



Decentring the Study of Migrant
Returns and Return Policies

Concept note

Studying Return Migration from a Historical Perspective

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D1.1 – Concept note



Funded by
the European Union

Co-funded by



UK Research
and Innovation



Canada Excellence
Research Chair in
Migration & Integration

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This research was conducted under the Horizon Europe project ‘GAPS: De-centring the Study of Migrant Returns and Readmission Policies in Europe and Beyond’ (101094341).

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Cite as:

Barthoma, S. (2023). “Studying Return Migration from a Historical Perspective - Concept note” in *GAPS: De-centring the Study of Migrant Returns and Readmission Policies in Europe and Beyond*. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10215052

Abstract

Neither return migrations nor politics of return are new. Nonetheless, as Russell King (2000, p. 7) pointed out, ‘return migration is the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration’. Although there has been an increasing amount of literature on return migration in recent decades, there remains a strong need to incorporate history as a disciplinary perspective into studies on return migration. This concept note aims to address this issue by presenting some initial ideas for adopting a historical approach to the study of return migration.

Introduction: The Significance of Historical Research

Neither return migrations nor politics of return are new. Nonetheless, as Russell King (2000, p. 7) pointed out, ‘return migration is the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration’. Although there has been an increasing amount of literature on return migration in recent decades, there remains a strong need to incorporate history as a disciplinary perspective into studies on return migration. This concept note aims to address this issue by presenting some initial ideas for adopting a historical approach to the study of return migration.

Beginning with the thought-provoking query of where history fits in migration studies, I will illustrate this with an analogy. In his acclaimed lecture in 1882, *What is a nation?*, Ernest Renan (2018) identified ‘forgetting history or getting history wrong (*l’erreur historique*)’ as an indispensable element in creating a nation. This conclusion can be extended to migration. Forgetting the historical origins and using migration history for contemporary debates can lead to distorted images and epistemologies of migration, where the knowledge and memories of historical experiences fade and become sedimented into pre-given facts about migration. As noted by historian Eric Hobsbawm in his book *On History* (1992), certain historical experiences become part of a broader historical memory, while others are overlooked. The history and memories of migration are often neglected in mainstream historiography, particularly in national histories such as those found in school textbooks. The impact of migration in the making of modern nations and nation-states recently received some scholarly attention (cf. Benjamin T. White, Laura Robson, see further down). Migration historians are well placed to offer a critical analysis of the foundational narratives of nations and nation-states.

Christophe Bertossi, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Nancy Foner (2021), in their introductory article to the special issue entitled *Past in the present: migration and the uses of history in the contemporary era*, analyse the notion of historical repertoires, which refer to elementary grammars of how the past is framed in contemporary public debates on immigration (ibid., pp. 4155, 4161). The authors discuss the divergences between US and European scholarship regarding the function of history in the context of immigration studies. American immigration scholarship has traditionally focused on past events, given the significant role that immigration has played in American history (Bertossi et. al. 2021, p. 4156). In the European literature, however, contemporary migration scholars have placed significant importance on

history; for instance, social historian Leo Lucassen's (2005) comparison of pre- and post-World War II immigrants in Europe demonstrates similarities in exclusion and integration patterns.

Migration scholars have generally paid little attention to the historical understanding of migration, often mentioning history merely as contextual background to the present. Nancy Green has noted that while historians may see parallels between contemporary migration patterns and those of earlier periods, sociologists often prioritise the notion of novelty (Foner 2005, p. 3). Historians Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen and Patrick Manning argued in their book *Migration History in World History* (2010, p. 4) that scholars, policymakers, and the media often ignore relevant historical analogies and perceive current developments as unprecedented. This emphasis on uniqueness, novelty, and unprecedentedness appears to be prevalent in many academic works (Bertossi et al. 2021), indicating a dearth of historical perspective in several studies.

For instance, using crisis rhetoric to frame migration is not a novel practice. Lucassen et al. (2010, p. 4) refer to the example of the economic historian William Cunningham (1897), who observed that Russian Jewish immigrants to London were as unassimilable as southern Europeans in the eyes of many American commentators and politicians around 1900. Before World War I, both the right and the progressive left in the US commonly feared 'unskilled and defective poor immigrants' (ibid.). The recurring patterns they refer to as 'moral panics' demonstrate how fear irrationally dominated public discourse and argue that revisiting historical accounts can offer a valuable temporal comparison for the present day, aiding our comprehension of both continuity and change, and ultimately placing recurrent moral panics in a more balanced context (ibid.). Thus the debate on migration (including returns) would benefit from the long-term insights developed in the field of migration history. Migration historians have the potential to rectify misrepresentations of the past, unveil collective amnesia around migration, and elucidate the logic behind the construction of collective memories.

