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Migration and Mobility

By [Marlou Schrover](#)

There is an ongoing debate among historians whether the First World War did in fact lead to drastic changes in migration and migration policies. The war certainly resulted in numerous severe disruptions in migration patterns: while some migrations came to a standstill because of the war but reappeared once it was over, others disappeared forever and new ones began. Generally it can be said that the onset of the war led to a shift towards more control being exerted over different forms of mobility. In this respect, the war marks a definite turning point.

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Introduction

"The Refugees"

Past the marching men, where the great road runs,

Out of burning Ypres the pale women came:

One was a widow (listen to the guns!) -

She wheeled a heaped-up barrow. One walked lame

And dragged two little children at her side

Tired and coughing with the dust.

The third

Nestled a dead child on her breast and tried

To suckle him. They never spoke a word.

So they came down along the Ypres road.

A soldier stayed his mirth to watch them pass,

Turned and in silence helped them with their load,

And led them to a field and gave them bread.

I saw them hide their faces in the grass

<p style="text-align: center;">And cry, as women might when Christ was dead.</p>

This poem entitled "The Refugees" appeared in *The London Spectator* at the beginning of the First World War.[1] It describes one type of migration characteristic of World War One, namely civilians on the run, one of the many forms the displacement took.

The First World War brought on many changes in regards to mobility and migration control. This article's central concern is to investigate what changed and why, and to what extent these changes mark a pivotal moment in migration history. It starts out with a section on the debate, and then addresses some of the major changes in migration at the time of the war: the rise of scares and panics, the increased remote control, decreased mobility and increased displacement, the effect of the movement of troops, deportations, the redrawing of borders and the introduction of the Nansen passport.

The First World War as a Turning Point According to the Literature

Every major 19th century political crisis in Europe (1812, 1848, 1866, 1870) was followed by an increase in attempts to control mobility, and the First World War was no different in that respect.[2] There is an ongoing debate among academics as to whether it should be understood as a turning point when it comes to migration policies. While some emphasize continuity,[3] others understand World War I as a critical chapter in regards to migration policies but not as synonymous with the end of the long period of *laissez faire*-politics that preceded it.[4] As government control increased at all levels of society, more restrictions and control were exercised but not only in regards to migration policies. Much like in previous political crises, those laws that were already in place were enforced more strongly, though only few new ones were introduced. The war also made the shortcomings of police surveillance extremely apparent, as officials initially found themselves incapable of even identifying enemy nationals.[5] In this sense, the war was a turning point because the perceived need for migration control as a necessity of growing importance coincided with an amplified possibility to exercise control that exceeded anything that had been possible ever before.

Attempts to control migration from 1914 to 1918 were part of a bigger trend towards restricting and monitoring mobility. The attempts to enforce this control, however, were affected by the principle of reciprocity: authorities feared that if they expelled foreigners to a neighboring country, the neighboring country might retaliate and in turn expel its own foreigners across the same border. Countries looked to neighboring nations for guidance. Around 1900, the power to control migration increased, and this urge to exercise control over the mobility of people is part of what Clifford Rosenberg calls "a bureaucratic fantasy of achieving total control over society". The revolutions and wars of the 19th century, the introduction of rapid means of transport in form of the railway, and cholera epidemics coupled with a greater awareness of how contagious diseases spread contributed to the perceived

need for more control.[6] Authorities hoped to be able to control the movement of paupers and revolutionaries. Laws that were introduced in the 19th century in order to restrict and control mobility (or at least create an image that projected a sense of being in control) fell into disuse soon after they had been introduced. The desire to control migration predated the ability to do so, and the war meant immense advances in the development of elaborate bureaucracies and technologies to ensure this.[7] The impetus to register was motivated by a changing conception of nationhood. Before 1900, few efforts had been made to register people by nationality, and many people did not even know what nationality they held. Changed ideas about nationality and belonging, and the failure of states to identify enemy nationals in their own midst during the First World War popularized the idea that it was beneficial if not necessary to register people by nationality to ensure safety.

