German Refugees and Refugees in Germany

Peter van der Veer

Introduction

Far from being an exceptional crisis, the 2015 movement of large groups of refugees into Germany is merely a moment in a long history of forced, partly forced, and relatively unforced movement of people in Europe and the rest of the world. The inescapable nature of global movements has led a number of leading social scientists, including the famous economist Thomas Piketty, to write an open letter to *The Guardian* (Thursday, June 28, 2018) in which they called for a science-based approach to policies on immigration rather than an approach based on electoral calculations. Unfortunately, policies on immigration have little to do with science, but everything with nationalism. The choice to publish this letter in *The Guardian* already makes the call a political one. *The Guardian* is a respectable, but in terms of readership relatively marginal, left-leaning newspaper in Britain, a country that has chosen to leave the European Union (EU) precisely because of nationalist perceptions of immigration, fueled by mass media controlled by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. The battle about immigration cannot be solved on straightforwardly empirical and scientific terms, but like any other major political issue on political grounds. For such politics, however, theoretical perspectives and historical awareness are crucial.

Refugee stands for "a person who is forcibly displaced." This sounds straightforward, but it is not. Conceptually, the distinction between migrant and refugee is pertinent, as a legal principle, but like all abstract principles, it runs into all kinds of difficulties in its application. To take only one random example, in Austria, in August 2018, an Afghan man who had asked for asylum on the grounds that he was homosexual and persecuted as such in Afghanistan was rejected because the judge did not think that he behaved like a homosexual or was clothed in a homosexual way. Directly relevant to this volume (see the contribution by

Wheeler) is the rejection of asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity and are refused asylum because they are judged to be fake Christians.[1]

Ultimately, much of our processual understanding of power and force, freedom and agency, property and citizenship depends on our theoretical perspectives. In my perspective, it is primarily the nation-state that defines subjects and citizens through law and law enforcement, but my understanding of the nation-state includes a wider variety of political formations ranging from fragile entities such as Libya and Afghanistan to supranational entities like the EU. Moreover, the recent history of Europe shows that what is understood today as established nation-states, such as Germany, Poland, and Russia, are very recent formations.

This chapter examines some aspects of the cultural history of refugees in Germany. Our focus in studying migration is often on migrants and their motivations and on the problems they face in their transition to another country. At the same time, it is crucial to see what the motivations are of those who are willing to receive refugees. Does history play a role in shaping these collective motivations? Historically, the German lands have been both producer and recipient of large numbers of refugees, both sending them out and receiving them. To what extent does that history play a role in the present and, if it does, what kind of role? Do people who are themselves refugees or children of refugees have more empathy for the plight of refugees than others? To what extent is empathy important in the political decision to accept refugees?

Moral Sentiments

The German novelist Jenny Erpenbeck (2015) has recently written a novel, entitled *Gehen, Ging, Gegangen* (in the English translation Go, Went, Gone). Richard, a retired professor of philology in Berlin, who, with his academic routine now disrupted, is unsure of what to do with the rest of his life. His wife of forty years is dead. He sleepwalks across the Alexanderplatz, oblivious of ten African refugees who have gone on a hunger strike to protest their dire situation as refugees. They refuse to give their names, but one of them has created a sign that reads "We become visible." That evening Richard watches a report on the hunger strike on the evening news and wonders how he could have just walked by without seeing the refugees. Something about the story catches his attention, and he thinks of his own story: as an infant his mother fled from Silesia to Germany, and mother and child nearly became separated. Like many, they lived through a postwar period of extreme need. At the same time, Richard is

ashamed of his total ignorance about Africa. He begins to ask questions and conduct research: "Where is Burkina Faso? What is the capital of Ghana, Sierra Leone or Niger?"

