

**World Refugee Year, 1959-60 and the history of population displacement  
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My paper arises from a monograph that has just been published: *Free World? The campaign to save the world's refugees, 1956-1963* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). This is linked to another project that I am currently completing, entitled *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, which is a global history of population displacement in the twentieth century, covering Europe, the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent, South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In this bigger project I examine the origins of refugee crises and the efforts made to address them, including the administrative and other devices that have been brought to bear on successive generations of displaced people and the networks of assistance to which displacement gave rise. I am concerned also with how and why displacement has variously been represented, including by those displaced, as crisis and as opportunity. At an early stage of research and writing I decided that it made no sense to focus exclusively on Europe and to discount sites of population displacement in other parts of the globe. The linkages and networks are simply too important to ignore. When I began work on *MMR*, I had no idea that a brief paragraph on World Refugee Year (WRY) would grow into a full-length book ... Today's talk is an attempt to demonstrate why I came to write on this neglected topic and how WRY is connected to the history and cultural representation of population displacement in the middle years of the twentieth century and to the international and transnational history of humanitarianism.<sup>1</sup>

World Refugee Year (1959-1960) was an ambitious attempt by the UN, by governments (mostly in the First World) and secular and faith-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to increase public awareness of enduring refugee situations and to canvass solutions including selective resettlement or local integration that would improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of refugees around the world. In addition, UNHCR hoped to improve its visibility and to get more governments to sign the 1951 Convention. As is evident from the decision to launch the campaign at the end of the 1950s, the campaign took place against the backdrop of the Cold War and an active phase of decolonisation. How the East-West rivalry translated into programmes for refugee relief in old and new sites of population displacement, and how that rivalry inflected the process of decolonisation, must be borne in mind. But this does not mean that the politicians who formulated the campaign for a 'refugee year' had their eyes fixed only on the present. I want to suggest that WRY was also infused with an awareness of the past, albeit selectively so, and that the past was invoked as a call to action.

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The United Nations approved World Refugee Year in June 1959 with the intention that an international campaign should focus on four vintage refugee groups: first, the so-called 'hard core' of refugees and Displaced Persons who were living in camps or in self-settled but impoverished clusters, primarily in Germany and Austria, fifteen

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<sup>1</sup> WRY is mentioned briefly in Gil Loescher, *The UNHCR and World Politics* (OUP, 2001).

years after the end of the Second World War. A second and much larger group consisted of Palestinian refugees who in 1948 fled to adjacent territories and states – Jordan (that is, the West Bank), the Gaza strip, Lebanon and Syria – where the majority lived in refugee camps. The third group was Chinese refugees who eked out a difficult existence in the British colony of Hong Kong having fled following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949; they lived in crowded settlements rather than in refugee camps. A final group was made up of several thousand elderly refugees of Russian origin who left Soviet Russia for China in the wake of the 1917 Revolution and who appeared to have been entirely forgotten. The inspiration behind the so-called ‘plan to save the refugees’ therefore derived from a sense that history had dealt each of these groups a poor hand. I shall say more about this later. For the moment I wish to point out that the Soviet bloc voted against the proposal for a refugee year, on the grounds that the difficulties confronting the ‘hard core’ could be readily addressed, provided the UN encouraged the return of refugees and DPs to their original places of residence in Poland and the Soviet Union. The arguments for and against repatriation had of course been well-rehearsed throughout the 1950s, and Western governments inevitably dismissed the USSR’s stance on this as on other occasions.

It is worth emphasising, however, that neither side tried to make much political capital out of WRY. The most overt attempt to do so emanated from the Assembly of Captive European Nations. Established in 1954 by a ‘a coalition of representatives from nations who found themselves under the yoke of Soviet domination’, ACEN aimed ‘to provide liberation from communist dictatorship by peaceful means, to educate public opinion on the actual situation behind the Iron Curtain, and to enlist the cooperation and assistance of governmental and non-governmental institutions’. However, the US administration kept its distance from these Cold warriors. To be sure, President Dwight Eisenhower agreed to designate a ‘Captive Nations Week’ that entailed ‘appropriate ceremonies and activities ... until such time as freedom and independence shall have been achieved for all the captive nations of the world’. But that was as far as the White House was prepared to go.<sup>2</sup> There were relatively few signs of the Cold War rhetoric that figured in the first half of the 1950s.<sup>3</sup>

