


German Life and Letters 74:2 April 2021
0016-8777 (print); 1468-0483 (online)

NARRATIVE AND EMPATHY: THE 2015 'REFUGEE CRISIS' IN
VLADIMIR VERTLIB'S *VIKTOR HILFT* AND OLGA GRJASNOWA'S
GOTT IST NICHT SCHÜCHTERN

STUART TABERNER 
(UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS*)

ABSTRACT

This article examines Vladimir Vertlib's *Viktor hilft* (2018) and Olga Grjasnowa's *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (2017) in relation to the 2015 'refugee crisis' and specifically the disillusionment of humanitarianism that has become evident in recent years following the war on terror, the 2008 economic crisis, the rise of populism, and the rapid explosion of humanitarian need. In the main body of the article, it is argued that both novels engage critically with the long-established motif of empathy as a foundation for humanitarian action, but that only *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* points to a way out of the disillusionment of humanitarianism by relativising European perspectives on the suffering of others (including repeated references to the Holocaust) and by encouraging the reader to think and act politically. Concretely, this means that the reader should focus on the political and moral responsibility of the state even towards non-citizens and should agitate for the state's adherence to international conventions (e.g. the right to asylum). At the close of the article, Hannah Arendt is invoked, as is a possible definition of 'ironic solidarity' in literary texts dealing with the suffering of others.

Dieser Artikel untersucht Vladimir Vertlibs *Viktor hilft* (2018) und Olga Grjasnowas *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (2017) in Bezug auf die Flüchtlingskrise von 2015 und spezifisch auf die Ernüchterung des Humanitarismus, die infolge des Krieges gegen den Terror, der Wirtschaftskrise von 2008, des Aufstiegs des Populismus und des rapide steigenden humanitären Bedarfs in Erscheinung getreten ist. Im Hauptteil des Artikels wird argumentiert, dass sich beide Romane – von zwei ansonsten sehr verschiedenen Autoren mit sowjetisch-jüdischem Hintergrund – kritisch mit dem längst etablierten Motiv der Empathie als Grundlage für das humanitäre Handeln auseinandersetzen. Darüber hinaus bietet *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* aber auch einen möglichen Ausweg aus der Ernüchterung des Humanitarismus, indem der Roman die europäische Perspektive (inklusive wiederholter Verweise auf den Holocaust) auf das Leid fremder Menschen relativiert und den Leser dazu auffordert, anstatt von Empathie geleitet zu werden politisch zu denken und zu handeln. Konkret bedeutet dies, dass der Leser auf die politische und moralische Verantwortung westlicher Staaten auch gegenüber Nichtbürgern fokussieren und sich für die Befolgung konventionsrechtlicher Verpflichtungen mobilisieren soll. Im Schlussteil des Artikels wird auf Hannah Arendt hingewiesen sowie auf eine

* The author is a Research Associate in the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch; German and French, at the University of the Free State, South Africa. He is grateful for financial support on this project.

mögliche Definition einer 'ironic solidarity' in literarischen Texten, die fremdes Leid thematisieren.

From Adam Smith and David Hume to John Rawls, Richard Rorty, and Michael Slote (or in the continental tradition, Johann Gottfried Herder, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Max Scheler, and Edith Stein), western philosophers have debated the proposition that empathy is both a universal expression of our shared humanity and a catalyst for humanitarian action on behalf of 'distant others'.¹ In such discussions and even more so in popular understandings of empathy, narrative seems especially important. From the eighteenth-century abolitionist movement to twentieth-century genocides and the conflict and climate-change refugees of the present day, story-telling is thought to provide privileged access to the 'authentic experience' of victims that, once told, can adumbrate realities that are otherwise too overwhelming or too abstract to grasp.² Empathy becomes possible when the scale and savagery of forced displacement, mass rape, or genocide are focalised through the experience of a single person or handful of people.

Yet the role of narrative in mobilising empathy is not unproblematic, of course – and empathy may in any event be a flimsy foundation for altruism. On the one hand, the 'humanitarian interventionism' of the 1990s,³ the hubris of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, and, more generally after 9/11, the fusing of humanitarianism and national security interests,⁴ are contemporary reminders that western states in particular have long used the language of empathy – aiding hapless victims, deposing dictators, and promoting human rights – to justify their global entanglements. On the other hand, when well-meaning humanitarians tell the stories of foreigners exposed to conflict or natural disasters, asylum seekers, or refugees, they may unwittingly frame them as being without agency or even individuality. Similarly, it is clear that we have empathy most readily with those who appear most likeable or deserving – children, mothers, and other 'innocents' – and those whose stories fulfil expectations, or even legal criteria. Psychologist Paul Bloom raises these and other concerns in his 2016 *Against Empathy: The Case*

¹ See Heidi Maibom (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, London 2017, especially part II, 'History of Empathy'.

² See James Dawes, *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity*, Cambridge, MA 2007. See also Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (eds), *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, Cambridge 2008.

³ See Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice*, Basingstoke 2013. In Brendan Simms and D. J. B. Trim (eds), *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*, Cambridge 2011, various chapters contextualise the liberal interventionism of the 1990s with examples from the early-modern period and the age of European empires, as well as from the United States and other non-European arenas.

