

“routine.” Tang also represents all Khmer Rouge era “forced” marriages as negative and violent, citing Peg Levine’s work; but in fact she takes issue with this characterization, even questioning the word forced. Part of Ra’s “captivity” is that she remained in such a marriage, but Levine points out that the majority of such marriages endured, partly because of the bonds created by the struggle to survive the Khmer Rouge era.³

NOTES

- ¹ Loïc Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment and Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 95–133.

- ² Nancy Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Aihwa Ong, *Budha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship and the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
- ³ Peg Levine, *Love and Dread in Cambodia: Weddings, Births, and Ritual Harm under the Khmer Rouge* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2010).

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Across the Seas: Australia’s Response to Refugees—A History



Klaus Neumann

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In his latest book, Klaus Neumann takes us on a very exciting tour through the deeps and shallows of Australia’s history of migration and asylum policies between 1901 and 1977 and sets out how subsequent administrations in Canberra have dealt with refugees intending to reach the “lucky country.” Not only is Neumann’s book very timely, given the record numbers of displaced people around the entire globe, but also, by covering the gamut of key global events and domestic stimuli for Australia’s more recent refugee policies, his go-to compendium fills a gaping hole in the accessible academic literature.

Against popular belief that Australia is the most sought-after refuge among the world’s displaced people, Neumann shows that for most of the 20th century, Australia was not a preferred destination for refugees, simply because it was deemed too remote and expensive to reach. More importantly, Australia, which at the time had an even more ethnically homogeneous population than its distant motherland, was not open to people with the “wrong” skin colour or the “wrong” religion. Too robust were the fears “of infiltration by professional trouble makers, whether Jewish terrorists or Communists agents, [who] will arouse the natural suspicion of all who wish to see Australia kept Australian” (93). Even before migration and border control became as sophisticated as it is today, there were many ways to block the entry of unwanted people. With expensive landing fees in place—it would have been useful if this book had contextualized them with current costs—that all migrants, other than a few who were exempt, had to pay upon embarkation, Australia

made sure that those who were simply too poor could not enter (although not long ago, public opinion also deemed that being too wealthy was inappropriate for a “deserving” refugee).

Neumann tells of Chinese stowaways, East German ballerinas, KGB spies, and others whose arrival in Australia was not necessarily the end of an enduring venture. One of the most illuminating stories is that of the publicist Walter Stoltzing. A non-practising Jew from Germany, Stoltzing fell under the 1935 Nuremberg laws, under which Jewish Germans no longer had the same rights as non-Jewish Germans. In order to escape the Nazis and save his life, he came to Australia, only to be viewed as a potentially pro-German enemy alien and interned in a camp, which later circumscribed his employment options.

Despite the prevailing anti-Jewish sentiment, even after the news about the Holocaust had come through, Australia did agree to take in German and, later on, also Polish Jews (yes, there was a clear hierarchy of the desirability of the persecuted). According to Neumann, the prime motivation was not humanitarian, but rather Australia’s urge to keep pace with its peers. Later in the book he presents a similar argument about the slow abolition of the White Australia policy; he considers politicians feared the negative effect it had on Australia’s reputation around the globe.

Whereas chapter 1 lays out how Australia attempted to prevent the arrival of refugees, subsequent chapters show how Australia, particularly when there was a labour shortage, slowly, and not without severe setbacks, started to open

up to refugee populations other than the blond and blue-eyed “beautiful Balts,” who were assumed the least likely to encounter problems in becoming “ideal ‘New Australians.’” Given that politicians dreamed of a bigger Australia after the Second World War, even though Australian fertility was then below replacement levels and the ennoblement of motherhood (to use the lingo of that time) would prove insufficient to boost population growth and therefore economic development, Australian decision-makers had to change their approach to refugees. With the help of the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), which Neumann denotes as a “child of the Cold War” (99), Australia started looking for people with certain nationalities and professions among the millions of displaced Europeans. The intake of more than 100,000 displaced people in the late 1940s signalled the end of Australia’s exclusive preference for British migrants, but refugees who migrated under the IRO schemes had to work and live as directed, or risk deportation (121). This cherry-picking meant that many maimed survivors of the war and less socially desirable people, such as single mothers and their children, were screened out.

Chapters 3 and 4 detail Australia’s different approaches in immigration policies under Menzies and Whitlam to subsequent refugee populations, including the Hungarians who came after the 1956 Uprising and the Czechoslovakians who left after the 1968 Prague Spring, as well as some Russian defectors. Next to those European refugees, at this time Australia began to be confronted with resettlement requests from other refugees, not just those from the Asia-Pacific region, such as the West Papuans, followed a decade later by the East Timorese who rejected the annexation of their homelands by Indonesia, and eventually the Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon, but also substantial refugee flows from political crises in Uganda and Chile. Because there was no consistent asylum policy, these refugee groups faced very different treatment. Some were allowed in but had to pledge to refrain from political activity related to their homelands, while others, such as the West Papuans who had crossed the border into Papua New Guinea (then an Australian colony, which did not become independent until 1975), were not allowed resettlement in Australia.

The last chapter focuses on the domestic challenges that the Fraser government faced after the first arrivals of Vietnamese asylum-seeker boats in Darwin and the rapid public

mood-swing from compassion to panic. Under the Fraser administration tens of thousands of people from Indochina were eventually resettled in Australia, yet after the 1977 federal election, in which refugee issues seemed to have played a significant role, Fraser was concerned that popular xenophobic sentiment, spurred on by the media, could get easily out of control. As is widely known, many subsequent Australian prime ministers have not shared any such concern at all.

Reading Neumann’s account, one cannot but wonder about the many historical parallels, whether it be the widespread ignorance among administrators of political developments overseas, or the good-character tests inflicted on people randomly, the interpretation of which is usually left to the discretion of bureaucrats. In fact, a primary strength of this book is that it subtly points out the many earlier versions of the punitive excrescences of Australia’s current refugee policy, such as the ongoing separation of family members. In much the same way that refugees face negative security assessments from the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation nowadays, suspicious aliens, even as far back as the late 1930s, had to defend their innocence without knowing exactly what organizations like the Commonwealth Investigation Branch was holding against them, because “the government did not reveal the reasons for someone’s internment,” making it “difficult for the internees to successfully convince the tribunal they were loyal to Australia or would cause no harm if released” (60).

Neumann has done a great job of digging up very insightful facts and figures from the archives, but he has also collected very illustrative stories and anecdotes from refugees and their biographical writings (which would make good follow-up reading too) to show what bureaucratic decisions meant for individuals confronted with them. Neumann refrains from making any moralistic conclusions, preferring to leave this to his readers. Even though it deals with some rather gloomy material, Neumann’s account is well written in an easy style and with a hint of irony, which make the book a real page-turner.

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