But reading about Africa and the refugees is not enough for Richard: He composes a questionnaire and goes to a refugee shelter to meet with the men. He finds a receptive audience—the men are more than eager to tell their stories (no questionnaire required). In halting English or Italian they tell Richard about unbelievable horrors—losing everything—livelihood, home, family—from one day to the next, forced onto rickety boats in the Mediterranean Sea. Now they have nothing but time on their hands. Many have skills, but they are not allowed to work. Richard finds it ironic that the presence of the refugees has created thousands of part-time jobs for Germans but that the refugees themselves are not permitted to contribute their labor to the country where they are (temporary) guests. Richard gets to know several of the men—Raschid, Ithemba, Awad, Osaboro—quite well. Their stories are similar—varying only in the degree of horror.

Most of the novel is narrated in the third-person present tense from the perspective of Richard. Eventually, Richard is no longer a passive listener: he actively intervenes on behalf of the men. Why is Richard disrupting his quiet retirement to help these men? Is he simply a *Gutmensch*—a do-gooder acting on some Christian or humanitarian principle? Or is he atoning for something in his past? Richard is an East German who grew up as a refugee child in a land devastated from war. So he knows from experience that permanence is an illusion; none of us can be sure that we will be spared the fate of a refugee.

The American-Vietnamese novelist and theorist Viet Thanh Nguyen has recently written a book on war, memory, and identity, entitled *Nothing Ever Dies* (2016). Nguyen is concerned with the remembrance of the war in Vietnam as one in which American suffering was paramount and Vietnamese suffering is largely elided. This exemplifies what Nguyen terms "unjust memory," which "limit[s] empathy and compassion to those just like us" and "terminate[s] empathy and compassion for others" (2016: 267). Much of *Nothing Ever Dies* is a critique of such memories and a meditation on the difficulty of producing a "just memory" of the US war in Vietnam that "celebrates the humanity of all sides and acknowledges the inhumanity of all sides, including our own" (2016). Nguyen has also written an award-winning novel *The Sympathizer* (2015) dealing with the cultural production of memory and the ambivalences of agency and victimhood. The point that Erpenbeck and Nguyen in their different ways make is that for both the refugees and the receiving populations, the work of memory and history is essential to connect to the suffering of others.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith observed that sensory experience alone could not spur us toward sympathetic engagement with others: "Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers." For Smith, what made us moral beings was the imaginative capacity to "place ourselves in his situation . . . and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them." Empathy or "Einfühlung" is not a given, but structured according to narratives of connection. People all over the world broadly feel responsibility for their kin, and when they don't, this is seen as troubling and frowned upon. Depending on the nature of their kinship systems, this can extend from the nuclear family out toward a wider circle of kindred.

Fictive kinship—the inclusion of others in quasi-blood relations—can play a role in extending this feeling of responsibility. Forms of fictive kinship are based on commonplace of origin, ethnicity, or religion. However, the variety of forms of bonding is enormous, and the weakness or strength of ties beyond the family is relative. This is exactly what Benedict Anderson (1983) tried to express with his description of "the nation" as an "imagined community." What one considers to be "us" and what one considers to be "others" varies and is dynamic to the extent that one cannot easily take natural or primordial ties for granted as the basis of caring for others. It is also not simply the case that human beings feel a universal, "natural" responsibility when they see the suffering of others.

Moreover, it can also not be argued that "empathy" is required for social action to take place. Research in social psychology shows that "empathy," for example in cases of sudden disaster like earthquakes, is short-lived, depends on specific framing of the narrative of suffering, and does not extend easily beyond individual cases with which one can "empathize." In fact, people may feel all kinds of emotions, including a kind of elation that one is not suffering oneself or at least not to the extent that others are suffering. Such is suggested by Freud's famous argument in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1918) about the ambivalence we feel when someone close to us has died. Sad that the person is gone, and glad that one continues to live oneself. This shows that one cannot take universal and unequivocal emotions as the basis of an account of caring for others.

Caring for others outside the family is a product of collective social action and thus a matter of politics. A politician might, for example, argue that caring for others is in the national interest: Chancellor Merkel has denied that *Mitgefühl* (sympathy) was a motivation in her refugee politics and claimed that her position was in the interest of Germany and the EU. The boundary between

those who belong and those who do not, between those for whom one has empathy and for whom one has not, depends on processes of state formation. This is largely determined by shifting state discourses about the religious and ethnic foundations of the nation.