⁴ See Stephen Brown and Jörn Grävingholt (eds), *The Securitization of Foreign Aid*, Basingstoke 2016.

for *Rational Compassion* (2016), but in truth the debate on both the righteousness and *practical* use of stories designed to provoke empathy has been ongoing since at least the simultaneous emergence of the novel and humanitarian discourses in the eighteenth century.⁵ In her *Empathy and the Novel*, Victorianist Suzanne Keen responds to the general presumption that literary works can heighten empathetic sensibilities with a laconic ‘Well, it depends’.⁶

This article examines two recent German novels focused on the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, when 1 to 2 million people fled conflict in Syria, the Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan.⁷ Vladimir Vertlib’s *Viktor hilft* (2018), it is argued, critiques the European novelistic tradition to which it belongs – hinting at the self-absorption of its privileged Austrian protagonist – but ultimately fails to elaborate a more robust basis for humanitarian action to substitute for a flawed empathy. Olga Grjasnowa’s *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (2017; *City of Jasmine*, 2019), in contrast, gestures towards a revitalisation of humanitarianism that relies less on empathy than on legal frameworks and states’ obligations under international conventions. Moreover, both Vertlib and Grjasnowa are Jewish migrants from the former Soviet Union, who allude to the historical memory of the Holocaust and their own lived experiences of dislocation. This adds a further layer of complexity to the novels, as will be discussed. It also suggests a model for Grjasnowa’s detached, unsentimental narration in German-Jewish refugee Hannah Arendt’s deliberately dispassionate insistence on rights rather than emotions.

VLADIMIR VERTLIB’S *VIKTOR HILFT*

Vladimir Vertlib is a multiple migrant of Russian-Jewish background. Born in Leningrad in 1966, the son of a *refusnik*, Vertlib moved with his parents to Israel, next to Austria, Italy and Austria again, then to Italy (again), the Netherlands, and Israel, after that to the United States and back to Austria, where he became a citizen in 1986. The initial focus of his work was autobiographical. *Abschiebung* (1995) and *Zwischenstationen* (1993) are based on his family’s travels.⁸ In subsequent texts, Vertlib focuses on Jews in contemporary Germany. *Letzter Wunsch* (2003), for example, tells of a woman who is not ‘Jewish enough’ to be buried according to Jewish

⁵ See Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, New York 2007. See also Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, New York 2007.

⁶ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, New York 2007, p. xix.

⁷ It is difficult to be precise, of course. FRONTEX recorded 1,802,267 border crossings for 2015, but that may include a number of multiple attempts by the same people. See <https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-map/> (accessed 30 October 2018).

⁸ See Dagmar Lorenz, ‘Vladimir Vertlib, a Global Intellectual: Exile, Migration, and Individualism in The Narratives of a Russian Jewish Author in Austria’, in Todd C. Hanlin (ed.), *Beyond Vienna: Contemporary Literature From the Austrian Provinces*, Riverside 2008, pp. 230–62.

rites, and of tensions between the settled community and arrivals from the former Soviet Union, whereas *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur* (2001) gently mocks Germany's post-Holocaust culture of philo-Semitism.⁹ The short stories of *Mein erster Mörder* (2006) and *Schimons Schweigen* (2012) are about Jews travelling between Russia, Germany, and Austria, and Israel, and *Ich und die 'Eingeborenen'* (2012) ruminates on the attitudes of Germans towards the others living among them. *Am Morgen des zwölften Tages* (2009), in contrast, focuses on the rise of the far right and anti-Muslim sentiment after 9/11.¹⁰

From late 2015 to 2016, Vertlib was active in local initiatives to assist refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere as they passed through Austria to reach Germany, which had opened its borders for a short time in the summer.¹¹ During this period, and into the summer of 2016, public sentiment in Germany shifted dramatically from euphoria – after Chancellor Angela Merkel allowed unrestricted entry, hundreds of thousands of citizens mobilised to help the new arrivals (the so-called *Willkommenskultur*) – to political backlash from the right (and sections of the left, who worried that Islam is incompatible with liberal values), the stereotyping of refugees as rapists and terrorists, and even physical attacks.¹² Vertlib's drama *ÜBERALL NIRGENDS lauert die Zukunft* (2016) and the novel *Viktor hilft* (2018) focus on these events, and specifically the challenge of translating cosmopolitan idealism into practical action when the needs are so vast, the supplicants not always grateful or even likeable, and the requirement to compromise in order to move people 'through the system' so disheartening. In both works, the underlying theme is the exhaustion of humanitarianism – and the inadequacy of empathy to mobilise and sustain a response, or even to match the scale and complexity of the crisis and its myriad and intersecting causes.

Viktor hilft tells the story of a middle-aged man, who in late 2015 crosses back and forth into Salzburg in Austria from his home in the German border town of Freilassing in order to help in grassroots humanitarian efforts to bring refugees to the German frontier where they can claim asylum – the authorities on both sides collude in this endeavour as long as they do not have to give it official sanction. Viktor is a migrant himself, a Jew from the former Soviet Union who moved to Austria as a child and is now married to Kerstin, a lawyer. In the opening pages of the novel, as Viktor

⁹ See my 'Performing Jewishness in the New Germany: Vladimir Vertlib's *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur*', in Stuart Taberner and Lyn Marven (eds), *Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century*, Rochester, NY 2011, pp. 32–45.

