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Responses to Refugee Crises in International Comparison

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In the summer of 2015, European governments, activists, and the international media went into crisis mode. The preceding years had seen some of the largest movements of refugees across national borders since World War II as result of the war in Syria, then in its fourth year, and other violent conflicts in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. Nonetheless, European governments and the European Union were caught off guard when the numbers of refugees and other migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean or making their way over the so-called Balkan route dramatically increased in mid-2015. By September 2015, the “European Refugee Crisis” had become a fixed term that dominated European public discussion of the situation. Policy-makers, activists, researchers, and journalists in Europe and North America engaged in heated, often polemical debates about how to cope with the “crisis.” Should the refugees be granted asylum? If so, which groups? On what terms? How many refugees should each country take in? Would large numbers of refugees jeopardize the security of citizens in the receiving countries? And, in the long run, should those countries try to integrate the refugees as permanent residents? If so, how was their integration to be achieved? How could European societies deal with rapidly increasing cultural and religious heterogeneity?

Historians have joined other scholars and experts in speaking out about the European Refugee Crisis, but they have had little influence in setting the terms of debate. In fact, the perception that an unparalleled crisis was unfolding rested to a certain extent on an ahistorical reading of the situation. Each new report of “record numbers” of arrivals and the “unprecedented” challenges Europe faced deepened the sense of urgency

and crisis. Yet, as some politicians and observers were quick to point out, the Euro-Mediterranean situation of 2015 was by no means unparalleled. Proponents of a more generous European admission policy and some academics pointed to successfully managed refugee crises inside and outside of Europe over the twentieth century. In a now famous press conference on August 31, 2015, German chancellor Angela Merkel reaffirmed that Germany would do its part to aid refugees from Syria. “We can do it!” she declared, and she offered several examples from history to back up that confident prediction. Among her examples was an earlier large-scale inflow of forced migrants: the so-called expellees from formerly German territories who had to be resettled after 1945.¹

The resettling of the expellees became a recurring if controversial point of reference in the German discussion of the 2015 “crisis” and its aftermath, but it was not the only historical example that figured in the ongoing debate across Europe. Depending on the country, newspaper readers (re)encountered the émigrés from the 1917 Russian Revolution; the 10,000 mainly Jewish children relocated from Central Europe to the United Kingdom in 1938 (the so-called *Kindertransport*); Hungarians who fled the failed revolution of 1956; Indochinese boat people in the late 1970s; and refugees of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s.²

In most cases, such historical references were nothing more than that: references. Largely detached from their specific context, historical examples were offered as reminders of a benevolent, mainly Western tradition of assistance to refugees or as evidence of “best practices” that receiving states might adopt at their own discretion.³ Nevertheless, such

¹ Angela Merkel, press conference, August 31, 2015: www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2015/08/2015-08-31-pk-merkel.html.

² Historical references recur throughout the articles, editorials, and commentaries on the unfolding refugee situation published, e.g., in the *New York Times*, September 9, 2015; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 14, 2015; *The Guardian*, September 10 and 21, 2015; *Foreign Policy*, September 10, 2015; *Le Monde*, September 18 and October 1, 2015; *Die Zeit*, October 23, 2015. For a comparative analysis of media reactions in three major receiving countries (Sweden, Jordan, and Turkey), see Dalia Abdelhady, “Framing the Syrian Refugee,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, eds. Cecilia Menjivar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness (Oxford, 2019), 635–56.

³ See the critical remarks by Jessica Reinisch, “History matters . . . but which one? Every refugee crisis has a context,” *History and Policy*, September 29, 2015, www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/history-matters-but-which-one-every-refugee-crisis-has-a-context.

examples offer a glimpse into a much broader history of refugee crises.⁴ Over the course of the twentieth century, especially in the decades after World War II, many countries experienced the arrival of large numbers of refugees and other forced migrants within short time spans, in some cases repeatedly.⁵ Some of those refugee crises involved more people, measured as a share of the world's population, than the 2015 situation, and some also posed much more dramatic economic and demographic challenges to the host countries. For some of the host countries in this larger history of refugee crises, the challenge of integrating millions of refugees was a defining experience that was interwoven with processes of state-building in the wake of war and decolonization.

