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The ‘Refugee World’: A Twentieth-Century Retrospective

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Abstract

In 1973 Sadruddin Aga Khan, the high commissioner of UNHCR, the UN refugee agency headquartered in Geneva, declared that refugees belonged to a ‘fourth world’. This article examines the implication of this term by tracing the ways in which UNHCR engaged with refugees and what refugees made of UNHCR in the quarter century following its inception in 1951. External observers of the ‘refugee world’, including British journalist Robert Kee, criticised UNHCR’s tendency to defend its institutional interests and to make *a priori* assumptions about refugees. Drawing on its confidential individual case files, this article discloses the voices and perspectives of refugees who wrote to the organisation: those who came within UNHCR’s mandate and those who hoped to access its assistance and protection but were excluded. Attention is then paid to those who sought refuge in communist states and to refugees in the third world who escaped colonial repression or became freedom fighters. The article concludes by demonstrating that some refugees challenged UNHCR to envisage an alternative refugee world or a world without refugees. This underlines the point that the world of refugees never constituted a single realm of persecution.

Keywords: refugees; UNHCR; Sadruddin Aga Khan; Robert Kee; refugee voices

Introduction

Delivering his annual speech to the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly on 26 November 1973, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, the high commissioner of UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, declared:

The facts point to the existence of what is, virtually, a Fourth World. A world without representation in this or any other Assembly, yet peopled by millions: refugees, the displaced and often stateless, and others in similar circumstances ...We have been privileged, with the understanding of governments, to meet

some hopes. But many in the Fourth World – that of the uprooted – feel that they deserve more of us.¹

Sadrudin (1933–2003) had taken up his post in 1966 after serving three years as deputy high commissioner. In this speech he went on to describe UNHCR's efforts on behalf of refugees in South Asia in the wake of the war between East and West Pakistan that culminated in the creation of Bangladesh, the resettlement of 'Asians of undetermined nationality who left Uganda' and the repatriation of Sudanese refugees. He also noted 'with grave concern' the need to attend to the well-being, legal protection and future of Chilean refugees.² Apart from his admission that many refugees were being let down, it is the reference to a distinct 'fourth world' that strikes the reader at a distance of more than half a century and provides the analytical framework for this article.

Sadrudin's speech is remarkable not so much because of the various situations he mentioned but because of his rhetorical flourish, which would have made his audience sit up and pay attention in a way that his three predecessors never managed: Dutch and Swiss diplomats, they were dedicated public servants but men who maintained a lower profile.³ Sadrudin was cast in a different mould. Appointed seven years earlier, he came from an immensely privileged background – born in France, the second son of Aga Khan III and thus a scion of Ismaili (Shia) Muslim royalty, Harvard-educated, supremely well-connected (and a personality that regularly got him into gossip columns), and with a mansion on the shores of Lake Geneva filled with his priceless collection of Islamic art. If there were indeed four worlds, he fitted comfortably in the first, notwithstanding the responsibilities he assumed on behalf of the global Ismaili community.⁴

The question then arises as to what it meant for refugees to inhabit this supposedly distinct realm where they had become destitute, marginalised, 'unrepresented' and speechless.⁵ It is not sufficient to trace the actions of external organisations such as UNHCR or its predecessors and neglect the experiences of refugees themselves.⁶ The plural term matters: it is important not to homogenise what some social scientists have characterised as the 'refugee experience'.⁷ It behoves historians to attend to specific

¹Statement by Prince Sadrudin Aga Khan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, 26 Nov. 1973. See <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/publications/statement-prince-sadrudin-aga-khan-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees-third-4>.

²UNHCR's actions during these episodes are described in an official history, *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Geneva, 2000), 59–77, 126–7.

³Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goodhart (served 1951–6), Auguste R. Lindt (1956–60), and Félix Schnyder (1960–65).

⁴D. Miserez, *Prince Sadrudin Aga Khan: Humanitarian and Visionary* (Market Harborough, 2017).

⁵L. H. Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology*, 11 (1996), 377–404.

⁶O. Bakewell, 'Research Beyond the Categories: the Importance of Policy Irrelevant Research into Forced Migration', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21 (2008), 432–53.

⁷M. Agier, *On the Margins of the World: The Refugee Experience Today* (Cambridge, 2008), drawing on B. N. Stein, 'The Refugee Experience: Defining the Parameters of a Field of Study', *International Migration Review*, 15 (1981), 320–30. See also A. Ager, 'Perspectives on the Refugee Experience', in *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, ed. A. Ager (1999), 1–23.

contexts and change over time, and to avoid the pitfalls of essentialisation and reification.⁸ How did refugees navigate major upheavals in the twentieth century: world wars, revolutions, the collapse of states, decolonisation, civil wars and state-building? These events have been extensively discussed by historians.⁹ Notwithstanding a number of important nationally focused monographs, there is room for more work to explain how refugees were positioned or positioned themselves in relation to the prevailing refugee regime(s), including refugees who were not recognised under international refugee law and who did not come within UNHCR's reach.¹⁰

This article examines the various meanings ascribed to the term, 'fourth world'. It explains how UNHCR became the lynchpin of the international refugee regime following the Second World War and how some critics observed a tendency to defend its institutional interests when pressed to justify its engagement with refugees. Sadruddin's use of the singular implicitly referred to a world in which refugee camps had proliferated, but it obscured the fact that they did not conform to a single type. Next the article turns the spotlight on refugees who fell outside UNHCR's orbit, including those who belonged to the 'second world', having sought refuge in the Soviet bloc, and who made themselves known to Geneva. The penultimate section draws attention to refugees in the 'third world' who escaped colonial repression or became freedom fighters. I conclude by demonstrating that refugees engaged with UNHCR in a variety of forms, including challenging Geneva to envisage an alternative refugee world or even a world without refugees.

⁸L. Banko, K. Nowak and P. Gatrell, 'What Is Refugee History, Now?', *Journal of Global History*, 17 (2022), 1–19; P. Gatrell, K. Nowak, L. Banko and A. Ghoshal, *Refugee Voices in Modern Global History: Reckoning with Refugeedom* (Oxford, 2025).

⁹M. R. Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1985); A. Bramwell (ed.), *Refugees in the Age of Total War* (1988); A. R. Zolberg, A. Suhrke and S. Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World* (New York, 1989); R. Hirschon, *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe: the Social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Piraeus* (New York, 1989); T. Kushner and K. Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National and Local Perspectives during the Twentieth Century* (1999); P. Panayi and P. Virdee (eds.), *Refugees and the End of Empire: Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 2011); P. Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford, 2013); P. Ther, *The Outsiders: Refugees in Europe since 1492* (Princeton, 2019); J. Jansen and S. Lässig (eds.), *Refugee Crises, 1945–2000: Political and Societal Responses in International Comparison*, Cambridge, 2020; D. Diaz, *En exil: Les réfugiés en Europe, de la fin du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours* (Paris, 2021); A. Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System* (New York, 2023).

¹⁰Nationally based case studies include C. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: the United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, 2008); K. Neumann, *Across the Seas: Australia's Response to Refugees, a History* (Collingwood, Victoria, 2015); G. Burgess, *Refugees and the Promise of Asylum in Postwar France, 1945–1995* (Basingstoke, 2019); P. Poutros, *Umkämpftes Asyl: Vom Nachkriegsdeutschland bis in die Gegenwart* (Berlin, 2019); P. Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy* (Ithaca, 2020); B. Taylor, *Refugees in Twentieth-Century Britain: A History* (Cambridge, 2021); R. Kapoor, *Making Refugees in India* (Oxford, 2022); V. Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, and Histories* (New York, 2007); J. Rosenthal, *From Migrants to Refugees: the Politics of Aid along the Tanzania-Rwanda Border* (Durham, NC, 2023); V. Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, 2024); M. Amar, A. Angoustures, D. Kévonian and A. Kunth (eds.), *Entre décolonisation et guerre froide: Administrer l'asile (1960–1990)* (Rennes, 2024); M. Anastasopoulou, *A Century of Asia Minor Refugees in Greece: Flight, Fight, and Fraternity* (Oxford, 2026); V. Abrahamyan, *Armenian Refugees in French Mandate Syria: Statelessness and Nation-Building in the Middle East* (Leiden, 2026).

