

Book Review

Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record



Klaus Neumann

University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004, 128 pp.

It is rare these days to read the words “Australia” and “humanitarian” in the same sentence. Outside of government documents (where Australia’s refugee program is by title and definition “humanitarian”), on the rare occasion when they are read together, the following quote is typical: “Bit by bit, Australia is detaching itself from or is increasingly willing to reject elements of human rights and humanitarian law that it no longer considers useful”¹ Klaus Neumann’s new book addresses the current detachment of Australia from humanitarianism while questioning whether there was any time when this was not the case. In an account that is as intriguing as it is unsettling, he shows that the current detachment of Australian refugee policy from humanitarianism has a wholly ambiguous past.

Although it may seem surprising, in the context of the current bifurcated debate over Australian refugee policy, the demonstration of such ambiguity is a valuable contribution. As Neumann acknowledges, the purported humanitarianism of Australia’s past has been exaggerated by both proponents and opponents of the current policies.² Neumann shows that the current policy is neither the inevitable extension of a longer historical indifference nor a complete departure from Australia’s earlier (relatively) generous policies in the middle years of the last century. Neumann explicitly avoids the Manichean fallacy in his account of Australia’s policies towards and treatment of refugees from 1930 to the early 1970. In Neumann’s view Australia’s past policies towards refugees were neither born of completely pure motives nor did they entail only self-serving consequences. Instead, Australia’s “humanitarian” past was born of self-interest as much as altruism and was influenced by both the immigration needs of the country and competing forces within its immigration bureaucracy.

Divided into seven historical periods, the book canvasses the treatment of refugees in Australia from the early 1930’s to the early 1970’s. Cutting across these historical periods are three overarching myths about Australia’s past disputed by Neumann: (i) that Australia has always been generous towards refugees; (ii) that onshore asylum seekers are a

relatively new phenomenon for Australia; and, (iii) that Australia has always followed international law and supported international organizations concerning refugees. The corollary of these disputed myths is that the current policies of the Howard government are a unique development in response to new developments. Not surprisingly, it with this last proposition which Neumann takes greatest issue.

The book is part of the “Briefings” series of the University of New South Wales Press. As is appropriate given the importance of refugee policies in current Australian popular discourse, a growing number of the “Briefings” books address refugee issues, including Australia’s refugee resettlement practices³, its offshore refugee status determination process known as the “Pacific Solution”⁴ and its increasing estrangement from the broader international human rights regime.⁵ In looking at the construction of the various myths about Australian refugee policy, Neumann is, in a sense, returning to a topic close to his heart. His previous work has attempted to understand the construction of the Holocaust in the contemporary imagination of Germans.⁶ Although it is a topic of much interest to Neuman, it is also one that he cannot fully cover in 113 pages of text (and an additional 14 pages of notes). Fortunately, Neuman is willing to admit as much. Rather, *Refuge Australia* is the first installment of a larger research project into the history of Australia’s refugee policies—a research project which the author declares should soon give rise to a longer and more detailed account of Australian policies.

Neumann traces the origins of Australia’s refugee policy, not without irony, to the period before the Second World War. For while Australia’s record in providing refuge to Jews fleeing Nazi Germany is nothing to be proud of it nonetheless marked the first time “the government made special provisions for the admission of refugees”⁷ Following the close of the Second World War, Australia expanded its efforts to resettle refugees (or “DP’s” as they were then known); the resettlement of “carefully handpicked” refugees to Australia was a central element in the post-War

government's efforts to populate Australia.⁸ At the time, there was very much a competition for the resettlement of refugees between Australia and the other "countries of immigration".⁹ It was a competition which, according to the numbers, Australia won. In the words of the Department of Immigration, "[i]n proportion to its population Australia has led the world in accepting refugees for resettlement"¹⁰ During the post-war decade, it is notable to recall that while Australia resettled skilled refugees it also pioneered the resettlement of "hard-core" refugees, elderly refugees and disabled refugees.

Of course, throughout this period, Australia selected refugees based upon their ability to settle in Australia. This ability was often defined in terms of race; for example, between 1950 and 1957 Australia resettled refugees were required to be European in appearance, descent, upbringing and outlook.¹¹ No exceptions were made to this "White Australia" policy (a policy which stretched from the 1850's through to the 1970's). Any enthusiasm for the "victory" of Australia in resettling refugees must be tempered by the terms of that victory: a review of Australian records leads Neumann to conclude that, between 1945 and 1965, "I could find no exceptions to Australia's refusal to admit non-European refugees"¹² The racial nature of this policy is underlined by Australia's willingness during this period to resettle individuals of European descent living in Asia and Africa fleeing the collapsing colonial empires of Britain and Holland.¹³ A counterpoint to Australia's response to the post-War refugees is its response to the outflow of South Asians from Uganda: the United Kingdom resettled 25,000, India 10,000, Canada 6,000 and Australia 198.¹⁴ And yet, Neumann also shows that what was considered "white" or "European" varied considerably over time and according to circumstance. To take Jewish refugees as an example, they were considered, depending on the historical era, as both non-European and European immigrants.¹⁵ A similarly nuanced view of "mixed races" also existed.¹⁶