Refugee Crises, 1945–2000 takes a comparative approach to this larger history of refugee crises. Our focus is not on the causes of large refugee migrations or on the experiences of refugees, but rather on the responses to refugee movements from actors at several levels, ranging from local communities in receiving societies to international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and supranational organizations. Adopting a decidedly global perspective, this volume brings together ten case studies from host countries in the global North and South. These cases cover a broad spectrum of types of involuntary migration and of international and domestic contexts. The driving forces and numbers of people involved varied considerably from case to case, and the backgrounds (national, religious, social) of the migrants also differed enormously. The common factor is that in each case the receiving country was confronted with the crucial question of how to deal with the arrival of a large number of people seeking refuge. They could not simply be sent

⁴ For an exploration of the ways in which past refugee crises are remembered, see Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester, 2006); Tony Kushner, *Journeys from the Abyss: The Holocaust and Forced Migration from the 1880s to the Present* (Liverpool, 2017).

⁵ The best survey with regard to responses by the international community is Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford, 2013). See also Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham, NC, 2002); *Religious Refugees in Europe, Asia and North America (6th–21st Century)*, ed. Susanne Lachenicht (Hamburg, 2007); *Les réfugiés en Europe du XVIe au XXe siècles*, eds. Olivier Forcade and Philippe Nivet (Paris, 2008); Dirk Hoerder, *Migrations and Belongings: 1870–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Philip Ther, *The Outsiders: Refugees in Europe since 1492* (Princeton, 2019); Klaus Bade, *Migration in European History* (Malden, 2003); Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN, 2003); *The Encyclopedia of European Migration and Minorities: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, eds. Klaus J. Bade, Pieter C. Emmer, Leo Lucassen, and Jochen Oltmer (Cambridge, 2011).

away, but they were also widely seen in the receiving countries as an unpredictable challenge to stability and social cohesion.

The case studies in this volume focus on the political and societal responses to different cases of involuntary mass migration since World War II. How did state and society react to the refugees? How did the refugees themselves shape the situation? To what extent were refugees integrated – socially, economically, and culturally – into the receiving society? To what extent did refugees integrate themselves? How were integration and participation pursued and achieved? What facilitated – or impeded – the migrants’ settlement? How was “success” in the settlement of migrants defined? What were the short-term and long-term consequences for the host countries of accepting the migrants? In putting these questions center stage, this volume makes at least two distinct contributions to the growing body of comparative scholarship on refugees and forced migration. The comparative approach has shed new light on individual cases, recasting them as chapters in a larger history of “ethnic cleansing” in the twentieth century.⁶ Scholars in the field have mainly sought to pinpoint the root causes, forms, and dynamics of displacement. The arrival, reception, and integration (or nonintegration) of refugees and the consequences, both long- and short-term, for receiving countries have, by contrast, been little studied in comparative perspective. With its emphasis on the processes after flight and displacement, *Refugee Crises, 1945–2000* addresses this desideratum. Moreover, with the global scope of its case studies, extending beyond the North–South divide, this volume distinguishes itself from a literature that tends to be mainly concerned with Western receiving countries but is seemingly oblivious to the fact that the vast majority of refugees today are to be found in countries of the global South.⁷

⁶ Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1985); Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Benjamin Lieberman, *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe* (Chicago, 2006); Philipp Ther, *The Dark Side of Nation States: Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe* (New York, 2014); Michael Schwartz, *Ethnische “Säuberungen” in der Moderne: Globale Wechselwirkungen nationalistischer und rassistischer Gewaltpolitik im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 2013).

⁷ On the importance of the global South as destination for refugees, see Aristide R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World* (New York, 1989); *L’asile au sud*, eds. Luc Cambrézy, Smaïn Laacher, Véronique Lassailly-Jacob, and Luc Legoux (Paris, 2008).

REFUGEE – CRISIS – REFUGEE CRISES

Talk of “refugee crises” pervades public and academic discourse. But what do we mean when we speak of a “refugee crisis”? Each of the component terms is complex, ambiguous, and problematic. Without trying to offer hard and fast definitions, we want to clarify the ways the terms “refugee” and “crisis” are used in this volume. Today, many definitions of the term “refugee” go back to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, commonly called the Geneva Convention, which recognized refugees as a distinct category of migrant in international law.⁸ Centered on individuals fleeing their countries out of fear of political, religious, or ethnic persecution, the Geneva Convention definition excludes several types of forced migrants and displaced persons, such as refugees from war zones and internally displaced persons. Some of the case studies in this book do deal with refugees who fell under the Geneva Convention, but this volume covers a much broader array of refugees and involuntary migrants. It includes several groups of people whose displacement predated the 1951 definition: people who did not, in a strict sense, cross an international border (e.g., the “returnees” from the colonies); war refugees; and those who were denied refugee status.