State Formation and Religious Cleansing

A moment of particular interest in the European history of state formation and religious cleansing is the expulsion of Muslims and Jews after centuries of *convivencia* from the Catholic *nacion* of Spain (Nirenberg 2014). With the expansion of Spain and Portugal, this ideology of purification is spread to Latin America and the Philippines, with the methods of the Inquisition. When Iberian power is not established, like in China and Japan, the rulers in those places show themselves just as capable to purify their nations from Christianity. Japan is the clearest case when at the end of the sixteenth century after the crucifixion of twenty-six priests and converts 250,000 Christians were killed and Japanese were asked to register as Buddhists (Paramore 2009). Only pockets of surviving hidden Christians, like Marranos in Spain, stayed in Japan, constantly fearing to question about their beliefs.

The Reformation stands out as the first period in European and possibly global history in which the religious refugee becomes a mass phenomenon. After the Jews and the Muslims came the Puritans who exiled themselves to America, the Anabaptists, the Huguenots, and everyone else in the several wars of religion that followed the Reformation (see te Brake in this volume). As the historian Nicholas Terpstra (2015) argues, the Reformation was not just a movement for intellectual and religious change. It was also Europe's first grand project in social purification. It was deeply about exile, expulsion, and refugees. The forced migration of religious migrants was a normal, familiar, and expected feature of public policy that was oriented to build a cohesive society. The formula of *cuius regio, eius religio* (people have to follow the religion of their rulers) was a principle that legitimized a combination of migration and war. At the end of the Thirty Years War, the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 built a fragile international system to deal with the treatment of minorities. Nevertheless, the German lands continued to be sites of huge migration to Eastern Europe (including Russia) and the United States. Some forty-six million people of German descent live in the United States.

This is part of the deep history of modern nationalism. The idea of purification by expulsion became a legitimate aspect of statecraft, combining ethnic and

religious cleansing. In the German case, Lutheran Protestantism became a dominant part of German nationalism in the nineteenth century, while the Catholics had to show their loyalty to the state (Lehmann 2007). However, one does not need religion for the cleansing of the nation. The two competing totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century—Nazism and communism—were atheistic but very much into ethnic cleansing in which religion was a significant element, but race paramount. The collapse of the Habsburg Empire and Czarist Russia gave rise to an unprecedented unmixing of populations. Cleansing was both by expulsion and by extermination. From 1933 to 1945, Nazi and Soviet regimes murdered fourteen million people between Berlin and Moscow, not taking into account the war dead (Snyder 2010). These were all civilians, abandoned to state power which reminds us that the state protects some, but attacks others and that mass murder and massive forced migration is nothing new to Europe. The idea that European nation-states are stable democracies is a fiction that could only be maintained during the Cold War where geopolitical forces kept the West and the East under tight control. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, this fiction was largely based on Germany's wish to be a stabilizing and unifying force in Europe and on the military hegemony of the United States. The global economic crisis of 2008 has shown the fragility of this fiction and continues to have a long-lasting fallout in the distrust that people have in liberal governments. So much for Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992). Although German politicians have regularly declared that Germany is not an immigration country, in fact, that is exactly what Germany is already for a long time. In Germany, the main narrative frame that legitimates the right to settle in Germany as refugees, however, is nationalist. It is about ethnic Germans who live in Eastern Europe outside of contemporary German national borders. It is not about the forty-six million people of German descent who live in the United States, but about a combination of blood and territory (*Blut und Boden*) in Eastern Europe.

