Klaus Neumann reviews two books that put displaced people at the heart of contemporary history

An international history: Polish women singing hymns at the displaced persons camp at Wildflecken, Germany, in 1945. David E. Scherman

The Making of the Modern Refugee
By Peter Gatrell | Oxford University Press | $67.95

Strangers in the Wild Place: Refugees, Americans, and a German Town, 1945–1952
By Adam R. Seipp | Indiana University Press | $34.95

“From a vantage point in the First World, debates around refugees carry a strong whiff of parochialism,” Peter Gatrell observes in his excellent new book, The Making of the Modern Refugee. That is certainly true in Australia. Leaving aside the fact that only about two per cent of the world’s forty-five million displaced people are asylum seekers, the circumstances that compel asylum seekers to risk the boat journey to Australia – or the no-less-perilous alternatives should that option be barred – feature remarkably rarely in Australian debates.

Over the past fifteen years, Australia has granted asylum to more Hazaras from Afghanistan than to any other ethnic group. Shouldn’t that prompt some curiosity about the situation in their homeland, or in Iran and Pakistan, the two countries that have hosted millions of Afghan refugees since the late 1970s? Such a question suggests that the parochialism of the Australian debate about refugees may be temporal as well as geographical.

Perhaps it is easier not to think about the past, nor to look beyond the jetty in Christmas Island’s Flying Fish Cove, if the arrival of “boat people” is conceived of as a crisis. If we believe people are pouring into Australia through carelessly opened “floodgates,” then what occurred in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, or even what is happening there now, seems to matter very little. But if we take account of the broader context, then we can compare what is happening here and now with what was happening then and there, and Australia’s asylum seeker “crisis” may turn out to be little more than an inconvenience.

That broader context even puts very large figures into perspective. At the end of last year, according to estimates by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, about six in every 1000 people living on this planet had been forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, generalised violence, conflict or human rights violations. Clearly, today’s levels of displacement are alarmingly high. But there is no need to be nostalgic about earlier, supposedly less conflict-ridden times. “It is easy to be seduced into thinking that the tectonic plates shifted fundamentally towards the end of the twentieth century,” Gatrell writes, “but the extent of the upheaval can be exaggerated.” He shows that in the aftermath of the second world war the ratio of displaced to non-displaced people was more than ten times higher than it is today: in the second half of the 1940s, seventy-six in every 1000, or 175 million people, were displaced.

Ninety million of those people were displaced within China as a result of the Sino-Japanese conflict and the Chinese civil war. Another twenty million people were displaced in the Indian subcontinent as a result of the partition of the British Indian Empire – and the simultaneous creation of the sovereign states of India and Pakistan – in August 1947. The vast majority of Chinese displaced people returned home or were resettled in
China, but following the creation of the People’s Republic in 1949, some 700,000 Chinese refugees fled to the British crown colony of Hong Kong. Over time, Muslim refugees from India were integrated in East and West Pakistan, and non-Muslim refugees from Pakistan made new lives for themselves in India.

In continental Europe, sixty million people were displaced in the course of the second world war. The vast majority of these displaced people – referred to at the time as DPs – returned home as soon as the circumstances permitted. Often they were assisted by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, or UNRRA, the organisation set up in 1943 to deal with the upheaval caused by the war. A significant number of these DPs were repatriated to the Soviet Union – and often, on their return “home,” disappeared into Stalin’s Gulag archipelago. Their fate should be borne in mind whenever repatriation is touted as the preferred solution to a refugee crisis. Since the end of the cold war alone, the UNHCR has assisted with the voluntary repatriation of about twenty-five million refugees. In a recent report commissioned by the agency, Katy Long points out that in some instances the word voluntary may need to be placed in inverted commas. “In the worst cases,” she writes, “employing the notion of ‘voluntary’ repatriation is arguably a manipulation of language that is used to legitimise politically expedient returns that do not meet basic protection criteria.”

In 1947, the repatriation of DPs to communist Eastern Europe was suspended except in cases where a DP clearly wanted to go home. Their local integration did not appear to be feasible at the time, given that the countries hosting the majority of the DPs – Germany and Austria – had been ravaged by war. Germany was also trying to accommodate twelve million ethnic German refugees from its former eastern provinces and from Czechoslovakia. The International Refugee Organization, which gradually took over from UNRRA after 1946 and assumed responsibility for solving Europe’s refugee dilemma, therefore promoted the resettlement of DPs who were unwilling to return home. In the space of about five years, it facilitated the resettlement of more than a million people. In 1949 alone, Australia resettled 75,486 European DPs under the organisation’s aegis. The fact that Australia, only four years out from the war, was able to resettle the equivalent of one per cent of its own population puts into perspective recent suggestions by leading Coalition politicians that the resettlement of 20,000 people – less than a tenth of a per cent of Australia’s current population, and about a tenth of its annual migrant intake – would be stretching the country’s resources.

