

FEATURED REVIEW

Citizens and Refugees: Stories from Afghanistan and Syria to Germany

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On September 2, 2015, the body of Alan Kurdi, a two-year-old Syrian boy, washed up on the shore of Turkey. His family had paid smugglers to help them reach Europe, but the boat taking them from Turkey to Greece capsized, and Alan drowned along with his mother and brother. Pictures of Alan's body, symbolizing innocent victimhood, quickly went around the world, generating international sympathy for the plight of Syrian refugees. Three days later, the Austrian and German governments announced that they would not close their borders to the tens of thousands of refugees who were stranded in Hungary.¹ Although refugees had already been arriving in Germany in substantial numbers, the announcement set in motion a mass movement of refugees toward the country. In 2015, approximately 890,000 refugees arrived in Germany, followed by about 280,000 more in 2016. The largest number of asylum seekers came from Syria, followed by Afghanistan.² Since the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949, Germany had never received so many asylum seekers in such a short span of time; the numbers in these years far exceeded the previous peak in the early 1990s.

The long summer of migration changed Germany. It changed the country's demographics, with Syrians becoming, already in 2016, the third largest group of foreign citizens in the country, after Turks and Poles.³ It also led, famously, to the blossoming of a *Willkommenskultur*, a broad movement or politics characterized by the conceptualization of immigration as a positive development for society, active support for migrants and refugees, and, at times, antiracist work.⁴ The arrival of more than 1 million asylum seekers in 2015–2016 also led to a powerful backlash. Germans, as in the early 1990s, once again attacked asylum seekers and asylum shelters.⁵ In 2016, for example, there were more than 3,500

¹ Philipp Ther, *The Outsiders: Refugees in Europe since 1492*, trans. by Jeremiah Riemer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 19.

² Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, *Migrationsbericht der Bundesregierung. Migrationsbericht 2019* (Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern, 2020), 88, 89, 246.

³ Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, *Migrationsbericht der Bundesregierung. Migrationsbericht 2016/2017* (Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern, 2019), 203.

⁴ See, for example, Ulrike Hamann and Serhat Karakayali, "Practicing Willkommenskultur. Migration and Solidarity in Germany," *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 2, no. 4 (2016): 69–86, and, for a more historical perspective, Jan Plamper, *Das neue Wir. Warum Migration dazugehört. Eine andere Geschichte der Deutschen* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2019), 270–317.

⁵ Panikos Panayi, "Racial Violence in the New Germany, 1990–1993," *Contemporary European History* 3, no. 3 (1994): 265–88; Norbert Frei, Franka Maubach, Christina Morina, and Maik Tändler, *Zur Rechten Zeit. Wider die Rückkehr des Nationalismus* (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 2019), 161–81.

attacks on refugees, including just under a thousand attacks on refugee shelters.⁶ The right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) encouraged the anti-refugee backlash, and by 2018 had ridden the wave of antiforeigner sentiment into every state parliament and the Bundestag. The AfD, only established in 2013, had become by far the most popular far-right party in Germany since the collapse of the Third Reich.

The long summer of migration has also had an impact on the study and writing of German history. The flight and expulsion of between 12 and 14 million ethnic Germans from eastern Europe in the immediate aftermath of World War II became a subject of sustained historical inquiry by the 1950s, and still is today. Historians have also written extensively on the history of the millions of mostly eastern European displaced persons (DPs) who found themselves on German soil at the end of war, as well as on the history of East German citizens and ethnic Germans in the communist East who fled to the Federal Republic. But until recently, the history of political asylum and of the non-German refugees who sought protection in Germany after the DP era came to an end in the early 1950s have received relatively minimal attention. The influx of asylum seekers in Germany in the early 1990s, largely a result of the collapse of communism in eastern Europe and civil war in the Yugoslav lands, led some historians, particularly Klaus Bade and Ulrich Herbert, to examine the history of political asylum in the Federal Republic of Germany.⁷ Nonetheless, despite the asylum question being one of the most contentious political issues in the Federal Republic from the 1980s through the mid-1990s, the topic remained firmly on the margins of the historical profession.⁸ West Germany's reception of some 14,500 Hungarian refugees in the aftermath of the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1956—during a critical moment in the Cold War in Europe and representing the first time West Germany took in asylum seekers in significant numbers—was not the subject of a history monograph until the year 2022.⁹ There is still no history monograph on the West German reception of approximately 30,000 Vietnamese “boat people” who arrived as refugees between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, just as the asylum debate was shifting into high gear.¹⁰

