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The genealogy of a political concept

'Refugee' or the Europeanization of the world system

Matthieu Rey

Summer 2015: a massive flow of people mostly from Syria and Iraq reached the European borders of Greece, Hungary and Italy. This displacement had been triggered by the Syrian war and the evolution of European migration policies. The refugee displacement wave seemed to come as a surprise to most observers. Journalists were faced with the dilemma of how to qualify the phenomenon. Were these people migrants or refugees? The two terms, often used imprecisely in newspapers and mainstream media, carry different connotations. 'Refugee' describes the unfortunate individual forced to take the hard road by 'external' circumstances. From the hegemonic perspective of humanitarians that dominated relations between the West and the rest of the world, such unhappy circumstances might be seen to justify the movement – even if these people reached Europe. On the other hand, the term 'migrant' evokes a variety of associations, from a person looking for job and better living conditions to the anonymous traveller who decides to enter Europe. The motivations associated with migration were harshly criticized in European public opinion. This chapter will trace the historical emergence of the 'refugee' to understand how the term has acquired positive connotations, in contrast to 'migrant'. This categorization reflected a long-term process of Europeanization of international attitudes towards population movements.

In 1951, the United Nations adopted a universal definition of 'refugee' in the United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees. For the first time, an international institution clarified who could qualify for refugee status. This concluded several decades during which authorities had to contend with sudden and massive movements of certain groups from their homelands towards neighbouring countries. Scholars have rightly considered that the First World

War and the consequences it had in terms of population movements caused the authorities considerable concern. In the aftermath of the war, a dual process affected the category of 'refugee'. First, humanitarian activities expanded in an attempt to resolve various crises such as famine and homelessness. Second, acknowledging that the failure of dialogue between the Great Nations had triggered the catastrophe of 1914, a new platform for debate was created. The new League of Nations was designed to pacify the international order; one of its duties echoed the recent expansion of humanitarian activities.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of the Nansen passport: the first international document that allowed stateless people to travel (Piana 2013). This first step paved the way for the 1951 refugee status (Hathaway 1984). However, while suggesting that forced migrations were nothing new in 1919, previous research did not explain how a particular word – refugee – came to encapsulate new meanings through the institutionalization of a status. Other scholars have focused on the emergence of a certain type of refugee, mostly in the context of nineteenth-century European revolutionary upheaval (Polasky 2023). Both academic trends highlighted the particularities of the 'refugee': this was a politically defined category that ascribed these people a specific position within a broader context of tensions and crisis.

This chapter extends this argument by showing how the category of 'refugee' was first and foremost a European creation, and how its introduction into the world system in the post-war era engendered other meanings connected with the European order. In this way, the term 'refugee' was part of the adoption of sectarian criteria that permitted the Great Powers to define various populations as a 'people' – in other words, as a potential sovereign entity unified by a particular identity. The evolution of the meaning directly echoed the extension of European power over the world, and its particular expression as the 'Eastern question' in the Mediterranean context. At the same time, in the colonial forms of subjection, authorities started to refine their categories. This process led them to classify human groups. From this perspective, the expansion of British power over Southern Africa helps illuminate a worldwide dynamic.

This process needs further attention as it has framed the capacities of current states to cope with Western order and to build an original response. The Europeanization of the categories largely explained how the Middle East became a 'warehouse' of refugees. This region in relation with the European colonial expansion also played a central role in determining which authorities qualified human groups as refugees, and which groups were denied from this notion. From this perspective, this chapter does not explore the motilities in themselves,

the mechanisms of movement, but rather how relations between internal and external stages in Europe underpinned the emergence of two broad kinds of mobile people – the migrant and the refugee. This dialogue reflected how in framing of the word ‘refugee’ were echoes of a certain political philosophy which defined the space of the opportunities for the actors and the political entities outside Europe. In this matter, discussing the unconsciousness of the refugee brings to light what the notion carries and how the ‘others’, mostly the Arab states and actors in civil society today, developed an agency with regard to what the notion offers. Local actors have since captured what opportunities these definitions of the refugee offered in their bargaining with international agencies and foreign partners. In order to understand how and why the concept of ‘refugee’ became prevalent as a political tool in the late twentieth century, this chapter explores the archaeology of the word and its meaning.