After the onset of the war, authorities in the United Kingdom installed structures that facilitated a surveillance of alien subjects at the borders and within the country. Before 1914, people had been deported for being convicted of a criminal offense (fraud, larceny or burglary). After the war, aliens were deported for violating landing, passport and registration regulations. Christiane Reinecke asserts that the year 1914 did indeed mark a turning point in the policing of immigrants in the United Kingdom but not in Germany, where controls and regulations had already been installed prior to 1914.[8]

Scares and Panics

According to Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, notions of race and nationality did not inevitably lead to exclusion; rather they often provided a variety of ideas that influenced thinking about the role assigned to foreigners in society.[9] The result was a series of scares and panics. Partly these were also the result of a fall in the price of newspapers that promoted such ideas and an increase in readership.

In the United States, the so-called "Yellow Peril"-scare (fear of Asian migrants) led to the introduction of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and the 1924 Immigration Act. The acts favored migrants from North-Western Europe. In 1910 in South Africa, the fear of Asian migrants led to the deportation of a large part of the 63,000 Chinese laborers. The "Black Peril"-scares that swept through Europe's African colonies between 1900 and 1930 also resulted in deportations and restrictions on mobility. During the Second Boer War in South Africa (1899-1902), the British deported 93,940 Dutch-speaking Boers and 24,457 Black civilians to concentration camps, where 25 percent of the Boers and 12 percent of the Black inmates died. The scale of deportation and internment of civilians in concentration camps on ethnic grounds was new, and it increased throughout the war.

A few months into World War One, an Indo-German plot to ship American weapons to India was uncovered. A revolt in India would have reduced Britain's ability to wage war on Germany, as well as on Irish nationalism.[10] Fears about this conspiracy affected the Dutch East Indies, where the Dutch

army included a rather large number of Germans, leading some to regard it as a bulwark of pro-German sympathies. Ties of friendship between Germany and Turkey were assumed to be used strategically to win over Muslim soldiers in the Dutch East Indies. It was believed that the leaders of the German community in the Dutch East Indies were planning to take over the colony once war had broken out between the Netherlands and Germany; they were allegedly inciting the Muslim community against Dutch rule. Dutch language newspapers in the colony started an anti-German campaign and called upon their readers to keep track of Germans and report their behavior. Papers set out on a *Pressefeldzug* and portrayed all Germans as spies and traitors. They suggested dismissing German soldiers from the Dutch army or at least send them to remote parts of the Archipelago. Finally it turned out that the conspiracy theories in the Dutch East Indies proved to be a hoax; the Indo-German conspiracy, however, did exist.[11]

Suspicions and distrust led to restrictions. In 1915 for instance, the International Congress of Women met in The Hague. Women's organizations had made a joint attempt to speak out and even drafted a resolution against the war. They were ridiculed in the press and called *Peacettes* (a play on "suffragettes"). President Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) called the endeavor silly and their demands futile, vague and hysterical.[12] The forty-seven delegates from the United States had great troubles getting to the Netherlands; twenty-four British delegates to the Congress had been issued passports but were stopped from going by British authorities. After the conference, female delegates traveled for five weeks through the Netherlands, England, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Italy, France, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Russia to advocate their cause. They were met with much suspicion and little support, but were nonetheless able to reach a large number of people, as well as address gatherings on their trip.[13]