As Australia moved through the 1960's and into the 1970's, international politics increasingly governed decisions on which refugees to resettle. During this period, an increasing number of individuals appeared on Australia's shores seeking refuge. In an array that curiously mirrors some of the most famous current asylum seekers, Australia found itself being requested for asylum by an assortment of Soviet diplomats, seamen, stowaways, Olympic athletes and foreign navy sailors.¹⁷ They were categorized, according to the vernacular of the era, as either "defectors" or "refugees"; however, only the former were assured of protection by Australia due to their being in "possession of intelligence that would be of value to Australia or the Western world"¹⁸. By showing how Australian immigration officials catego-

rized most asylum seekers as the latter, Neumann dispels the too common assertion that all refugees were seen as ideological tokens during the Cold War.

Refuge Australia ends its historical account in the early 1970's. It does so explicitly to separate its account from the more common "histories" of contemporary refugee policy and, presumably, to keep his account within a manageable length for the largely popular audience that is its target. A continuation of its account closer to the present would have allowed Neumann to address how the various myths of Australian refugee policy were born into the popular consciousness. Similarly, the popular audience of the "Briefings" series, at times precludes more detailed footnoting and elaboration of some of the nuances of policy. Undoubtedly, both of these criticisms will be addressed in Neumann's anticipated longer work on the topic.

A more serious concern about the book is its focus on the policies and actions of the government of Australia. It is perhaps a bit churlish to list this as a defect as it is largely a feature of the book being a history of Australian refugee policy more than a history of Australian refugees themselves. While Neumann has made an admirable effort to reconstruct several personal narratives from government records, his historical methodology relies very heavily on government archival sources. It is very difficult to imagine a history of refugees themselves emerging from such sources. While a broadening of sources is perhaps less necessary for a strict policy history, by addressing the larger historical myths and their social context Neumann broadens the scope of his historiography—and his sources should be expanded accordingly. Certainly constructing such a history of refugees and refugee policies poses particular methodological problems, including those related to the precariousness of the population defined as "refugees". However, Neumann has shown no indication that he will be unable to meet this challenge in his forthcoming longer work.

At the outset of this review, I mentioned the current habit of treating "Australian humanitarianism" as an oxymoron and the ultimately unsettling effect of Neumann's book. Neumann explicitly addresses this way of thinking and provides a context for this book that defies a simple acceptance or rejection of the term. However, of broader importance to the field of refugee studies is the book's highlighting of another all too often oxymoronic term in scholarly circles: "refuge policy history". Those who would dispute the contradiction embodied in this term need listen only to the deafening silence of the scholarship. Herein lies the unsettling effect of the book.

Refuge Australia is both the only book on the history of Australian refugee policy and one of a handful of books addressing the history of refugee policy more generally.¹⁹

Neumann himself has elsewhere noted the dearth of historical scholarship in the field of refugee studies:

Often when I hear Australian lawyers speak at public events on behalf of refugees, I feel somewhat ashamed on behalf of my own profession, for Australia's historians don't have as good a track record as lawyers when it comes to contributing their expertise to this campaign.²⁰

While Neumann lays the blame with his colleagues in the field of history, those of us in the field of refugee studies must share some of the blame. For an explicitly interdisciplinary field, refugee studies has a dearth of historians. Anyone reviewing the faculty and doctoral students associated with all but a few of the leading refugee studies centres is left with the impression that there are but a few individuals primarily focusing on the history of refugees, policy towards them or of the field of study itself.²¹ Similarly, the leading journals of refugee studies, including this one, seldom publish historical scholarship.²² While historical analysis is not completely absent from other scholarship, one cannot help but feel that the field of refugee studies is the poorer for the lack of true historians.

It may seem like a logical leap to conclude that the dearth of historians in refugee studies is symptomatic of a problem with the field of refugee studies. However, early in the book, Neuman suggests a potential reason for the absence of histories of refugee policy that both rings true and supports this leap of logic:

Maybe the glaring contradictions in past policies, and their apparent refusal either to endorse or condemn present policies, explain why there [are] so few histories of Australian responses to refugees and asylum seekers.²³

His suggestion should be read as a warning to the field of refugee studies. It is troubling that the absence of these histories noted by Neumann has not slowed the field in its characterizations of the past. In many ways, the refugee studies scholarship, as much as the public discourse, can be faulted for the quarrying of the past “merely to establish genealogies for political point scoring”²⁴ In this regard, the often repeated mantra of the late 1990's scholarship that the 1951 Convention is an anachronism of Cold War politics comes to mind—a characterization which is itself suggested to be an anachronism in the Australian context by Neumann's nuanced analysis of the difference between “defectors” and “refugees” during the Cold War.²⁵ Even if all of the historical “truths” of refugee studies cannot be similarly questioned, historical scholarship such as that of Neumann serves to remind us of the disquieting fact, most famously

pointed out by Eric Hobsbawm, that not all historical events become part of the field's wider historical memory.²⁶

This is not to say that there are no historians of refugee policy but rather that there should be more. This book, and the lengthier work by Neumann that likely will follow, joins a small but growing scholarship about the history of refugees in other countries, including in Canada and the United Kingdom,²⁷ and the treatment of refugees by international institutions.²⁸ While few in number, these works have had a profound influence on both the scholarly and popular discourse, for example by challenging the laudatory Canadian national myth of generosity towards refugees and by forcing the UNHCR to confront some of the bureaucratic and political demons that constrain its efforts to assist refugees.