Today, the UNHCR advocates three “durable solutions” for refugees: resettlement, local integration and voluntary repatriation. But for many refugees, none of them is a realistic option. More than ten million people now find themselves in what the UNHCR calls “a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo.” Almost half of these are Palestinians. The origins of their plight can also be traced back to the late 1940s, when at least 750,000 Palestinians fled their homes or were expelled in the course of the creation of the state of Israel.

Gatrell’s numbers also throw light on the geography of the refugee problem in the late 1940s and the origins of international refugee law. The perceived need to resettle Eastern European refugees languishing in German and Austrian camps weighed on the minds of at least some of the drafters of the 1951 Refugee Convention – more so, I suspect, than the fact that potential countries of asylum closed their borders against Jewish refugees in the late 1930s. The mainly Western diplomats negotiating the Convention thought of Latvian or Polish DPs when discussing the criteria according to which somebody could be recognised as a refugee, rather than of, say, Chinese refugees in Hong Kong or Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan, who were left to fend for themselves. Gatrell quotes India’s relief and rehabilitation minister, who commented on the West’s lack of interest in what was happening during Partition. At the same time as a massive relief effort was under way to deal with European DPs, he observed, “the powerful tide of international help flowed past the vast area of our own tragedy without as much as lapping at its fringes.”

Just as the authors of the 1951 Convention didn’t want to know about refugee movements in the Middle East, South Asia and China, the institution they helped to create, the UNHCR, did not concern itself with non-European refugees until about ten years after its establishment. Even when refugee crises involved Europeans, the UNHCR was initially not directing the traffic. Western resettlement countries, including the United States and Australia, set up a rival organisation, the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, for fear that the United Nations refugee agency would interfere with their immigration policies. The UNHCR was kept on a short leash and starved of funds; during its first years, the organisation was, Gatrell writes, “a sickly creature with a limited life expectancy.”
HISTORY is useful when it alerts us to the differences between the past and the present, and to the unique challenges the present poses. History can be equally useful when it draws attention to parallels and similarities. “Looking back in time shows that current practices often uncannily echo earlier formulations, whether in relation to ideas around security or to problem-solving,” Gatrell notes in his introduction. The perspectives he provides by looking back in time make his book immensely useful – and not just for fellow historians.

As his argument unfolds, Gatrell revisits the major refugee crises of the twentieth century. While we may have largely forgotten some of them, the responses they prompted are eerily familiar. In one case, he writes, British newspapers – which were initially sympathetic to the arrival of this particular group of refugees – “soon began to describe a refugee ‘stream’ that might yet become a ‘cataract.’” They weren’t talking about Afghans or Bosnians (although the same language was later used to describe both these groups), but Belgians during the first world war. How many of those currently writing about the impending centenary of that war mention that about one million Belgians fled the invading German army to the neighbouring Netherlands, and another 200,000 to Britain? The first world war and associated events, including the Russian Revolution and the Armenian genocide, were responsible for the displacement of vast numbers of people. Leaving aside a handful of notable exceptions, such as Annemarie Sammartino’s recent book *The Impossible Border*, the challenges posed by refugees in the interwar years have received little attention. Histories of Weimar Germany, for example, rarely mention that in the early 1920s every tenth resident of Berlin was a Russian refugee. As Gatrell accurately observes, “Refugees have been allowed only a walk-on part in most histories of the twentieth century.”

Gatrell is intrigued by the “general absence of refugees in historical scholarship” and the marginal role of history in much of the academic writing on refugees. He identifies three gaps. He emphasises how central a role refugee movements have played in recent history. He explores the role history plays for refugees: how they have “helped to fashion themselves by recourse to history” and how “the past has been a means to express their predicament and a channel for articulating and validating the possibilities of collective action.” And he seeks to demonstrate that refugees make history, as much as they are being made by it. “They are habitually portrayed as if they are without agency,” he notes, “like corks bobbing along on the surface of an unstoppable wave of displacement.”