Recent German History

Automobilists using the Bundesautobahn 38 from Göttingen to Halle cannot fail to see a huge monument on a hill just outside of Friedland. It is a twenty-eight-meter-high Home-coming Monument of steel-like concrete slabs commemorating the Germans who died in the war or were pushed out of Eastern Europe (see Nagel in this volume). It was paid for by the Association of Returnees, Prisoners of War, and Relatives of Missing Persons of Germany

(Verband der Heimkehrer, and Kriegsgefangenen und Vermisstenangehörigen Deutschlands). The first stone was laid in 1965 by Konrad Adenauer, who had been between 1949 and 1963 West Germany's first chancellor and who had traveled to Moscow in 1955 to get 10,000 prisoners of war back to Germany, which after his death was seen by many as his greatest political achievement. In 1955, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR decided to release the deported Germans from their special settlements in Siberia and Kazachstan without however letting them return to their old areas near the Wolga (Eisfeld 2004). The return of the German war prisoners to Germany from Russian Labor Camps was followed for decades until today by the emigration of ethnic Germans from all over Eastern Europe to the Bundesrepublik. Among late emigrants (*Spätaussiedler*) are two recent German Nobel prizewinners, Hertha Müller for Literature (emigrated in 1987) and Stefan Hell for Chemistry (emigrated in 1978), who are both the so-called Banaterschwaben or Donauschwaben, an ethnic German population in Rumania.

The text on the monument calls for peace, freedom, human dignity, as well as reconciliation and the abandoning of hatred, which is probably why this monument is called a *Mahnmal*, since it is meant to admonish rather than merely remember. What is particularly noteworthy is its statistical enumeration and categorization of German victims of the war. Though the enumeration starts with referring to fifty million people that were killed in the entire world during the Second World War, it lays out in specific detail that fifteen million people were forced out of their Heimat east of the newly established Oder-Neisse Border and Bohemia, Eastern and Southeast Europe. And that more than two million people, mostly women and children, lost their life on the road killed by human hands or from exhaustion. Three-and-half million German soldiers were in thousands of Russian prison camps and were piecemeal released over more than a decade. More than a million Germans went missing and remained missing. And finally, it mentions that in 1956 the last transport arrived, but that in 1966 still not everyone was released.

An elderly gentleman whom I encountered at the monument told me that he was from the former DDR. He observed with anger in his voice that there was no mention of the guilt of Germans in causing all this bloodshed. This is a view one encounters more often in conversations with people from the former DDR that in the DDR they at least had the moral decency to understand these facts in terms of German guilt instead of in terms of victimhood. The prevailing view in the DDR was that in the BRD Germans saw themselves as victims. Moreover, since the BRD did not accept the borders of Germany, established after the war, it was revanchist.

Of course, Germans had turned the very areas from which the Germans were now expelled to killing fields of Jews, Poles, Russians, and others. What could not be acknowledged in the DDR was that Stalin had already begun the extermination of national minorities in the Soviet Union long before the rise of Hitler.

The Second World War turned almost seamlessly in the Cold War. The territorial division of Germany in a capitalist and a communist part (very much like North and South Vietnam or North and South Korea) ended only in 1991, while large areas that had been previously part of Germany remained forever part of Poland, Russia, and Czechoslovakia, after the BRD's acceptance of the Oder-Neisse border. Not only in terms of territory but also in terms of mentalities this history is continued as is witnessed until today in the continuous contradictions and discomforts in the relation between Ossies and Wessies (East and West Germans), exacerbated by large economic disparities. Clearly, not only Germans expulsed from the now Russian, Polish, or Czech areas were received in Western Germany, but also some 20 percent of the DDR population, about three and a half million people with especially skilled manpower, who left the DDR before the building of the Wall. Such migration from East to West picked up again after the Wall fell and has only recently abated.

Hitler's territorial ambition had been to bring all the Germans back into the realm (*Heim ins Reich*) largely by changing the borders that were established after the First World War, by moving ethnic Germans within these borders, and by moving non-Germans out or enslaving them, especially Poles, or exterminating them, especially Jews. This implied the "unmixing" of populations that had been living together for centuries in various demographic equations. If one formulates this ambition abstractly as that of creating a homogeneous nation-state with marginal groups of ethnically inferior laborers, one cannot help to note some similarities with political ambitions that are accepted even today in democratic systems. The brutality with which this ambition was achieved and the totalitarian use of the entire state system toward its ends are, however, exceptional, although there are clear similarities with Stalin's population policies in the same period. One is struck by the consistent emphasis by British politicians both after the First World War and after the Second World War that Germans should be removed from the areas in which they lived together with other nationalities (Münz and Ohliger 2003). Essentially, this is also what happened in the Partition of British India, in which Muslim Pakistan was separated from secular Hindu India. The Potsdam Conference of 1945 produced an agreement between the Soviets and the Western Allies to a massive transfer of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe to divided Germany.