This article draws on UNHCR's archival records, in particular the confidential individual case files that it assembled from its inception in 1951 until 1975 when it adopted a new system of record keeping. Whenever it received a letter from a refugee or on occasion from an advocate, UNHCR opened a case file.¹¹ Beyond the legal-bureaucratic formalities, as outlined below, refugees disclosed having witnessed distressing events and having lost family members, friends and property. They wrote in the hope or expectation of prompting UNHCR to intervene on their behalf. Many applicants were turned down because they did not meet the conditions for recognition (see next section). In short, the case files illuminate the terms of the encounter between refugees and the dominant international agency for refugees, thus enlarging the scope and significance of what Sadruddin meant by a 'fourth world'.¹² Ultimately, they underline the key point of the article, namely that the 'fourth World' never constituted a single, homogeneous realm and thus Sadruddin's formulation risks obscuring historical context, differentiation and manifestations of refugee agency.

UNHCR: governing the 'fourth world'

The emergence and practices of domestic and inter-governmental organisations as well as humanitarian aid organisations dedicated to supporting refugees have been extensively covered in the historiography. This includes important studies of what has become known as the international refugee regime, with UNHCR as its core.¹³ UNHCR had been established some two decades previously with a mandate that coincided with the adoption of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. According to the UNHCR's statute the high commissioner could protect any person who had been considered a refugee under existing arrangements including those protected by the constitution of the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) which assisted post-war Displaced Persons (DPs) in Europe, along with pre-war groups such as Russian, Armenian and Spanish Republican refugees.¹⁴ Thus UNHCR was expected in part to address the legacy of displacement that stretched back to the Armenian genocide in 1915 and the Russian civil war in 1918–21. Crucially, UNHCR adopted the practice of the IRO in ascertaining the credibility, authenticity, and coherence of the testimony provided by refugees. It compiled and updated the IRO's eligibility manual to determine whether or not to

¹¹UNHCR Records and Archives, Geneva, Fonds UNHCR 17, Records Relating to Protection, Sub-fonds 1, Individual Case Files, 1951–1975, hereafter abbreviated as IC followed by the number of the case file.

¹²P. Gatrell, 'Raw Material: UNHCR's Individual Case Files as a Historical Source, 1951–1975', *History Workshop Journal*, 92 (2021), 226–41. On the modern era, see L. E. Abdelaaty, "'The Greatest and Most Important Human Right': Citizenship and Bureaucratic Indifference in Refugee-UNHCR Correspondence', *Migration Politics*, 3 (2024), 1–27.

¹³C. M. Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime* (Oxford, 1995); G. Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path* (Oxford, 2001); S. Salvatici, *A History of Humanitarianism, 1755–1989: In the Name of Others* (Manchester, 2019); K. Akoka, *L'asile et l'exil – une histoire de la distinction réfugiés/migrants* (Paris, 2020); R. Balint, *Destination Elsewhere: Displaced Persons and their Quest to Leave Europe after 1945* (Ithaca, 2021); J. Schönnhagen, *Geschichte der internationalen Flüchtlingspolitik 1945–1975* (Göttingen, 2023); A. Weinke (ed.), *Internationales Flüchtlingsrecht nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg: Konzepte, Akteure, Entwicklungslinien* (Leiden, 2026).

¹⁴In addition to works already cited, see L. W. Holborn, *The International Refugee Organization: A Specialized Agency of the United Nations, its History and Work, 1946–1952* (Oxford, 1956), 87–103; J. McAdam, 'Rethinking the Origins of "Persecution" in Refugee Law', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 25 (2014), 667–92.

recognise the claims of each individual for protection and assistance. They had to have demonstrated a well-founded fear of persecution and be outside the country of their nationality from which they fled, a condition which many of those who wrote to Geneva failed to meet.¹⁵

The UNHCR statute confirmed the date limitation of 1 January 1951 that had already been incorporated into the Refugee Convention. The statute included provision for the high commissioner to protect other persons. This stipulation proved crucial following the exodus of Hungarian refugees in 1956. High commissioner Lindt accepted internal legal advice that their mass departure owed its origins not just to the Hungarian revolution but was also due to 'fundamental political changes which took place as a result of the last war', thereby removing the date line that would otherwise have restricted eligibility to those refugees displaced prior to 1951.¹⁶

Although 'non-political', it assisted refugees in Morocco and Tunisia in 1958 who had fled French repression in Algeria by adopting a so-called 'good offices' formula which enabled UNHCR, with the approval of the General Assembly, to provide material assistance to these and other refugees on 'humanitarian' grounds. As high commissioner Félix Schnyder explained the formula in 1962: 'When the object is merely to give urgent material help, as is in fact the case with the new refugee problems, my Office now has the possibility of intervening in the field without first enquiring into the reasons which induced each refugee, considered individually, to leave his country.' Schnyder argued that 'now that it is dissociated from the definition given by the original mandate, the term "refugee" has taken on a meaning more specifically social and no longer purely legal'.¹⁷ But he was careful not to invoke the formula on a regular basis for fear of alienating major donor states and so the 'good offices' doctrine did not mean *carte blanche* to assist, let alone to protect, all refugees.¹⁸

Under the tenure of Schnyder and subsequently Sadruddin, UNHCR extended material assistance to groups of refugees in sub-Saharan Africa such as those from Rwanda, Sudan and Congo on the grounds that they were *prima facie* of concern, 'to avoid the paralysis which would have resulted from a strict interpretation of the mandate', in other words by dispensing with the need for individual eligibility determination.¹⁹ Furthermore, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees afforded additional scope for UNHCR to become involved. It retained the optional geographical

¹⁵L. W. Holborn, *Refugees: A Problem of Our Time: The Work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951–1972* (Metuchen, 1975); A. Holian and G. D. Cohen, 'Introduction: The Refugee in the Post-War World', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 25 (2012), 313–25; S. Huhn, 'Plausible Enough': The IRO and the Negotiation of Refugee Status after the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 58 (2023), 598–413; Balint, *Destination Elsewhere*, 20–40.

¹⁶Holborn, *Refugees*, 161, 178, 394.

¹⁷Statement by Mr. Félix Schnyder, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, at the thirty-fourth Session of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), 27 Jul. 1962. See <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/admin/hcspeeches/3ae68fb62c/statement-mr-felix-schnyder-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees-thirty.html?query=report%20of%20the%20high%20commissioner>. See also Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, 105–39; and M. Rahal and B. T. White, 'UNHCR and the Algerian War of Independence: Postcolonial Sovereignty and the Globalization of the International Refugee Regime, 1954–63', *Journal of Global History*, 17 (2022), 331–52.

¹⁸Holborn, *Refugees*, 442.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 443.

restriction in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention which referred to ‘events in Europe’ (although most signatories did not invoke this restriction) but removed the temporal limitation and allayed the concerns of new states that the organisation neglected non-European refugees.²⁰ On the other hand, it remained the case that not all refugees qualified for recognition. For example, in response to the crisis in Vietnam following the withdrawal of US forces in 1975, Sadruddin denied the so-called ‘boat people’ the right to be categorised as refugees, describing them as ‘self-evacuees’ who were mainly an American responsibility. In that sense, UNHCR decided who belonged to the ‘fourth world’.²¹

When addressing the UN in 1973, Sadruddin announced that the organisation had adapted to new circumstances. However, his speech said more about UNHCR than it did about the real lives of refugees. He described a ‘population’ that belonged to a distinct domain: distinct in the sense that refugees lived beyond the bounds of protection by any state, distinct in being often (but not always) in tangible distress and distinct in requiring UNHCR’s assistance and protection. To be sure, Sadruddin had a reputation for bringing refugees into conversations with the world’s media, but he did so in the style of a ventriloquist. Thus, in his capacity as deputy high commissioner, he addressed a press conference in October 1963 with the following remarks:

I think it was particularly moving when I had a chance to talk to many of the refugee leaders and some of the refugees themselves, the most simple people, to hear what it meant for them to know that the United Nations was caring for them. This to them was a completely revolutionary concept. They had no idea, they could not imagine that somewhere, miles away over the seas, people were really interested in their plight and their human suffering.