¹⁰ See my *Transnationalism and German-language Literature in the 21st Century*, London 2017, pp. 166–75.

¹¹ For Vertlib's account, see 'Let's go Europe', in Uwe Beyer (ed.), *Europa im Wort. Eine literarische Seismographie in sechzehn Aufzeichnungen*, Heidelberg 2016.

¹² See Bastian Vollmer and Serhat Karakayali, 'The Volatility of the Discourse on Refugees in Germany', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16/1–2 (2018), 118–39.

completes a shift at the provisional transit camp on the Austrian side of the border, he receives an SMS out of the blue from a former lover, Gudrun, who demands to meet him. It transpires that Viktor has a daughter, Lisa, who, recently estranged from Gudrun, is now living with a German couple, Beate and Bruno. Bee and Bruu are former leftists who now sympathise with PEGIDA, or Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident, the far-right movement that emerged in Germany in late 2014. Viktor travels to the town of Gigricht to meet Lisa, although he knows she cannot be his daughter – he is infertile – and seeks to get to know her as well as to expose himself to the inevitable challenge to his humanitarian instincts and Jewish identity. At the close of the novel, Bruu is roundly condemned in the media and even by PEGIDA colleagues for seemingly racist and anti-Semitic comments he made at a rally in front of a torched asylum seeker hostel; Arok, a refugee known to Viktor from an earlier encounter in the Austrian transit camp threatens to jump from a building; and Viktor returns to Austria with Lisa, even though she now understands that they are not in fact father and daughter.

At the most basic level, Vertlib's novel illustrates what might be described as the emotional topography of Germans' responses to the sudden influx of refugees in the summer of 2015 – compassion, provoked by the scale of the need and also by the inadequacy of the state, but also a mix of pity, paternalism, expectation of gratitude, and an ethno-nationalist prejudice that refugees should adapt and integrate.¹³ Thus British Sikhs cook for the refugees, local women care for mothers and children, the Catholic relief agency Caritas distributes clothes, and *Train of Hope* sets up showers,¹⁴ but even the most committed volunteers display a weary cynicism and disappointment that their efforts are not fully acknowledged by overly demanding refugees (e.g. V, 95), while the state is concerned only with registration and swift onward movement (e.g. V, 94). Beyond this broadly descriptive purpose, however, *Viktor hilft* also invites its reader to ruminate on more fundamental issues relating to the conceptual integrity of humanitarianism itself. These include: how empathy may be contingent on refugees appearing 'likeable'; the mixed motives of those who offer assistance; and, related to this, how our need to frame the suffering of others within familiar contexts ultimately privileges the stories we wish to tell about ourselves rather than the narratives that refugees and other marginalised people might relate – if only they had a voice.

Likeability, inevitably, is linked to agency. Refugees who behave as subjects rather than supplicants, especially by asserting beliefs and behaviours that

¹³ The novel's depiction accords well with subsequent anthropological studies. See, for example, Jochen Kleres, 'Emotions in the Crisis: Mobilising for Refugees in Germany and Sweden', in Donatella della Porta (ed.), *Solidarity Mobilizations in the 'Refugee Crisis'*, Basingstoke 2018, pp. 209–241.

¹⁴ Vladimir Vertlib, *Viktor hilft*, Vienna 2018, p. 83. Hereafter, V in brackets after quotations in the main body of the article.

alienate their hosts, may find that empathy is quickly withdrawn and even replaced by hostility. Most obviously, the narrator's depiction of how a patriarch puts a sick child's life at risk by refusing to allow 'his' women to go ahead without him alludes to the ongoing debate in Germany and Europe more generally about the compatibility of Islam with western values (V, 97–8). Later, Bee and Bruu cite Islam's supposed misogyny to justify their antipathy, referring to the molestations that took place on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne (V, 141–3), and Lisa even concocts a sexual assault perpetrated by Fouad. In fact, the 'ideal refugee' is most likely Arok, who is silently passive and pathetically grateful (V, 201–4). Even his plunge from the roof of the burnt-out hostel is consumed as pure spectacle by German onlookers (V, 280–2).

That empathy may ultimately depend on likeability – and that to be likeable may require refugees to deny their agency – suggests the potential arbitrariness of a humanitarian philosophy derived from our 'natural instinct' to identify with the suffering of others. And the same may be said when humanitarianism presupposes lofty and purely altruistic motives. Initially, then, Viktor frames his engagement in political and idealistic terms – a challenge to European nations to work together to distribute refugees fairly, establish reception centres, interdict the traffickers, and support refugees' home countries, as well as a moral imperative because: 'Ich bin kein Zyniker' (V, 190). In truth, his motives are far more mixed, and even self-regarding. Above all, his childlessness is a factor – the same was said of Merkel (V, 159–60), of course. Viktor's first interaction with a refugee in the novel is to offer a child sweets and biscuits (V, 8); he takes responsibility for Lisa, though she cannot be his, and he falls into a father-like role with a young woman of Russian-Jewish origin who serves him in an *Autobahn* service station (V, 122–3), wondering, rhetorically, why *she* can't be his daughter. (When he returns, she ignores him; V, 283–5). To the extent that his actions are shaped by the contingencies of biography – perceived hurts and missed opportunities – Viktor may be little different from Bee and Bruu, therefore. These two one-time leftists became far-right radicals largely in reaction to Bee's cousin Barbara, who is ostentatiously refugee-friendly but also once stole Bee's boyfriend (V, 244–6).