The chapter will build upon three main sets of work. First, it follows the new approach towards migrations provided by Robert Zetter (Zetter 2007). From this perspective, similar reasons trigger economic and forced migrations, blurring the two categories beyond their formal jurisdictional understanding. Migration studies insist on the performativity of the norm. Second, the chapter engages with Mahmoud Mamdani, showing how the European engagement with African populations was underpinned by two main categories: race and tribe (the latter used as a designation only for Black populations) (Mamdani 2015). Finally, this chapter builds upon the work of Henry Laurens, who has explored the key moment of the Grecian crisis in the 1820s during which the Eastern question emerged (Laurens 2017). This dynamic entangled the West into local conflicts of the Ottoman lands. It also affected the representation of who deserved the right to be a people. This scholarship helps refine the concept of the refugee. This chapter is built on extensive analysis of different kinds of documents in which the word ‘refugee’ appears, an exploration that reveals different temporalities.

The European creation of the ‘refugee’

Migrations and forced displacements constitute historical phenomena that go back to the very first human societies. It was not until the modern era and the emergence of the state as a sovereign territorial authority over large populaces, however, that specific categories were defined for these groups. The connection between state-building and ‘refugee’ was made explicit when the word was first integrated into English and French documents. By charting the mention of

'refugees' in such texts, it is possible to draw up a chronology of the term from the moment of its inception to the beginning of the twentieth century:

Figure 1.1 allows us to identify three main periods. From the late seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the term was only to be found in a few texts. The usage of the term then increased significantly in the 1830s and the 1850s. On the eve of the twentieth century, the term had become common in many documents, reflecting various circumstances. The outline of this chronology and considerations of the broader historical context underline the connection between the use of the term 'refugee' and the evolution of state policies towards foreigners.

Both French and English dictionaries indicate a shift in the meaning of 'refugee' at the end of the seventeenth century. Until then, 'refuge' had meant shelter, while 'refugee' was only really used in a zoological context.² As of the 1690s, all mention of 'refugees' referred to the same group: the French Protestants deported from France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Louis XIV decided to suppress all rights and protections afforded to Protestants in France that had been granted at the end of the War of Religions in 1589. The king's decision sought to homogenize the population by forging a single sectarian bond. However, in the context of late seventeenth-century Europe, it created a breach in the new order. After 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia paved the way for establishing peace after a long period of religious struggles. It declared *cuius regio, eius religio*: common sectarian bonds should unify the king and his subjects to build a sovereign territory or a political entity. At the same time, a new term entered the dictionary: sectarianism (Breuilly 2011). This concept specified that social groups should be defined predominantly by their confessional or religious identity, irrespective of other characteristics. In this sense, the Peace of Westphalia sectarianized the European order by equating sectarian bonds and



Figure 1.1 Occurrence of 'refugee' or 'réfugié' in digitalized texts from 1800 to 1920.¹

national identity. Louis XIV's decision contributed to this process by eliminating those who refused to be Catholic. This decision was a milestone in building the French monarchy following two key principles: the king represented and acted for the state and the nation unified under his tutelage echoed the state. Building a monarchical and Catholic kingdom created a *de facto* excluded group, the Protestant.

Yet on the international stage, deportations and forced exiles made it necessary to find a name for these groups who were neither French subjects nor integrated into another state. At the same time, the French process of homogenization did not differ from other European experiments. Within the Christian populations, those who did not belong to the king's faith had to move. This process led to two different outcomes. As observed by Zolberg, refugees were those of the refuge, that is, a sub-Christian group recognized by others; while at the same time European authorities denied the Jews, the same category (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo 1989: 7–8). This twin process – sectarianization of the European order and the emergence of a legitimated migrant group – went hand in hand. Thus, whenever these people settled elsewhere, they were described as refugees. From Cape Town to the Thirteen Colonies, writers referred to 'refugees' or 'French Protestant refugees'.

This single meaning was challenged at the very end of the eighteenth century. Thomas Jefferson and other American authors used 'refugees' to describe groups in favour of Great Britain. On the eve of the American Revolution, divisions between refugees and autochthonous people were rife throughout the population living in the colony. This distinction was politically motivated by the fight between the colonies and the state. Those who refused to adopt the new principle and become part of 'we, the people' were designated as refugees. This precise moment revealed the progressive entanglement of the several meanings attributed to 'refugees'. In the words of Jefferson and his compatriots, refugees were either a political group (partisans of the British king) or a 'national' entity (the British living in the new United States). This slight difference underscores the slow evolution of the meaning of nations, citizens and their counterparts, the refugees. As the new republic established a common white male citizenship, the authorities regarded anyone living within its territory that refused the new order as a foreigner and representative of the old colonial power. This change was part of the Europeanization of the world. In dialogue with European authorities – the British and their Canadian colonial counterpart – the white Christian politicians of the recently born United States designated a group as a nation within their state – the British who refused the new order. Westernization and Europeanization

were entangled in this dynamic. This process moreover underpinned a conceptual shift: from a sectarian definition, it became associated with political and ethnical origins. A 'nation' in exile might pretend to be refugees.