The focus on the needs of refugees in Europe (including newly arrived refugees from Yugoslavia), in the Middle East, in Hong Kong and China did not prevent the UN and member states from recognising the extent of suffering brought about by fresh crises, in Tibet, Rwanda, Congo and above all Algeria. In most instances, these crises involved European colonial powers whether, as with Belgium, they were struggling to rid themselves of imperial possessions in central Africa or (as in the case of France) attempting to retain such control. (International opinion regarded Algeria as a French colony even though it was administratively an integral part of France.) WRY also implicitly asked questions of other colonial powers such as Portugal (which resolutely refused to get involved in the campaign in any meaningful way) and the Netherlands, which embraced WRY enthusiastically without directly linking its participation to the

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<sup>2</sup> Brutus Coste to Charles Merz, Editor, *New York Times*, 15 January 1958, ACEN Records, IHRC247, Box 138, Folder 4.

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Carruthers, *Cold War Captives: Imprisonment, Escape and Brainwashing* (University of California Press, 2009).

retreat from its empire in Indonesia. In the case of Tibet, the imagination of First World countries was seized less by the knowledge of China's territorial claims than it was by the drama of the Dalai Lama's flight and by a readiness to embrace Tibetan exiles as 'good refugees' who suffered for their faith – rather like Armenian refugees in the 1920s, whose credentials derived from their Christian 'sacrifice' at the hands of the Young Turks. However, the British government trod carefully, because of a reluctance to get involved in questions of human rights ('If we had voted for a resolution about loss of human rights in Tibet, we would have abandoned the argument which helps to prevent human rights in Nyasaland, Kenya, Central African Federation etc. being debated at the UN [and] to keep that body as much as possible out of our colonial affairs') and preferred to focus on 'purely humanitarian' considerations. The situation in Algeria and neighbouring Morocco and Tunisia also grabbed some of the headlines, because the FLN succeeded in internationalising the crisis. By 1959-60 UNHCR had become involved along with several NGOs. But in Algeria itself, the French government objected to anything that could be construed as external encroachment on its sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

WRY had little or nothing to say about other histories. Korea and Vietnam warranted only a brief mention in the literature issued by the UN office in Geneva. The campaign passed over the Holocaust in almost complete silence. No-one drew attention to the impact of the Spanish Civil War, presumably because the Republican exiles were assumed to be making the best they could of their lives in France or South America after the torment of being incarcerated in French concentration camps in the late 1930s – and also because no-one in the First World wanted to ruffle General Franco's feathers by picking at this particular sore. Older refugee populations – above all, Armenian refugees and Russian refugees, other than those in China – are virtually absent from the campaign record, perhaps reflecting their integration in the USA, France and parts of the Middle East and perhaps because of an unspoken and begrudging acknowledgement that at least some Armenian refugees had managed to make a life for themselves in Soviet Armenia. In the Federal Republic of Germany, conservative politicians and public figures tried to link the campaign for a refugee year to the cause of the German expellees (*Vertriebenen*), but this had relatively little resonance in West Germany and none at all further afield. The expellees were left much to their own devices, as indeed they had been for more than a decade, benefiting from the rapid economic growth or *Wirtschaftswunder*. Finally, WRY all but ignored the consequences of Partition in the Indian sub-continent, because the UN and NGOs alike maintained that the refugee crisis had been resolved. However, to the extent that Hindu and Muslim migrants continued to cross the Indian-Pakistan border long after 1948, and particularly the frontier separating East Bengal from West Bengal, this was a misleading conclusion to draw. Nevertheless, the selective geographical focus of WRY rather misses the point. Its supporters chose their terrain carefully, and the campaign was sufficiently flexible to accommodate other sites of displacement.

I want to emphasise the importance of history to the success of mounting a campaign for WRY. Citizens in the First World had to be provided with sufficient information to convince themselves of the need to donate money and armed with knowledge in order to lobby governments. Some historical background was therefore essential.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Columbia University Press, 2002).