The recent long summer of migration, however, appears to have put the history of non-German refugees and political asylum in Germany on the historiographical map. In 2017, Philipp Ther published *Die Außenseiter*, a history of flight, refugees, and integration in Europe since 1492, with an English translation appearing in 2019. Although focusing on Europe as a whole, Germany's role as an important refugee-receiving state, especially after the collapse of communism and again in 2015–2016, receives substantial attention. The book effectively highlights the Federal Republic's decades-long wavering between generosity and increasing restrictions for potential asylum seekers.¹¹ In 2019, Jan Plamper published *Das neue Wir*, a book that examines the many groups of migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, that arrived in Germany since 1945 and their contributions to a changing, multicultural German identity. Plamper portrays the history of immigration in postwar Germany, despite some challenges, as largely a success story, a conclusion with which many

⁶ “Mehr als 3500 Angriffe auf Flüchtlinge,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 26, 2017 (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/fremdenhass-mehr-als-3500-angriffe-auf-fluechtlinge-im-jahr-2016-1.3395560>).

⁷ Klaus J. Bade, *Ausländer-Aussiedler-Asyl. Eine Bestandsaufnahme* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994); Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland. Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2001).

⁸ The major exception is Patrice G. Poutrus, who has published numerous articles on the history of political asylum in East and West Germany and the first general history of asylum in postwar Germany; see Patrice G. Poutrus, *Umkämpftes Asyl. Vom Nachkriegsdeutschland bis in die Gegenwart* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2019).

⁹ Rita Kiss, *Aus Ungarn nach Bayern. Ungarnflüchtlinge nach Freistaat Bayern, 1956–1973* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2022).

¹⁰ Frank Bösch, “Engagement für Flüchtlinge. Die Aufnahme vietnamesischer ‘Boat People’ in der Bundesrepublik,” *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 14, no. 1 (2017): 13–40.

¹¹ Philipp Ther, *Die Außenseiter. Flucht, Flüchtlinge und Integration im Modernen Europa* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017).

historians will disagree.¹² In the same year, Patrice G. Poutrus, who has spent the last two decades researching and writing on the history of political asylum in East and West Germany, published *Umkämpftes Asyl*, a history of the battle over the right to asylum in Germany from 1949 through the events of 2015–2016. In an account that is more critical than Plamper's book, Poutrus makes a compelling case that "the debate about flight and asylum should be viewed as a central aspect of the history of the political culture of divided postwar Germany."¹³ More specialized books have also appeared in recent years, examining topics such as the role of German Protestantism in the asylum debate in the Federal Republic, the German reception of asylum seekers from Yugoslavia, and the aforementioned monograph on Hungarian refugees in West Germany.¹⁴ Growing interest in the history of political asylum is also evident in this journal. As far as I can tell, *Central European History* (*CEH*) did not publish a single article on the history of political asylum in postwar Germany between the journal's first issue in 1968 and 2018. Since then, *CEH* has published three articles that are largely or wholly focused on political asylum in Germany and numerous articles that thematize refugees and asylum in modern central Europe.¹⁵

Scholars have been hesitant to use the term "refugee crisis" in connection with the events of 2015–2016, and with good reason.¹⁶ But "crisis" fairly describes the situation that refugees faced when they arrived in German cities in large numbers in late summer 2015 and the following fall and winter. In Berlin, refugees waited outside of the Landesamts für Gesundheit und Soziales (Regional Office for Health and Social Matters, LAGeSo) every day for months. They were often hungry, sick, exhausted, had nowhere to sleep, and faced language barriers and difficulties navigating German bureaucracy. The LAGeSo was not able to help refugees in a timely manner, so volunteers from all over Berlin began to spend hours, days, and eventually months at LAGeSo, coordinating aid and assistance for newly arriving refugees.

One of those volunteers was the historian Joachim C. Häberlen. His deep engagement in volunteer work on behalf of refugees led to friendships with many refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and to deep knowledge of the networks that supported Germany's *Willkommenskultur*. These relationships and experiences, in turn, led to Häberlen writing multiple articles and two books about the long summer of migration and its aftermath. The first book, *Wie aus Fremden Freunde werden*, is a brief work that centers on a friendship he formed with Mariam, a refugee from Afghanistan whom he met while volunteering at LAGeSo.¹⁷ In the book, Häberlen argues that close personal relationships with foreigners can challenge nationalism and are good for democracy, allowing people to understand different cultures and worldviews, without necessarily having to agree with them. Democratic societies, he insists, must be able to accommodate difference. Highlighting how difficult this can be,

¹² Plamper, *Das neue Wir*.

