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Forced Migration and Refugee Resettlement in the Long 1940s: An Introduction to Its Connected and Global History

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Abstract

When considering the wave of forced migrations during the Second World War in Europe and Asia, and the international and institutional responses thereof, we can speak about the 1940s as witnessing the birth of a global refugee resettlement regime. Organisations including the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the International Refugee Organization (IRO), and eventually the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) placed refugee resettlement at the heart of constructing the postwar world order. This volume adopts a global optic to investigate the formation of this international resettlement regime in Europe and Asia, while also studying refugee camps and movements, agency of refugees and migrants, decision factors for resettlement, and the intellectual production of people on the move. A historicisation of the global resettlement regime of the long 1940s may well carry important political and ethical lessons for us today, if only to remind us of the connected fates of our common humanity, and the responsibilities we therefore bear towards our fellow human beings.

Keywords: forced migration; Asia; Europe; global refugee resettlement regime

The 1940s witnessed the most massive wave of forced migrations known in human history. These resulted from several historical events: Nazi imperialism and the Holocaust in Europe; Japanese imperialism in the Asia-Pacific; civil war in China; the partition of India; and the partition of Palestine. These were, of course, not just parallel but also connected events. German and Japanese invasions and atrocities in Europe and Asia were connected via the Axis alliance; the civil war in China was aggravated by the catastrophic fallout of Japanese imperialism; the weakening of Britain as a result of the war hastened independence and partition in South Asia; while the partition of Palestine cannot be understood without taking into account the tragic legacies of the Holocaust as well as of British colonial policies. This special issue focuses on variegated refugee histories of this period, spanning Asia, Europe, and South America. We regret not being able to include a chapter on the Partition of Palestine and the Palestinian refugee tragedy, due to a COVID-19-related late author withdrawal—–a major desideratum that we shall address in our subsequent work.

To adopt Sanjay Subrahmanyam's term, we need the optics of "connected histories"[1] to understand these interlocked phenomena. The leading historian of refugee studies, Peter

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[1] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31:3 (1997), 735–62.

Gatrell, 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."[2] Further, the postwar international order was itself self-consciously global in ambition, grounded in diverse visions and practices of world-making.[3] The United Nations framework, and especially organisations like the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), the International Refugee Organization (IRO), and eventually the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), placed refugee resettlement at the heart of constructing the postwar world order. The UNRRA was one of the first transnational bodies to manage the afterlife of persons affected by violence on an absolutely global scale.[4] For these and more reasons, we can speak about the 1940s as witnessing the birth of a global refugee resettlement regime.

Historians have, for quite some years now, investigated the formation of this international resettlement regime in Europe, while also studying refugee camps and movements. By mid-1949, the UNRRA had helped many European displaced persons (DPs) and refugees find a new home in far-flung corners of the world, including Australia,[5] Latin America,[6] and North America, especially Canada.[7] But, as Wolfgang Jacobmeyer observed, despite this initial wave of resettlement, a large remainder population was still left, which was increasingly seen as constituting a "problem."[8] Michael Marrus, in his seminal monograph *The Unwanted,* designated them as "the 'hard core' of unsettled refugees, people whose occupation, health, age, or some other condition made their removal extremely difficult."[9] Gerard Daniel Cohen speaks of "the last million" Nazi victims—the residues of the resettlement project—whose responsibility was taken up by the IRO, as the successor institution of the UNRRA.[10] Simultaneously, as Kim Solomon has underlined, the onset of the Cold War—marked by such epochal episodes as the Berlin blockade and the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia—made it incumbent on the IRO to focus its attention on refugees fleeing the belligerent Soviet Union and its satellite states in central and eastern Europe.[11]

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[2] Peter Gatrell, "Refugees—What's Wrong with History?," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30:2 (2017), 170–89, 182.

[3] On world-making, see for example Duncan Bell, "Making and Taking Worlds," in *Global Intellectual History,* ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 255–82.

[4] Jessica Reinisch, "Internationalism in Relief: The Birth (and Death) of UNRRA," *Past & Present* 210: 6 (2011), 258–89, https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq050; Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[5] Klaus Neumann, *Across the Seas: Australia's Response to Refugees: A History,* Melbourne: Black Inc., 2015; Jayne Persian, *Beautiful Balts: From Displaced Persons to New Australians,* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2017).