Although Gatrell successfully impresses on the reader the need to think of refugees as agents, he is only occasionally able to demonstrate how they have exercised their agency. He shouldn’t be blamed for this shortcoming: a book that tries to cover a global story extending over a century is not the ideal place to delve deeply into the dynamics of refugee movements and demonstrate how refugees, far from being passive pawns, often display initiative and sometimes exercise power.

THIS is where Adam Seipp comes in. He has written a history of *Wildflecken*, a village of about 3000 people in the north of Bavaria, in the Rhön Mountains. The Rhön is only slightly to the south of the geographical centre of today’s Germany, but was long one of the most remote and economically isolated parts of Germany. Seipp’s history begins in 1937, when several nearby villages were displaced to make way for a large army training facility. From 1940, Wildflecken hosted a munitions factory employing hundreds of forced labourers from France, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. In 1945, it became the final destination for hundreds of German refugees, and the temporary site of a DP camp set up by UNRRA. Then, when the DPs left, the American army turned the Wehrmacht’s training facility into an army base; Wildflecken became “Wild Chicken.”

The last Americans departed in 1994, and today Wildflecken and nearby villages are not unlike what they were in the early 1930s: remote and comparatively marginalised places in the heart of Germany. But I suspect they have changed in one important respect: the idea of what it means to be local has been challenged both by interactions with forced labourers, DPs and

American GIs, and by the fact that those who now consider themselves locals include both former German refugees and new immigrants from Eastern Europe, with the latter making up almost 30 per cent of the population.

In *Strangers in the Wild Place*, Seipp is mainly concerned with the history of the local DP camp. By 1947, there were 416 such camps in American-occupied Germany alone. Wildflecken was not just any DP camp, however.
Its life span, from 1945 to 1951, was unusually long, and with a population of around 15,000 it was also comparatively large. But its prominence in accounts of DP camps in postwar Germany is probably mainly due to Kathryn Hulme, an American who worked there for UNRRA from 1945 to 1947 and then, in 1953, published *The Wild Place*, an award-winning memoir about her experiences in the camp. More people no doubt read *The Wild Place* after the success of Hulme’s next book, which was inspired by the experiences of another UNRRA worker at Wildflecken, the former Belgian nun Marie Louise Habets, who became Hulme’s life-long partner. In 1959, that book, *The Nun’s Story*, was made into a box office hit starring Audrey Hepburn.

It is to Seipp’s credit that he treats Hulme’s observations with great caution. A history that relied on her account would most likely be an American history, or at least one that foregrounded the perspective of UNRRA staff. In such a history, refugees would likely be “mere flotsam and jetsam, moving ‘spontaneously’ in search of safe ground,” to use a line from Gatrell’s book. In order to include the perspectives of local Germans, German refugees and the inhabitants of the Wildflecken DP camp, Seipp draws on German and American published and archival sources, and on some oral histories. “This book is an international history of a very small place,” Seipp justifiably claims.

It is also a Polish history. From 1946, Wildflecken’s population was almost exclusively made up of non-Jewish Poles, many of whom had no intention of returning to Poland (and some of whom had been repatriated, only to return to Wildflecken). For them, Wildflecken became Durzyń, “a legally incorporated Polish town with its own government that paralleled the apparatus of UNRRA.” The name was meant to refer to a tribe of Slavs who had supposedly lived in that part of Bavaria some 1500 years earlier.

UNRRA kept the camp supplied with basic necessities, but left the camp’s internal administration to the DPs themselves. Not surprisingly, Hulme and her fellow aid workers knew little about the politics of Durzyń. When the Western Allies had crossed into German territory towards the end of the war, they had to secure and then administer the territory they occupied. They had to disarm regular soldiers who had been taken prisoners of war but also the police and members of paramilitary organisations. They had to disband Nazi organisations and hunt down, lock up and eventually prosecute their leaders. And they needed to identify Germans who had not been compromised by twelve years of Nazi rule and who could serve as local administrators. The Allied armies struggled given the size of the task, but comparatively speaking, they were well-prepared for their role as conquerors.

They were less prepared for their role as liberators: of concentration camp inmates, prisoners of war, and forced labourers. Millions of people needed to be accommodated, fed, provided with medical care, and eventually repatriated or resettled. While the advancing American, British and Canadian army units were accompanied by interpreters to facilitate the communication with German prisoners of war and civilians, they couldn’t readily draw on Polish or Czech or Russian speakers and often had to rely on using German in their interactions with people they had liberated. A history of DPs in occupied Germany needs to be cognisant of the lack of understanding, and sometimes the mistrust, between the DPs and their liberators, and the resulting relative autonomy enjoyed by DPs.