The breaking-up of the Habsburg Empire and the rise of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe can be seen as setting the stage for the radical population policies of the Nazis. One can perhaps say that the long-term result of such territorial ambitions has been the "unmixing" of Eastern Europe which has recently been further pursued in the falling apart of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and today is a major element in the Ukraine. At the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union took part of Poland and pushed Poland to the West, which led to the expulsion of Germans from Eastern Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia, which then were repopulated by Russians from other parts of the Soviet Union, and by Poles from Eastern Poland, while Germans from Bohemia and Moravia were pushed out to be replaced by Czechs. Ethnic cleansing was accompanied by toponymical cleansing: Königsberg became Kaliningrad, Breslau became Wroclaw, and Marienbad became Marianski Lazny. Who visits these areas today would have difficulty finding any evidence of the many centuries of German presence. In Poland, this has also been helped by the fact that the population of Polish territory that was annexed by the Soviet Union was moved to Silesia, where they had no historical roots and previous acquaintance with Germans. One can find similar movements of populations, for example from the Ukraine, in former East Prussia and in Czech Sudetenland resulting in local historical amnesia. The history of this huge ethnic cleansing of Germans in Eastern Europe has also not received much attention from historians outside of Germany (Evans 2012). However, not only Germans were on the move. The historian Peter Gattrell (2019) estimates that at the end of the war seventeen million people were on the move.

Given varying definitions of the German refugees like *Heimatvertriebene* or just *Vertriebene* or *Flüchtlinge*, one cannot come to a definite statistic about the German refugees in the first years after 1945, but in 1950 there were some twelve million refugees from Eastern Europe, around four million in the DDR and eight million in the BRD. This was around 20 percent of the total population with concentrations in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Niedersachsen, Bayern, Hessen, Sachsen-Anhalt, and Schleswig-Holstein. Obviously, with a large part of urban Germany in ruins, the refugees were often not very welcome, as a dirge that made the round in 1946–7 in Schwaben makes clear:

> Dear Lord in Heaven, see our need; we farmers have fat nor bread; Refugees eat themselves thick and fat and steal our last bed; we famish and suffer great pain, Dear Lord send that brood back home; Send them back to Czechoslovakia and free us from that brood. They have neither belief nor name, those threefold cursed, in eternity Amen. (Kossert 2008: 78)

In the BRD, the *Landsmannschaften* (hometown associations) came to play a very significant role in politics. In the DDR, however, there could only be a recognition of the expulsion of Germans by the Russians, Poles, and Czechs, all part of the communist brother people, in terms of the German guilt. Even the 50,000 *AntiFa-Umsiedler* from the Sudeten (who had been anti-fascist members of the communist and socialist parties and persecuted during the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia) were in fact expelled to the DDR, because in the end they were not regarded as fellow communists, but as Germans (van Hoorn 2003). In the DDR they felt that they were sitting between all chairs, since they were not allowed to form hometown associations, long publicly for their Heimat or be critical of what happened to them. At the local level they were regarded as intruders, and at the national level they were watched by the intelligence services.

What were the religious effects of this enormous forced migration of German speakers? Churches were almost the only institutions left after the war and trusted by the allied forces. Almost the first thing the churches did was to organize the search for expelled and lost Germans. They brought name cards from the many camps together and organized them according to place of origin (*Heimatortskarteien*). In 1999, more than twenty million people were registered through this system. In fact the churches replaced the state in an important function of locating and identifying citizens (Kösters 2005).