The concept of 'refugees' during the Age of Enlightenment remained deeply attached to the traditional understanding of 'nation' as a group of people unified either by a location (a city), by sectarian bonds or by profession. Individuals designated as refugees were not viewed positively or negatively but were rather excluded from the general body politic. At the same time, the notion was used very cautiously compared to the extent of population movements, which multiplied in different areas during the second half of the seventeenth century. Soldiers, priests, merchants and, to some degree, peasants started to migrate across different continents (Osterhammel 2015). But most written documents spoke of travellers, settlers or adventurers, rather than migrants or refugees. A new era began in 1815.

European order and the balance of Great Powers

On the eve of the nineteenth century, several changes affected the status of the 'subject' as an inhabitant of a state. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars profoundly altered considerations of the 'people' as a cultural and political unit, the link between subjects and authorities, and finally population movements. Previous understandings of what it meant to be a 'nation' vanished and the term began to refer to a political community unified by cultural bonds. This implied that 'foreigners' and 'subjects' were two different groups: 'foreigners' had the right to live outside their own country if they were in possession of a passport. Finally in 1815, the Great European powers tried to settle peace in Europe during the Congress of Vienna. Without entering into a detailed explanation of the discussions, the negotiators reached three major conclusions: (1) stability in Europe meant the preservation of the established states and their rulers; (2) if future continental conflict was to be avoided there had to be a 'concert of nations', through international conferences between the representatives of the Great Powers; (3) slavery would be declared illegal, a resolution which constituted the first 'universal' European decision. The combination of these three determinations not only initiated a new relationship between Europe and the world in the age of European colonization but also created new perspectives on European stages. In parallel, the start of the Industrial Revolution provoked a massive influx of rural inhabitants to

European cities along with population movements across the newly established borders. These political, economic and cultural dynamics reached a climax in the late 1820s, further complicating the question of how to distinguish a refugee from a migrant.

The question was debated in two different arenas: within each country and at the European level. Naturally these two theatres of political discourse were linked. For example, the 'refugee' question arose in France due to the events in Poland. However, the discourse differed from what people thought. Successive French legislation tracks the changes that occurred between 1830 and 1850.³ Three evolutions provided the background to these laws. First, the authorities who rose to power after the glorious revolution of 27–9 July 1830 tried to encapsulate the spirit of the French Revolution by instituting a liberal monarchic order. Eighteen years later, a new revolution challenged the political order. Most discussions revolved around political representation, the rights of citizens and the structure of power. In parallel, European insurgencies, predominantly in Russian, German, Ottoman and Austrian lands, echoed the French demand for the establishment of political order based on the 'people'; the deposed leaders appealed to international solidarity and sought shelter. Finally, these two decades saw people flocking to the new industrial centres as the old labour market crumbled. Together these dynamics fuelled heightened tensions that were reflected in the legislation.

From 1830 to 1850, the volume of decrees, laws and administrative orders amounted to several hundred pages. A few examples broadly illustrate how debates concerning the 'refugee' question framed the content of the law:

I will simplify as much as possible the writing of the account. (. . .) The account will present: 1. the numeric situation, by nation and by class of refugee, the degree of help to be given according to the new quota. The result will be shown in a column entitled 'population per nation'.

This instruction sent by the Comte d'Argout to the provincial *préfets* (state representatives) exemplified the first method of recognizing refugees. Some foreigners found shelter in France and were offered help and support. The circulars mostly gave details of the procedures for counting and calculating the necessary resources, which explains the second circular:

Foreigners arrive at the border every day claiming they have been forced to leave their country in order to avoid political persecution, and demanding subsidies as soon as they touch French soil. The ease with which such individuals gain admission to our territory, whose legitimacy is guaranteed solely by their word,

constitutes a severe abuse which in the interests of public security and those of genuine refugees, needs to be put to an end.