Second, history was something that governments could invoke as tradition, namely a readiness to assist displaced people. This was linked to the trajectories of leading humanitarians whose authority rested in part on their past experience of engagement with refugees. Thirdly, however, history spoke of an intolerable burden that helped to explain why some countries could or would not participate. Fourth, the past could be made to account for the political agenda in the present. This was related to the search for a means of recompense for the wrongs that been done to displaced persons in the past.

A key element of WRY was the need to encourage a more intimate knowledge of the 'refugee problem'. According to the UN office for WRY, public opinion had become familiar with refugees in the abstract: 'through frequent repetition, the word 'refugee' had come to lose much of its poignancy, and there was little personal knowledge of the plight and sufferings of refugees beyond the immediate areas where they were living'.<sup>5</sup> Privileged citizens in the First World were to be fed a diet of reliable and 'authentic' stories about the circumstances of individual refugees. Granted, this history was etiolated and restricted; for example, attempts by officials in the UN Relief and Works Agency to recount the origins of the Palestinian refugee crisis did not evoke a great deal of public interest. Nevertheless, at a general level the campaign spread the basic historical content beyond the specific ethnic groups and diasporas to which it had largely been confined hitherto. This set WRY apart from most previous efforts to assist refugees, for example from Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany and Spain. As part of this concerted publicity drive, Geneva regularly issued brief, illustrated brochures on refugees in Europe, the Middle East and the Far East, and provided information on various private initiatives that generated additional revenue for the UN, NGOs and the individual national committees for WRY. I return to this point later.

The second aspect in which history intruded into the campaign was the recurrent emphasis by national governments of 'tradition', as in the 'traditional welcome' extended to refugees. This rhetoric served different purposes. It might explain why governments were willing to support WRY, but it also served as justification for doing only so much and no more. The British, American, Canadian, Australian and Norwegian governments could recite this argument off by heart. British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan put the case for 'tradition':

Some people may think that the best contribution that we can make in the WRY is to take in a large number of the refugees ourselves. They may say that the life of our country has been enriched because 80,000 refugees the majority of whom were Jewish, came here before the war, and because we have taken in about a quarter of a million other refugees since then ... But precisely because in our small country we have welcomed so many, we cannot raise further hopes in this direction. Essentially our contribution must be in money.<sup>6</sup>

In making this point Macmillan lined up with deeply unpleasant regimes such as in the Dominican Republic, where President Rafael Trujillo did not hesitate to remind everyone of his 'rescue' (much overblown, as it turned out) of Jews from Nazi

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<sup>5</sup> Report to the Secretary-General by his Special Representative for WRY, UNHCR archives, Fonds UNHCR 11, Records of the Central Registry, Series 1, Classified Subject Files, 1951-70, Misc. boxes: World Refugee Year, Information Paper 1960.

<sup>6</sup> FO 371/145387, file on the official opening of WRY.

Germany in 1940.<sup>7</sup> The customary point of reference was the Hungarian refugee crisis, because this was fresh in the public mind – and also a pointed reminder that not everyone had been sympathetic to the plight of Hungarian exiles [**illustration of Austrian stamp**].

Generally speaking, Western governments and NGOs looked to countries in the southern hemisphere, particularly in South America, to open the gates to refugees from Europe and China who wished to resettle. As the British Foreign Office put it:

It is an essential part of the proposal that the World Refugee Year should be adapted to meet the circumstances of the different countries taking part. The Latin American countries, for example, who have less money to spare for international charity than, say, the countries of Western Europe and the ‘old’ Commonwealth, could play a significant part by agreeing to the resettlement in their territories of a larger number of refugees during the ‘Year’.<sup>8</sup>

But these countries also invoked history as a reminder of the weight of past responsibilities and difficulty of doing more for refugees during WRY. Argentina claimed to have been lumbered with social problems in the recent past and would therefore only admit refugees who were ‘strong, healthy and unaffected by the war’. Some countries explained what they could contribute but also what they could not do as a result of previous episodes of displacement that imposed an intolerable economic strain. India and Pakistan, still coming to terms with the consequences of Partition, clearly fell into this category of countries that were absorbed with their own problems. The Italian government likewise responded that ‘Italy had many refugees within her own borders and these imposed a considerable financial burden’. The same idea surfaced in less well-known situations, as in Finland which excused itself by referring to the influx of 400,000 refugees from Karelia who fled after the Second World War and who imposed an ‘indirect cost to the economy [thanks to] high subsidies, which have to be paid to enable them to make a living on their small uneconomic agricultural holdings’. For this reason Finland declared itself unable to match the commitment shown by its richer but less troubled Scandinavian neighbours.<sup>9</sup>