Historical Approach to Migration and Returns

Historians approach migration as an integral part of human history. As Patrick Manning (2005, pp. 8-9) notes, migration is 'the underlying human impulse' that connects different parts of the world and creates social, cultural, and economic links. This statement is equally valid for returns, which constitute an inherent aspect of all forms of human movement. People do not only move from one place to another but also 'return' to their point of origin or continue to another destination. This non-linear understanding of mobility is crucial for understanding the historicity of return migration and broader patterns of human mobility.

Overall, historians studied return migration as an inextricable part of migration across a range of historical periods. They sought to identify the longitudinal patterns of human movement, whether voluntary or forced, by examining social, economic, cultural, and political factors that shape the return migration processes within the broader context of migration history. By examining historical data and sources, historians aimed to reveal the factors that influence individuals' and groups' decisions to return to their home countries. Additionally,

they analysed the impact of return migration on the sending and receiving countries, how individuals negotiate their sense of belonging and identity upon returning to their home countries and communities, and how these factors shape their experiences and interactions.

The historical origins of modern-day return policies can be traced back to pre-modern and ancient times where exiles, deportations, and forced expulsions of individuals or groups from territories were commonly practiced. These actions were particularly prevalent in contexts involving wars, conquests, and the expansion of empires. Scholars such as Jan Felix Gaertner (2006) have noted that these methods were often employed as punishment tools, while also serving strategic and demographic purposes. States were granted power to determine who could reside in a territory as well as the circumstances under which an individual could exercise their *right of return*. Typically, the exercise of this right was directly related to the cessation of hostilities following a conflict, or with the changes of established social, political, or economic power structures. With the rise of nation-states, a change in terminology can be observed and deportations were employed as a political instrument, not only to define the boundaries of a nation-state *externally* but also *internally*. This led to the expulsion of ‘undesirable groups’ from the boundaries of nation-states with the goal of forming an ‘imagined’ and ‘homogenised’ community. For instance, during the 1880s, the US federal government established the nation’s initial deportation policies, which reflected the ‘racism and nativism of the era’, targeting Chinese immigrants in addition to ‘idiots, prostitutes, alcoholics and public charges’ (Hester 2020).

Indeed, scholars have emphasised the strong link between nation-states and deportation practices, viewing deportations as a type of forced displacement with historical roots in colonial conquests and genocides (e.g. Lindberg 2023; Walters 2002; Peutz and De Genova 2010). They argue that deportation has been widely utilised as a ‘nation-building device’ (Lindberg 2023), a ‘technology of citizenship’ (Walters 2002, p. 282), and a form of ‘infrastructure of racism’ (Khosravi 2019, p. 114). As noted by Aristide R. Zolberg (1983), the formation of new States after the two world wars was a ‘refugee-generating process’. From a historical perspective, many nation-states were founded by deporting particular groups, which involved an element of demographic engineering. Forced return, in the form of deportation and the like, was widely implemented to carry out this ‘nation-building project’.

Before delving into the specifics of what can be termed a historical approach to return migrations, it would be helpful to contextualise the topic by providing a brief overview of major historical milestones. The periodisation below, however, is merely tentative and does not aim to provide an exhaustive account of all the return movements of refugees and displaced people.

Tracing Patterns of Returns in the Early Modern Period (ca.1500-1800)

Some historians have noted a significant rise in worldwide geographic mobility as a defining feature of a global early modernity. In early modern Europe, religious and confessional minorities stood out as the most prominent group of migrants (Behrisch et al. 2023). They established diasporas to maintain their unique cultural and linguistic identity across

generations. From the perspective of return migration, these diasporic formations were crucial in preserving ties with their country of origin or imagined homelands.

Another example from the early modern period is the persecution and mass migration of Palatines and Huguenots in Europe. They sought refuge in England where they were recognised as Protestants fleeing Catholic oppression. In the early eighteenth century, the discourse around naturalising ‘Poor Palatines’ in England is fascinating and draws parallels with current migration debates. Advocates of Palatine integration stressed their potential to augment the British economy, citing their abilities as skilled farmers and craftsmen. Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe* and supporter of this political stance, wrote a pamphlet defending the ‘Poor Palatines’ in 1709 and campaigned for legislation to naturalise foreign-born Protestants. However, the hospitable stance faced escalating challenges with the surge in migrant numbers (Dresser and Fleming 2001).