[6] Keith W. Yundt, *Latin American States and Political Refugees,* (New York: Praeger, 1988); Christoph Rass and Sebastian Huhn, "The Post-World War II Resettlement of European Refugees in Venezuela: A Twofold Translation of Migration," in *Processes of Spatialization in the Americas: Configurations and Narratives,* ed. Gabriele Pisarz-Ramirez and Hannes Berger-Warnecke, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2018): 243–67.

[7] Pascal Maeder, *Forging a New Heimat: Expellees in Post-War West Germany and Canada,* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Unipress, 2011).

[8] Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, *Vom Zwangsarbeiter zum Heimatlosen Ausländer: Die Displaced Persons in Westdeutschland 1945–1951,* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).

[9] Michael R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985): 345.

[10] Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

[11] Kim Salomon, *Refugees in the Cold War: Towards a New International Refugee Regime in the Early Postwar Era,* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991), 55–91.

There was relatively limited conversation, however, between this rich tradition of Europeanist scholarship and research on forced migrations and resettlement processes in postwar Asia. This has largely been caused by area studies divides. Historians of Europe and of Jewish history focus on the Holocaust and on forced migrations in European contexts, but this scholarship remains largely disjuncted from histories of forced migrations due to colonialism, civil war, and partition in China and India. Historians of South Asia or China rarely connect the tragic events in their own regions with events in Europe in the 1940s.

At least in part, these academic divides are rooted in trajectories of postcolonial nation-state building. For example, in the case of India, despite the rich legacies of anti-colonial cosmopolitanism,[12] postcolonial nation-building ultimately centre-staged frameworks of state sovereignty and citizenship over broader solidarities. As Ria Kapoor has shown most recently, this translated into a refugee policy that was centred on the nation-state rather than on internationalist solidarities and international governance.[13] The figure of the refugee was nationalised—thus, the Indian nation-state would concern itself with "Indian" refugees, rather than contribute to global policies for refugee rehabilitation. When historians have chronicled the refugee histories of postcolonial states like India, they have in turn replicated this basic nation-state orientation of postcolonial governance.

The academic landscape has only slowly begun to change now, as some of the best works on specific world regions are beginning to make brief comparativist references to forced migrations in other regions in the era.[14] The first major transnational history of partitions appeared in 2019.[15] Research on Chinese refugees, linking them to the international refugee regime of the period, is picking up.[16] New volumes have been emerging—for example on European refugees who moved to India and other British colonies and dominions as well as to China—which underline the importance of transcontinental frames.[17]

Despite these welcome developments, the field of global refugee history is perhaps still in a nascent stage. In their introduction to a recent and wide-ranging comparativist volume on twentieth-century refugee history, Jan C. Jansen and Simone Lässig observe that "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 macroprocesses such as

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[12] See, for example, Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra, eds., *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010); Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017); Milinda Banerjee, "Sovereignty as a Motor of Global Conceptual Travel: Sanskritic Equivalents of 'Law' in Bengali Discursive Production," *Modern Intellectual History* 17: 2 (2020), 487–506.

[13] Ria Kapoor, "Removing the International from the Refugee: India in the 1940s," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 12: 1 (2021), 1–19.

[14] See, for example, Matthew Frank, *Making Minorities History: Population Transfer in Twentieth-Century Europe,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[15] Arie M. Dubnov and Laura Robson, eds., *Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[16] Rana Mitter, "Imperialism, Transnationalism, and the Reconstruction of Post-War China: UNRRA in China, 1944–7," *Past and Present* 218: 8 (2013), 51–69; Laura Madokoro, *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold War,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[17] Anuradha Bhattacharjee, *The Second Homeland: Polish Refugees in India,* Delhi: SAGE, 2012; Pan Guang, *A Study of Jewish Refugees in China* (*1933-1945*): *History, Theories and the Chinese Pattern,* (Singapore: Springer, 2019); Swen Steinberg and Anthony Grenville, eds., *Refugees from Nazi-Occupied Europe in British Overseas Territories,* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

wars, decolonization, the Cold War, and processes of state-building."[18] We agree with these scholars that refugee history must dialogue with wider global histories—in the case of the twentieth century, especially of imperial dissolution and Cold War.