The past was also present, in the sense that many of the most pressing refugee situations provided evidence of Communist revolution and the consolidation of Communist power in Russia and Eastern Europe, and in China. Austria emphasised the flight of Hungarians in 1956. There were warnings of continuing subversion in the Middle East and Latin America, where the Cuban Revolution appeared to reiterate the point that Communism would prompt a mass exodus. Yet as indicated earlier, although the Cold War played an important part in the campaign, it formed part of the background rather than being an integral element. Governments were more circumspect: the British wanted to maintain reasonable relations with the People’s Republic of China rather than to complicate matters in Hong Kong by making political capital out of the crisis caused by the influx of Chinese refugees. When UN officials repeated the mantra that WRY was ‘non-political’, this suited both member governments and NGOs.

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<sup>7</sup> Simone Gigliotti, ‘Acapulco in the Atlantic’: revisiting Sosúa, a Jewish refugee colony in the Caribbean’, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 24, no. 1, 2006, 22-50.

<sup>8</sup> UN FO Dept to Chancery, Montevideo, 10 October 1958, FO 371/137030.

<sup>9</sup> British Embassy, Helsinki, to FO, 24 April 1959, FO 371/145386.

The main reason for playing down the Cold War was linked to the final aspect of WRY as history. The campaign contained an important element of atonement. One did not have to look far into the past to see that the crisis of the ‘hard core’ reflected an injustice perpetrated by the Free World. This did not mean remembering the Allies’ immediate post-war policy of organised repatriation undertaken by UNRRA and implemented by the military in occupied Germany. Rather, atonement meant a recognition that DPs had been left to ‘rot’ in camps (many them former prison camps) once the West had ‘skimmed the cream’ in order to replenish the depleted labour market in the late 1940s. (Several NGOs were quick to accept that there was more than a grain of truth in the old Soviet charge that Western governments had operated a ‘slave market’.) History held out to Western governments the opportunity to remedy their previous lack of generosity by admitting ‘hard core’ refugees before it was too late. To be sure, not everyone wished to atone – France was too busy attempting to hold on to Algeria. The best that officials in Paris could come up with was a postage stamp that alluded to French losses during the Second World War [**illustration of French stamp**]. Nevertheless atonement and recompense struck a chord in the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK. Something of the same idea governed attitudes towards elderly Russian refugees in China who had been abandoned to their fate.

Past experience also helped explain why the future threatened to be hopeless for individual refugees unless the West did something about their situation. In a report headed ‘Human wastage’, UNHCR dramatised this prospect by describing how:

Every morning Jaro Nicolaiwitch rises from his bunk at six. This is a habit which he formed when he worked as an assistant accountant in a small tobacco factory in his native town ... This once active man now accepts idleness as an easy way of life ... Thousands of miles away lives the young woman who was once his wife ... He has now settled down to a parasitic existence, with which he feels at peace. He cares little for work and distrusts all words of kindness and sympathy. And there are thousands like him who are no longer interested in their future ...<sup>10</sup>

This narrative of incarceration belonged to a litany of complaint that refugees and DPs had become ‘apathetic’ and alienated. Now, however, their lack of interest in the future was a function of past wrong inflicted on them, not by Hitler but by the ‘Free World’. Their prospects were blighted, but the situation could yet be rescued by sensitive and urgent action, whether by admitting more refugees to Western countries or to Latin America, or by improving their conditions in situ, thanks to the generosity of the public. Hence the importance attached during WRY to ‘before and after’ photographs of camp clearance that drew attention to their ‘metamorphosis’ and ‘rehabilitation’ [**illustrations of DP camps**]. In other words, the past provided a stimulus to action that would ensure the future wellbeing of refugees.