¹³ Poutrus, *Umkämpftes Asyl*, 13.

¹⁴ Jonathan Spanos, *Flüchtlingsaufnahme als Identitätsfrage. Der Protestantismus in den Debatten um die Gewährung von Asyl in der Bundesrepublik (1949–1993)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022); Christopher A. Molnar, *Memory, Politics, and Yugoslav Migrations to Postwar Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018); Kiss, *Aus Ungarn nach Bayern*.

¹⁵ Lauren Stokes, "The Permanent Refugee Crisis in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1949–," *Central European History* 52, no. 1 (2019): 19–44; Lauren Stokes, "Racial Profiling on the U-Bahn: Policing the Berlin Gap in the Schönefeld Airport Refugee Crisis," *Central European History* 56, no. 2 (2023): 236–54; Christopher A. Molnar, "Greetings from the Apocalypse: Race, Migration, and Fear after German Reunification," *Central European History* 54, no. 3 (2021): 491–515. This trend is also evident in other journals. See, for example, the forum "The Refugee Crisis in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Modern European History* 20, no. 1 (2020); and the special issue "Refugees Then and Now: Memory, History and Politics in the Long Twentieth Century," *Pattens of Prejudice* 52, nos. 2–3 (2018).

¹⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, "The Migration Panic and Its (Mis)uses," *Social Europe*, December 17, 2015 (<https://www.socialeurope.eu/migration-panic-misuses>).

¹⁷ Joachim C. Häberlen, *Wie aus Fremden Freunde werden. Ein politisches Essay über Begegnungen mit Flüchtlingen* (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2018).

his friendship with Mariam ends abruptly when her Afghan boyfriend, threatening violence and blackmail, demands that Mariam stop speaking with other men.

In *Citizens and Refugees: Stories from Afghanistan and Syria to Germany*, Häberlen presents some new conclusions about the refugee experience and more fully develops many of the ideas he introduced in his articles and *Wie aus Fremden Freunde werden*. The book is a history of the long summer of migration in Germany told through the stories and experiences of two dozen refugees from Syria and Afghanistan who sat for unstructured interviews with the author, as well as the author's own experiences with refugees and those who volunteered to assist them upon their arrival in the country. In a book that consists of a preface, an introduction, four sections, and a brief epilogue, Häberlen seeks to recognize the full humanity and lived experiences of the refugees, countering the typical depiction of refugees, especially in the media and in the realm of politics, as an undifferentiated mass of needy victims, or worse, as a menacing threat to German and European society. Regarding his retelling of refugees' personal experiences, he emphasizes that "telling these stories is the argument, as it requires us the [sic] reframe the history of the refugee crisis" (12). He is particularly interested in what he calls the "acts of citizenship," as opposed to simple legal citizenship, that those who fled to Germany have carried out, often during violence and revolution in their homelands, and suggests that these actions could inspire Germans and others in the West. In an age of democratic decline, he argues that "what those who fled from these countries have to say matters for how we think about freedom, democracy and citizenship" (3). Finally, he offers a powerful critique of Germany's much-heralded *Willkommenskultur*.

The first section, "Where Stories Begin," focuses on the biographies of ten refugees prior to their flight to Germany. Häberlen explains that he began all of his interviews, which he says were more like conversations with friends and acquaintances, by asking "When does your story begin?" (10). This allowed his interlocutors to tell their own stories and to choose what they thought was important or meaningful for their personal biographies. His interview partners had different answers, but they all responded to his opening question by describing their lives in the years and decades prior to their flight. With this approach, Häberlen seeks to decenter our conceptualization of the refugee crisis by moving it, at least in this section, away from Germany. He also hopes to reframe our understanding of the refugee crisis by presenting refugees not as needy victims but as people with complex biographies, histories of active citizenship, and, in some cases, heroic pasts. To exemplify this approach, he opens the section with a ten-page narration of the life of Sabrina ("The Tale of a Heroine"), a young woman from Afghanistan whose father died fighting the Taliban in the 1990s and who, without a father in a deeply patriarchal society, faced years of extreme physical and mental abuse at the hands of male family members and other men in her village. Nonetheless, she excelled as a student, eventually ran a United Nations-sponsored women's center in her village, became a television presenter, and won a prestigious scholarship to study in India. The narration and analysis of Sabrina's life effectively support the author's point that refugees come to Germany—to any receiving country—with biographies and experiences that are almost never appreciated or even recognized. The second half of the section features refugees recounting their experiences during the Syrian Revolution, accounts that often emphasize the joyful, beautiful aspects of the revolution, the feeling of being swept up into a powerful mass movement. Häberlen contends that for many Syrians the revolution was not only a history of violence and suffering, but "a moment of personal liberation, of feeling alive, of exuberance, and not least of political participation"; the revolution "turned subjects into citizens" (61).