I therefore recommend, Sir, that henceforth you take special care to ensure entry into your department is forbidden to any traveller not in possession of a legal passport, or unable to justify in a satisfactory manner the impossibility of obtaining one from the authorities of his country.

The question of population movements led to interactions between the internal and external stages. While authorities had to recognize refugees – as a consequence of the 1820–30 turmoil – they attempted to place strict limits on the extent of their obligations. Controlling migration and defining the status of refugees became closely linked. The understanding of what it meant to be a ‘refugee’ remained closely related to the concept of ‘nation’ as a legitimate national group. Carlists from Spain, Polish insurgents and others received subsidies and papers allowing them to stay in France. At the same time, travellers were suspected of wandering into the country, creating trouble and disturbing the public order. A refugee, then, was a member of a ‘people’ who was no longer able to live in their country. A shift took place that placed increased emphasis on national identity, as defined by those in power, over sectarian bonds.

Like most of the Great Powers, from the 1830s onwards the post-Vienna order posed difficulties for France. On the one hand, the European peace depended on agreement between the powers, thereby curbing any desire the different populations might have had of contesting those powers. When Polish officers rebelled against the Russian authorities, they upheld the constitutional goals of French political groups in their fight to establish their sovereign nation. While France welcomed these Polish dissidents, according them the status of refugees, the authorities could not be seen to support the insurrection. The reasons behind the recognition of their status related to broader discussions and dynamics revolving around exactly who should be recognized as a ‘people’.

Changes in the Mediterranean underscored the gradual emergence of identifiable ‘peoples’. Two different cases occurred simultaneously. First, in July 1830, French troops invaded Algiers and occupied the coast; France then started to colonize the country. The task of defining the status of local inhabitants sparked debates in French institutions. For some, adopting the ‘American solution’ – extermination – seemed the best way to avoid future trouble. Others argued that local inhabitants should become subjects but not citizens. They would be treated as minors. All these debates presumed that colonization (the transfer of sovereignty) of Muslim populations was legitimate, as no ‘people’ were living in

the country – that is, inhabitants who might claim political rights. A few months earlier, thanks to the concert of nations, France, Great Britain and Russia had forced the Ottoman Empire to recognize Greek independence under the London Protocol – the second pertinent case for the present discussion. In real terms, the European powers recognized a sectarian group (Orthodox) living in a particular geographic region (the Peloponnese) as a people who consequently had the right to be independent and sovereign. The main status criteria to emerge from the Greek War of Independence were sectarian belonging and racial origin: white Christians could constitute a ‘people’ as body politics and therefore be recognized as sovereign or ‘refugees’ if obliged to leave their lands.⁴

The outcomes of these two events created distinctions that divided the world’s population into subjects who were free to migrate but not to become political actors, and people who were free to claim refuge. The issues these distinctions raised were echoed in different contexts. No contemporary documents mentioned refugees in other parts of the world, such as Asia or Latin America. There was one exception: the situation on the borders of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope.

I have been assured by Dr Smith, one of the best-informed and most enlightened travellers who have lived among the people of South Africa, that in that country every tribe of the native races, who have submitted to social regulations, however imperfect, and have acquired some wealth by the cultivation of the soil or by pasturage, have, in their immediate neighbourhood, hordes of outcasts or refugees who hover on their borders, and live by depredation, or on the precarious produce of the chase, or the spontaneous fruits of the earth, roaming through forest and desert places. The Bushmen are thus the outcasts of the Hottentots; and Dr Smith has clearly proved that this is the real origin of the Bushman race. Many tribes of Kafirs have also hordes of outcasts answering to the Bushmen in their vicinity, who rob and plunder strangers, and wander in pursuit of an uncertain livelihood. The Fingoes, who were subject to the Kosah Kafirs, appear to have been a tribe of this description. Civilised nations, like those of Europe, imprison or put to death unruly people, who cannot be kept in subjection to the laws of society, or they transport them beyond seas; a greater number transport themselves to the colonies and elsewhere. But in countries such as those to which I have alluded, there is no similar resource.⁵