Even so, he received several complaints from refugees that he had failed to engage with them during one of his many visits, as one Ethiopian refugee reminded him in 1970.²² More to the point, in referring patronisingly to ‘the most simple people’, Sadruddin underlined the social gulf between UNHCR and the refugees with whom Geneva came into contact or who approached UNHCR directly. As we shall see, some refugees certainly understood ‘what it meant for them to know’ and demonstrated a readiness to engage with this ‘revolutionary concept’.²³

²⁰Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, 124; Holborn, *Refugees*, 174–82; S. E. Davies, ‘Redundant or Essential? How Politics Shaped the Outcome of the 1967 Protocol’, *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 19 (2007), 703–28.

²¹W. C. Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (1998), 24; S. Cosmans, ‘The Internationalization of the Refugee Problem: Resettlement from the Global South During the 1970s’ (Ph.D. thesis, KU Leuven, 2021), 169, 180.

²²IC4447. Malath K., Addis Ababa, to Sadruddin, 25 Apr. and 9 Sept. 1970.

²³See <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/admin/hcspeeches/3ae68fb910/joint-press-conference-given-mr-felix-schnyder-united-nations-high-commissioner.html?query=report%20of%20the%20high%20commissioner>.

Refugee world(s) – critical outsiders

Some ten years before Sadruddin gave his speech about a fourth world, the British journalist and broadcaster Robert Kee (1919–2013) articulated something of a similar idea when he wrote *Refugee World*, a short book recounting his visits to refugee camps and other facilities in Germany and Austria in 1960. This was in connection with the UN campaign for World Refugee Year (1959–60).²⁴ These camps housed thousands of former displaced persons (DPs), mainly of Slavic or Baltic origin, who had failed for various reasons to be resettled, including having a physical disability or having had a minor criminal conviction. World Refugee Year (WRY) was designed to draw attention not only to refugees in Europe but also to elderly Russians in China, Chinese refugees in Hong Kong, and Palestinian refugees. Since UNHCR had no mandate to assist Palestinian refugees, WRY kept them in the public eye. Other participating UN member states took the opportunity to highlight domestic refugee ‘problems’. West Germany, for example, drew attention to several million ethnic Germans expelled from east-central Europe, and India publicised the plight of Tibetan refugees as well as Indian nationals who had fled in the wake of Partition in 1947.²⁵

While Kee barely mentioned those groups, *Refugee World* deserves attention for several reasons. First, his book reminded readers of the legacy of the Second World War and specifically pinpointed the failings of Western governments that let DPs languish in camps or ‘out of camp’ locations. Second, Kee looked beyond the bureaucratic terminology of ‘problems’ and ‘programmes’. He sought to engage with the human dimension of displacement by speaking face to face with refugees themselves, even if he could only do this by making contact with UNHCR officials in Germany and Austria who provided him with the necessary access.

Refugee World managed to pull off the important trick of telling its readers that alongside the situation of individual refugees, it was essential to understand the perspectives of those persons who held power over them, chiefly UNHCR’s Geneva team, almost all of whom were born and educated in the first world.²⁶ Kee did not address fundamental issues around UNHCR’s accountability, but he acknowledged the gulf in understanding between the external observer and refugees: ‘To have been a refugee over a long period of years is to have built up an inner world of feeling and experience of which the outsider can often have little idea.’ It may be that the insertion of the words ‘outsider’ and ‘often’ was an oblique reference to his own incarceration as a prisoner of war in Germany.²⁷

Kee did not hold back in making critical observations about most of the UNHCR personnel whom he met and who smoothed his path through the bureaucracy. One official in particular, Raymond Terrillon (1923–92), a French-Canadian national who

²⁴R. Kee, *Refugee World* (Oxford, 1961).

²⁵P. Gatrell, *Free World? The Campaign to Save the World’s Refugees, 1956–1963* (Cambridge, 2011).

²⁶To the best of my knowledge, the only exceptions at UNHCR’s Geneva headquarters before 1975 were the Iranian Amir Abbas Hoveyda (1919–79), an adviser in the Near East section in the late 1950s; the Sri Lankan born lawyer J. E. R. Candappa, who joined the legal division in 1967; and legal officer H. C. Kapur. They were joined later by the Ghanaian-born Emmanuel Dadzie who worked in the protection division in the late 1970s.

²⁷Kee, *Refugee World*, 31. Kee wrote about his wartime experiences in *A Crowd Is Not Company* (1947), originally published as a novel and republished a decade later as an autobiography.

joined UNHCR in 1955 and headed the Bonn office between 1957 and 1962, came across as arrogant and dismissive of DPs. As he told Kee:

You've got to remember that many of these people are very simple peasants from Eastern Europe. They're used to primitive standards. They'd sometimes much rather live in overcrowded huts, paying eight marks a month rent, than in a decent apartment paying a hundred marks a month. They don't see the point. It really is difficult for some of them to get out now.

Kee mentioned that Terrillon rushed off to a meeting with a flourish, saying rather grandly: 'I've been seeing refugees ever since 1945, when I went into Austria with the Military Government.' He then offered Kee a favour:

As I was going out he asked his secretary to look out a file for me. 'Have a glance through it if you have the time. You'll see the sort of thing I mean. It's just one of thousands'. And his secretary handed me the story of Dushan Dokič. Inside, a sheet of paper gave a few humdrum particulars of Mr Dokič's life.

Terrillon did not explain why he singled out Dokič, one of many refugees in his case load. He did so to underline his claim to extensive knowledge of the 'problem'.²⁸

Robert Kee was not the first in this field nor would he be the last: other journalists as well as aid workers and key personnel in voluntary agencies had published searing accounts of refugee camps in Europe and beyond in the years following the Second World War, including a slim volume compiled by Kaye Webb and Ronald Searle to coincide with WRY that likewise named a number of refugees whose stories were illustrated by Searle's distinctive drawings.²⁹ What marked out Kee's work was that he challenged the policies of host states and the indifference of what had already become known as the 'affluent society'. He also had UNHCR in his sights. He despised its impersonal bureaucratic language such as 'the case-load'. All the same, Kee's approach raises a number of problems. His evident dislike of officialdom led him down a questionable path. As a journalist, Kee probably enjoyed the sneak preview of a case file, although he reported this parting shot as a sign less of generosity than as an indication of Terrillon's lofty approach to his case load. But naming refugees and telling the world that Dushan Dokič's 'story' had been preserved in a UNHCR filing cabinet, however well-intentioned, was blatantly unethical.

According to Robert Kee, 'A lot went on in the refugee world that never got near the High Commissioner's or anyone else's neatly roneoed and precisely worded files.'³⁰ As it happens, UNHCR carefully preserved these individual case files as precedents for determining eligibility. They paint a much richer picture than Kee suggested. In addition to inter-office correspondence, such as between officials in the legal and resettlement divisions, or exchanges between UNHCR and voluntary organisations, they include numerous letters from refugees who wrote to Geneva or to UNHCR's

²⁸Kee, *Refugee World*, 13–15, 77.

²⁹K. Webb and R. Searle, *Refugees 1960: A Report in Words and Drawings* (1960). A valuable guide to the contemporary literature is M. Wyman, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945–1951* (Ithaca, 1989).

³⁰Kee, *Refugee World*, 86.

branch offices. Their letters and petitions demonstrate the knowledge that refugees had or acquired as a condition of survival: knowledge of routes and destinations, resources and networks and knowledge of the refugee regime, including whom to approach and how to enlist intermediaries and advocates who could speak on their behalf. In learning by doing, refugees came to view UNHCR not as an abstract entity but an instrument wielded by people on whose support they hoped to count. Indeed, 'a lot went on in the refugee world' and refugees insisted that UNHCR should continue to know about it.³¹

Refugee camps as a refugee world – or not?