The novel's scarcely subtle allusions to the accident of Viktor's childlessness as a motive for his empathetic altruism establish both a precedent and a context for scepticism towards more 'worldly' aspects of Viktor's biography: his own refugee experience, his family connection to the Holocaust, and the anti-Semitism he encounters in the present day. Thus, even as Viktor's own history is elaborated, the reader is invited to question the presumption that one kind of suffering can be analogous with another, and that empathy with those who are proximate can be transferred outwards, as it were, towards more distant others. In conceptual terms, this implies a challenge to what Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder describe as 'cosmopolitan memory', that is, the proposition that the globalisation

of Holocaust memory nowadays underpins universal human rights,¹⁵ and perhaps also to Michael Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory', according to which Holocaust memory – through its mobilisation in relation to less familiar, even suppressed memories of persecution and atrocity elsewhere in the world – may 'reveal' injustice in both the past and the present, and globally.¹⁶ More prosaically, it is suggested that in reaching for familiar narratives to frame the suffering of others, we more often than not speak mostly about ourselves.

Thus, the novel opens with a boy taking chocolate from a middle-aged man, feigning gratitude when in fact he feels cowed by an immigration official who is enjoying his power over the child and his mother. In the next passage, it is clear that this was a flashback to the vulnerability Viktor endured as a young migrant, just in the moment that – now a man in his fifties – he too is handing sweets to a child refugee. The point of the juxtaposition may be that Viktor's own experience facilitates empathy (for the reader too) with newcomers today. Yet there is no way of knowing whether *this* Syrian, Iraqi, or Afghani child – no age, gender, or nationality is given – feels any less scared than Viktor once did. As James Dawes argues, speaking *for* distant others is perhaps more likely to deny their agency while pandering to audience expectations,¹⁷ and empathy in particular creates an illusion of access that may gratify the donor more than it truly comforts the recipient.

These opening episodes foreshadow further flashbacks throughout the text to Viktor's family's chronicle of persecution and flight, again compiled by the third-person narrator, which ultimately invoke the Holocaust. For example, to the extent that they are already – negatively – implicated in this traumatic history, German or Austrian readers are no doubt expected to recognise the cue in an oblique allusion to his mother's aversion to the Federal Republic (V, 62), and to endorse his efforts to resist racism in the present day, including PEGIDA. Yet it is far from certain that empathy with the assimilated, Austrian-dialect-speaking Jewish man (V, 64) will easily transfer to Muslim refugees, who remain essentially voiceless. Indeed, references to anti-Semitism in Poland between the wars, in the Soviet Union, during the Nazi period, and in Ukraine after 1945 (V, 77) reaffirm Jewish suffering but may not always encourage compassion for more distant others whose stories take place beyond the horizon. Bree and Bruu, notably, conclude that Holocaust memory requires them to express not solidarity with, but rather hostility toward Muslims.

The more vividly Jewish suffering is invoked, moreover, the more it may eclipse 'other' traumas. Viktor is always careful, in the novel's many

¹⁵ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in a Global Age*, Philadelphia, PA 2006.

¹⁶ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford 2009.

¹⁷ James Dawes, 'Human Rights in Literary Studies', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 3/2 (2009), 394–409.

passages of reported speech, to present himself as an expression not of Jewish particularism but of universal human rights: 'Ich helfe diesen sogenannten Antisemiten, und zwar gerade, weil ich Jude bin' (V, 134). In a lengthy and at times self-contradictory excursus on his past towards the end of the novel, however, Viktor's focus seems to be his dilemma as a Jew in post-Holocaust Germany rather than Europe's shameful response to refugees in the present day. He declaims the improbability of his grandparents' survival, the accident of his own existence, and his choice to live in Germany, 'ausgerechnet in dem Land, wo der Mord an meinen Vorfahren beschlossen und organisiert wurde?' (V, 188). Similarly, the narrator's frequent interjections from Viktor's biography – his relatives' murder in Nazi camps, pogroms in post-war Ukraine (V, 76–8), abuse at school (V, 81–2), the Muslim refugee Ali's insults (V, 210) and allusions to gassing Jews during the Waldheim affair (V, 239–41) – inevitably appear more *immediate* than the second-hand, truncated accounts of the novel's superficially-drawn refugees. In the end, it seems that references to the familiar context of Jewish suffering, however well-intentioned, can only ever restate Viktor's – and more broadly European – preoccupations.