Deliberately departing from the 1951 Geneva Convention definition, *Refugee Crises, 1945–2000* uses the term “refugee” more broadly to designate any person fleeing negative political actions and exclusion, much as the term did in the first half of the twentieth century.⁹ A common thread linking the different groups discussed in this volume is coerced migration. All were forcibly driven from their home or felt compelled to flee, and return was not a viable option, at least not in the short term. To be sure, the forms and degree of coercion varied from case to case, ranging from indirect or situational pressure to direct force.¹⁰

⁸ On the historical connections between “migrants” and “refugees,” and the problems of the 1951 distinction, see Katy Long, “When Refugees Stopped Being Migrants: Movement, Labour and Humanitarian Protection,” *Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 4–26.

⁹ See, for example, John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem: Report of a Survey* (Oxford, 1939), 3–4; John Hope Simpson, “The Refugee Problem,” *International Affairs* 17, no. 5 (1938): 607–28, esp. 607–9.

¹⁰ On the distinction between direct and indirect force, see Krystyna Kersten, “Przymusowe przemieszczenia ludności – próba typologii,” in *Utracona ojczyzna: Przymusowe wysiedlenia, deportacje i przesiedlenia jako wspólne doświadczenie*, eds. Hubert Orłowski and Andrzeja Saksona (Poznań, 1996), 13–29; Philipp Ther, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene: Gesellschaft und Vertriebenenpolitik in der SBZ/DDR und in Polen 1945–1956* (Göttingen, 1998), 96.

Those extremes are represented in this volume by postcolonial “returnees” and “repatriates” who feared reprisals in the wake of independence struggles or believed they had no future in newly independent states and by expellees and “resettlers” who were the subjects of state-organized displacement.¹¹ Although natural disasters and climate change can also be seen as causes of forced migration, the case studies considered here all had political root causes.

The ways in which the migrant groups considered in this volume were classified at the time and the concrete legal status they obtained varied widely. Some of them were recognized as refugees under the Geneva Convention; some were denied that status and were deemed “irregular” migrants. Many others – including expellees, resettlers, returnees, and repatriates – were granted a special legal status created by the receiving states. The diversity of cases considered here is intentional. Only by comparing groups that have been categorized in a variety of ways can we assess the role that framing has played in responses to refugee crises and how it impacted the realities of refugee life.

The term “crisis” poses an entirely different set of problems. There is no legal or official definition of crisis. The challenge, then, is not to open up or complicate a narrow definition, as with “refugee,” but rather to put forward a more rigorous analytical understanding of the term. As anthropologist Janet Roitman reminds us, “crisis,” in the vocabulary of politics, is a highly charged term, suggesting certain perceptions and narratives and patterns of behavior while foreclosing others.¹² In everyday and political language, “crisis” serves as a popular catchphrase for turmoil, emergency, chaos, disorder. In some instances, it signifies a situation out of control; in others, a steady decline or imminent demise. The links that are made in public, political, and scholarly discourse between refugee

¹¹ Both expellees and decolonization migrants included subgroups who had been subject to varying degrees of coercion. For a careful discussion of the category of decolonization migrants as “forced migrants,” see Andrea L. Smith, “Coerced or Free? Considering Post-Colonial Returns,” in *Removing Peoples: Forced Removal in the Modern World*, eds. Richard Bessel and Claudia B. Haake (Oxford, 2009), 395–417. On the general problem of delineating the boundary between “free” and “unfree” migration, see Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen, and Patrick Manning, “Migration History: Multidisciplinary Approaches,” in *Migration History in World History: Multidisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Lucassen, Lucassen, and Manning (Leiden, 2010), 3–35, esp. 8–11.

¹² Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC, 2013). On the contextual factors leading to the “crisis” perception of the 2015 situation, see Leo Lucassen, “Peeling an Onion: The ‘Refugee Crisis’ from a Historical Perspective,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, August 4, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1355975>.

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movements and “crisis” are often grounded in this understanding of the term. Several of the refugee movements in this volume were referred to as “refugee crises” at the time. That is no accident. As political scientist Peter Nyers points out, the vocabulary of crisis – in the sense of “emergency” – has become an integral part of the dominant discourse about migration in general and about refugee movements in particular.¹³ It is not surprising, then, that the pitfalls of crisis-as-emergency discourse are especially apparent in discussions of refugees. The search for “immediate, practical, and operational responses”¹⁴ to a situation conceived of as “an emergency” tends to obscure the need for critical reflection and thinking in broader frameworks. In this respect, the essentially ahistorical responses to the 2015 “refugee crisis” and the general tendency to view refugee situations in isolation rather than from a comparative perspective can be seen as consequence of the crisis-as-emergency paradigm.