One fundamental manifestation of the 'refugee world' that never escaped the attention of UNHCR was the proliferation of refugee camps. They have a long genealogy and many scholars have examined them in detail.³² Robert Kee devoted much of his book to refugee camps in Europe some fifteen years after the end of the Second World War. In her landmark 1986 book, *Imposing Aid*, Barbara Harrell-Bond, one of the key figures in the emerging field of refugee studies, rehearsed some of Kee's arguments in a non-European context. But she offered a sharper analysis of UNHCR's approach on the basis of extended fieldwork among Ugandan refugees housed in refugee camps in southern Sudan in the early 1980s. She described the disenfranchisement of refugees, which she interpreted not just in terms of the absence of political and other rights in the host country but as the reflection of the power wielded by UNHCR officials and humanitarian aid agencies who lacked accountability. Harrell-Bond's analysis also emphasised a proclivity on the part of the refugee regime to amalgamate refugees into a single category of concern, rather than acknowledge the broad distribution of skills and knowledge. Her stance did not make her popular in the humanitarian sector, not least because the prevailing consensus among aid workers was that the refugee camp enabled the effective distribution of aid or facilitated repatriation in due course.³³

³¹Gatrell, 'Raw Material'; M. Rürup, 'Legal Expertise and Biographical Experience: Statelessness, Migrants, and the Shaping of New Legal Knowledge in the Postwar World', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 43 (2017), 438–65; J. Donovan, V. Fastovskij and V. Hamed-Troyansky, 'Knowledge Production in Displacement and Forced Migration', *Journal of Migration History*, 11 (2025), 103–14.

³²K. McConnachie, 'Camps of Containment: A Genealogy of the Refugee Camp', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 7 (2016), 397–412; M. Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (Polity Press, 2011). Case studies include D. A. Cretu, 'Child Assistance and the Making of Modern Refugee Camps in Austria-Hungary during the First World War', *Central European History*, 55 (2022), 510–27; B. T. White, 'The Global Origins of the Modern Refugee Camp: Military Humanitarianism and Colonial Occupation at Baquba, Iraq, 1918–1920', in *Continental Encampment: Genealogies of Humanitarian Containment in the Middle East and Europe*, ed. A. J. Knudsen and K. G. Berg (Oxford, 2023), 43–67; J. Peteet, *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps* (Philadelphia, 2005); J. K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Oakland, 2020); and P. Karagkounis, 'Hellenising Refugeeedom, Refuging Hellenisms: Humanitarianism, Refugees and the Making of Modern Greece, 1919–1955' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 2025), ch. 2.

³³B. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford, 1986); E. Voutira and B. Harrell-Bond, 'In Search of the Locus of Trust: the Social World of the Refugee Camp', in *Mistrusting Refugees*, ed. E. V. Daniel and J. Knudsen (Berkeley, 1995), 207–24. See also E. Colson, 'Imposing Aid: the Ethnography of Displacement and its Aftermath', *Papers: Kroeber Anthropological Society*, 99–100 (2011), 154–67.

Most historians and social scientists would agree that refugee camps were sites of social and political dynamism. This is not to downplay the many instances of their degrading living conditions whether in relatively prosperous Europe or in less developed parts of the world. But the refugee camp did more than serve the disciplinary demands of the modern state and aid workers: it provided refugees with an opportunity for cultural and educational activity and for protest and political mobilisation.³⁴ Camps manifested all manner of hierarchies, including internal social, economic and ethnic differentiation among the refugee population. Nor were they hermetically sealed. In the words of Jordanna Bailkin, 'what we conventionally refer to as "refugee camps" were never only for refugees'. Her research, like that of Harrell-Bond and others, complicates the idea of a closed environment separated from the outside world.³⁵ The refugee camp could also paradoxically be a privileged world, in the sense that refugees were granted support and material assistance that singled them out for special treatment, leaving locals relatively deprived and aggrieved, something that Robert Kee had acknowledged as early as 1960.

What did refugees who wrote to Geneva have to say about the world of the refugee camp? Not surprisingly, they were prompted to write about oppressive conditions, including being detained on grounds of national security, as happened for example to Bulgarian refugees in Greece during the 1950s who were held on the small island of Syros in the Cyclades. One such refugee made much of its isolation and of having been singled out, 'owing to the fact that I know foreign languages'.³⁶ Following the 1956 revolution, Hungarian refugees drew attention to their incarceration in camps in Yugoslavia. In his letter to UNHCR, 27-year-old chemist Zoltán K. remarked: 'You heard of the things that happen there and undoubtedly know how hard it is for a young man accustomed to mental activity to bear the physical and mental stagnation and almost complete lack of news.' The implication was clear: UNHCR could not plead ignorance. (Zoltán and his fiancée were eventually resettled in Sweden.)³⁷

A different scenario played out in sub-Saharan Africa during the 1960s and 1970s when host countries, with the backing of UNHCR, tied resettlement to encampment and thus restrictions on refugees' mobility. This policy emerged most clearly in Tanzania, the destination of many Rwandan Tutsi refugees who fled across the border following the installation of a predominantly Hutu government after independence in 1962. They were joined by other Rwandan refugees who arrived from Congo. Tanzania insisted that the refugees enter new settlements and become 'self-reliant'. Refugees who resisted this offer risked the withdrawal of food rations. When protests erupted, UNHCR was quick to blame 'ringleaders'. Its response to a 1968 complaint is fairly typical: a group of refugees wrote to protest the behaviour of the commandant of the settlement who accused them of engaging in illegal activities – in fact, this amounted to their refusal to sign official permits registering them as refugees. They demanded

³⁴K. Nowak, *Kingdom of Barracks: Polish Displaced Persons in Allied-Occupied Germany and Austria* (Montreal and Kingston, 2023); F. Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, 2002); Lipman, *In Camps*, 161–200.

³⁵J. Bailkin, 'On Camps, Past and Present', *History Australia*, 18 (2021), 588–601 (590); J. Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (Minnesota, 2000).

³⁶Box 2271890 (2/2). RESGE-1A-0052440. Krste B. to Mollie Rule, 20 Sept. 1958.

³⁷IC4175. Zoltán K. to UNHCR, 25 Feb. 1957.

to be returned closer to the border to enable them to return to Rwanda when it was safe to do so. In a show of support for the Tanzanian authorities, UNHCR local representative Anatole Komorsky dismissed them as 'stubborn'.³⁸ His view corresponded to a growing belief in Geneva that refugees should be put to work in pursuit of the host country's economic development.³⁹ Here, as elsewhere, government officials as well as members of the Organisation of African Unity [OAU] found it easier to focus on development projects than on the freely expressed wishes of refugees. So, for its part, did UNHCR.⁴⁰ To these refugees, at least, a different kind of world had emerged in which UNHCR retreated from its protective role or rather accepted the assurances of host states that they offered adequate safeguards.

Other worlds: writing to Geneva

UNHCR could do nothing about the disenfranchisement of millions of refugees who were ineligible under the UN Refugee Convention. Nor, as already mentioned, did its 'good offices' extend to all situations. In Sadruddin's words, the UN did not 'represent' them all. How could it, when the UN comprised sovereign states that were either responsible for the persecution of refugees or for exercising discretion as to whom to admit and/or recognise as citizens? Put another way, many refugees belonged to a world with which UNHCR was either unfamiliar or not concerned, as a number of studies of displacement in East and Southeast Asia have demonstrated.⁴¹ This did not stop refugees announcing themselves to Geneva whether or not they qualified for UNHCR's assistance. Some pressed their case because, as a Bulgarian refugee put it in a letter sent from a camp in Trieste in 1955, 'I am fully convinced that you are the sole authority that could relieve a refugee from a great embarrassment.'⁴² Similarly, Rwandan refugee Alphonse K. wrote from Kraków in 1966: 'Allow me, Excellency, to say that I recognise only the High Commissioner as my government and embassy, which is why I write about my difficulties.'⁴³

Given the imperative to highlight their predicament it is thus not surprising that refugees wrote from all corners to UNHCR headquarters or its branch offices in the hope of enlisting its support. For example, the case files include dozens of letters from German expellees, a fraction of the several million persons who fell outside UNHCR's mandate by virtue of being deemed to be protected as 'national refugees', that is having 'rights and obligations which are attached to the possession of the nationality of that

³⁸Komorsky office memos dated 19 Mar. and 28 June 1968. UNHCR Fonds 11, Series 1/Box 168, 11/1-6/1/TAN Protection 09/1964-08/1970.

³⁹For a broader discussion of refugees as a 'resource', see L. Robson, *Human Capital: A History of Putting Refugees to Work* (2023).