What else did it mean to suggest that WRY looked forward as well as backwards? Supporters of WRY campaign were fearful about what the 1960s had in store. As I have already indicated, liberals and conservatives feared that communism would extend its influence across the globe, by filling the gap left by retreating colonial regimes and helping to inspire revolution among the peasantry and emerging working class in the Third World. These concerns manifested an anxiety about a general crisis of citizenship in democratic states. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Auguste

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<sup>10</sup> *To Have a Key: a Storybook of Human Drama* (Geneva: UNHCR, 1958).

Lindt spoke apocalyptically of the potential dangers of creating a 'race of camp dwellers', should western countries fail to address the needs of refugees. Officials employed by the UN Relief and Works Agency for the Middle East (some of whom were themselves refugees) expressed concern about the growing numbers of deprived Palestinian youths in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank. In the absence of a political solution to the refugee crisis, their prospects could best be improved by intensive investment in vocational education and training. But this turned out to be over-optimistic rhetoric.

Another vital element of WRY was its emphasis on the humanitarian imperative as exemplified by churches, secular non-governmental organisations and private individuals. Once again, history was invoked to demonstrate that non-state institutions had done their bit for refugees. Pope John XXIII spoke of the Catholic Church's historic concern for refugees, albeit drawing a veil over its limited role before and during the Second World War on behalf of Jews in Nazi Germany. The Canadian Jewish Congress advertised its 'considerable experience in the settlement of refugees following World War One and in large numbers in assisting in the rescue, relief and rehabilitation of victims of concentration camps after the liberation of Europe' (as well as from Shanghai) ... and therefore associates itself with 'the world wide plans to bring succour and relief to those who deserve and will appreciate it'.<sup>11</sup> Churches and NGOs also appealed to the past in seeking to persuade potential donors that their money would be well spent – and by implication to demonstrate that rival claimants had a lesser claim on donors' purses.

Campaign publicity also made much of the energy and generosity of individuals and groups who organised fundraising in participating countries. Geneva publicised heroic individuals who had a history of assisting refugees and DPs and who sometimes travelled to distant lands in order to do so. They included the Dominican priest, Father Georges Pire (1910-1969) who belonged to the Belgian resistance during the Second World War (and whose family had been refugees during the First World War) and who established 'European villages' for elderly refugees in 1949 in order to enable them to leave DP camps and live more freely. DPs were offered counselling and advice on establishing small businesses: 'the positioning of the 'villages' on the outskirts of European towns gives the refugee a sense of community [and] on the other hand facilitates their integration and especially that of their children into their national environment'.<sup>12</sup> The executive director of the US Committee for Refugees, Edward B. Marks (1911-1995) had worked with Displaced Persons in post-war Europe on behalf of the International Refugee Organisation and the International Office for Migration, including being sent to Yugoslavia in 1957 to deal with the Hungarian refugee crisis. WRY could thus be located in a continuum of refugee relief. Informed and professional social workers, psychologists, nurses, engineers brought their expertise as well as empathy to bear on refugee crises. A newspaper profile of Mollie Rule who worked for the World Council of Churches after the Second World War described how 'she has dealt with more refugees than any other woman, anywhere'. In 1956 the WCC sent her to Yugoslavia to support Hungarian refugees. Interviewed in 1960, following work in Rhodesia, Tanganyika and the Philippines,

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<sup>11</sup> Canadian Committee for WRY, McMaster University, Folder 6.

<sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 11 November 1958; G. Kent, 'The promised land of Father Pire', *Reader's Digest* (June 1959), 46-50.

she lamented the recurrent flow of refugees ('I see no end to it') but affirmed the benefit of long years of practical experience in resettling refugees: 'You can't (she said) learn it all from books'. At the end of the story, the journalist asserted Mollie's ability to maintain a kind of cosmopolitan existence. While 'home is still Central Africa', she enjoyed holidaying in London where she was able to buy her favourite shoes. She was both discerning consumer and dedicated humanitarian. Displacement enabled her to alleviate distress and to be a kind of informed global citizen. I am struck by the emphasis on modern consumption – there were limits here to notions of self-sacrifice demanded by most faith-based organisations – but also how the depiction of a peripatetic and even cosmopolitan empathy echoes stories of adventurous relief workers in the 1920s who spent years in the Balkans and in the Middle East working on behalf of Greek, Armenian and other refugees. These stories emphasised their credentials as eye-witnesses who could vouch for the extent of suffering and the effort required to alleviate it. Heroic endeavour and the exercise of responsible citizenship offered a counterpoint to the image of enforced refugee displacement and refugees' troubling incapacity.