This last example highlighted the connection between civilization, peoples, refugees and population movements. Those referred to as ‘kaffirs’, the Black population on the borders, did not meet Western criteria. They could not be considered refugees in the new European sense of the word. However, new

categories inside the African tribes received the qualification of refugees. Understanding this point requires a quick overview of the dynamics in Southern Africa. First, the foregoing document cited refers to the explorations of Dr Smith, conducted nearly fifteen years before the published article.⁶ As Etherington highlights, this travel formed part of a broader enterprise to study the borderlands of the Cape Colony. Movements of population transformed demographic realities from the end of the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century (Etherington 2002). These movements came mostly from the Cape and the distant eastern coastline, the region of present-day Kwa-Zulu Natal. On the one hand, what was called 'Great Trek' designated a progressive expansion of European settlement and the different wars connected to this movement. On the other hand, it denoted the internal struggles between political entities (mostly Ndwande, Ngwane, Cele, Hlubi) pushed as a result of displacements from the coast and towards the interior (Hamilton and Wright 2017; Rasmussen 1978). New groups, moreover, came into contact with the expansive European powers.

The encounter was accompanied by intense discursive production to determine whether the new political entities on the Natal coast belonged to the 'civilized' world or barbaric realm. While battles ensued between neighbouring polities and the new ruler of the northern part of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Shaka, pushing them in all directions to find shelter, the new European settlement around Durban, along with the British forces pushing through the frontier of the Eastern Cape, precipitated further investigation from the colonial authorities to determine if they could ally with the new Zulu kingdom or if it represented a threat. As Carolyn Hamilton revealed, the debate quickly pinpointed the barbaric character of the new political entity, a way to undermine its legitimacy as being a legitimate body politic (Hamilton 1998). At the same time, the arrival of groups such as the Fingo (Mfengu) – a European designation for people fleeing Natal – pushed colonial authorities to recognize them as victims of barbaric power. Therefore, they progressively became integrated groups that potentially could become viable polities. But, as they faced barbaric violence and defeat, they were forced into migration. This recognition paved the way for establishing 'refugees' laws' (1854,1858), to determine the status of Black local migrant in the Natal Province. Three interrelated processes explain the use of 'refugees' to qualify these groups: the distinction between barbaric and non-barbaric political entities, the facts of forced migration and, finally, British attempts to determine which human group may become legitimate polities or people.

Following up the discussion of the works of Laurens and Mamdani, the use of the term 'refugee' points to a novel way of qualifying human groups. Three criteria

were combined to determine whether forced migrants – who could also be part of economically driven movements – could receive the title of refugee. First, this group needed to belong to certain sectarian or tribal groups which could serve as intermediaries between those acknowledged as part of civilization and those disqualified as barbarians. Second, refugees referred to members of potential body politics. Third, groups qualifying as refugees participated in distinguishing communities as a result of the expansion of colonial study. Travellers, explorers, artists and scientists all contributed to the study of people on the borderlands of European colonies and territories. From the Mediterranean Sea to Southern Africa, similar modes of categorization emerged which attributed the status of refugee to certain human groups with particular sectarian and racial identities. Discussions regarding refugees and migrants also reflected both the amplification of public opinion through the press, media and other publications, and the new humanitarian concern for southern territories.

Around the 1860s, the meaning of the term ‘refugee’ changed somewhat from that of the pre-revolutionary era. Authorities recognized people or nations in exile through the allocation of resources. The first criterion centred on whether or not a group of individuals belonged to a ‘people’ or recognizable political entity. But as European affairs showed, the predominant criteria remained racial and sectarian. White Christians could constitute a ‘people’ and found a state while others were predominantly rejected from the public sphere and classified as minors and subjects. Thus, the initial meaning of ‘refugee’ continued to influence contemporary understandings of the term. In the post-Westphalia order, the sectarian identity of the Huguenots on the European stage was translated into national belonging, which equated on the world stage to being part of the white Christian population. New developments related to the Eastern question affected this initial understanding and paved the way for the emergence of a new status in 1919.

Oppressed peoples and war: The emergence of refugees

Over the course of the 1860s, recorded uses of the term ‘refugee’ increased from dozens to hundreds of documents. Looking at the different texts, several circumstances are described as having provoked population movements that created ‘refugees’. As previously established, ‘nations’ in exile were granted refugee status. From the 1890s, Russian Jews were classed as refugees when arriving in the United States or England. They were designated either as ‘Jew’

or 'Russian', showing the close connection between sectarian and national bonds in the public imagination.⁷ A new meaning emerged from the American context: 'refugees' became people displaced due to conflict, who mostly settled in cities and camps. The authorities remained principally concerned with health issues, as they considered these individuals as potential carriers of disease.⁸ This understanding of 'refugee' appeared in certain publications around the time the British entered Alexandria in 1882.⁹ Reports referred either to 'refugees' secured in Malta and others places by the navy or to the return of 'refugees', meaning the displaced people who had left the city during the brief war period. The medical and humanitarian point of view also emerged in this publication, a perspective clearly adopted by another text in relation to the population fleeing persecution in Barotseland who were also qualified as 'refugees'. Lastly, several texts adopted the term (although often with only one use in several hundreds of pages) to refer to individuals fleeing conflict in Asia (two occasions in Korea, one in the Safavid Empire, three in Jamaica).