However, much more has still to be done and many more histories are still to be written (and, as importantly, read). In short, the only individuals who should not read Neumann's current work are the (hopefully) gathering crowds of historians awaiting Neumann's next, expanded, publication on this topic. The rest of us should read it and should do as much as possible to encourage other books like it.

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Notes

1. Craig Bildstien, “PM targeted over human rights ‘blot’” *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), page 27 (9 September 2004) (quoting Irene Khan, secretary-general of Amnesty International).
2. Klaus Neumann, *Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004) at 10.
3. Peter Browne, *The Longest Journey* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, forthcoming January 2006).
4. Michael Gordon, *Freeing Ali: The Human Face of the Pacific Solution* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, September 2005).
5. Spencer Zifcak, *Mr Ruddock Goes to Geneva* (University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, November 2003).
6. Klaus Neumann, *Shifting Memories: The Nazi past in the New Germany* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2000).
7. At 23. Australia provided refuge to between 6500 and 10000 people fleeing Nazi Germany in the years following 1933.
8. At 33.
9. At 33. The term “countries of immigration” is used to refer to not only America and the other countries of the Commonwealth, but also such countries as Peru and Venezuela.
10. At 37. Neumann rightly notes that the Department's use of the verb “to accept” in this phrase (along with the very “to recruit” in other publications) is indicative of an underlying self-con-

- ception of Australia's resettlement of refugees as both in the national self-interest and altruistic.
11. At 42. Between 1950 and 1957, Australia required resettled refugees to meet the following three criteria: (i) "European rather than non-European in appearance", (ii) "75% or more of European descent", and (iii) "fully European in upbringing and outlook".
 12. At 43.
 13. At 44.
 14. At 47 and 48.
 15. At 49. The examples cited for each of these propositions are as follows: (i) the policies preceding the Second World War imposing quotas on Jewish immigration, (ii) the policies of the 1950's, and (iii) the allowance of Jewish immigration from Iraq following the coming to power of the Ba'athist regime in 1969.
 16. At 49 et seq. While individuals of mixed-race were initially refused permission to immigrate to Australia, a policy-change in 1964 allowed such individuals to immigrate provided they established either hardship due to discrimination in their country of origin or close family ties to Australia. Interestingly, almost all of subsequent mixed-race migrants were allowed under the latter exception—indicating to Neumann a continuing reluctance to allow humanitarian considerations to influence the outcome of applications.
 17. In particular, there are interesting parallels between the current Australian case of Chen Yonglin, a former Chinese diplomat seeking asylum, and that of Vladimir Petrov, the Third Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Canberra who sought asylum in Australia in 1964 (at 52 et seq.). The current Canadian case of Jeremy Hinzman, a deserter from the US War in Iraq, also has parallels with the three deserting Portuguese sailors from the Portuguese frigate *Goncalves Zarco* in late 1961 (at 61 et seq.).
 18. At 58.
 19. The caveat to this proposition is the definition of "history". As noted earlier, Neuman's history goes back much further than conventional approaches to the "history" of refugee policy in Australia, which generally do not go back further than Neuman's end-point of the early 1970's.
 20. Klaus Neumann, "Refugees: the silence of the historians" *The Age* (Melbourne), 11 June 2004 (available online at <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/06/10/1086749836896.html?from=storylhs>>; last accessed 19 December 2005).
 21. A review of the listed staff and doctoral students at the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University, the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford University, the Refugee Studies Programme at the University of East London and the Forced Migration Program at the American University of Cairo reveals that only 4 out of 121 individuals pursuing research self-identify as historians.
 22. A survey of the five most recent issues of *Refuge*, the *Journal of Refugee Studies* and *International Migration* reveals only 4 out of 100 articles are works of historical scholarship. Of these four articles, almost all focus narrowly on the "history" of the past quarter century.
 23. At 10.
 24. At 10.
 25. At Chapter 4, pages 52 et seq.
 26. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (Abacus Press, London, 1998) at 353.
 27. In the United Kingdom, historical scholarship has formed part of many recent books on refugee issues including, notably, the work of Dummett and Nicol, *Subjects, Citizens, Aliens and Others: Nationality and Immigration Law* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson Press, London, 1990) (which is referenced to suggest that the field of "history" should not be narrowly defined). In Canada, reference must be made to the similarly groundbreaking work, albeit in reference to a more recent era, of Abella and Troper, *None is Too Many None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933–1948* (Lester Publishing Ltd., Toronto, 1997).
 28. Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics: A Perilous Path* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001).