The Tories waged a propaganda campaign against migrants and the Naturalisation Act, arguing that these migrants were a drain on the economy, taking jobs from the English poor and posing a threat to the nation’s security because they were not members of the Church of England. This narrative, resembling modern-day populist rhetoric, garnered support from specific segments of society. Due to the unfavourable social and political climate, numerous Palatines were resettled in the American colonies. Historians emphasise the role that transnational religious minorities such as the Huguenots and Palatines played in the expansion of capitalism and migratory routes across the Atlantic (ibid.).

The Age of Migration and Returns (1850-1913): Returning Europeans from the US

From the late eighteenth century onwards, Europeans started to migrate on an extensive scale, and this migration had a substantial impact on both the European continent and beyond (de Haan et al. 2023, p. 75). This particular era, as described by Castles and Miller (1998) and de Haan et al. (2023), helped shape a ‘global migration system’ with a variety of actors, such as sending and receiving countries and the migrants themselves, playing a role in its multiple processes. For instance, government policies of the host country constituted a significant factor in determining the fate of migrants. In the US, the surge in migration commenced only after a court in Indiana prohibited the ‘redemption system’ that had compelled destitute newcomers to become bonded servants upon borrowing money for entry (de Haan et al. 2023, p. 82). This judicial ruling unintentionally led to a massive influx of migrants and broader societal transformations.

Technological advancements throughout history have had a direct impact on human mobility, including return migration. In the early modern period, the scale of intercontinental migrations was relatively modest. The development of infrastructure – including highways, waterways, and railways – allowed more individuals to move away from their homes and social habitats. These same transport systems also facilitated people returning to their homelands,

keeping in touch with relatives, and maintaining ties to their homeland through the proliferation of the telegraph and significant expansion of the press (de Haan et al. 2023, p. 75). Migration and return migration rates rose due to the shift from sail to steamships that reduced the cost and duration of the transatlantic voyage during the 1850s and 1860s. Travel time from Europe to the US shrank from one month in 1800 to eight days by 1870 (Hugill 1993; Cohn 2005). As a result of this transportation revolution, Keeling (2010) estimates that eastward journeys (from the US to Europe) increased from 18 per cent of total transatlantic travel in the 1870s to 30 per cent by the 1900s. Due to technological advancements, the migratory pattern of this era has shifted from linear to circular.

Historical records demonstrate that the extent of return migration correlates with migration. Approximately 55-60 million individuals departed Europe and relocated primarily in the Americas during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Before the war, in 1914, Argentina had the largest immigrant community with 58 per cent of its eight million residents being first- or second-generation immigrants from Spain and Italy (de Haan et al. 2023, p. 80). Many of these migrant communities were geographically concentrated in the US, such as the Irish in Boston, the Dutch who founded Holland in Michigan, and the ‘German Belt’ spanning Ohio, Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Missouri (de Haan et al. 2023). This clustering allowed for ongoing interaction with their homeland, keeping the notion of return alive and creating conditions for a potential re-emigration to their European homelands.

According to Abramitzky et al. (2016), who compiled extensive data sets from Norwegian and US historical censuses during the Age of Mass Migration (1850-1913), it is noted that 30 million European migrants moved from Europe to the US in this period, and one-third of them eventually returned to Europe. During the period 1908 to 1923, official statistics from the US government showed that a comparable proportion of around 35 per cent of approximately 10 million immigrant arrivals left the country and returned to their countries of origin (Gould 1980; Wyman 1993, pp. 10-12; Hatton and Williamson 1998, p. 9). Some have suggested that these return rates may have been as high as 70 per cent, according to Bandiera et al. (2013).