⁴⁰Fonds UNHCR 11, Series 1, 1951-1970, 15/SA 'Refugees from Rwanda - Resettlement in Africa'. See also J. Glasman, 'Seeing Like a Refugee Agency: A Short History of UNHCR Classifications in Central Africa (1961-2015)', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 30 (2017), 337-62.

⁴¹G. Peterson, 'The Uneven Development of the International Refugee Regime in Postwar Asia: Evidence from China, Hong Kong and Indonesia', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 25 (2012), 326-43; L. Madokoro, *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold War* (Cambridge MA, 2015); K. Ramnath, *Boats in a Storm: Law, Migration, and Decolonization in South and Southeast Asia, 1942-1962* (Stanford, 2023).

⁴²IC988. Ilija G. to UNHCR, 28 Nov. 1955.

⁴³IC3481. Alphonse K. to HC, 8 Sept. 1966. See note 54.

country'.⁴⁴ They described living in dire straits. Elli R. wrote in 1956: 'We are refugees from the Eastern Zone ... despite Germany's economic recovery, I have to buy offal from the butcher in order to have something to cook.' Her letters to the German chancellor and parliamentarians in Bonn had yielded no results: 'all we get are soothing words and further delays. What is the use of everything we have been through when we are again cold and hungry? Please help us to live instead of merely [to] exist.' Her appeal fell on deaf ears and UNHCR merely sent a standard acknowledgement, a reminder of the contours that had been drawn around those on the move in post-war Europe.⁴⁵

In the same vein, individuals caught up in the aftermath of the Partition of India contacted UNHCR long after the events of 1947. In December 1972, Kiron C. addressed the high commissioner from Calcutta, describing himself as 'the most impoverished and helpless refugee living in India since 1950'. He hoped to attract Sadraddin's attention by praising him as a potential patron, 'capable and powerful [and] the honorable head of the most powerful humanitarian organisation of the world and, moreover, you yourself in your personal family stature and status an honourably remarkable [sic] in any corner of this globe'. Kiron outlined a brief history of Partition and its impact on him and his family, bemoaning the fact that 'I am not known to any a big magnet [sic] or MP ... Regretfully saying that our govt. would never help me.' Kiron had no option but to look beyond India for support: 'this noble organisation which you are directing and functioning helped millions of wretched people of this world. Will this not open a new avenue for me too?' Geneva ignored Kiron's request since he did not come within UNHCR's mandate. But his letter made visible the enduring consequences of population displacement in the Indian subcontinent. Kiron himself pinned his hopes on the power vested in UNHCR and he made a calculated appeal to Sadraddin as a figure who projected charismatic authority in the refugee world.⁴⁶

Other enduring histories of displacement also generated correspondence and indicate how the case files gave expression to a multi-sited refugee world. Palestinian refugees came under the aegis of the UN Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA, and were therefore not the responsibility of UNHCR. This did not stop a young Palestinian refugee, Marika D., from writing in 1970 from an address in California to explain what she hoped to do following her graduation in social psychology: 'My parents became refugees in 1948 when we left all our property in [redacted] suburb of Jerusalem. My parents are in the occupied [West] bank of Jordan, in Bethlehem, and they are unable to help me in my education. My father is an old man trying to subsist by working in the olive wood articles for tourists.' Rejoining her parents would mean going to Israel which would be difficult because she had a Jordanian passport on which she had travelled before the Six-Day War. 'There is a great difficulty they will not let me in. On the other Bank of Jordan I'll be cut off completely from my parents by being unable even

⁴⁴Holborn, *Refugees*, 97–8.

⁴⁵IC10928. Elli R. to UNHCR, 9 Mar. 1956, translated. See also C. Molesini, "'We Should No Longer Sit on Packed Suitcases': German Expellees' Emotions in Post-war West Germany', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 31 (2023), 527–48.

⁴⁶Box 2271208. RESGE-1A-0055340. Kiron C. to 'Honourable Mr Sadraddin Agha Khan', 10 Dec. 1972. His letter coincided with the war between West and East Pakistan that drove several million refugees into India. Kiron's aerogramme was overprinted with a stamp for refugee relief designed to contribute to the support of refugees from East Pakistan, as discussed in Kapoor, *Making Refugees in India*, 180–221.

to write to them.' Marika worried lest financial difficulties oblige her to interrupt her education: 'I am very much interested in teaching and doing research in the Middle East as I know we lack a great deal of it. By teaching and doing research, I hope to help the world understand the Arab World and ... the Arab World understand the West.' Geneva referred her to an educational charity. Tantalisingly, she disappeared from view. However, her presence in the case files confirms that refugees such as Marika looked to the future as much as to the past, to a world that she might enhance by capitalising on but also transcending her experience of exile.⁴⁷

Refugees in the second world

What of 'unlikely refuge' in the Soviet bloc?⁴⁸ Although Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied east-central Europe had sought sanctuary in the Soviet Union during the Second World War, this history was soon overshadowed by Cold War politics that registered the Soviet bloc as a world from which refugees escaped to freedom in the West.⁴⁹ Communist refuge was partly about socialist solidarity among progressive-minded persons in Europe: for example, Romania by the end of 1974 accepted around 1,400 Chilean refugees.⁵⁰ Their profile was quite mixed, including trade unionists, workers, members of the professional intelligentsia as well as communist leaders. In July 1960, the Czechoslovak constitution formally defined asylum as being extended to 'citizens of a foreign state persecuted for defending the interests of the working people, for participating in the national liberation movement, for scientific or artistic work, or for acting in defence of peace'. Czechoslovakia had supported Russian émigrés and Republican Spanish exiles before the Second World War, and civic society initiatives were not stifled by the communist seizure of power. Small numbers of refugees from Iran and Guatemala were admitted in the early 1950s, along with much larger numbers of Korean child refugees.⁵¹

The case files mainly reflect the support of Soviet bloc countries for African refugee students. They include 28-year-old Biafran, Christian O., who had left for the Soviet Union in 1964 to embark on a law degree at Kiev State University. In 1969 he wrote to UNHCR to explain that he could not return to Nigeria in the midst of the civil war and thus qualified for recognition as a refugee *sur place*, that is having a well-founded fear of persecution having previously left their respective home country before such a fear arose.⁵² Nigerian diplomats in the USSR attempted to thwart his education and to demand his deportation, but the university authorities allowed him to complete

⁴⁷Box 2271226 1/3. RESGE-1A-0057666. Marika D. to UNHCR Geneva, 11 Nov. 1970.

⁴⁸Michal Frankl (ed.), *Refugees and Citizens in Twentieth-Century East Central Europe: An Unlikely Refuge?* (London, 2026).

⁴⁹M. Edele, A. Grossman and S. Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union* (Detroit, 2018); S. L. Carruthers, 'Between Camps: Eastern Bloc "Escapees" and Cold War Borderlands', *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), 911–42.

⁵⁰I am grateful to Mioara Anton for sharing her unpublished paper on this topic.

⁵¹N. Tohma and J. Reinke, "'Like We Would Help Brothers or Sisters'?" Practising Solidarity with Greek Civil War Refugees in Socialist Czechoslovakia and the GDR in the Shadow of World War II', *International Review of Social History*, 69 (2024), 13–41.

⁵²A. Zimmermann and T. Einarsen (eds.), *The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol: A Commentary* (Oxford, 2024), 397–408.

his MA degree: 'I must say I am very much indebted to Kiev University officials who protected and defended me.' However the Nigerian government withdrew his funding and he made his way to the Netherlands to embark on a doctorate.⁵³ The aforementioned Alphonse K. acknowledged the 'unforgettable' support of UNHCR in helping him get to Poland where he had enrolled on a course of study in Kraków but struggled to meet his living expenses. UNHCR noted that since only CARE and the Lutheran World Federation among the voluntary agencies appeared to have contacts in Poland, 'it would strengthen the universal role of UNHCR if arrangements could be made through governmental or private channels to deal with individual refugee cases in that part of Europe'.⁵⁴ It was clear that the Second World could not be dismissed as simply a refugee-creating entity.