In the mid-nineteenth century, the range of those who qualified as 'refugees' appeared to expand, revealing several new dynamics that affected public opinion, the status of various human groups and the changing conflict and power relations between Europe and the rest of the world. These different factors were interlinked but each factor deeply modified the status accorded to a 'people'. First, technical military expertise, more widespread conflict and the industrialization of war and its consequences all blurred the boundaries between military and civil populations. If people fleeing warzones had been a very common phenomenon, responses changed in several respects during the 1860s. Two dynamics intersected to provide a new framework for war activities. The medical improvements necessitated by the industrialization of war were accompanied by a broadening of the scope of medical concerns. People affected by war became the object of a new rhetoric concerning such health issues as disease and epidemics. The new by-products of war involved new actors. From this perspective, refugees came to represent something different. They were victims, or what we might today call civilian casualties. In parallel, the cruelty of European warfare and the denunciation of barbarity in general – mostly against slavery – led to the constitution of humanitarian discourses. Massacres and conflict had to be controlled, either through intervention or remedial action. With the emergence of humanitarian concerns in the previous decade (for evidence, we need to look no further than Delacroix's painting *The Massacre at Chios*), humanitarian discourses and practices became more technical, adhered to accepted definitions of 'victimhood' and were supported

by new organizations specialized in offering aid and rescue, such as the Red Cross. However, the organization's main activities, as highlighted by their reports, concerned war and medicine; not one report mentioned refugees between 1870 and 1910. In addition to this, several texts referred to people fleeing natural disasters as refugees, such as those affected by earthquakes in Turkey and Italy.

This use of the term played a crucial role in improving the image and fostering a more sympathetic understanding of what it meant to be a refugee. The violence of war introduced an element of inevitability and highlighted the innocence of people facing modern means of destruction. In other contexts, such as the situation in Barotseland, the presence of refugees justified the civilizing mission in which colonizers claimed to be engaged. Nonetheless, this new understanding was not matched by the passing of any new legislation. On the contrary, giving somebody refugee status meant that medical authorities removed this individual from the political realm.

In parallel, as a consequence of discussions regarding refugees, the concept of 'asylum' acquired a new meaning. One text explained: 'Neither nation has ever tolerated the idea of the surrender of political refugees for trial in their own country. This is all that is generally meant by the "right of asylum".'¹⁰ But what were the conditions for becoming a political refugee? Was it exclusively a question of political motivation? On the contrary, links made between 'Jews' and 'refugees' in several documents highlight how the notion of sectarianism was refined during the second half of the nineteenth century. When talking about the Jewish Russians generally, or when referring specifically to a group of people that had recently arrived, the port authorities spoke of refugees, in the press and in parliament, when discussing the plight of Jewish people fleeing the Russian Empire. This extension of the concept echoed the word's original seventeenth-century meaning by defining a sectarian group as refugees. It also mirrored the long process of emancipation of the Jews in the Western world (Laurens 1999). From this perspective, mostly in the discussion with the Ottoman Empire legislative treatment of the Jews became a criterion to ascribe a degree in a fictional hierarchy of civilization to the southern countries: the communities giving maximal freedom to the Jews were recognized as civilized. Progressively, this move and the rise of anti-Semitism led authorities to acknowledge Jewish groups as potential body politics. Thus, most discussions concerning Jewish 'refugees' revolved around conditions of asylum and protection. Their refugee status was, in essence, recognition of the existence of the Jewish 'people', as outlined earlier.