After the United States entered the First World War in 1917, suspected enemy aliens were brought to Ellis Island, which had been turned into a detention center. At the end of the First World War, a fear of Communists and Socialist (or "Red Scare") spread across the country and thousands of suspected alien radicals were interned at Ellis Island, and hundreds deported based on the principle of guilt by association with any organizations advocating revolution against the federal government.[14] Revolutions in Russia, Germany and Hungary and attempted revolutions elsewhere, led to fears of revolutionary impulses which might spread to other countries. Migrants were seen as potential revolutionaries, and as terrorists fighting their wars on somebody else's soil. Controls that had been put into place during the war only slackened gradually and instead became more institutionalized. In the United States, fears of Germans were transformed into fears of Bolsheviks. The Anarchist Exclusion Act of 1918 made it possible to deport non-citizens who were believed to be advocates of revolution and anarchy. One of the 249 aliens who were deported from the United States in December 1919 was Emma Goldman (1869-1940), who had migrated in 1885 and held American citizenship. Authorities insisted, however, that her citizenship had been revoked and deported her to the Soviet Union. Legally, it had been possible to refuse "anarchists" at the border since the introduction of the first federal immigration law of 1882. Deportation of persons who had been living in the United States for over thirty years and held citizenship was a new addition and clearly a

consequence of the "Red Scare" and the war.

As the war drew to a close, the influenza pandemic of 1918 began to spread, ultimately killing 25 to 100 million people worldwide. The flu could spread so rapidly because people were weak and hygiene was poor in camps, because troops were returning home and large numbers of people were on the move. The disease was commonly referred to as the "Spanish flu" because the first cases were identified in Spain. German soldiers called it the "Flanders fever." In the United States, some people believed the Germans had spread the disease on purpose.

Remote Control

The gap between the desire and the ability to control was partly filled by private institutions, including the transatlantic shipping companies.[15] European shipping lines made a profit on every person they could bring into the United States, and a loss on the transport back to Europe of passengers who were rejected by the authorities. Before the war, shipping companies circulated information on U.S. immigration laws and practices via a network of agents in Europe. At the ports of departure, company doctors examined passengers and tried to identify people who would be rejected upon arrival in the United States. Shipping line employees or agents were also checking passports at borders around Europe and stopping people. When war broke out, this activity fell away initially but it was resumed immediately and with renewed enthusiasm when the war ended. Changes across Europe during the war had also increased the activities of the shipping companies.

In the new Hungarian state, members of the eugenics movement argued against taking back the migrants that had been rejected by American authorities. The Hungarian Ministry of War was to make sure that re-migration to Hungary would be "eugenically and hygienically controlled."[16] At the Russian–German border and at the port of Antwerp in Belgium, shipping companies stopped transit migrants who were deemed medically unacceptable by American standards. The shipping companies became subcontractors for the American authorities, and Belgian authorities made shipping companies in Antwerp responsible for the American remote migration control.[17] The Red Star Line in Antwerp (one of the major shipping companies) expanded its buildings and converted them into a high speed migrant processing plant which was finished in 1922. It consisted of a maze-like trajectory through a two-story warehouse. The hygienic circuit was on the ground floor: men and women were separated, people were separated from their luggage, and everything was disinfected, with people passing through showers. The selection circuit was on the upper floor. Doctors assessed the migrants' chances of successfully entering the United States.[18] Urge and ability to control movement had finally come to fruition.

Decreased Mobility and Increased Displacement

Before the First World War, there were contradictory developments, some stimulating migrations and

others frustrating them. Around 1900, there was increased competition for agricultural labor between Germany and its neighbors in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Western Europe and North America pulled labor away from Eastern Germany. German landlords sought cheap workers among Poles in Russian Poland and in Austria-Hungary. France, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries were also recruiting workers in Eastern Europe. Austria-Hungary tried to get Austro-Hungarian citizens to settle in Bosnia, and Russia promoted free movement of labor. German landlords, due to agricultural changes, needed more workers but only ever for shorter periods than before - a condition that made the work they were offering much less attractive to those seeking employment. At the same time, Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) halted the import of labor for nativist or racial reasons. In 1885, he began a systematic anti-Polish campaign, and expelled 30,000 to 40,000 Poles.[19]

