niraja Gopal Jayal, state citizenship perpetually breeds discontents.[49] Seen in this light, transnational/global refugee history – of the kind that we offer in this special issue – reveals fundamental discontents about twentieth-century global history. We realize that, while decolonization resulted in the global progress of democratization, the rise of nation-states also advanced various forms of capitalism (including state capitalism, of the Soviet, Chinese, or Indian variants) and related ethnic-religious majoritarianism. The gradual collapse of empires – first, the land empires of continental Europe and the Mediterranean, and then the colonial empires of Asia and Africa – liberated long-suffering multitudes. But these triumphs were rapidly offset by new forms of nation-state dominance. Several authors in this special issue argue that, in fact, imperialism centrally shaped nation-states, as in the Middle-East, and/or that nation-states acted as neocolonial agents, pursuing deeply neocolonial developmentalist logics, whether in India or in China.

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[48]Olivia Bennett and Christopher McDowell, eds., *Displaced: the human cost of development and resettlement* (New York, NY, 2012); Julia Caroline Morris, *Asylum and extraction in the Republic of Nauru* (Ithaca, NY, 2023).

[49]Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Citizenship and its discontents: an Indian history* (Cambridge, MA, 2013).

Cold War geopolitics offered limited channels of mobility to refugees – such as allowing able-bodied Hungarians to escape to the United States or Dachen Islanders to flee to Taiwan and receive American help, or indeed offering Bengali refugees immense imaginative resources to fight against the Indian state. But, ultimately, Cold War realpolitik was perhaps more a constraint than an enabler for autonomous refugee politics, compelling refugees to adapt to state programmes. By privileging the military, political, and economic priorities of state and capital over solidarity-oriented internationalism, Cold War geopolitics ultimately set constraints on decolonization.

Communist politics had a more ambiguous role. On the one hand, as Gusejnova, Knoll, and Yang demonstrate in this special issue, in its more destructive avatar as state socialism, communism forced people to escape in search of freedom and better lives. Many would indeed characterize such state socialism as 'state capitalism', rather than socialism in any meaningful sense. After all, the state functioned in these polities like an overarching mega-capitalist in organizing commodity production and exchange; in administering wage labour, often under severely exploitative conditions; and in integrating societies into global capitalist markets.[50] On the other hand, as Dasgupta and Banerjee underline for Malaya and India, in its more emancipatory avatar, communism enabled vibrant forms of anti-capitalist and feminist politics. It facilitated variegated forms of subaltern internationalism. In such cases, communism often merely gave final ideological form to already-existing subaltern collective politics, bringing together peasants, industrial working classes, women, and dispossessed literati and gentry.

Like twentieth-century global communism, decolonization has been a Janus-faced affair. It has unleashed forces of liberation as well as constructed novel scaffolds of oppression. Jettisoning triumphalist mythologies about national freedom, our special issue insists on seeing decolonization from the standpoint of those who lost out in the race to create majoritarian nation-states. Rather than seeing decolonization across Afro-Eurasia as a finished affair, we are forced to ask: who were the losers? What forms of kinship and community life, political emancipation, and radical solidarity were obscured by the globalization of the nation-state? And how do these losses shape our planetary present?

The Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe (b. 1957) has argued that the world as a whole is becoming 'Black', in the sense that more and more people are reaching conditions of subalternity that have historically been associated with Black populations.[51] The thesis is, undoubtedly, controversial. But adopting Mbembe's critical spirit, and through our unhappy reading of the mid-twentieth century,

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[50] For classic theorization on state capitalism, see Friedrich Pollock, 'State capitalism: its possibilities and limitations' (1941), in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, *The essential Frankfurt School reader* (New York, NY, 1990), pp. 71–94; Moishe Postone, *Time, labor, and social domination: a reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory* (Cambridge, 1993). Recent years have seen a rapid growth in scholarship on global histories and sociologies of state capitalism. See, for example, Vincent Kelly Pollard, ed., *State capitalism, contentious politics and large-scale social change* (Leiden, 2011); Joshua Kurlantzick, *State capitalism: how the return of statism is transforming the world* (Oxford, 2016); Martin C. Spechler, Joachim Ahrens, and Herman W. Hoen, *State capitalism in Eurasia* (Singapore, 2017).