In the end, the novel's tendency to present the world through the lens of Viktor's experience, even as its ostensible theme is the suffering of Muslim refugees, most likely unwittingly exposes the limitations of the tradition to which it belongs. In *Viktorhilft*, the compelling horror of the Holocaust past perhaps inevitably frames the perspective of its titular protagonist and its likely readership. Yet an inability to think beyond the histories and preoccupations of its own continent has long been characteristic of the European novel ever since it emerged in the eighteenth century in parallel with western philosophical thinking on empathy¹⁸ – most especially when it has sought to describe the encounter with others.¹⁹

OLGA GRJASNOWA'S *GOTT IST NICHT SCHÜCHTERN*²⁰

Olga Grjasnowa arrived in Germany as a child in 1996 as one of around 200,000 'jüdische Kontingentflüchtlinge' (Jewish 'quota refugees') who, from the early 1990s to mid-2000s, were permitted to immigrate from the

¹⁸ See Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (note 6), especially chapter two, 'The Literary Career of Empathy', pp. 37–64.

¹⁹ The classic exposition of this linkage, of course, is Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, New York 1993.

²⁰ Elements of the following discussion have appeared elsewhere. Here, my argument concerning the role of the narrator as a protagonist in the refugee narrative she relates, and more generally concerning literature and humanitarianism, is significantly developed. See my 'Towards a "Pragmatic Cosmopolitanism": Rethinking Solidarity with Refugees', in Olga Grjasnowa's *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, *Modern Language Review*, 114/4 (2019), 819–40.

former Soviet Union.²¹ She speaks Russian and some Azeri (she grew up as part of the Russian minority in Azerbaijan), and writes in German. She is married to Syrian actor Ayham Majid Agha, who has resided in Germany since 2013 and is unable to return to his home country on account of his ongoing opposition to the Assad regime. It was her husband, Grjasnowa emphasises in interviews, who provided her with the quotation from the second sura of the Koran that became the title of her 2017 novel *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (The novel appeared in English translation as *City of Jasmine*, 2019). Believing himself to be God-like, the Syrian dictator Bashar Hafez al-Assad does not recoil from inflicting the most extreme punishments when his people refuse his command.²²

In *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, Hammoudi returns home to Syria after training in France as a plastic surgeon, to renew his passport before he takes up a prestigious position in Paris. In Damascus, his documents are retained by the regime; he is unable to travel back to his French (Jewish) girlfriend Claire and, following the outbreak of war, he sets up a makeshift hospital before being forced to flee by Islamic State fighters. Hammoudi travels to Athens via Turkey and joins other refugees on the 'Balkan route' to Germany where he is murdered by right-wing extremists. The story of the novel's second protagonist, Amal, is told in alternating chapters, at least initially until the novel's structure disintegrates in parallel with the collapse of any semblance of order in Syria itself. Amal is distinctly privileged. She is independent and financially secure, a successful TV actress, and able to rely on her father's contacts after she is arrested for taking part in a demonstration – though she is sexually harassed, forced to beat another inmate, and made to endure a mock execution.²³ Shortly after her release from detention, Amal becomes estranged from her father when she discovers that he had lied to her and her brother Ali about her (Russian) mother having abandoned them, and that he has a second family. She leaves for Beirut, where she encounters Youssef – a one-time date in Damascus, an opponent of the Assad regime, and the grandson of a Palestinian woman who fled the establishment of Israel in 1948 – and together they pay people smugglers to bring them from Turkey to Europe. Their criminally unseaworthy ship sinks, and they wash up in Italy. Finally, they arrive in Germany – with Amina, a baby whose mother drowned – and Amal finds work as a presenter on a daytime TV show: *Mein Flüchtling kocht*. The novel's protagonists Hammoudi and Amal bump into one another – for a second time, following a brief encounter in Damascus – and end up in a hotel room together, where Amal's narration

²¹ See <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurz dossiers/252561/juedische-kontingentfluechtlinge-und-russlanddeutsche?p=all> (accessed 30 October 2018).

²² Susanne Lenz, 'Es ist keine schöne Geschichte', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 13 July 2017, <https://www.fr.de/kultur/literatur/keine-schoene-geschichte-11019096.html> (accessed 30 June 2018).

²³ Olga Grjasnowa, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, Berlin 2017, pp. 93–7. Hereafter, G in brackets after quotations in the main body of the text.

of her perilous Mediterranean crossing and how Amina's mother drowned inhibits their likely intention to make love (G, 299–300). Shortly after, the two refugees meet very different fates. Hammoudi is brutally murdered by neo-Nazis while Amal turns down a career opportunity in the United States and resolves to settle in Germany with her 'new' family Youssef and Amina.

Similar to Grjasnowa's previous novels *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* (2012; *All Russians Love Birch Trees*, 2014) and *Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe* (2014),²⁴ multiple and interwoven subplots in *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* connect the lived experience of refugees to defining features of our age: intra-state conflict, internal repression, and mass displacement, of course, but also more generally the eroding of humanitarian norms and the precarity of those who do not 'belong'.²⁵ As important, however, the dense texture of the narrative signals the complexity of refugees' lives, emphasising the volatility of individual agency and pre-empting a reductive sentimentalisation. Rather than an 'instinctive' empathy, therefore, what is required of the novel's reader is a dispassionate but principled insistence that refugees have rights even when they are not likeable or even 'deserving'. This, it will be argued, can be understood as an 'ironic solidarity' that echoes Hannah Arendt's sober avowal of the insufficiency of compassion by itself, and of the consequent necessity of *politics*.