In spite of these additional meanings, contemporary reports neglected large groups of displaced populations. There were, for instance, significant population flows from the Balkans and the Caucasus to Anatolia. Similarly, rebellion in Asia sparked departures. An examination of the categories used to describe events in the Ottoman Empire highlights the clear difference in attitudes to refugees depending on their geographic and ethnic origins. From the European point of view, Hungarians, Bulgarians and Greeks could all be refugees. The Cherkess expelled from the Caucasus and the Bosnians from Anatolia were, however, not afforded the same status (Chatty 2017). On the contrary, Ottoman authorities granted them with full rights provided they followed the imperial rules (Shaw 1977: 141–6). This differentiation coincided with a new relationship between the Great Powers and the Ottoman authorities. Since the fifteenth century, special privileges had allowed France and Great Britain to protect non-Muslim groups in the Ottoman Empire. During the nineteenth century, there was increasing pressure on the Ottoman authorities to push for reforms, while at the same time consular privileges protected large groups of Christian and Jews. These individuals became both Ottoman and subjects of French, British or Russian protection. This situation was made more complicated in 1878. At the Congress of Berlin, the Great Powers requested that the Ottoman authorities protect the Armenians (Sluglett and Yavuz 2011). A new national sectarian group emerged from these debates, but their representatives did not receive any specific protection from the Great Powers. However, Armenians progressively entered into the European debates as a potential body politic. However, those who migrated in the wake of the massacres that took place in 1894–6 were not considered refugees.¹¹

On the eve of the First World War, the meaning of refugee had thus shifted slightly since its first use in the late seventeenth century. The term now referred to various different groups who could claim to belong to a given ‘people’, largely defined by sectarian and racial criteria. When war broke out, the authorities were suddenly confronted with new challenges. Within a few weeks, large concentrations of people were under fire. The intensity of the conflict forced massive displacement throughout Europe (to the east and west) and elsewhere. Moreover, the play of alliances drove certain groups into exile. As Annette Becker reminds us, the French authorities had great difficulty adopting a consistent vocabulary to describe these displaced people, recognizing refugees as potential beneficiaries of help (Becker 2001). On the Ottoman front, there were other dynamics in play. In every country at war, foreign communities aroused suspicion and as the war got underway different administrative measures were taken to ensure control was

maintained. In the Ottoman Empire on the eve of the war, some foreign nationals were able to leave the country. However, the start of the conflict complicated travel. In this context, the British authorities held intense discussions to try and decide how to deal with these 'refugees.' A closer look at archival documents reveals the characteristics of the displaced people, who were predominantly members of two sectarian groups: the Jews and the Armenians. Hosting them in the region created technical problems until the building of camps near Port Said.¹² This last initiative demonstrated the extent to which the war blurred the lines between who could and who couldn't be considered a refugee. It also changed the overall significance of the term – in part by returning to its original meaning.

When the war ended, there was a massive flow of prisoners of war and displaced people throughout Europe and the Middle East, preventing any one national authority from being able to tackle the refugee issue. In parallel, international organizations such as the ICRC or Near East Relief were only able to focus on groups in certain areas. Five peace treaties were signed with the defeated states and a new international organization emerged: the League of Nations. One of the League's duties in 1919 was to deal with groups categorized as 'refugees.' The institutionalization of the category of refugee was undertaken through several different stages. First, Fridtjof Nansen was appointed as High Commissioner for Refugees. In collaboration with colleagues, he examined the situation of three main groups: the Russians, the Bulgarians and the Armenians. Rescue and emergency measures helped to settle these people in host countries. After intense negotiations, the League of Nations finally issued a new passport for the Russians and the Armenians who had fled Russia (then the USSR) and Turkey that would allow them to travel. This initiative represented the very last step in the process of analysis concerning the Eastern question: certain displaced groups were acknowledged as 'a people' and therefore gained the right to be recognized as refugees in exile, but the vast majority were not eligible for this status. Finally, in 1923 the League of Nations delegated responsibility for travellers, migrants and displaced people who were not refugees to a new international institution: the International Labour Organization. This institutionalized for the first time the previously opposing categories of 'migrant' and 'refugee.'

Final thoughts

A long-term history of the meaning of 'refugee' highlights several implicit dynamics. First, the labelling (or not) of groups as refugees is inextricably linked

to the history of European state-building. Following the Peace of Westphalia, sectarian identity emerged as the core element to achieving subject status and sovereignty. Changes around the time of the American Revolution and the later European uprisings provided a new context and therefore gave new meanings and practical value to being a refugee. Authorities used the concept to define people belonging to supposedly European national groups such as the Italians and the Polish, even though Poland and Italy did not exist. This recognition meant support had to be offered to these people. However, further discussions concerning other peoples around the world highlighted an implicit assumption underpinning this system of categorization: only white Christian groups could be classified as refugees. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed important growth in the use of the term and its signification. Two different dynamics changed its connotations. By referring to people affected by wars and natural catastrophes as refugees, reports on these events created a more sympathetic image of refugees as innocent victims, emphasizing the neutrality of the term and its potential implementation as a social-scientific category. In administrative discourse, the term 'refugee' was used solely to designate specific groups, mostly based on their sectarian identity. The First World War accelerated the development of refugee status by translating this new sympathetic understanding through a strong institutionalized basis with the creation of a new international organization. This long history, therefore, highlights how European intellectual categories underpinned the new international order from 1919.