Seipp captures this aspect of the relationship between the rescued and their rescuers well. “UNRRA, even with support from the [American] army, left a tiny footprint in the camps,” he writes. “Inside the perimeter, increasingly contentious debates over repatriation seriously threatened UNRRA’s ability to fulfill its mandate.” Those in charge of Durzyń didn’t want to be repatriated, and they used their influence to impress their view on fellow Poles. Disagreements over repatriation led to sometimes-violent conflicts among the DPs and with UNRRA staff. Thus the history of Wildflecken also needs to include an account of the political projects of its inhabitants and of the “prewar political lines” and “wartime fractures” that shaped these projects.

By early 1947, with the onset of the cold war and the growing demand from countries such as Australia for immigrants, repatriation no longer suited the West. But it would be a mistake to write the history of the DP camps without taking into account the agency of the DPs themselves. “The radicalisation of politics within the camp helped shape its future,” Seipp writes, and “that of its increasingly impatient residents, and of the wider structures of refugee life in the post-1945 world.”
The history of Wildflecken is also a German history – or rather, two German histories: that of the locals, and that of the Heimatvertriebenen (literally: people driven from their homeland), the ethnic Germans who fled the advancing Red Army or were expelled from territories that ceased to belong to Germany. Because villages and small country towns offered more to eat and had more housing than the bomb-damaged cities, a comparatively large proportion of these German refugees settled in rural areas, particularly in Bavaria and other eastern regions of West Germany. It is one of the central arguments of Seipp’s book that the presence of foreigners, including DPs, “sometimes had the entirely unintended but very important effect of catalyzing the integration of expellee populations into pre-existing communities,” not least because “in a hierarchy of foreignness, the expellees at least appeared closer to the locals than the DPs ever could.”

But that is not to say that locals, German refugees and DPs lived side by side without engaging with each other. On the contrary: as it provided access to food, the DP camp was the centre of the local economy. The camp’s status as a “hub of commercial activity” is not something that could be gleaned from Hulme’s memoir, in which, as Seipp notes, Wildflecken’s “residents appear sparingly and as an undifferentiated mass.” The local Germans were as much a part of the DP camp as the DPs had become a part of Wildflecken: “the camp and the people living around it developed a mutually dependent, unequal, and often antagonistic set of relationships.”

For the local Germans, the camp was a source of much-needed provisions. But it also posed a threat. After the war, many DPs who had suffered as prisoners of war, forced labourers or concentration camp prisoners didn’t wait for reparations to be paid to them, but rather helped themselves by pillaging the houses of Germans. Particularly in the early days after their liberation, they could often do that with ease; in Wildflecken, for example, some of the DPs had guns, while initially not even the local German police were allowed to carry arms, and the Americans were less concerned about marauding DPs then about German war criminals. Germans were fearful not only because they actually experienced vengeful DPs, but also because they expected DPs to take revenge, knowing all too well how badly most of them had been treated.

ADAM Seipp’s book puts refugees – Heimatvertriebene and DPs – at the centre of postwar German history. Unless we recognise the interactions between local Germans, American occupiers, displaced people and German refugees, with their “very different hopes, expectations, and fears for the future,” he argues, “we cannot understand the processes that underlay the construction of a workable society in post-war West Germany.” In this way, Seipp’s “international history” not only is a particularly appropriate means of understanding the history of the Wildflecken DP camp, but also provides new insights into “German” history – which may in fact be less German than many historians of postwar Germany assume.

In many respects, Seipp has written the kind of history Gatrell is calling for in his book: one that casts refugees in the lead roles and emphasises their agency. Seipp could perhaps have gone further by trying to be a historical ethnographer as well as a historian. As Gatrell suggests, “Writing refugees back into history means asking questions about the sources at the disposal of the historian.” The historical evidence is lopsided: organisations such as UNRRA documented their operations, and people like Hulme wrote memoirs, while the voices of refugees are often mediated by immigration officials or refugee advocates. Such lopsidedness requires historians to read their sources against the grain. Seipp does that well, and his example could entice historians to broaden their scope. I only wish he had been less sceptical about the usefulness of oral histories, and also tried to harness the admittedly skewed perspectives of those who in the second half of the 1940s grew up in Durzyń and Wildflecken.

Both books are recommended for anybody frustrated by the parochialism of the debates about refugees and asylum seekers: Gatrell’s because he emphasises the importance of the global and historical context, and convincingly sketches it for us; and Seipp’s because it draws attention to the messiness of a past in which refugees and the people with whom they interact make history.