Hammoudi, then, is not simply the heroic doctor tending to the wounded in Deir az-Zour, the government stronghold contested by state forces, the Free Syrian Army, al Qaeda, and the rival Jihadist group Islamic State. In truth, his courage may be motivated by an urge to distract himself from the pain of his separation from Claire that is self-obsessed and even nihilistic. His first reaction when a sniper shoots at him is to wonder whether Claire has found someone new (G, 163). Amal's backstory too complicates hasty presumptions about the refugee's reasons for fleeing. She is young, independent, and secular (G, 53) – a Muslim that western liberals can feel comfortable with. Yet her opposition to the Assad regime is not clear-cut, or entirely free of frivolous egocentricity. Amal attends the protest that preceded her arrest largely to pursue her infatuation with Youssef, and even after her detention she continues to benefit from her father's connections and to lead a life of privilege (G, 104). Moreover, it is evident that her flight is not solely motivated by a fear of persecution. She discovers that her father had been lying to her for years about her mother – he had claimed that Svetlana had forsaken them for her native Russia – and that he has a second family (G, 133–7). Bassel fails to show up to a rendezvous to discuss the situation, and soon enough Amal quits Damascus for Beirut – it is difficult not to conclude that her estrangement from her father is the decisive factor.

²⁴ Olga Grjasnowa, *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt*, Munich 2012; *Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe*, Munich 2014.

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, New York 2009.

A further and equally significant implication of the novel's detailed depiction of the refugee's journey as one that begins long before departure and which even after arrival in Europe continues to intersect with other stories across multiple time zones and geographies is the way this complexity frequently situates the narrator – most likely a cipher for the Jewish writer Olga Grjasnowa – at the edges, or even outside of the stories that she tells. As the curator of the novel's many subplots, the narrator of course exercises the power of selection, juxtaposition, and suggestion. This is evident, for example, in the subtly recurrent insinuation of parallels between the Assad regime and Nazi Germany – the narrator's claim that the protesters named the Damascus secret police HQ 'Holocaust' (G, 84); her description of a portrait of Assad with a Hitler-like moustache (G, 126); a paratextual quotation from the British Jewish historian Simon Schama citing the Polish Jewish refugee Isaac Deutscher; and mentions of literary works by exiles from Nazism, including the German Jew Anna Seghers (G, 230). These multidirectional allusions (*pace* Rotherberg) no doubt engage the novel's likely German reader and appeal to notions of cosmopolitan memory and universal human rights. At the same time, however, they also suggest the narrator's stake in the story she is telling, and even shape her as a *protagonist* within her own narrative to the extent that *her* concerns – and perhaps her past (as a migrant, as a Jew) – colour her account of Hammoudi and Amal's journeys. Yet – unlike in *Viktor hilft* – the European (Jew) is not offered as a focal point for identification who might then enable empathy with more distant others. The narrator does not pretend to 'know' Hammoudi and Amal – they are exemplars rather than people she has met – and she does not attempt to use her own lifestory as a bridge to theirs. What's more, her mediation of refugee stories most likely knowingly 'provincialises' her own, and indeed European, frames for comprehending the refugee crisis.²⁶ Her infrequent references to the Nazi genocide seem both incongruent – introduced 'from outside' – and are entirely absent from the refugees' own efforts to make sense of their suffering. Refugees shape their own – always fragile and contested – Middle Eastern-North African solidarity and swap their own stories of hardship under dictatorial regimes and in conflict zones (G, 243).

Gott ist nicht schüchtern reverses the lens, as it were, to position the narrator as the distant other who reports from the edges of refugee conversations but can never truly 'feel her way into' their stories (*empfinden*). This decentring of the European humanitarian does more than simply demonstrate the insufficiency of empathy, however. It also predicts the narrator's efforts to shape a more effective intervention, namely her

²⁶ For a discussion of the Eurocentrism of framings of 'other' atrocities in relation to the Holocaust, see Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*, Basingstoke and New York 2013.

quasi-sociological focus on the structural violence²⁷ of states and bureaucracies in both sending and receiving countries. The narrator's matter-of-fact depiction of the abuse Hammoudi and Amal suffer in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, across Europe, and finally Germany thus consistently exceeds the hypnotising spectacle of the individual's suffering in the moment when pain is inflicted and instead highlights the systemic injustices within which this occurs. This is evident even in her descriptions of the horrific effects of chemical weapons (G, 187–91); indiscriminate killing and rape (G, 158–9); and torture of detainees (G, 93–7), which consistently reference the regime, the opposition, or ISIS as the perpetrators, and it is even evident in her summary of Hammoudi's graphic reports of mutilated bodies: 'Die Körper der Ermordeten sind mit Spuren der Folter übersät: mit Verbrennungen und Hämatomen, Ätzungen von chemischen Substanzen, tiefen Schnitten, Striemen von elektrischen Kabeln, Blut' (G, 102). Here, the doctor's forensic analysis evokes empathy for individual victims but more generally indicts the state apparatus whose 'purpose' it is to inflict pain, using the tried and tested methods of dictatorial regimes throughout twentieth- and twenty-first-century history. In Germany, on the other hand, it is the state's generalised indifference to the wellbeing of refugees that emerges from the narrator's recounting of how Hammoudi and Amal are processed, subjected to popular prejudices, and – in Hammoudi's case, at least – eventually murdered by neo-Nazis.