A number of countries suffered a decline in mobility before the onset of the war. Steve Hochstadt shows that migration rates in Germany started to drop before the outbreak of the First World War.[20] Reasons for this development were the social legislation implemented by Bismarck during the 1880s, and the rapid industrialization of Germany. Furthermore, in the United States the German immigrants were competing with new migrants from Eastern and Southern European countries, who could be hired for lesser wages.[21]

When the war began, authorities moved soldiers to and civilians away from the front. The First World War led to "cleansing" (ethnic or otherwise), movement of labor and the creation of internment camps on a larger scale than ever before. The First World War was a war of trains and trenches. The scope of the mostly forced migrations was unprecedented. In the beginning, the Dutch population (counting 6 million) was at its limits after the arrival of 1 million Belgian refugees. By the autumn of 1918, 2 million French civilians had been uprooted in the course of four years of fighting. In Russia, 6 million people had been uprooted from their homes. There were 9 million prisoners of war detained in camps throughout Europe.[22]

World War One was the first war in which extremely large numbers of people were taken prisoners (civilians and soldiers), who all had to be repatriated eventually. At the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris, a special commission led by Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) was created to tackle the task of repatriation. On Russian territory alone, there were 1.25 million prisoners of war and internees who were citizens of the Central Powers. Half of them died in the Russian Civil War that lasted from 1917-1922 before they could be repatriated. In any case, repatriation was a complicated issue because Western countries were reluctant to recognize the Bolshevik regime and enter into negotiations. It was carried out via the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and from Vladivostok amidst all the fighting and a famine, and while the railways system lay in ruins. It took until 1922 before the last repatriates had left the Soviet Union.[23]

When the war began, travel became difficult, patterns of seasonal migration were broken, men were drafted and people postponed migration plans. At the same time, new migrations began. Migration to

Australia, for instance, had been falling in numbers before the war due to a reduced demand for labor and increased shipping fares - a trend that continued and was reinforced during the war. This migration was, however, replaced by new migrations when Australia offered to accept British and Belgian women who were affected by the war, as well as British, Belgian and French children who had become orphans because of it, facilitated and subsidized by the Australian authorities.[24] Widows and orphans were arriving to Australia, while Australian war-time nurses and ANZACs (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) were moving towards deployment in Europe. 20,000 ANZACs landed on Gallipoli beach in Turkey on 25 April 1915, 8,000 were killed.

Soldiers and Other Migrants

More young men migrated from their homes to military units in the west of the Russian Empire over a two-week period in the summer of 1914 (3,915,000 men) than had gone from Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belorussia, Latvia and Russia to North America over more than three decades from 1880–1914 (3,715,000 men). 1.4 million men were already serving in the Russian army and thousands of officer's wives, nurses, doctors and other auxiliary forces moved westward when the war began. As it was nearing its end, the total number of men who had been mobilized into the active army was as high as 14,923,000.[25] Austria-Hungary mobilized a total of 8 million soldiers in 1914.[26]

When the war broke out, troops stationed in European colonies were transferred back to Europe. Furthermore, the United Kingdom brought in civilian workers from South Africa (31,200), the West Indies (8,000), Mauritius (1,000), the Fiji Islands (100), China (92,000) and Egypt (82,000) to work behind the British front, while France recruited workers in Algeria (75,900), Indochina (49,000), Morocco (35,000), Tunisia (18,500), Madagascar (5,500) and China (36,700). In 1917, France signed treaties with Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece to recruit workers for the war-industry. The Entente Powers employed 650,000 colonial soldiers on European battlefields. France deployed African troops from Algeria (172,800), West Africa (134,300), Tunisia (60,000), Morocco (37,300), Madagascar (34,400), the Somali Coast (2,100) and Indochina (44,000).[27] 1.5 million Indian troops fought in the British army during the war.[28] These migrations brought unprecedented large numbers of people from the colonies to Europe. After the war, a number of the people that had been brought stayed, while those who did return increased demands for more rights within the colonies. The arrival of immigrants from the colonies in Asia and Africa in Europe led to a stronger urge to control who was moving, coupled with stronger notions about who could stay. Especially the marriages to white women for those who stayed in Europe were perceived as a cause for alarm, as well as a reason for an intensification of registration.[29] From the relationships between French colonial troops (about 30,000 men) occupying the Rhineland shortly after the war with local German women, 600 to 800 children were born. They were later labeled "Rhineland bastards", regardless of the marital status of their parents. After 1933, these children were one of the first groups to be submitted to a program of forced sterilization.[30]