In practice, however, insofar as UNHCR dealt with communist governments in east-central Europe, the main issue concerned the small number of refugees who wished for various reasons to repatriate, such as two Greek refugees who wrote from East Germany in 1972 to explain that as teenagers they had been abducted from Greece and sent first to Bulgaria and then East Germany. Jannis had trained as a metalworker and 'indoctrinated'. His daughters had been granted East German citizenship against his will. None of them thought of East Germany as their home (*Heimat*). Jannis ended: 'my situation depresses me very deeply. I ask for your help.' UNHCR could do nothing in regard to their request for exit visas. Perhaps officials were bemused at the idea of protection as being granted thanks to the enforced citizenship of a communist state.⁵⁵

Refugees in the Third World

Political change beyond Europe produced multiple displacements of individuals and groups. Long-established minority populations, hitherto entrenched by colonial powers, as well as European communities found themselves exposed to the forces of decolonisation that swept across South and Southeast Asia, the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Some refugees fled pre-emptively and explored the options for asylum and resettlement, others were expelled at short notice. National liberation movements gathered pace in societies where white settler regimes in southern Africa attempted to cling on to power.

What of those who were displaced as a result of colonial repression and the struggle for independence from colonial rule: did they belong to the refugee world? In 1961 John Kelly, a senior figure in UNHCR, wrote to Schnyder about Angolan refugees who had crossed into Congolese territory, prompted by the 'severe pacification measures of the Portuguese authorities'. Kelly indicated that these refugees might be excluded from recognition under the UNHCR Statute 'on the grounds that, although Portuguese nationals, they have been welcomed into their own ethnic tribes this side of the

⁵³IC8951. Christian N.O., 'A Statement on Why I Cannot Return to Biafra', 18 Aug. 1969.

⁵⁴IC3481. Alphonse K. to HC, 8 Sept. and 6 Dec. 1966; Jacques Cuénod to Alphonse K., 24 Jan. and 21 Mar. 1967.

⁵⁵IC868. Jannis C., Dresden, and Anastasios G. to the UN commission on human rights, letters dated 24 Jan. 1972. On repatriation from eastern Europe, see S. Cosemans and R. Himpe, 'Chileans ex Romania: Resettlement, Containment and the Limits of UNHCR's Global Ambitions during the Cold War', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 39 (2026), 233–248.

frontier' and therefore 'comparatively easy to assimilate'. He distinguished African refugees from Europeans:

The statute was drafted keeping in mind the concept of nationality and structure of society as developed in Europe. In African society, far more important to the individual than the rights and obligations which are attached to possession of a nationality, are the rights and obligations which are attached to membership of a tribe. Given his tribal rights, the African refugee in the simpler society in which he lives appears normally to need no further rights. The international protection required by a European refugee in the more complex society in Europe has little meaning under African tribal conditions.

Kelly suggested that they 'did not show the horror which under similar circumstances European refugees would have shown'. He went on to say that 'the Portuguese deny that there is any policy for such acts, and state that if Africans are killed indiscriminately it is done in an explosion of anger when the troops or armed settlers find the bodies of Portuguese or loyal Africans [sic] who have been killed with tribal savagery [sic]'.⁵⁶ This racist argument endorsed the colonial perspective and suggested a bifurcation in the refugee world.⁵⁷

The status of freedom fighters was another matter. In a notable intervention in 1970, J. E. R. Candappa, a member of UNHCR's legal division, observed that existing policy ruled out providing material assistance to 'refugees engaging in political activities directed against their countries of origin'. However, he went on to say that 'political activities and subversive activities can only be anathema to us if their purpose is to undermine a government which guarantees to its subjects the basic democratic freedoms without discrimination and the constitutional right to redress, in effect a government which respects the rule of law'. He singled out South Africa, Rhodesia and Portuguese-held Mozambique and Angola whose governments 'have, by the suppression of the majority indigenous populations, the denial to them of the fundamental human rights, earned the opprobrium of the world, so much so that the United Nations has recognised the struggle of these suppressed peoples against the minority regimes as a legitimate struggle'. Noting that these regimes were 'determined to resist at all cost', with help from Western powers, Candappa argued out that 'the only alternative left to the indigenous populations is to resort to revolt or guerrilla warfare'. What is more:

Any active propagandist against colonialism, who is at the same time a refugee, say in the remotest part of Peru, or the editors of many respected newspapers and journals committed to the same cause, would also be stigmatised as freedom fighters. Partisans and resistance fighters in other climes and at other times were also freedom fighters against the occupation of their countries by alien

⁵⁶ J. D. R. Kelly to Felix Schnyder, 27 June and 1 Jul. 1961, marked 'confidential'. Fonds UNHCR 11, Records of the Central Registry, Series 1, Classified Subject Files, 1951–1970, 13/7/GEN – 15/0/GEN/ANG, Angolan refugees [1961–66], Folder 1.

⁵⁷ For a critique of this enduring view, see B. S. Chimni, 'The Geopolitics of Refugee Studies: A View from the South', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11 (1998), 350–74.

forces and powers. They were encouraged in their fight and were heroes who are the eternal subject of historical sagas, film epics, and annual official days of remembrance.⁵⁸

Not everyone in Geneva shared this view.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, none other than Sadruddin himself acknowledged that decolonisation had changed the refugee world. In his 1973 speech he stated for the record: 'I cannot speak of the African situation without pointing out that the overwhelming majority of refugees of concern to my Office came from territories under colonial administration.'⁶⁰

The UNHCR case files provide ample evidence of how refugees manifested such 'concern'. Congolese refugee Assumani H. described the impact of Belgian colonial rule:

Not so long ago, we were nothing but a submissive, wretched people, suffering under the yoke of the Belgian colonizer. Indeed, who were our women, if not beasts serving at their pleasure, and what were we ourselves, if not herds of cattle forced to submit to the merest whims of unscrupulous people whose sole desire was to satisfy their base, domineering instincts?

He arrived in Belgium as a 32-year-old and applied for refugee status on the grounds that independence had not put an end to persecution: 'nothing has changed although like many others I had hoped that it would usher in a new future for my people'. In a letter to UN Secretary General U Thant in May 1971, Assumani urged him as 'the staunch defender of universal human rights and despite gigantic obstacles the apostle of fraternal peace among men ... [to] take note of the events that are the cause of my distress'. When his letter reached UNHCR, the legal division decided that his application was 'very dubious' because he had apparently requested a replacement passport from the Congolese embassy in Brussels and by seeking its 'protection' had thereby not established evidence of persecution. His difficulties mirrored those of other refugees from sub-Saharan Africa whose claims were dismissed on the grounds that they were 'merely economic migrants'. He concluded, 'any African living presently in certain European countries and in the same conditions as mine would suffer a similar fate'. No record emerged of his subsequent fate, but Assumani's historical and political analysis indirectly demonstrated the narrow vision of external observers who thought they understood the refugee world.⁶¹

⁵⁸J. E. R. Candappa, "'Freedom Fighters': Branch Office Memorandum no. 26, 1968, a Reassessment, 24 June 1970", UNHCR Records of the Central Registry, Box 58, ARC-2/A40, liberation movements (11/1-1/1/79), 07/1967-07/1974, folder 1.

⁵⁹J. Elie and J. Hanhimäki (2008), 'UNHCR and Decolonization in Africa: Expansion and Emancipation, 1950s to 1975', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 48 (2008), 53-72.

⁶⁰N. Mansouri and D. R. Quiroga-Villamarín, 'Third Worlding International Organization: The Parallel Quests of Santa-Cruz and Aga Khan for a New International Institutional Order (1946-2002)', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 15 (2024), 212-35.

⁶¹IC2271. Assumani H. to Henriette Taviani, 20 Apr. 1971; E. Jacobs, note for the file, 16 Apr. 1971; Assumani H. to U. Thant, 13 May 1971, my translation; note for the file, 9 Feb. 1972. Fonds 11/Series 2/Box 951, Protection and General Legal Matters - France [Volume 1] 11/2/60-600.FRA[a] 1970-1975. See also Akoka, *L'asile et l'exil*, 205-29.