If “crisis” is to be more than a highly problematic buzzword that obscures more than it uncovers, we have to ask what specific meanings and insights the depiction of a situation as “crisis” might carry that alternative terms such as “turmoil” or “emergency” do not convey. The conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) of “crisis” provides the basis for an answer.¹⁵ The ancient Greek term, used in various disciplines

¹³ Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (London, 2006), 1–24. See also Jane McAdam, “Conceptualizing ‘Crisis Migration’: A Theoretical Perspective,” in *Humanitarian Crises and Migration: Causes, Consequences and Responses*, eds. Susan F. Martin, Sanjula Weerasinghe, and Abbie Taylor (London, 2014), 28–49; Cecilia Menjivar, Marie Ruiz, and Immanuel Ness, “Migration Crises: Definitions, Critiques, and Global Contexts,” in *Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, eds. Menjivar, Ruiz, and Ness, note 2 above, 1–17. For an attempt at a more complex definition (from the practitioners’ perspective), see Bernard Husson, André Marty, and Claire Pirotte, “Observations on Crises,” in *Responding to Emergencies and Fostering Development: The Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*, eds. Pirotte, Husson, and François Grunewald (London, 1999), 11–13. For a sweeping panorama of how migrations and crises intersect in world history and why the crisis narrative prevails in some cases, see Dirk Hoerder, “Migrations and Macro-Regions in Times of Crises: Long-Term Historiographic Perspectives,” in *Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises*, eds. Menjivar, Ruiz, and Ness, 21–36; see that collection for other recent case studies.

¹⁴ Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, note 13 above, 5.

¹⁵ On the term “crisis” as a historical concept, see Reinhart Koselleck, “Krise,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart, 1972–97), vol. 3, 617–50; Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), esp. 103–4, 127; Reinhart Koselleck, “Some Questions Concerning the Conceptual History of ‘Crisis,’” in *Culture and Crisis: The Case of Germany and Sweden*, eds. Nina Witoszek and Lars Tragardh (New York, 2002), 12–23; Randolph Starn, “Historians and ‘Crisis,’” *Past and Present*

(medicine, jurisprudence, military, religion), encompassed a variety of meanings, such as “discrimination,” “struggle,” and “decision.” Its medical sense was later adopted in writings about politics and history. “Crisis” designated the critical moment in the course of a disease at which it would either intensify (and possibly lead to the patient’s death) or subside (and possibly open the way to recovery). Rooted in this conceptual history, “crisis” as a term of historical analysis highlights certain moments and particular aspects of them.¹⁶ It denotes a temporally limited, exceptional situation, even if its beginning and end are subject to debate. It is a moment when action is – or is thought to be – urgently needed, a moment of decision with wide-ranging consequences for the future. By extension, crisis also implies a high degree of uncertainty about the possible outcome of a situation. In contrast to a medical crisis, a historical crisis generally points to a structural change, a transformation; it does not end with a simple return to the preexisting situation. Finally, a crisis is also marked by “crisis-awareness”¹⁷ among contemporary actors and witnesses. Insofar as it refers to a real situation, crisis is essentially a mode of self-reflection and self-description. It is not only a narrative about origins but also a reflection on the future: about impending decisions, their potential consequences, and the possibility of shaping consequences. As a mode of self-description, “crisis” shapes judgments (or expresses preexisting ideas and interests) and informs decisions, with far-reaching consequences.

By taking a more complex idea of crisis as its basis and by providing a broad historical comparison, *Refugee Crises, 1945–2000* seeks to break away from the shortcomings of the crisis-as-emergency paradigm. We do not contend that “refugee crisis” is a clear-cut, universally applicable analytical term. Nonetheless, conceiving of the case studies in this volume as critical moments of decision highlights a common factor that, in turn, provides a starting point for comparative analysis. In each case, the

52 (1971): 3–22; Edgar Morin, “Pour une crisologie,” *Communications* 25 (1976): 149–63.

¹⁶ See in particular Rudolf Vierhaus, “Zum Problem historischer Krisen,” in *Historische Prozesse*, eds. Karl-Georg Faber and Christian Meier (Munich, 1978), 313–29.