Another remarkable development was that with the influx of refugees the regional confessional boundaries were broken. Catholics moved to Protestant areas and vice versa. Even within one confessional community different traditions were introduced. The Germans in Eastern Europe were Pietist Lutheran or Mennonites or traditional pilgrimage-oriented Catholics. Germany had since the Thirty Years War always been characterized by strong geographic separation of confession which was significantly shaken up by the refugees. On the other hand, there was a strong pressure on the refugees to integrate in the existing churches of the area of immigration. This was often deeply resented and resisted by the refugees who wanted to keep their traditions (often the only thing of the Heimat that they had left) alive. This is, for instance, very clear in the Russian-German Free churches (*Russlanddeutsche Freikirchen*) in villages near Göttingen where the Russian-Germans till today continue to form very tight communities in which their church plays a central role. In short, the influx of refugees created a lively exchange of religious ideas that disrupted the traditional equations of the German countryside. They created a new, modern Germany that eventually also would become gradually secular.

A final religious element concerns dealing with the dead and the missed persons. When one visited German families in the 1960s, one would often encounter portraits of the missing or dead fathers, sons, or brothers who had been lost in the war. In an autobiographical book *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003) (With the example of my brother), the novelist Uwe Timm tells about the shadow that was hanging over the household in which he grew up because of the death of his older brother as an SS soldier (and probably war criminal) in the war. The journalist Burkhard Bilger (2016) has reported on a spiritist in Berlin, named Gabriele Baring, who helped people to make peace with their dead. The therapist could sympathize with the plight of refugees, since her own father had lost a leg on the Russian front and her home town Hannover was largely destroyed. The spirit séances were a kind of Gestalt, a psychodrama in which patients reenacted traumatic memories through playing different roles in the family (*Familienaufstellung*). However, Baring's therapy, based on the very controversial theories and practices of Bert Hellinger, goes a step further by bringing the spirits of the dead. While the personal does not immediately reflect world history, there is something in the personal biography of several German generations, born before the war and being sent to the front as young adults and the generation that grew up immediately after the war in the hot war and in the cold war of a divided and truncated Germany that more than usual connects to Germany's traumatic history. The latter generation is not "Children of War" in the sense of having experienced the war but old enough to be traumatized by it. A major element in this is that Germans for generations have grown up with the wages of guilt (Buruma 1994). As the German comedian Mittermeier put it, "Three days a week we had Guilt; On Fridays, we had Shame." Germans were hardly allowed to mourn their dead, since they were almost constantly reminded of their guilt in supporting a regime that killed so many others.

The silencing of the past has received an alternative psychoanalytic interpretation by the Mitscherlichs (1967), who interpreted the German inability to mourn as an inability to deal with the traumatic loss of the father-figure, the beloved Führer. In their view it was therefore not the inability to mourn the many victims of the war and terror, but the inability to mourn the defeat of the Führer. This was such a shocking theory that the part about the trauma for the loss of Hitler was quickly erased by a more acceptable thesis about the inability to mourn the dead. It is indeed important to realize that many Germans had not only lost an assumed mass-psychological father-figure but also concretely mourned their dead and lost fathers.

Conclusion

Adam Smith's moral philosophy proposes that history and memory may indeed be important but only in so far as it is constitutive to the connections that bind people to the interested self. What kind of work do history and memory do? They can equally motivate people to accept refugees as to reject refugees, to deny them a place. Take, for example, Erika Steinbach, long-time president of the Association of German Refugees and MP for the CDU as well as Spokeswoman for Human Rights, who left the Parliament under protest against Merkel's refugee policies. In 2018, she was chosen as the president of the Erasmus Foundation, a think tank close to the AFD, the right-wing nationalist party that was one of the winners in the recent (2018) German elections. The Association for German Refugees stands for a conservative and sometimes reactionary German nationalism despite the fact that its members are refugees themselves. The debate about history and memory is crucially connected to the construction of the nation and thus to its relation with religion and refugees. In the late 1980s, this debate famously took the form of asking, to put it crudely, whether Hitler's Germany had been so much worse than Stalin's Soviet Union. Conservative historians, like Ernst Nolte, and leftist historians and philosophers, like Jürgen Habermas, found themselves at opposite ends of this *Historikerstreit* (dispute among historians). In the 2010s, it is the right-wing politicians of the Alternative für Deutschland that openly demand a more positive presentation of German history, and are very much opposed to accepting non-German refugees.