It was also striking how the modern humanitarian relief worker could move relatively freely from one site of displacement to another, a reminder that the 1950s witnessed the rapid growth of mass tourism. Affluence allowed the modern consumer to travel much more easily than hitherto. These opportunities were denied the refugee. A British Foreign Office memorandum noted that refugees did not enjoy the same kind of unfettered and enjoyable travel: 'thousands of people delight to spend their summer holidays' in countries that were home to refugees [**illustrations from *Crossbow***]. Richard Russell painted a picture of refugee camps near Salzburg, 'famous for its tourist resorts, its exquisite villages, its wooded hills reflected in calm waters [but] less known as the approach to the most densely packed concentration of Refugee Camps in Austria: the residuary scrap-heap of the Forsaken People'.<sup>13</sup> Asking for suggestions about a campaign in the West Indies and Bermuda, a British official advised that 'some of the tourists who winter there must surely be known to you and willing to give WRY a good push during their warm holiday'.<sup>14</sup> More imaginatively, the Canadian national committee planned a 'border-crossing' initiative whereby travellers between the US and Canada would be invited to donate a sum of money at the frontier. The idea was 'to enlist the cooperation of the Outdoor Advertising Association, adopting some such theme as 'Have Passport, Can Travel (What about the Refugees in Camps?)'.<sup>15</sup> An unusual initiative took place in Sweden and Norway that entailed 'the setting up jointly of a mythical State'. Newspapers reported the formation of 'Morokulien', a 'new country' on the Norwegian-Swedish frontier, created from the Norwegian and Swedish words for fun ('moro' and 'kul' respectively). TV programmes broadcast football matches and other contacts between the 'citizens'. Morokulien issued its own stamps, and TV cameras were there to record the mail being collected and sorted. A local radio show invited listeners to send in money to help build a house to accommodate a refugee family on the new 'territory'.<sup>16</sup> Although WRY did not – and could not – undermine state sovereignty,

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Russell, 'Refugee camps in Austria', *Contemporary Review*, 190 (July-December 1956), 355-57; FO note, 15 November 1959, FO 371/145392.

<sup>14</sup> E.J. F. Scott to Kelly, Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for WRY, 29 December 1959, FO 371/145393.

<sup>15</sup> CCWRY Box 4, Folder 5; *International Committee for World Refugee Year*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> UNOG, 55/0088 File 093, Norway.

nevertheless some of its supporters betrayed a healthy scepticism, lampooning the world's fixation with borders and passports by demanding that visitors to make-believe 'refugee camps' show their 'papers' before being admitted.

New initiatives spoke of disseminating knowledge and bringing people together. Barriers to communication could also be broken down. It was a source of pride to the Geneva office that public opinion learned about events 'in the most remote areas of the world'. The Australian committee for WRY prided itself on having done something to inform the 'majority of Australians [who] had little or no knowledge of the nature and extent, or the difficulties of the world refugee problem'. The Irish campaign also claimed to have made a difference, in that a 'greater sense of concern about world problems has begun to displace the parochial preoccupation with Irish or Anglo-Irish issues which over the past twenty years at least had characterised political life in this country' – an exaggeration, but an interesting indication of the importance that it attached to WRY. The campaign was also construed as a means of instilling a new 'spirit'; for example, Georges Pire described how a 'Europe du coeur' took shape in different settings that encouraged a brotherhood of 'all men, working in unison in a spirit of true solidarity, serving a cause which is utterly humane and absolutely true'. This vision had a political component, but it transcended Cold War rivalry. There was something of a utopian and cosmopolitan strand to WRY, which we saw in relation to dissolving borders between countries. It was also evident in the hope that DPs could be enabled to set aside old enmities; Richard Russell believed that it was possible to help refugees to become not only Austrian citizens but 'citizens of the world ... killing the backward-looking, vengeful feelings that are still apt to arise'.<sup>17</sup> In some instances, WRY was invested with the prospect of combining public awareness of refugees and knowledge of people closer to home. I am thinking here of the visit paid to Canada by Peter Casson, the UN special representative for WRY (**illustration of Peter Casson in Frobisher Bay**). Casson contrasted the lack of donations from white Canadian residents this with the generosity of the Inuit population in Frobisher Bay, who demonstrated in his view a much better grasp than their wealthier neighbours of the need to 'rehabilitate' refugees: 'I think that Canadians should now decide to declare themselves quite frankly as to whether they don't care about their fellow human beings who suffer'. Casson concluded with a dramatic flourish: 'I would be very glad to have Eskimo blood in my veins tonight'. This argument exposed several layers of meaning: not only did the humanity of native Canadians put white Canadians to shame, but Inuit participation in WRY was also proof of their own 'rehabilitation'.<sup>18</sup>