This chapter has aimed to uncover the prejudices framing the notion of the refugees. The long-term history highlights the connection between this word, European expansion and its political outcome. It mainly emphasizes that acknowledging somebody as a refugee was part of a broader process of defining which human group was a potential body politic. Two criteria interplayed, race and sectarian identity, with a progressive extension of the scope of potential 'people'. These two criteria also determined the relation between imperial authorities and the different countries on which the West established its control, or in which Europe claimed to play a humanitarian role. Therefore, in the course of uprisings or political revolts, Western authorities progressively accorded white, Christians groups both the status of potential body politics and, for those in exile, refugees. This status was progressively extended to other groups and situations: displaced white people in the United States during the Secession War; Jews, victims of pogroms; and finally, during the First World War, the Armenians. In the aftermath of the war, new legislative and transimperial

discussions settled this status as a new way to deal with the massive flow of population.

This conceptual archaeology serves to remind us how the agency of populations depended on untold criteria. From a postcolonial perspective – that is, the adoption by independent powers of colonial attitudes and habits – it also helps in understanding how the states interacted with Western powers vis-à-vis refugees to grab resources, defending their abilities to keep migrants or illegitimate mobile people while being in charge of important groups of refugees. Fierce contemporary debate concerning what qualifies an individual for the status of a refugee must thus be seen as linked to debates that have raged since the concept's inception and throughout its subsequent evolution.

Notes

- 1 The present graph was built upon n-gramme viewer. Certainly, the graph does not determine a perfect number of occurrence (Peccatte 2012), nor a precise frequency, but rather the curve highlights clear global trends. This chapter crosses this general framework with extensive exploration of text corpus on Google and JSTOR (nineteenth century).
- 2 See <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9R1267>
- 3 See <https://asileurope.huma-num.fr/circulaires-sur-les-refugies>
- 4 See, for example, 'An appeal on behalf of the Greeks', *Bristol Selected Pamphlets*, 1824.
- 5 See, for example, Anniversary Address for 1848, to the Ethnological Society of London on the Recent Progress of Ethnology Author(s): James Cowles Prichard, *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* (1848-1856), Vol. 2 (1850), pp. 119–49.
- 6 See the report published, D. Smith, *Travels in Southern Africa*, 2 vols.
- 7 For example, Divad Sulzberger, 'The Beginnings of Russo-Jewish Immigration to Philadelphia', *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, No. 19 (1910), pp. 125–50.
- 8 Walter Wyman, R. D. Murray, Horlbeck, Robert Smalls, L. E. Cofer, H. R. Carter, F. T. Lincoln, J. L. Horsey, S. Kenan, J. J. Kinyoun, Wm. T. Jenkins, G. M. Guitéras, S. C. Wrightington, Edw. F. McSweeney and Jno. J. S. Bodgers, *Abstract of Sanitary Reports*, Vol. 8, No. 41 (13 October 1893), pp. 985–1000.
- 9 'Sanitary Arrangements on Board The Refugee Transports At Alexandria', *The British Medical Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1128 (12 August 1882), pp. 288–9.
- 10 Sedgwick, *The North American Review*, Vol. 136, No. 318 (May 1883), pp. 497–505s.

- 11 On the massacres, see Boris Adjemian et Mikaël Nïchanian, «Les massacres de l'époque hamidienne, global narratives and local approaches», *Etudes arméniennes contemporaines*, vol 1 et vol. 2 (2018). On Western responses, see Stéphanie Prévost, 'Channelling Ottoman Armenian Refugees During the Hamidian Massacres: Immigration Restrictions and British Liberal Imperial Humanitarianism at Stake (1894-1896)', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (2023), pp. 1–33.
- 12 R. G. White, *Report of an Outbreak of Pellagria amongst Armenian Refugees at Port Said, 1916–1917*.

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