Return rates vary between different immigrant groups. For example, a mere five per cent of Jewish immigrants to the US returned to Europe, whereas 59 per cent of Bulgarians and Serbians returned before World War I, and half of the Italians who migrated to the US between 1905 and 1915 subsequently returned to Italy (de Haan et al. 2023, pp. 82-83; see also Wyman 1993, p.11 and Gould 1980). Zachary Ward (2016) collected the first dataset from Ellis Island arrival records between 1917 and 1924 to investigate migrants’ intentions to stay or return home. His findings revealed that although only 15 per cent of the immigrants who arrived in the US in this period reported their intention to return home during entry, 40 per cent eventually did. Ward argues that the high rate of unplanned returns can be explained by the difficult initial years after arrival, which were more challenging than expected. The numbers decreased in the 1920s when new migration quotas were introduced. Additionally, contextual factors aside, it is important to consider the changing nature of migration motivations. Return is partially linked to the initial motivations for migration, but these early motivations are not fixed and often

change during the post-migration period. For instance, in the early 20th century, some people moved to the US temporarily to accumulate savings and subsequently returned home to marry or purchase property. Return migration could also arise due to unemployment, sickness, or personal and family reasons. Edward A. Steiner (1906), an observer of the period, recognised that return migrants typically fell into two disparate categories: ‘those who go home because they have succeeded and those who go home because they have failed’ (Steiner 1906).

Applying this logic, Francesco Cerase (1974) identified four different typologies in his study of Italian returnees from the US that illustrate four different types of return: ‘the return of failure’ in the host country, ‘the return of conservatism’ focused on investing in the home country, ‘the return of retirement’, and ‘the return of innovation’, where returnees are viewed as agents of change in their home country. Returnees of this era experienced an improvement in their financial standing compared to their pre-migration situation, purchasing farms on making other investments when returning (Wyman, 1993, pp. 79,132). ‘He who crosses the ocean can buy a house’, a popular phrase in Italy at the time, reflects the impact of temporary migration to the US (Cinel 1982: 71).

As several studies have shown, return rates increased during periods of economic downturn, e.g. following the panics of 1893 and 1907. A period of unemployment was a significant factor in facilitating the return journey of migrants back to their home (Wyman 1993, p. 79). A large number of returnees suffered from illnesses or injuries due to strenuous work conditions in the US. Tuberculosis, which the Irish dubbed ‘the American disease’, was common among the returnees (*ibid.*, p. 85). Migrants were also targeted by popular animosity during economic downturns; particularly those who intended to return home, were singled out for not assimilating into mainstream American society and instead prioritising short-term financial gain (Foner, 1997, p. 367). This negative perception was also evident in official documents (cf. the Dillingham Commission’s 1907 report¹) and several policies restricting migration were put forth for debate. For instance, in 1896, Representative John Corliss (R-MI) proposed an amendment suggesting that no one should be allowed to enter the US while still maintaining a residence in a foreign country (Wyman 1993, p. 104).

Rising Nationalism, Political Exiles, and Their Return Trajectories

The emergence of new nation-states, the rise of nationalism, and the dissolution of three multi-ethnic empires resulted in significant population shifts and facilitated the development of diasporic communities with strong connections to their countries of origin. Understanding these communities is crucial for comprehending specific return trajectories (de Haan et al. 2023, pp. 75-76). As previously stated, the idea and myth of return flourished and was bolstered amidst diasporic communities in correlation with the exponential growth of nationalism.

¹ The US Immigration Commission report in 1911, about the negative view of ‘new immigrants’ from southern and eastern Europe and their ‘unwillingness’ to integrate into American society

Another type of 19th-century European migration involved political exiles who played significant roles and influenced millions during their exile and upon their return. Prominent political and intellectual figures from this era include Karl Marx (1818-1883), who spent most of his life in Belgium, France, and England and produced influential work. The leader of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), spent many years in exile, as did other notable political figures such as the Pole Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), the German Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), and the Italian Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872) (ibid. p. 76). The Frenchman Victor Hugo (1802-1885) wrote some of his most famous works, including *Les Misérables*, while in exile in Guernsey.

Political exiles, typically, maintained involvement in politics and intellectual life in their home country. This extensive connection continuously fostered the discourse of return among this cohort and inspired some to aspire to change their nation's political system. The exiles were primarily comprised of a highly educated elite group. Their strong subjectivity allowed them to turn their exile into a space for innovation, particularly in 19th-century Europe. They published countless books, newspapers, and magazines and made significant contributions to intellectual and political life in their home countries and beyond. This aspect is an important topic beyond the scope of this conceptual note.

Migration of the ‘Colonial Subjects’ and of ‘Administrative Personnel’ Through Imperial Networks

Another trajectory for studying the migration and returns of this era is the ‘imperial networks’ through which ‘colonial subjects’ migrated to imperial centres as did a large number of administrative and military personnel (and their families) to colonies. The colonisation settlement underwent an essential shift during the 1920s and beyond, especially after the US introduced quota laws, which led to a shift in migration trajectories.