Although, as Sadruddin put it, 'traditional hospitality' had helped refugees to survive, under his tenure development projects garnered serious support as a means of enabling refugees either to thrive until such time as they could return to their homes or to be resettled in neighbouring countries. This imposed an obligation on African refugees who had found sanctuary in Europe to return to the subcontinent.⁶² Ibeanusu O., a 29-year-old refugee of Ibo origin, contacted UNHCR in 1969. He left Nigeria in 1962 to study in the USA and Sweden. UNHCR noted that he was one of a number of African refugees studying in Switzerland:

In our several interviews with Mr O. we have been given the impression that he is particularly qualified and intelligent and moreover anxious to return to Africa, preferably to serve his own people who have taken refuge in neighbouring countries, but otherwise [to serve] an African government which could make full use of his qualifications. We trust that suitable settlement will be found for him through the OAU Bureau.

UNHCR agreed to provide financial assistance to him in the meantime. He was to all intents and purposes a model refugee.⁶³

Other refugees made their presence felt in Geneva and thereby occasioned considerable debate within UNHCR. In Zanzibar, for example, the lives of its Arab minority were turned upside down following the revolution in 1964. Rashid M. discharged a volley in the direction of the international community: 'the world is busy condemning Communism, South Africa Apartheid policy, American colour bar and prejudice, British arrogance and what not. But there is a greater evil than all that combined – if that can ever be possible – AFRICANISM !!' He continued:

The world may not be fully aware of the things that happened in Zanzibar ... those who are aware possibly think of tiny Zanzibar as too small to warrant international intervention ... If there is none, then the principles that are being advocated by [the UN] become only paper work. Where is the United Nations with its Human Rights Charter? It is the smallest and the weakest of us all that needs most protection and attention.

Exhausted, Rashid signed off, 'I am afraid I must stop now. This is a letter, not a book.' He had pulled out all the stops, combining rhetorical flourishes with a display of his knowledge of international affairs and his insistence on the need for UNHCR to take a stance: 'If by this letter I have been able to write anything that has moved you to pity my fellow Zanzibaris then I have done a service to my people.'⁶⁴ The case file exposed differences of opinion among UNHCR officials. One view held that the government of Tanzania having nationalised the properties of African as well as Asian owners weakened the claim of the latter to have established a well-founded fear of persecution. UNHCR mainly limited itself to providing material relief efforts on behalf of Zanzibaris

⁶²UNHCR. *Refugees in Africa* (Geneva, 1966), 3–8.

⁶³IC8959. Candida Toscani, Geneva, to the UNHCR regional liaison representative for Africa, 16 Dec. 1969; notes for the File, 23 Sept. 1970 and 10 June 1970.

⁶⁴IC7035. Rashid M. to UNHCR, 23 Aug. 1965.

who made their way to the Trucial States. Any residual sympathy for this propertied elite did not extend to incorporating them in the ranks of the fourth world.⁶⁵

As refugees in the global south continued to insist on the validity of their first-hand experience of persecution, one way of countering potential rejection was to provide Geneva with carefully crafted history lessons about their situation and hence their eligibility for protection. One compelling example emerged in 1970 from Kurdish students who had left Syria 'originally on illegal and forged passports for political reasons because we were members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria and because we were political prisoners in Syria for some time'. They made their way to Sweden, 'in the hope that we might be accepted as refugees and be granted permits to keep ourselves alive'. They sketched a succinct contemporary history:

The denial of the existence of the Kurdish people as an ethnic group; the denial of the right to education in the Kurdish language; the application of racial discrimination and second class citizens' treatment especially after 1963 where a forged Census was carried out in the Kurdish regions by which 100,000 Kurds were deprived of Syrian citizenship and deported from their land to be replaced by Arabs; the suppression ruthlessly of every Kurdish activity whether on the cultural, social or political level. Every communication in the Kurdish language is forbidden.

They concluded: 'this is only a very short account of the detailed genocidal policy of the Syrian government against the helpless Kurdish population in Syria'.⁶⁶ UNHCR's legal division invited the Swedish authorities to give their application 'favourable consideration if the facts are established to your satisfaction' and at least one of them settled permanently in Sweden. Lacking political representation in their home country, as per Sadrudin, they demonstrated a capacity to argue their case for recognition.

Refugees: critics of the status quo

Refugees unsurprisingly called out UNHCR when they felt it ignored or misunderstood their situation. One way in which refugees challenged the prescriptions of the refugee regime was to assert their rights. Others adopted a more specific tactic and drew unfavourable comparisons between their own treatment at the hands of UNHCR and that of others. A handful disclosed an inner world of imagination and fantasy, free of the constraints of refugeedom, or professed an aversion to nationality and affirmed a wish instead to remain or to become stateless. These critiques of the status quo are all reflected in the case files.

Celestin M., a Southern Sudanese refugee student, struck a defiant note when he contacted UNHCR from the Central African Republic in 1968 in connection with his application for a student grant. He had been rebuffed by various agencies when requesting basic necessities for himself and his family: 'haunted [sic] out of the office

⁶⁵IC4029. Memo from UNHCR Geneva, 23 Oct. 1972; Holborn, *Refugees*, 812–13; N. Mathews, *Zanzibar Was a Country: Exile and Citizenship between East Africa and the Gulf* (Berkeley, 2024), 66–70, 115–16.

⁶⁶Box 2271221. 2/2 RESGE-1A-0057507. Abdul-Hamid D. and Mohamed Hasan K. to UNHCR legal division, 15 Aug. 1970; Ivor Jackson to Statens Invandrarverk, Stockholm, 1 Sept. 1970.

at any time I approach the authorities just like a classless human being'. But his letter encompassed more than his personal circumstances: he wrote on behalf of others, having 'taken it part of my duty to expose and defend the condition of the refugees wherever possible'. In his view the UN was

quite keen in sending out her foreign representatives to execute her policy to the nations at large especially where [the] refugees problem is involved ... In some certain occasions she may send out very few such as high commissioners who for reasons of organising their office may assign their business to others mostly from the white races.

He concluded by requesting 'the copy of the legal status or charter governing the life of a refugee in a foreign land'. The UNHCR case file contained no record of any reply, someone simply having scribbled 'subject: Complaint' on the top of his letter.⁶⁷

A striking illustration of the defence of refugees' rights emerged when 30-year-old Cameroonian refugee Manfred E. wrote to Sadruddin from Lomé in 1972, describing his persecution in graphic detail. He and his family had been arrested in August 1970 for having plotted against the government of Cameroon. They were all, as he put it, staunch supporters of individual liberty and campaigned for the liberation of their country: 'Not only for peace and justice, ideas that are inseparable, but also for cultural development'. They received lengthy prison sentences; his father was tortured and killed in Yaoundé in January 1971. Manfred fled first to Accra and then to Togo in September 1971. He described himself as an exile who had a narrow escape. He wished it to be known that he wrote 'in a humanitarian and apolitical spirit'. His letter was remarkable for its rhetorical flourishes: have we, he asked, made any progress since the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini wrote about liberty in 1835? He also referred to the devastation wrought by the two world wars but he maintained:

We should not forget that it was precisely these tragic and catastrophic events that led to the creation of international organisations with an ambitious scope greater than anything attempted in the past. Nor should one overlook the way in which the free world came together to condemn the subjugation of the Hungarian people. We must not cease to fight for victory over evil and to ensure that past heroes will not have shed their blood in vain.

Manfred's application for a student bursary was turned down because UNHCR expressed doubts about the certificates he supplied in support of his application for a scholarship. Nor did it help his cause that he adopted a 'threatening attitude'.⁶⁸ Their decision paid scant attention to his experiences nor did UNHCR comment on his political analysis, which underlined the transnational impact of Mazzini's protean writings

⁶⁷Box 2271203. RESGE-1A-0054550. Celestin C. to UNHCR Geneva, 10 Sept. 1968.