The U.S. army drafted 367,000 African-American soldiers after they entered into the war in 1917. 2,000,000 African-Americans fought with the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France. None of them, however, fought alongside white American troops. The segregated black units fought with the French Army and took orders from French commanders who had agreed to this set-up because they were desperate for troops. The war effort, their treatment by the French commanders and the overseas experience were important to the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Increased job opportunities during the war, especially in the big industrial cities in the North, led to the so-called Great Migration of 1 million African-Americans from the southern country sites to the northern cities. They filled jobs that had been worked by recent arrivals from Europe before. This Great Migration altered the social, economic and political fabric of society in the United States completely.

Deportation

During the war, people were interned and deported because they were considered enemy aliens, based on their (former) nationality. At the onset of World War I, 32,000 "enemy aliens" were interned in the United Kingdom for example, while 20,000 had been "repatriated". From the beginning, there were also strong and rather common anti-German sentiments, coupled with a hysteria over spies. In 1915, a German U-boat sank the passenger ship *Lusitania*; 1,198 passengers and crew members died. The common response in newspapers outside of Germany ran the call to "avenge the Lusitania." 4.5 million Germans lived in countries as diverse as Great Britain, France, United States, Canada, Russia, China, Hong Kong, Siam (now Thailand), Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. The sinking of the *Lusitania* led to widespread anti-German immigrant riots. They started in Liverpool and spread to other towns in England, but also to other countries including Russia and South-Africa. Windows of what were believed to be German shops were smashed and they were looted, furniture thrown into the street and set on fire and buildings went up in flames. German schools were closed and publications banned. Naturalized as well as non-naturalized Germans were detained in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States with the plan to repatriate them to Germany after the war.[31] In wartime Belgium, the suggestion was made to deprive Germans who had taken Belgian citizenship before the war of their new nationality, and so drive them out of Belgium once the war was over. When the war had come to an end, Germans were arrested and detained in *camps de concentration* where they awaited their deportation.[32]

After the outbreak of the war, Russian Jews were displaced. The tsar placed the territories closest to the front lines under the control of a military government with vast powers, who carried and propagated hostile anti-Semitism. In 1915, the military started to expel Jews from the war zone. Hundreds of thousands were driven from their homes without a place to go. Many Jews also fled from the German advance on own accord. By 1916, more than 250,000 Jews had fled or been expelled from Russia's western provinces.

By early 1917, some 6 million tsarist subjects, most of them non-Russians from the Empire's

western borderlands, had become [refugees] or deportees.[33] In the beginning of the war, Germany had tried to colonize the Baltic. The idea had been to use it to resettle 2 million Germans who had been driven out of Eastern Europe. The Baltic was considered to be empty, or if it turned out not to be, it could be emptied and its population could be driven out.[34] In 1915, 340,000 people, most of them Jews, fled from the Austrian Empire's populous northern province Galicia, many of them to Vienna. Anti-Semites complained and demanded that the Jewish refugees be removed from the capital and isolated in special camps in Moravia.[35]

In an effort to "cleanse" the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turk government embarked on a systematic program of [mass murder and deportation of the Armenian population] in 1915. The intention was to annihilate this racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minority. 1.5 million Armenians died.