This special issue aims to provide a pioneering connected and global history of the forced migrations and of the resettlement regime that emerged in the 1940s, linking Europe, South Asia, East Asia, and South America. Such a view is particularly important now, as refugee lives and tragedies of forced migration unfold across different corners of the world, including in West Asia, South Asia, Africa, and Europe. Simultaneously, our gaze moves beyond refugee history to also investigate transnational histories of public health, labour and capitalist modernisation, and intellectual production. Our frame, in moving from comparativist to connected histories, is ultimately also the product of sustained discussions carried out through a major new global migration history network, "People on the Move," founded in 2017 at Osnabrück University, which connects scholars from Austria, Germany, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The concept for this volume originated in a conference on the topic organised by Kerstin von Lingen at the University of Vienna in 2019.[19]

Our special issue does not aim at an empirically "comprehensive" global history of the refugee resettlement regime, if such an attempt were even possible. Rather, we offer snap-shots to demonstrate how a multi-scalar, or rather trans-scalar, connected history of the regime can be authored,[20] bridging local, regional, national, and transnational scales. The administration of refugee movements had already become a significant political issue in Europe and the League of Nations system in the years after the First World War, following the dissolution of the Russian, Habsburg, German, and Ottoman Empires, and the emergence of several separate states across Europe and West Asia, often characterised by ethnic majoritarianism. In these circumstances, to borrow Gatrell's words, "the modern refugee came to be construed as a 'problem' amenable to a 'solution.'"[21]

Nevertheless, the era following the Second World War still constituted a threshold moment when the refugee resettlement regime coalesced at a global level. This happened through the convergence of the work of international organisations like the UNRRA and the IRO with the activities of individual nation-states. In his essay in this special issue, Rana Mitter demonstrates that the birth of the global resettlement regime and the emergence of postwar (taking Japanese imperialism into account, also postcolonial) China, were integrally linked phenomena. Developmental assistance and knowledge coming from the UNRRA joined with civil war between nationalist and Communist forces to shape China's transition into the Cold War. Mitter emphasises the intersections between international, national, and local efforts in refugee rehabilitation. However, the anomie created by the forced migrations eroded the legitimacy of the nationalist government and paved the way for Communist hegemony in China. This transition from nationalist to Communist rule, mediated through a pervasive sensibility of refugee rootlessness, offers a fascinating parallel with the Indian state of West Bengal. Milinda Banerjee's chapter, discussed later, shows a comparable, if much slower and less violent, transition there. Mitter's lens of "rootlessness" finds parallels in Banerjee's essay, which focuses on the

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[18] Jan C. Jansen and Simone Lässig, eds., "Responses to Refugee Crises in International Comparison," in *Refugee Crises, 1945–2000: Political and Societal Responses in International Comparison,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 9.

[19] Conference, Displacement and Resettlement during and after the Second World War in a Global Perspective, Vienna University, Vienna, 5–6 July 2019.

[20] Jeremy Adelman in Richard Drayton and David Motadel, "Discussion: The Futures of Global History," *Journal of Global History* 13:1 (2018), 1–21, 19.

[21] Gatrell, *Modern Refugee,* 5.

"loss of foundation" experienced by Indian refugees, which instigated their political polarisation and radicalism.

The interlocking of the international and national scales of analysis is also the hallmark of Sebastian Huhn's essay. Huhn offers an extensive deconstruction of scholarship to show how Western, especially American, dominance in the Cold War era moulded the historiography of the postwar international migration regime, and especially of the IRO. In these narratives, the role of the United States and other Western states received the bulk of attention, while the role of smaller refugee-receiving countries, especially from the Global South, was reduced to a marginal presence. Huhn instantiates a reversal of this gaze by focusing on Venezuela. Huhn shows that the Venezuelan state exerted significant political agency in international refugee resettlement politics. It was driven by national imperatives of economic modernisation, including agrarian expansion and industrialisation, for which the state favoured skilled white labour (as opposed to Asian and Caribbean immigrant labour). There was also considerable ambivalence about Jewish labour immigration. Seen from the vantage point of Venezuela, race and labour assume as much importance as any humanitarian motives in ensuring settlement of European displaced persons (DPs) and refugees in the South American country. Huhn thus relates the postwar refugee regime to transnational histories of racialised capitalism and labour history.

A comparable weaving together of the international and the local scales of analysis is visible in Roderick Bailey's essay, which presents a pioneering global health history of refugee relief in the 1940s. Bailey focuses on delousing campaigns in DP camps in Europe, aimed at preventing typhus epidemics. British and American success in these campaigns, regarded at the time as owing to the use of DDT, were part of broader experiments and interventions that spanned the Western world and beyond into North Africa and East Asia. Simultaneously, Bailey centre-stages DP responses, ranging from patient accommodation to intrusive medical interventions on their bodies, to sensibilities of humiliation, rage, and resistance. The essay shows how adequate negotiation with global history has to join dialogues of local and from-below approaches with capacious geographical interrogations.