⁶⁸IC61. Manfred E. to Sadruddin, 5 June 1972; regional representative, West Africa to Geneva, 10 Nov. 1971; A. J. Kozłowski to Manfred E., 21 Jul. 1972. See M. Terretta, 'Cameroonian Nationalists Go Global: From Forest Maquis to a Pan-African Accra', *Journal of African History*, 51 (2010), 189–212.

and ideas and which evoked other instances of activism among young refugees in what has become known as the global south.⁶⁹

For other refugees, imagination opened up different vistas. In 1952, Janos S., a Hungarian refugee seaman, suggested that the ‘sufferences’ of refugees might be brought ‘to an end by letting them cooperate in building up a “State” of their own in the form of a “Reservation” following the noble example of the USA where by [the] Constitution there was given a place to the Indians under the Sun’. He stressed his credentials: ‘apart from being a seaman, I am also a journalist’ – albeit, one might add, someone with an uncritical view of America’s treatment of its first nation people. Janos insisted: ‘the moment has arrived to do something radically in order to solve the unbearable situation of the ever growing number of stateless intellectuals’.⁷⁰ Writing in 1955, Mediha F., a 44-year-old Albanian refugee from an elite background, described herself as ‘homeless, rightless, jobless and without any protections’. She proposed a bold solution on behalf of herself and others: ‘We millions of refugees could form nearly an entire state, yet nobody thinks of it to put it into action.’ (UNHCR referred her to a voluntary organisation in the USA.)⁷¹

Other displaced correspondents argued in favour of statelessness, adopting a stance that ran counter to UNHCR’s assumption that everyone should have a nationality and a state to call their own. One such voice belonged to Hans R. who wrote at length to high commissioner Goedhart from Stockholm in 1953. As a Jew he had left Germany in December 1935 on account of the Nazi racial laws that deprived him of his nationality. Hans travelled between different Baltic countries before settling in Sweden in 1938, but now he did not seek Swedish naturalisation, nor did he wish to be thought as having German citizenship. On the contrary, having been inspired by some of the young people he met, he did not seek to acquire any nationality: rather, ‘the freedom which I seek is that of international mobility’. Hans did not accept the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, according to which each person had the right to a nationality. He regarded this as the embodiment of outdated values, ‘values of tradition and of the custom of sedentarism’ (‘des habitudes de fixation’). Indeed he valued his juridical status as being stateless. He asked Geneva to provide him with papers that would protect him as he moved from one country to another, a kind of revamped Nansen Passport to which Russian and Armenian refugees had been entitled between the two world wars. UNHCR fobbed him off with the suggestion that he approach the Swedish authorities for travel papers, which missed the point Hans was making about wishing to claim statelessness.⁷²

⁶⁹A. O’Malley and V. Thakur, ‘Introduction: Shaping a Global Horizon: New Histories of the Global South and the UN’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 13 (2022), 55–65; S. L. Lewis, ‘Decolonising the History of Internationalism: Transnational Activism across the South’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 2 (2024), 345–69; C. A. Bayly and E. F. Biagini (eds.), *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism, 1830–1920* (Oxford, 2008).

⁷⁰IC11515. Captain Janos S., Copenhagen, to UNHCR, 25 Mar. 1953.

⁷¹IC594. Mediha F. to Eleanor Roosevelt, 16 Mar. 1955.

⁷²IC11135. Hans R., Stockholm, to Goedhart, Geneva, 20 Jul. 1953; E. Jacobs to Hans R., 14 Aug. 1953. For a broader overview, including a discussion of claims to statelessness, see M. L. Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Cambridge MA., 2020).

Conclusions

To return to Sadruddin Aga Khan's speech in 1973: did he have a point when he spoke of a 'fourth world'? Yes, in that refugees signified an anomaly in a world of sovereign states where everyone is supposed to belong to a state.⁷³ Yes, also, in that he had sufficient insight and honesty to acknowledge that 'many in the Fourth World feel that they deserve more of us'. He berated those in UNHCR who acted as if it were a 'Western European club', a pointed rebuke, typical of his attitude towards his subordinates, that may have prompted his sudden resignation in 1977.⁷⁴

Yet Sadruddin's analysis falls short in several respects. Although he understood that the refugee world was dynamic, his chosen term was incomplete insofar as it lacked context: lumping all refugees into a single frame risks overlooking their history, their background and the multiple reasons that prompted them to contact UNHCR. Many of them had fled armed conflict. Others escaped revolutionary upheaval. Some engaged with Geneva from abroad where they carried on the struggle for national liberation. Many refugees were caught up in the formation of new states. The fourth world was never a single realm of persecution.⁷⁵ To adopt Carolyn Biloft's term, there were 'sundry worlds' or spheres marked by separation and exclusion but also characterised by interaction and encounter.⁷⁶

No less important was Sadruddin's adherence to the institutional mindset according to which refugees were passive victims who required UNHCR's support and advocacy. Although this was true up to a point, it did not account for the capacity of refugees to speak for themselves and demand their rights. Sadruddin's argument fell into a familiar pattern of regarding refugees as the object of external intervention, to be observed rather than to be regarded as having agency even as they faced various constraints. As well as reflecting on their circumstances, refugees engaged with and criticised the measures taken on their behalf or demanded protection and assistance as did others who learned of their exclusion from UNHCR's mandate. Hence the significance of the case files in demonstrating the multiplicity of voices and demands. Many refugees who contacted UNHCR to protest the conditions in which they were living or because they wanted to get a proper education. Others insisted on their rights and were not prepared to take no for an answer. Some taught UNHCR a history lesson to make its officials understand the issues at stake. Others envisaged life in an entirely transformed realm.

Close inspection of the confidential case files makes it possible to grasp something of what refugees thought of the world around them, not just what the world thought of them. Careful scrutiny of this material underlines the point that the refugee world was composed of states and patrolled by UNHCR but inhabited by refugees who could not be forced into a single category. Refugeeedom was never a single, homogeneous realm. It included some, but not others. Recognised refugees and those aspiring to recognition

⁷³E. Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns* (Cambridge, 2008), 3–4, 65–69.

⁷⁴Verbatim record of Statement of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, United Nations high commissioner for refugees, to UNHCR headquarters staff, 24 Jan. 1977, available at <http://heritage.ismaili.net/node/36155>. See also Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics*, 201.

⁷⁵Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, *Escape from Violence*, 20–33, 227–57; Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made*, 135; Holian and Cohen, 'Introduction'.

⁷⁶C. Biloft, 'Sundry Worlds within the World: Decentered Histories and Institutional Archives', *Journal of World History*, 31 (2020), 729–60.

did not hesitate to assert themselves in a world of uneven access to assistance and protection.⁷⁷

What does the world of refugeedom look like today? The balance sheet makes for painful reading. UNHCR, having grown exponentially in the later twentieth century, now confronts a sharp decline in funding that has necessitated cuts to existing programmes. Wealthy states place ever less emphasis on resettlement and prioritise containment and repatriation, which is not to overlook the fact that during the third quarter of the twentieth century most refugees remained in the Third World and were discouraged from resettling in the First World. Western governments display an intransigence and a declining respect for international refugee law, reflected in the high bar they set for recognition of claims to refugee status.⁷⁸ Meanwhile many of the world's refugees are hidden from view and barely register on the radar of public opinion in Western societies, save for the relatively small number who seek safety on European shores or those who are periodically exposed to 'humanitarian photography'.⁷⁹ Refugee camps remain under-scrutinised as institutions, except by aid workers and a handful of intrepid journalists and dedicated anthropologists or former inmates who write of their experiences.⁸⁰

The world in which refugees find themselves is unlikely to vanish but it can be understood, historically and politically. Thinking about refugees in the past lends itself to all kinds of disciplinary approaches. There are questions to be posed about broader issues of historical method and about sources; about institutional provision and accountability; about who gets to write refugee history and how to respond ethically to the testimony of people who occupy a marginal position in society; how to interpret multiple stories told by different actors and generated for different purposes, including material that has gaps and silences; how to relate the realm of the intimate with the expectations of those in authority; how to reflect on one's positionality as historians; and not least, how to communicate issues of recurrent concern to a wider audience whose appetite for history can surely accommodate an informed discussion of refugees. It is hoped that this article will be a further step in that direction.

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⁷⁷Gatrell et al., *Refugee Voices*, 218–27.

⁷⁸D. S. FitzGerald, *Refuge Beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers* (New York, 2019), 253–65.

⁷⁹H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian Photography: A History* (Cambridge, 2015).

⁸⁰S. Hayden, *My Fourth Time, We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the World's Deadliest Migration Route* (2022); C. Horst, *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya* (New York, 2006); B. Rawlence, *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp* (New York, 2016); B. Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (Sydney, 2018).

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