At the same time, Germans have been earlier very willing to accept Vietnamese refugees. Immediately after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 the West German government had declared a willingness to accept a contingent of refugees without submitting them to individual asylum procedures (this is when the term contingent, *Kontingent*, was coined), first 1,000, later expanded to 6,000, then to 10,000, and finally to 38,000. The government of Lower Saxony decided on its own without consultation with the Union government to bring 1,000 refugees out of camps in Thailand and Malaysia. Frankfurt also took the initiative to bring 258 refugees out of camps in Hong Kong, again without coordination with Bonn. When Germany had admitted 23,000 refugees from Southeast Asian camps in mid-1982, the German authorities restricted asylum to family reunion. All others had to prove personal persecution in Vietnam through a regular asylum procedure.

From 1979 onward, the journalist Rupert Neudeck started a campaign to rescue boat refugees which was called a ship for Vietnam. While some 10,000

refugees were saved by the Cap Anamur, a ship leased by Neudeck's committee, German political opinion gradually turned against it. The accusation was that the existence of the ship attracted people to try to escape by boat and that these were not political religious refugees, but economic migrants. An echo of this argument we hear today in relation to boat refugees in the Mediterranean Sea.

Why were Germans initially so eager to accept refugees? What was the narrativization of the plight of the Vietnamese that made this politically possible? First of all, the media and German humanitarian organizations primed the plight of the Vietnamese boat refugees and were able to get it recognized by the German public, which put considerable pressure on the political authorities to rescue them from the sea and from overcrowded refugee camps on the shores of Malaysia and Thailand. An interesting case is Lower Saxony, where the state government under Ernst Albrecht with considerable popular support took the initiative to invite 1,000 boat refugees to come. Albrecht made a straightforward comparison between the situation at the end of the Second World War when East European Germans were fleeing for communism and the situation in which Vietnamese were fleeing communism. After his death, there was a separate memorial service organized by the Vietnamese boat refugees, who wanted to show their gratitude for what he had done in their hour of need. Till the 1990s, Germany had a relative liberal asylum policy which can perhaps be seen as a form of atonement for having forced so many into exile during the Nazi years. The Germans had no direct stake in the war in Southeast Asia nor in its aftermath, but humanitarian arguments and solidarity with its allies led them to receive 40,000 refugees from the area. Public opinion was of course highly sensitized to the Vietnam War, which was the last direct confrontation between the so-called Free World and the communist world. Young people in the West had in majority been against the Western involvement, while the older generations had supported it. In Germany, this generational conflict was heightened by the Cold War relation between West Germany and East Germany. The boat refugees had fled communism and thus signified a justification of the Cold War, while opponents of the American role in the war could not easily be against accepting those who had fled in its aftermath. Crucial in the narrativization of humanitarian action is thus the Cold War context of Germany. This is further illustrated by the simultaneous recruitment of Vietnamese contract laborers by the DDR, the German Democratic Republic. In the mid-1970s, the DDR had signed treaties with Vietnam, Cuban, Angola, and Mozambique to bring contract laborers to work in the industry. These contracts were for four to five years. The treaty with Vietnam was signed in 1980, exactly at the time that West

Germany was accepting boat refugees. The largest number of contract laborers in the DDR was Vietnamese, amounting to 60,000 in 1989.

The narratives of the Cold War have been partly replaced by the "clash of civilizations," in which especially the incompatibility of Islam and modern Western civilization is highlighted (Huntington 1996). Such narratives are never entirely coherent or straightforward. They show ethical conflicts and ambivalences. At their core, however, is an ambivalence in caring for others which is perfectly underlined by the Indo-European linguistic relation between the words hospitality and hostility, as pointed out by the linguist Emile Benveniste (1969: 87–9). This is what seems to have happened in Germany from 2015 to 2018: a shift from hospitality to hostility which is the result of a massive political struggle about how to define the German nation. Ethics is perhaps less about transcendent values than about everyday politics that is supported by continuous struggle about interpretations of history.