Global microhistory is an exciting subdiscipline today, which reinscribes the local at the heart of global history.[22] Through an archivally dense interrogation of Yugoslav soldiers in a DP camp in Allied-occupied Germany, Christian Höschler presents a Cold War global microhistory of the refugee resettlement regime. Höschler links the interventions of the UNRRA with the life-paths of Yugoslav DPs as well as with the policies of the Communist Yugoslav state during the late 1940s. Höschler shows how the self-fashioning of Yugoslav former prisoners of war—building a monarchist and anti-Communist discipline and self-administration—was linked to flows of information connecting Germany, Yugoslavia, and the United States, mediated by newspaper reports, leaflets, and oral information. Höschler argues that we need to transcend the gulf that separates studies of international politics and similar macro-investigations from local histories of DP camps. Finally, refugee self-governance forms a connecting thread between this essay and Banerjee's.

The last two chapters of this special issue pivot around the transnational context of refugee intellectual production. Linda Erker adopts a biographical lens to show how the Austrian Jewish scholar Grete Mostny could leverage her Egyptological training, acquired at the University of Vienna, to design a successful career as postwar Chile's preeminent archaeologist. This is a story of transcontinental knowledge production and exchange: the use of Egyptological expertise to develop indigenous archaeology and history in

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[22] Special Issue "Global History and Microhistory," *Past and Present* 242: 14 (2019), 1–383.

Chile, and ultimately nourish Chilean nationalism. Erker shows how this display of female agency was made possible by the racially charged value that white-European skills commanded in the South American academic market. Like Huhn, Erker thus centres the role of white labour in modernisation programmes pursued by twentieth-century South American states as the necessary precondition for offering hospitality to European refugees. Such interrogations have remained obscured until now owing to the hegemonic emphasis placed by intellectual history scholarship on the journeys of European émigré intellectuals to the United States and Britain.

Milinda Banerjee concludes this special issue by positioning Indian refugee political thought within global intellectual history. Banerjee studies Bengali Hindus who were forced, from the late 1940s onwards, to migrate from Muslim-majority East Bengal—which after the partition of 1947 was part of Pakistan—to the Hindu-majority Indian state of West Bengal. Banerjee underlines the transnational horizons of refugee intellectual production, as these Bengali refugees identified themselves as "new Jews," emphasised historical cases of refugee contributions to host societies, and drew upon various strands of European, Soviet, and Chinese Marxist thought to fashion their self and politics. The tragedy of European Jews and the conjoined history of Palestine/Israel formed a central node in Bengali thinking. While refugee rehabilitation in India largely happened within the nation-state framework, local refugee political struggles in West Bengal were sustained by transnationally moulded political and social discourses. Such thinking propelled refugee politics of forcible occupation of governmental and elite private property, eroded the legitimacy of the nationalist Congress government, ushered in Communist rule in the state, and later instigated lower-caste/Dalit radicalism. Banerjee theorises about "refugee democracy" and "refugee republicanism," as constituted by refugees forming political societies from below in postcolonial India.

What do we gain by placing the refugee resettlement regime of the long 1940s within frameworks of connected, transnational, and global history? Faisal Devji reminds us that "despite their international, transnational or global carapaces, [. . .] connected histories tend to possess conceptual gravity mostly when dealing with particular parts of the world, which might suggest that local arenas are far more important in contributing to global narratives than the studies of imperial grandiosity acknowledge."[23] Nile Green suggests that by "examining world history from the ground up through tracing the exchanges between distant but interlinked locales, we are able to draw together two scales of analysis by recognising that global history is at the same time microhistory."[24] Such advice is important to bear in mind. Our special issue does not conceive of global history as exclusively, or even primarily, a history of international organisations and grand geopolitics. Our global history framework offers much more than a history of the UNRRA or the IRO. It connects the transnational scale with the national, and above all, the local and the individual biographical scales. The transnational scale assumes more enriched valence when it helps us better understand how refugee actors on the ground negotiated adverse circumstances and forged new pathways, whether in relation to their bodies, careers, politics, or thought-worlds.