In the place of – or rather in addition to – empathy, what is required is *politics*. Indeed, allusions to three well-known German exile writers (one Jewish: Seghers; two non-Jewish: Erich Maria Remarque and Bertolt Brecht) direct the reader's attention back towards the unsentimentally 'political' focus in the decades following the defeat of Nazism on the state's fundamental obligation to protect those fleeing persecution – namely the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol.²⁸ Thus the narrator names Seghers's *Transit* (1944) and Remarque's *Die Nacht von Lissabon* (1962) as the two books that Amal took with her when she fled Damascus for Lebanon, Turkey, and Europe (G, 230).²⁹ In *Transit* and *Die Nacht von Lissabon*, based on their authors' experiences, would-be-emigrants endure listlessly in the ports of Marseilles and Lisbon, waiting for transit papers and engaging in futile affairs.³⁰ Self-evidently, the invocation

²⁷ Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6/3 (1969), 167–91.

²⁸ For more information, see UNHCR, *The 1951 Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol*, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html> (accessed 30 October 2018).

²⁹ Seghers's *Transit* was first published in English in Boston, USA, in 1944. It subsequently appeared in German, in Konstanz, in 1948; Erich Maria Remarque, *Die Nacht von Lissabon*, Cologne and Bonn 1962.

³⁰ In 2018, director Christian Petzold released a film adaptation of Seghers's *Transit*, set in a present-day Europe in which Nazis are in charge. The film draws a clear parallel between the post-war period

of these two classics of exile literature indicts the continuing failure of the international community *today* to honour the conventions that emerged in the aftermath of the Nazi terror. In Seghers, Remarque, and Grjasnowa, refugees exist in a state of limbo, without protection and agency. At the start of the final part of *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, an image of heavenly constellations invokes a utopian globalism but is quickly undercut by a famous quotation from the dramatist Bertolt Brecht:

Der Pass ist der edelste Teil von einem Menschen. Er kommt auch nicht auf so einfache Weise zustande wie der Mensch. Ein Mensch kann überall zustande kommen, auf die leichtsinnigste Art und ohne gescheiterten Grund, aber ein Pass niemals. Dafür wird er auch anerkannt, wenn er gut ist, während ein Mensch noch so gut sein kann und doch nicht anerkannt wird.³¹ (G, 278)

Today, just as in 1940 when Brecht (himself an exile) wrote these remarkable sentences, states' inconsistency in extending protection to those without papers means that millions can hope only for the compassion, even *sentimentality*, of host populations. Yet reliance on the benevolence of others is also a form of precarity. Amal is lucky throughout her journey, but Hammoudi is not, and that she flourishes while he is murdered is entirely arbitrary.

Present-day humanitarianism, it is implied, must rely less on expressions of solidarity than on citizens' willingness to mobilise politically, both to demand fundamental changes in the global order, including geopolitics and economics, and to insist on their governments' adherence to international norms that, in recent years, have been more honoured in the breach than the observance. This gritty, even grinding engagement may be less emotionally satisfying than empathy, but it may also be more sustainable. More specifically, it connects – or, more accurately, reconnects – humanitarianism unambiguously to the discourse of human rights, with which it has much in common,³² of course, but with different emphases.³³ This is important on the one hand because it embeds humanitarianism within an insistence on legal frameworks and conventions – the right to asylum, states' obligations to offer succour, etc. – and provides a more solid foundation for action than empathy alone. On the other hand, and just as vital, however, the humanitarian impulse injects a sense of urgency into what can seem to be a rather abstract discourse

and today's political situation in Germany and Europe, including the rise of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) and the hounding of refugees.

³¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Flüchtlingsgespräche*, Berlin 1961, p. 1.

³² See Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown, 'Introduction', in Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (eds), *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 1–28.

³³ For a subtle discussion of the similarities and differences between humanitarianism and human rights, see Michael N. Barnett, 'Humanitarianism and Human Rights', in Chris Brown and Robyn Eckersley (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory*, Oxford 2018, pp. 289–303.

of human rights.³⁴ ‘Philosophical approaches’, James D. Ingram argues, ‘ask what these rights are, why we have them, what they are based on’, but ‘political approaches [...] start with the problem of putting human rights into practice.’³⁵

This *pragmatic* intersection of humanitarianism and human rights is exemplified in the novel’s final episode, when Amal flies to America to take up a job offer only to take the next flight home before she even passes through US immigration. In a highly contemporary novel completed and published in 2017, this is most likely a reference to Donald Trump’s election as President in 2016, and to his executive order barring arrivals from certain Muslim countries, including Syria. Amal’s decision not to even attempt to enter may simply pre-empt her being refused, of course. However, it seems more purposeful: ‘Sie springt auf und eilt zum Gate. Amal verlässt die USA mit demselben Flugzeug, mit dem sie angekommen war’ (G, 309). Notwithstanding the German public’s ambivalence towards refugees – and outbreaks of neo-Nazi violence – the Federal Republic at least accepts its most basic cosmopolitan responsibilities and obligations,³⁶ and Amal determines to return to make use of the rights that issue from these. In this moment, Amal is no longer an ‘abject subject of compassion’ but a ‘legal person as well as a political activist claiming the recognition of his or her international human rights’, to use Benhabib’s apposite terminology³⁷ – and she is no longer the object of the narrator’s curation but the true protagonist of her own story.