Following World War I, the colonies emerged as the principal destination for European emigrants. More than 400,000 individuals departed Britain to settle in colonies, while some 700,000 French citizens migrated to Algeria following its occupation in 1830 and its incorporation as a department of the French state in 1848 (de Haan et al. 2023, p. 83). Italy witnessed a similar pattern of immigration in the mid-1930s through the settlement programme initiated by Mussolini, and Portugal pursued its emigration programme to Angola and Mozambique, which constituted 50 per cent of Portuguese emigration in the 1950s. After World War II, decolonisation movements forced many European settlers to return. The repatriated millions of Europeans (British, French, Italian, Belgian, Portuguese, and Dutch) benefited from ‘assisted return’ and ‘reintegration programmes’ (Daniel et al. 2023, p. 93). Interestingly, these two terms are widely being used in EU’s current return and readmission policies. During the same period, the auxiliaries of colonial armies often received less support. A specific group, the *Harkis*, who served as auxiliaries for the French Army during the Algerian Independence War (1954-1962) and relocated to France, were permanently placed in camps (ibid.). This example highlights the underlying racial discrimination and segregation present in the nation-state project: being a crucial part of the French military in Algeria did not warrant

equal citizenship status. The effects of ‘returnees’ on the host countries will be discussed in the next section.

Repatriations in the Aftermaths of WWI and WWII

The scale of World War I, in terms of population mobilisation and the extent of bloodshed, resulted in a vast displacement of people. In 1917, the war triggered the forced migration of seven million people (Daniel et al. 2023, p. 86). In the war’s aftermath, the term ‘return’ was used to describe the process of repatriating soldiers and refugees to their country of origin. The League of Nations played a significant role by establishing repatriation commissions and envoys to deal with specific refugee groups – including Russians, Armenians, and Germans – and assist in their return to their homes. However, none of these efforts resulted in long-term arrangements (Lowe 2017). Katy Long (2013a) provides a comprehensive examination of the history of repatriation by tracing its roots in the early days of the international refugee regime following the end of World War I. Long (ibid.) criticises the international community’s focus on repatriation as the ultimate solution to refugee crises and for overlooking the needs of refugees who are unable or reluctant to return.

Repatriations were also employed as a means of creating homogeneous nation-states. Repatriation of Greeks from Turkey and Turks from Greece during the 1920s and 1930s took place in the wake of the Greek-Turkish War as part of the population exchange agreement between Greece and Turkey. The populations were resettled on the basis of their ethnic and religious identities.

After World War II, there were also extensive repatriation efforts to return displaced persons, prisoners of war, and refugees to their home countries. This included the repatriation of some 40 million civilians from different European countries who were displaced during the war. The Allies drew up plans that differentiated between ‘refugees’ and ‘Displaced Persons’. The former was defined as ‘civilians not outside the national boundaries of their country’; the latter described as ‘outside the national boundaries of their country by reason of the war’ and expected to return to their countries of origin with the assistance of Allied authorities (Banko et al. 2022). The newly established United Nations formed separate bodies to deal with European, Palestinian, and Korean refugees.

The end of the war created a decade-long mass movement of populations from east to west and vice versa. Historian Bernard Wasserstein (2011) referred to these groups of distressed people who searched for safety and a new home as ‘wanderers’. The peace settlements at the end of World War II forced another massive number of people to leave their homes, driven by a process of ethnic sortition. This resulted in the expulsion of approximately 3.5 million German nationals (*‘Volksdeutsche’*) from Polish territory, 3.2 million people from Czechoslovakia, and approximately 225,000 people from Hungary. The vast majority of these *‘Heimatvertriebenen’* (expellees) settled in the Western occupation zones, increasing the total number of migrants in the newly established Federal Republic of Germany to roughly 12 million individuals (Daniel et al. 2023, p. 89). After the war, nearly two million Poles were

compulsorily transferred from eastern areas of Poland that had been annexed by the USSR. Additionally, the involuntary repatriation of four million Russian POWs in German custody served as another significant instance. A considerable number of Soviet populations resisted repatriation, instead seeking refuge in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, or Australia (Daniel et al. 2023: 88; Wasserstein, 2011).