The second section, "Becoming a Refugee," focuses on the experience of flight and the process of settling in Germany. Here, too, Häberlen uses refugee biographies to complicate our understanding of the refugee experience. Just as he emphasized the positive aspects of refugees' lives prior to flight in the first section, in this section he draws attention to the liberatory and joyful aspects of the often-perilous trek to Germany, contrasting that with the typical conception of a refugee as a person who has lost everything and lives a life of

permanent danger and insecurity. He tells us of Parya, a teenager at the time of her flight from Iran, whose English-language ability made her a leader on the difficult journey to Germany and for whom becoming a refugee was “an empowering and liberating experience” (68). We meet Alaa, for whom the decision to flee Syria was a personal choice, not made out of desperation, but because she had always wanted to travel the world and now had an opportunity. For Sultan, a refugee from Afghanistan, the difficult journey to Germany was like an “adventure trip” in which he made many friends and became a committed volunteer himself (73). In relaying these accounts, Häberlen also recognizes the dangerous and traumatizing aspects of the flight to Europe, although that is not his focus. He also details the suffering and insecurity caused by the years-long bureaucratic delays refugees faced once they were in Berlin and applied for asylum, for the right to family reunification, for work permits, and more.

The third section, “The German Welcoming Culture,” offers a robust critique of *Willkommenskultur*. According to surveys, in November 2015, nearly 11 percent of Germans volunteered to help refugees, and the percentage of volunteers had increased by May 2016, at a point when the backlash against refugees had gathered force. Jan Plamper suggests that this was the most broad-based social movement in Germany since 1945, and other scholars and commentators in Germany advanced the hope that *Willkommenskultur*, by offering new models of active citizenship and multicultural democracy, could lead to a revitalization and reimagining of German politics and society.¹⁸ While maintaining that volunteers have done invaluable work on behalf of refugees, Häberlen is skeptical of the claims about the large number of volunteers and argues that *Willkommenskultur*, because of its many limitations, cannot offer a new model of politics and active citizenship in Germany. The most important limitation, according to the author, is that volunteers, quite pragmatically, focus on offering emergency relief—food, clothing, and shelter—at a moment of crisis and are generally not interested in collectively pushing for political change in Germany. Volunteers, he suggests, work somewhat like social workers. They look to solve a refugee’s problems; when those problems are resolved, they lose contact with the refugee. This also points to the problematic hierarchical nature of this volunteer work. According to Häberlen, “At times, volunteers’ gaze on refugees replicates narratives of (white) Europeans not only rescuing but also civilizing those who allegedly come from backward, undemocratic countries” (116). Finally, once refugees have received the necessities of life in Germany, Germans often view them as people defined by their deficiencies: language skills, education, family, social and cultural skills, and more. Refugees are thus seen as problems to be solved; their experiences, abilities, and rich biographies, which Häberlen has done so much to sketch out, no longer seem to matter.

The fourth and final section, “Citizenship and Belonging,” examines “what citizenship and belonging can mean for those who are, as refugees, both legally and conceptually excluded from the political demos” (134). In a long and somewhat unfocused chapter, Häberlen details the various ways that refugees have tried to find spaces of belonging in Germany, including by visiting Berlin’s techno clubs, learning German and embracing German values, and becoming politically active. The experiences of two Syrian refugees stand out. While many Syrian and Afghan refugees became active in homeland-directed politics after arriving in Germany, Maher and Hisham became deeply involved in German politics, with the former joining the Green Party and the latter joining the Social Democratic Party, and both taking part in numerous political initiatives. As Häberlen notes, “They act as citizens, even without being citizens” (151). Nonetheless, they were primarily valued as migrants. The Greens asked Maher to be a spokesperson on issues related to migration and refugee policy. At the Kreuzberg Initiative against Anti-Semitism, where Hisham was active, he educated groups of people about the Nazi past and the Holocaust, but he was chosen to speak only to other refugees, not German students. German audiences and other party members did not

¹⁸ Plamper, *Das neue Wir*, 270–71.

value what Maher and Hisham had to say about topics that moved beyond their biographies as refugees. Other refugees had been active citizens in their homelands, fighting for just causes, but found themselves unsure of what or how they could contribute to German civil society, stunting their sense of belonging.