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In thinking about 'borders', I am struck by the differences between refugees and humanitarians as well as the distinction between the space of the refugee camp and the world beyond, a distinction that emerges in the work of sociologists such as Erving Goffman and more recently Michel Agier.<sup>19</sup> Most refugee and DP camps are

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<sup>17</sup> Quotations from Richard Russell Papers, Box FL097, File ref 4RFR/2, The Women's Library, London Metropolitan Library; also Russell to Haynes, 28 November 1956, CA/I/6/7 AER: correspondence and bulletins 1956-66.

<sup>18</sup> Newspaper clippings in the archives of CCWRY, Box 7, Folder 17.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Agier, 'Between war and city: towards an urban anthropology of refugee camps', *Ethnography*, 3, no. 3 (2002), 317-41. See also Ian Hacking, 'Between Michel Foucault and

set apart from normal society and constitute a separate and enclosed social world. Incarceration and externally-imposed disciplinary arrangements have gone hand in hand in defining the camp regime. But another strand in the refugee studies literature indicates that other things are going on. Indeed the literature on 'bare life' and 'spaces of exception' discounts the extent to which the refugee camp historically gave rise to an impressive degree of creative (and often contested) cultural, educational and political activity. This is certainly evident in the world of Europe's DP camps after 1945, but it is not confined to Europe by any means.<sup>20</sup>

The refugee camp historically provides plenty of evidence of antagonism between local host populations on the one hand and refugees on the other. In Egyptian-administered Gaza, for example, Ilana Feldman has shown that local residents in the 1950s resented the influx of Palestinian refugees, because the main UN agency (UNRWA) failed to recognise the host community's sense of dispossession.<sup>21</sup> WRY did little on its own account to close this gap in sites of displacement between refugees and non-refugees, either in Europe, the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East or the Far East. Where the gap was closed, it was because other factors came into play, in particular the rapid economic growth that contributed to the betterment of conditions in West Germany, Hong Kong and India during the later 1950s and early 1960s. Until this happened, the boundary between the camp and civil society remained starkly defined rather than blurred or porous. WRY had no answer to this kind of border demarcation, and subsequent campaigns have also struggled to break down these barriers.<sup>22</sup>

As indicated above, WRY helped to connect local communities with the wider world, sometimes with lasting consequences for humanitarian action. That is not all. The blend of innovative campaigning, energetic organisation and theatricality that was sustained by a sense of obligation to one's fellow human beings proved effective in raising large sums of money. In 1959-60 citizens of the 'free world' listened to stories of displacement in Europe and beyond. They lobbied governments on behalf of refugees to relax the criteria for entry or to find other 'permanent solutions'. Their donations helped finance a much enhanced role for UNHCR and NGOs of various stripes. WRY also helped to give rise to other campaigns, in particular to Amnesty International ('What – asked Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty – about a World Year against political imprisonment?') and Freedom from Hunger. In the UK a glossy government booklet suggested how the issue of world hunger might be handled

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Erving Goffman: between discourse in the abstract and face-to-face interaction', *Economy and Society*, 33, no. 3 (2004), 277-302.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945-1951* (Cornell University Press, 1998); Anna Holian, 'Displacement and the postwar reconstruction of education: Displaced Persons at the UNRRA University of Munich, 1945-1948', *Contemporary European History*, 17, no. 2 (1998), 167-95; Lynellyn D. Long, *Ban Vinai: the Refugee Camp* (Columbia University Press, 1993); Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago University Press, 1995); Tania Kaiser, 'Songs, discos and dancing in Kiryandongo, Uganda', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32, no. 2 (2006), 183-202.