¹⁷ Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, note 15 above, 137; Vierhaus, “Zum Problem historischer Krisen,” note 16 above, 321–2; Carla Meyer, Katja Patzel-Mattern, and Gerrit Jasper Schenk, “Krisengeschichte(n): ‘Krise’ als Leitbegriff und Erzählmuster in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive – eine Einführung,” in *“Krise” als Leitbegriff und Erzählmuster in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, eds. Meyer, Patzel-Mattern, and Schenk (Stuttgart, 2013), 9–23.

receiving country was confronted with the crucial question of how to deal with the arrival of a large number of people seeking refuge.

CASES AND CONTEXTS

Refugee studies, which emerged as an academic subdiscipline in the 1980s, has often been accused of an ahistorical, presentist bias. And, indeed, historians have been conspicuously late in joining the interdisciplinary study of refugees and refugee protection.¹⁸ This disregard was reciprocated. The founders of refugee studies clearly prioritized examination of the legal, social, political, and economic dimensions of refugee situations in the present over analysis of historical roots or precedents. Historians, in turn, appeared wary of considering refugees and refugee movements as drivers of historical change.¹⁹ This is why, despite the expanding scholarship on topics such as forced migration, refugee protection, and humanitarian aid, refugee history is still, in the words of one of its most eminent proponents, very much an “emerging field.”²⁰ Although the number of case studies is growing, we still have only a fragmented picture of twentieth-century refugee crises and the responses to them. Much needs to be done to connect and compare different refugee crises and to understand how they relate to key developments and macro-processes such as wars, decolonization, the Cold War, and processes of state-building.²¹

This volume offers elements for that sort of broad-picture comparative analysis. The contributors eschew universalizing humanitarian discourse

¹⁸ See the critique by Philip Marfleet, “Refugees and History: Why We Must Address the Past,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2007): 136–48.

¹⁹ Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*, note 4 above, 39–40; Philip Marfleet, “Explorations in a Foreign Land: States, Refugees, and the Problem of History,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2013): 14–34.

²⁰ Peter Gatrell, “Population Displacement in the Baltic Region in the Twentieth Century: From ‘Refugee Studies’ to Refugee History,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 43. For good overviews of the historical scholarship, see Jérôme Elie, “Histories of Refugees and Forced Migration Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, eds. Elena Fiddian-Qasbiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona (Oxford, 2014), 22–35; Peter Gatrell, “Refugees – What’s Wrong with History?,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, April 11, 2016, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/few013>.

²¹ Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch, “Refugees and the Nation-State in Europe, 1919–59,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 49 (2014): 479; Gatrell, “Refugees,” note 20 above, 15.

that removes refugees from their historical contexts.²² The comparative approach adopted here works against narratives of unbroken national or continental traditions of refugee admission or nonadmission. Radically opposed to a decontextualized approach to the past, historical comparison can only caution against the idea of such traditions. The starting point of analytically rigorous historical comparison is not the construction of identity or sameness between its objects, but the recognition of their historical specificities and differences.²³ The approach applied throughout this volume is thus first and foremost to bring back contexts. These contexts help us not only to understand each case more fully, but also to identify possible commonalities with other cases and with refugee situations in general.

The refugee crises discussed in this volume are embedded in a variety of interlocking local, national, regional, and international contexts. Despite their geographic variety, the cases are connected through certain shared international macro-contexts, three of which are of particular importance: the Second World War and the emergence of the postwar order; the dissolution of colonial empires and the so-called North-South conflict; and the global Cold War and its aftermath. At the same time, the cases also spotlight different phases in the evolving history of international refugee protection since 1945. Several of the crises analyzed in this volume proved in fact to be transformative moments in the development of an international legal framework and new forms of international cooperation to deal with refugees.

The first part of the volume brings together case studies dating from what we call the postwar and decolonization moment, the period of roughly three decades that was marked by the reverberations of World War II and the end of Europe's colonial empires. As a result of wartime displacement, persecution, and expulsion, tens of millions – as many as 60 million by some estimates – were uprooted in Europe alone in the mid-1940s.²⁴ The postwar moment in fact constituted the last catastrophic

²² Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 377–404.

²³ On comparative history, see Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, "Comparison and Beyond: Traditions, Scope, and Perspectives of Comparative History," in *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, eds. Kocka and Haupt (New York, 2010), 1–30.

²⁴ On the resettlements in Europe in the wake of World War II, see *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe 1944–1948*, eds. Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak (Lanham, 2001); Pertti Aho et al., *People on the Move: Forced Population*