[51] Achille Mbembe, 'Introduction: the becoming Black of the world', in *Critique of Black reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC, 2017), pp. 1–10.

we may ask: is the world increasingly doomed to become a world of refugees? Every passing year depressingly produces ever-new waves: refugees from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Palestine; famished migrants fleeing from war and famine in sub-Saharan Africa; climate refugees from Bangladesh. In a world of global warming, shall we witness entire island nations turn into territory-less diasporas?

Political thought will surely have to centre the refugee now in ways it has never hitherto done. Drawing on Hegel and subaltern studies, we argue that it is time to rewrite histories of the political from the vantage point of the refugee as relational subaltern. The 'refugee polis' must become as important a terrain for innovative thought and praxis as the territorial state was before. Musch's reading of Arendt's conceptualization of the human being as made for the polis, Strobl's analysis of Jewish self-organization in Australia, Yang's portrayal of Dachen new villages in Taiwan, Dasgupta's historicization of the rise and fall of the refugee township of Faridabad, and Banerjee's description of Bengali refugee camps and colonies as sites of democratic assembly – all these flesh out in dense detail the conceptual and empirical lineaments of the 'refugee polis' as a general political form. Based on the articles in this special issue, we advance the hypothesis that the 'refugee polis' emerged as a global form across various parts of the mid- to late twentieth-century world, in reaction to the consolidation of nation-states and mass expulsions of minorities.

It will no longer be enough to say that refugees are 'bare life' (Agamben) or grounds for urban cosmopolitanism (Derrida).[52] As Agamben himself admits, to aid refugees in a depoliticized way, as modern humanitarianism too often does – bare life needing to be saved – is an approach that it is itself part of the problem, rather than the solution. And from Taiwan to Faridabad, we have witnessed the tragic consequences of such bureaucratic 'saving'.[53] In short, the refugee political will have to be rigorously put to stake.

Though Hegel ominously describes world history as 'the slaughter-bench (*Schlachtbank*) at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized', history cannot, in fact, be reduced to tragedy.[54] For all their privation, refugees turn out to be resilient and resistant actors. Even as old lifeworlds and cosmologies are rendered extinct, new political communities rise and take their place. What is lost can never be replaced, and yet new worlds dawn. This is certainly true of the innumerable communities that colonial and postcolonial state-making have rendered exiles. This special issue has shown that refugees are remarkably canny in building new social communities and in forming novel political alliances, with and against the globalized forces of nation-states and capital. They are adept in shaping new techniques of refugee republicanism, of building new spaces of refugee democracy.[55]

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[52] Agamben, 'Homo sacer'; Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!* (Paris, 1997).

[53] Agamben, 'Homo sacer', pp. 110–11.

[54] G. W. F. Hegel, *The philosophy of history*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, NY, 1900), p. 21.

[55] On refugee republicanism and democracy, see Milinda Banerjee, 'The partition of India, Bengali "new Jews", and refugee democracy: transnational horizons of Indian refugee political discourse', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 283–303.

Sometimes, as evident among Dachen Islanders as well as among various groups of Indians discussed in this special issue, refugees draw upon prior traditions of collective self-governance to build their new refugee polis. At other moments, the very experience of utter destitution impels the emergence of new forms of collective life, of polis and cosmopolis. In material terms, refugee vulnerability instigates them to build wide-ranging alliances – with churches, politicians, and entrepreneurs, as much as with peasants, industrial workers, and feminists. They help forge various forms of subaltern internationalism, linking the Dachen Islands to the United States, central European Jews to Australian women, impoverished Indian refugees to Soviet and Chinese communists, as well as to anti-colonial Indian and Chinese revolutionaries in maritime Southeast Asia. While David Featherstone has studied subaltern internationalism as a central element of twentieth-century working-class politics, we have emphasized that refugee actors, too, may be studied as subaltern internationalists. They are subaltern actors who forge ideological and material solidarities across nations and continents in order to shape decent and dignified lives in confrontation with state violence.

If more and more people in the world are indeed becoming refugees – and if this will only accelerate as the climate crisis deepens – then the refugee political will certainly become a pre-eminent way to think about global politics in the coming decades. And if this is indeed the case, then the least we can do as historians is to learn from the past, so that we can better appreciate, advertise, and aid the making of refugee democracy – a democracy constituted by the detritus of the world, the salt of the earth.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.