Our special issue thereby contributes to two principal strands of looking at the history of refugee resettlement in the era following the Second World War. On the one hand, scholars have interpreted this in terms of international geopolitics, as a regime designed to politically stabilise Europe, as well as contribute to postcolonial nation-building in South Asia and China. Historians have interpreted this geopolitics in idealistic terms—as driven, for example, by internationalist considerations inherited from and radically

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[23] Faisal Devji, "C. A. Bayly," *Past and Present* 237: 1 (2017), 3–12, 9.
[24] Nile Green, *Terrains of Exchange: Religious Economies of Global Islam,* (London: Hurst and Co., 2015), 7.

reshaped by the League of Nations era,[25] or by specific nationalist hopes[26]—as well as in more materialistic ways, in terms of nation-state policies of immigrant labour recruitment. On the other hand, historians have also offered rich from-below perspectives, emphasising how DPs/refugees negotiated a profound sensibility of loss (of identity, of homeland), but simultaneously tried to preserve and recreate social knowledge to negotiate this loss. Christoph Rass, Ismee Tames, and Frank Wolff have done recent pioneering research in this regard.[27] Rass and Wolff have rightly emphasised the need to take into account both top-down interventions and from-below refugee agency in defining a given migration regime.[28] In varying ways, the essays in our special issue emphasise precisely this dialectic. Refugees are studied here as objects of international and national intervention, but never as completely heteronomous victims; they remain political subjects even in the maelstrom of war and displacement.

Ultimately, the global history of the refugee resettlement regime does not only constitute a global refugee history. As Gatrell suggests: "Refugees have been allowed only a walk-on part in most histories of the twentieth century, and even then as subjects of external intervention rather than as actors in their own right." He "argues that they belong to the mainstream rather than the margins."[29] The essays in this special issue have attempted to put refugee histories on centre-stage by intersecting them with transnational histories of labour migration and racial capitalism,[30] with histories of production and circulation of scientific knowledge, and with global intellectual history.[31] These essays help us see refugees as both victims of political and social forces largely beyond their control, and as agents who could partly take charge of their destinies to forge new forms of politics and intellection. Refugees became part of "postcolonial" global history in complex ways. Refugee movements could both promote state-building, as in South America, as well as destabilise regimes, as in China. Finally, a historicisation of the global resettlement regime of the long 1940s may carry important political and ethical lessons for us today, if only to remind us of the connected fates of our common humanity, and the responsibilities we therefore bear towards our fellow human beings. It may also enable a more adequate appreciation of refugees as global actors and thinkers in their own proper right, rather than as the debris of history.

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[25] Mark Mazower, "Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe," *Daedalus* 126: 2 (1997), 47–63; Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea,* (London: Penguin, 2013).

[26] Jessica Reinisch, "'We Shall Rebuild Anew a Powerful Nation': UNRRA. Internationalism and National Reconstruction in Poland," *Journal of Contemporary History* 43: 3 (2008), 451–76.

[27] Ismee Tames and Christoph Rass, "Negotiating the Aftermath of Forced Migration: A View from the Intersection of War and Migration Studies in the Digital Age," doi: 10.12759/hsr.45.2020.4.7-44. In: Special Issue of *Historical Social Research* 45:4 (2020), 7-44; Frank Wolff, *Neue Welten in Der Neuen Welt: Die Transnationale Geschichte des Allgemeinen Jüdischen Arbeiterbundes 1897–1947,* (Köln: Böhlau, 2014).

[28] Christoph Rass and Frank Wolff, "What Is a Migration Regime? Genealogical Approach and Methodological Proposal," in *Was ist ein Migrationsregime? What Is a Migration Regime?,* ed. Andreas Pott, Christoph Rass, and Frank Wolff, (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 19–64; Christoph Rass, "International Migration," in *Handbook of Political Science,* ed. Dirk Berg-Schlosser et al., (London: SAGE, 2020).

[29] Gatrell, *Modern Refugee,* 284.

[30] The *locus classicus* for theorisation about racial capitalism is Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition,* (London: Sed, 1983).

[31] Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

University. Before coming to Vienna, she led a research project on war crime trials in Asia at the university of Heidelberg, resulting in her own monograph on the intellectual history of "Crimes against Humanity", and four PhD studies. She has held fellowships and guest professorships at ULB Brüssel (2016), Vienna (2017), and the Lauterpacht Centre for International Law, Cambridge (2018), is a DFG Heisenberg fellow of 2018 and won the Ernst-Czempiel-Prize for Peace and Conflict Studies in 2020. Kerstin von Lingen has published widely on the history of genocide and violence, in particular the Holocaust, memory and apology politics, on the period of decolonization (esp. Asia), contempory legal history, and forced migration studies.

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