In 2017, Peter Gatrell published an article with the title “Refugees—What’s Wrong with History?” The question had two targets: social scientists who ignore the work that historians do on refugees and historians who neglect the history of refugees, particularly by failing to weave the history of refugees into broader narratives of historical change.¹⁹ Since the publication of that article, there has been an explosion of research on the history of refugees, including, as we have seen, among historians of central Europe. Joachim Häberlen’s book is a most welcome addition to this growing area of inquiry. He provides a very different history of the long summer of migration, which effectively shifts the focus from policy and politics to refugees’ lives, and from Germany and Europe to Syria and Afghanistan. Following in the footsteps of scholars of migration and imperialism, he prods us to broaden our understanding of where German history is made and who its subjects are. Häberlen also embraces the complexity of history and of lived experience. He offers, for example, a nuanced discussion of refugee women taking off their veils in Germany and does not shy away from highlighting the reality that Syrians and Afghans fled to Germany for a variety of reasons, not all of which were out of a sense of desperation. His trenchant critique of *Willkommenskultur* is the most bracing part of the study and should be read widely, even outside of academia. Above all, in this deeply humane book, Häberlen gives refugees a voice and insists that we in the West can learn from them.

Citizens and Refugees does, however, have a number of limitations that stem from Häberlen’s positionality. First, he does not venture outside of Berlin. The stories that refugees had to tell about their experiences in Germany surely would have differed in some ways if, instead of settling in multicultural, cosmopolitan Berlin, they had settled in a small town in Bavaria or in a community in the former East German *Länder*, where anti-refugee agitation was especially pronounced and where the AfD rose to prominence. Second, there is selection bias in the group of refugees that Häberlen interviewed. He notes that those he interviewed were a diverse group in terms of politics and religion. But he states that he is very open about his politics on Facebook, where he keeps in touch with many refugees and that “it is probably no accident that the people I talked to [that is, interviewed for the book] also tend to have rather liberal and progressive views” (10). He also notes that all of his interview subjects knew English, which means his interlocutors were generally more highly educated than the average refugee from Syria or Afghanistan. A more randomized or diverse group of interview subjects would have yielded some different refugee narratives, particularly in the section on belonging and citizenship. Third, all of the refugees Häberlen interviewed had successfully made it to Berlin; they had not died in the Syrian Revolution or in the back of a smuggler’s truck or been apprehended at sea and sent to languish in a camp in Turkey. This is obviously wonderful. The point, however, is that there is a bit of survivorship bias in the accounts that form the core of the book. I could not help thinking of this when Häberlen continually emphasizes the joy and beauty of revolution and flight, which is certainly a reasonable observation, but one that he sometimes pushes too hard, or accepts too uncritically, in his quest to humanize refugees. Even Rahaf, one of the refugees he interviewed, suggests as much. Trying to cheer her up by asking about her experiences during the Syrian Revolution (“I hoped that talking about such memories might [re]discover a sense of pride, of self-confidence, of joy and meaning that I found missing when we were talking about her current feelings”), Häberlen sends her a

¹⁹ Peter Gatrell, “Refugees—What’s Wrong with History?” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017): 170–89. For a similar article that takes stock of the growth of the field and seeks to set an intellectual agenda for the field of refugee history, see Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, “What Is Refugee History, Now?” *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 1 (2022): 1–19.

YouTube video of Syrians singing in the street in 2011, defying the Syrian dictator. He finds the video inspiring and hopes Rahaf will as well. She responds by asking, “Do you know how many people singing in the video are dead by now?” (60).

At the very end of the preface, Häberlen describes the book in a way that roughly approximates my feelings after reading and thinking about *Citizens and Refugees*:

This book, then, is certainly not a typical work of academic history, based on archival research and an intimate knowledge of a vast literature, but it is, emphatically, about history. At least I have learned something profound about history by listening to these stories, and not just about the history of the refugee crisis and what preceded it. For that, I’m immensely grateful. (4)

It will be many years before we have an archivally based history of the long summer of migration. When that book does arrive, the international response to Alan Kurdi’s tragic death will surely be part of the story. But I also hope that it will feature some of the voices and insights that Häberlen has provided. Moreover, I hope that his book will encourage more scholars to explore the history of refugees and to integrate refugee history into mainstream historiography. *Citizens and Refugees* should find a broad readership. It is highly recommended to historians of modern Germany and scholars in a range of fields who work on migration and refugee studies. The accessible writing style also makes it suitable for advanced undergraduates.