People Across Borders - Borders Across People

When World War One had come to an end, large numbers of people changed country without crossing any borders, but because the reconfigurations of territory meant that certain borders crossed over them. Under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had lost 65,000 square kilometers of territory, inhabited by 7 million people. Belgium gained sovereignty over Moresnet and [Eupen-Malmedy], and France over [Alsace-Lorraine]. 110,000 to 170,000 Germans who had settled in Alsace-Lorraine after 1871, were expelled or left voluntarily.[36] Germany recognized Czechoslovakia's independence and ceded part of the province of Upper Silesia to it, as well as another part of their territory to the new state of Poland. German Bohemians, who were living in what was now Czechoslovakia, applied for German citizenship, as did part of the Germans who had been allowed to stay in Alsace-Lorraine.[37] 900,000 Poles from former Russian and Austrian Poland migrated to the new Poland, followed by about 1 million Poles from Russia. People moved to new countries because borders had been re-drawn, while others all of a sudden lived in a different country without having moved at all. People fled from states that ceased to exist. Redefinitions of citizenship and the creation of new states left some people stateless. Authorities soon sensed that this was something that would have to be addressed and dealt with.

The Nansen Passport

After the end of World War One, the refugee problem took on unprecedented dimensions. 1 to 1.5 million Russian nationals fled to Poland, Czechoslovakia and Germany, Asia Minor, Manchuria and Shanghai. Most had lost their Russian or Soviet citizenship because of decisions made by Russian or Soviet authorities. They could or would not return to their country of birth. In order to deal with this crisis, the League of Nations under the leadership of Fridtjof Nansen created international travel documents specifically for these refugees. The identity certificate was issued annually. It stated the holder's identity, nationality and race and ensured the right to a certain freedom of movement. With this so-called "Nansen passport", the holder could move from one country to another to find work, or

to search for and rejoin family members. It did not necessarily give the holder the right to return to the country that had issued the document. Nansen passports were later also extended to Armenians who had survived persecution in Turkey. The survivors, numbering 500,000 to 1,000,000, were in overcrowded camps in the Caucasus, Greece, the Balkan countries and the Middle East.

The Nansen passport was recognized by fifty-four countries for Russians; thirty-eight countries recognized it for Armenians too. Some countries, such as Canada, refused the Nansen pass holders on the grounds of "returnability" or "deportability": Nansen pass holders could not be returned to their country of birth, nor to the country that had issued the passport if they turned out to be criminals or a public charge. Canada agreed to accept Nansen pass holders if those who were criminals or a public charge could be returned to the country that had issued the passport. The relevant authorities, however, refused this, and so none of the pass holders could go to Canada.[38]

The introduction of the Nansen pass was a clear turning point. It fitted in with a trend of increased interest connected to passports and citizenship. However, issuing identity papers to people who were considered stateless was new and introduced an aspect that would become a key element in debates on refugee rights: who was to protect those who their own state failed to protect, and could they forcibly be returned to the country they had fled?

Conclusion

Many of the policies that were introduced during or shortly after World War One with the aim to control mobility were not entirely new- and yet, the war is often regarded as turning point. Firstly, a series of scares and panics accompanied the war, culminating in a consensus that there was more need for control. Secondly, there was an increase in measures which were applied more efficiently, lasted longer and affected more people; most importantly, they were not discontinued after the war had ended, but rather intensified. The wish to control began to coincide more with the actual ability to control, and once controls were installed effectively and also institutionalized, they were unlikely to be dismantled. Thirdly, the war caused unprecedented displacement. More people than ever before were deported, detained and killed on ethnic or racial grounds. In the fourth place, the war led to a redrawing of borders. As a result, large numbers of people found themselves in the bizarre situation where they were all of a sudden living in a different country than before the war, without ever having moved. The redrawing of borders also led to new migrations, and the un-mixing of people, cultures, nationalities and ethnicities. Lastly, the Nansen pass was a true novelty and an extremely important starting point for a new factor to be considered in any debate regarding refugee rights. It has thus become clear that in terms of migration and migration control, the First World War was, indeed, a turning point in more ways than one.

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Notes

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