HUMANITARIANISM AND THE NOVEL

Vertlib’s *Viktor hilft* and Grjasnowa’s *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* confirm the disillusionment of humanitarianism outlined at the start of this article – the overwhelming ‘demand’ from supplicants; the arbitrariness of who is helped; the inadequacies and indeed the cynicism of states; and, of course, the capriciousness of empathy. Only *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, however,

³⁴ See, for example, Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights*, Ithaca, NY 2013. See also Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers. Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order*, New York 2005.

³⁵ James D. Ingram, ‘What Is a “Right to Have Rights”? Three Images of The Politics of Human Rights’, *The American Political Science Review*, 102 (2008), 401–16 (402).

³⁶ See Richard Beardsworth, Garrett Wallace Brown, and Richard Shapcott, ‘Introduction’, in *The State and Cosmopolitan Responsibilities*, Oxford 2019, pp. 1–14. The three editors raise the prospect of a ‘cosmopolitan state’ that internalises its obligations towards non-citizens even at the expense of absolute sovereignty. There has been a long-standing debate among historians and political scientists focused on post-war Germany about whether the Federal Republic may legitimately claim to be such a state. See, for example, Stephen E. Welch and Ruth Wittlinger, ‘The Resilience of The Nation State: Cosmopolitanism, Holocaust Memory and German Identity’, *German Politics and Society*, 29/3 (2011), 38–54.

³⁷ Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin*, Princeton, NJ 2018, p. 121.

offers a way forward – or, more accurately, a way back – to a form of humanitarianism that insists on the responsibilities of states, and on the requirement for citizens to hold governments to account regarding the care of strangers. To this extent, Grjasnowa's novel intervenes in the debate that has been taking place since the late 1990s among philosophers, political scientists, and – of greater practical relevance – humanitarian organisations, international agencies, and activists, contrasting 'classical humanitarianism', an emergency response rooted in empathy and supposedly 'beyond politics', to a 'new humanitarianism' focused on the *political implementation* of human rights.³⁸ At the same time, its closing chapters underscore the sober pragmatism that characterises the narrative as a whole, by emphasising that – in western democracies too – differences exist between governments, meaning that some are more amenable to demands that they respect their fundamental obligations.

Beyond the specifics of the conflict in Syria, the refugee crisis, and western governments' varying degrees of conformity with international conventions, however, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* more generally implies an alternative model for how literature can effectively mobilise readers' 'natural' humanitarian impulses towards practical action.

As Lynn Hunt describes, from the eighteenth century the emergence of the novel in Europe and North America was closely tied to – and also encouraged – readers' growing presumption of a universal human capacity for empathetic identification with distant others, and a normative understanding that people everywhere must possess the same rights.³⁹ Vertlib's *Viktor hilft*, it can be argued, both inhabits this conventional framing and reveals its inadequacies – the narrative focus on how Viktor encounters the mass of refugees emphasises *his* journey, *his* agency, and *his* humanity. Grjasnowa's *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, in contrast, 'decentres' its narrator-protagonist and suggests to its non-migrant readers that German and indeed European perspectives – our offer or refusal of empathy; our inclination to relate horrors taking place elsewhere to the Holocaust; our presumption of refugees' lack of agency – are inevitably provincial in their intellectual and emotional compass, and always imbricated in given ideologies, institutions, and bureaucracies. In essence, the purposeful *unsentimentality* of *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* offers more than an alternative basis for humanitarian action. It also shows how literature can promote a necessarily distanced, even *ironic* solidarity with refugees and other distant others that depends not on the reader's innate capacity for empathy but

³⁸ This debate centres on the contrast between 'traditional' or 'classical' humanitarianism, based on empathy and an avowedly non-political response, and the 'new humanitarianism' from the late 1990s, which emphasises the need to engage with – and challenge – existing political structures. See James Darcy, 'Human Rights and Humanitarian Action: A Review of The Issues', Overseas Development Institute, 2004; online at <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/2311.pdf> (last accessed 7 April 2020).

³⁹ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, New York 2007.

on his or her sustained engagement with the political typographies that predict and more often than not constrain humanitarianism's practical effectiveness.

In *Men in Dark Times* (1968), Hannah Arendt suggests: 'humaneness should be sober and cool rather than sentimental [...] that friendship is not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world.'⁴⁰ In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt had already written that 'solidarity, though it may be aroused by suffering, is not guided by it,' and 'that compared with the sentiment of pity, it may appear cold and abstract [...] Terminologically speaking, solidarity is a principle that can inspire and guide action.'⁴¹ While *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* does not name the German-Jewish thinker – it cites fellow refugees Seghers, Remarque, and Brecht – its ironic solidarity is surely Arendtian to the extent that it is not enough to have empathy with the victims of violence, persecution, and arbitrary refusal, and that the suffering of distant others must be remedied through careful analysis and effective political mobilisation on the part of citizens and non-citizens.

⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, New York 1968, p. 84.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York 1963, p. 84.