<sup>21</sup> Ilana Feldman, 'Difficult distinctions: refugee law, humanitarian practice and political identification in Gaza', *Cultural Anthropology*, 22, no.1 (2007), 129-69.

<sup>22</sup> UN efforts to promote long-term economic development, in order to assist refugees and host communities, need to be understood in this light. This history has yet to be written.

in British schools: the history syllabus adopted by one exam board included studying the UN and inviting candidates to write an account of Oxfam and the World Health Organisation. A 'world educational programme' was adopted in 50 countries in the hope it would stimulate a 'consciousness of the unity of mankind and of the need for world cooperation'. WRY thus had an afterlife in helping to encourage international and transnational humanitarian enterprise. When read alongside the history of Amnesty, the campaign for a world refugee year showed the advantages as well as the limitations of engaging with states. Amnesty demonstrated a less timid approach. But Amnesty and WRY alike fought shy of addressing the mainsprings of population displacement or the root causes of oppression. The emphasis in both cases was on humanitarian assistance and addressing past wrongs. We probably need to look elsewhere – for example to Médecins sans Frontières – for an example of a campaigning organisation that seeks to break the mould.<sup>23</sup> Whereas Amnesty focuses on the individual victim of political persecution and MSF does not fight shy of criticising states that violate human rights, organisations that campaign on behalf of refugees face the challenge of trying to acknowledge the importance of each individual while confronting the scale of displacement, negative public attitudes and the power vested in the modern state.

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What, then, was the broader significance of WRY? The campaign had important achievements to its credit. It created a 'splash', particularly in Western Europe and North America, and gained support across the non-Communist political spectrum. It brought material improvements to the lives of many refugees, even if the scale of such improvement was less than its supporters hoped, particularly when it came to resettling refugees in third countries. It helped inspire campaigns on behalf of political prisoners, world hunger and even apartheid. But on the debit side, the extent of participation from country to country was uneven, and in truth the campaign raised public awareness in relatively few countries. Perhaps the harshest charge that can be levelled at WRY is that it expressed a kind of ignorant concern. Public interest in refugees remained superficial; a fairly thin veneer of historical awareness was probably the best that WRY could sustain. This was evident from the outset – consider for example the publicity that helped to prompt the campaign in the first place [**illustration from *Onslaught***]. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that most NGOs avoided a thorough engagement with the politics of population displacement and immigration, because they had a stake in keeping on the right side of governments that facilitated access to refugee groups and enabled them to demonstrate their usefulness. Campaigners and relief workers operated inside the refugee-hosting state, but did not challenge the principle of non-intervention in another country's internal affairs. States could be shamed, but ultimately they operated a tight discretionary programme of resettlement and certainly guarded their sovereignty jealously.

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<sup>23</sup> Tom Buchanan, 'The truth will set you free': the making of Amnesty International', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37, no. 4 (2002), 575-97; Peter Redfield, 'A less modest witness: collective advocacy and motivated truth in a medical humanitarian movement', *American Ethnologist*, 33, no. 1 (2006), 3-26; Bertrand Taithe, 'Reinventing (French) universalism: religion, humanitarianism and the French doctors', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 12, no. 2 (2004), 147-59.

WRY belongs to the history of engagement with crises of population displacement. Generations of privileged and prosperous citizens have come to know refugees, usually without meeting them face to face. The humanitarian gesture may discourage a fuller commitment to understanding the causes of displacement and acknowledging the wishes of displaced people. It is clear that refugees enjoyed only a walk-on part during WRY, and this is part of a broader pattern of dismissal. With no sign of the world's displaced population diminishing in number, attempts to assist refugees continue to entail speaking on their behalf. Ironically, having lost homes, status and loved ones, refugees all too often find that expressions of sympathy and efforts to relieve suffering have not renounced the tactics of appropriation.