Decolonisation and Repatriations in the Post-War Period

Decolonisation led to mass population movements and repatriations. Following the partition of British India in 1947, Hindus and Sikhs repatriated to India from newly-formed Pakistan, while Muslims migrated to Pakistan from India. This mutual repatriation of Hindus/Sikhs and Muslims aimed to establish ethnically and religiously homogeneous nations, similar to the Greek-Turkish population exchange. The mass population exchanges resulted in the displacement of individuals from their historical homelands and livelihoods in the name of settlement of a war between countries. In the aftermath of the war and throughout the Cold War, repatriation policies implemented by the international community were predominantly presented as a ‘successful solution’ that aligned with the nationalist and liberal tenets of decolonisation movements and were seen as the ‘only’ way to address States’ refugee problems, even when returns were neither voluntary nor safe (Long 2013b).

After the Algerian War of Independence, repatriation waves included French citizens, *Pied Noirs* (European-descended Catholics and Sephardic Jews), and pro-French Algerians (*Harkis*) who opted to leave Algeria and return to mainland France. Within a few months in 1962, about 900,000 *Pied Noirs* and approximately 90,000 *Harkis* with their families fled to France (Daum 2015). The treatment of the *Harkis* is an exemplary case as they were unwanted by the French authorities and forced to live in camps for many years without any formal recognition.

One of the most poignant instances of repatriation occurred during the Bangladesh refugee crisis. In 1971, the war culminating in the independence of Bangladesh spurred around 10 million Bangladeshi refugees to escape to India, resulting in the most significant singular displacement of refugees in the latter half of the 20th century. In 1973, UNHCR played a pivotal role in facilitating the transfer of a significant number of peoples between Bangladesh and Pakistan – one of the largest population exchanges in history (UNHCR 2000). Katy Long’s (2013b) evaluation report highlights the contentious implications of the collective decision-making surrounding the global community’s repatriation policy, resulting in concessions that deviate from the universally-endorsed principle of voluntary refugee repatriation. Several studies, such as the cases of the repatriation of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar in the early 1990s and the return of Rwandan refugees from Zaire and Tanzania in the mid-1990s, have shown that the principle of ‘voluntariness’ has been pushed to its limits (Barnett 2000, p. 8). Long (2013b) contends that repatriation operations entail a trade-off between competing interests, with some actors willing to compromise the principle of voluntariness to facilitate refugee returns. In extreme cases, framing returns as ‘voluntary’ may serve as a form of linguistic manipulation to justify politically expedient returns that do not

satisfy minimum protection standards (*ibid.*, p. 1). Despite the disconnect between the universal principle of voluntariness and its implementation, Long supports the continued relevance of the principle of voluntariness and proposes that UNHCR's repatriation operations be based on the criterion of 'safety'.

Return Migration of Guest Workers and Post-Soviet Era 'Voluntary' Returns

In the 1970s and 1980s, the return of guest workers in Europe is a noteworthy case to examine the notion of voluntary returns. After the post-World War II economic boom, various European nations including Germany, France, and the Netherlands employed foreign workers to overcome labour shortages. These guest workers had initially planned to stay on a temporary basis. At least this was the initial perception and expectation of both receiving States and guest workers themselves. Consequently, in subsequent years, some guest workers and their families chose to return to their countries of origin voluntarily. This was due to changing economic conditions, family reunification, or a desire to reconnect with their cultural roots (Wessendorf 2007).

Razum et al. (2005) emphasise that Turkish returnees from Germany were not only motivated by economic factors but also by value-oriented motivations. Rittersberger-Tiliç et al. (2013) came to a similar conclusion. The authors present various factors that influenced returnees' decision, such as attaining or failing to attain migration objectives, parents' desire for their children to receive education in Turkey or grow up in their authentic cultural upbringing or both, the absence of future opportunities for their children to pursue higher education in Germany, as well as marriage, homesickness, difficult working conditions, health issues, and retirement. King and Kilinc (2013) identified five narratives of return among Turkish returnees in their study: return through a family decision; return as a traumatic experience; return as an escape for a new start; return as self-realisation; and return and the 'Turkish way of life'.

Another wave of (voluntary) returns took place after the fall of Soviet regimes in 1991. Some nine million people (UNHCR 2000) found themselves on the move, having either found themselves outside their 'homelands' following the drawing of new national boundaries or having been deported by Stalin in the 1940s. Chudinovskikh and Denisenko (2017) note that migration flows between former Soviet republics after the breakdown of the Soviet Union are to a large extent the result of Soviet-era migration. The end of political restrictions opened up a free space for mobility. Returnees had different motivations: some had the desire to participate in political and economic transitions in their home countries, while for some the driving factor was a sense of national identity and belonging that were reconstructed after the fall of Soviet system. Voluntariness of these movements were highly structured by contextual factors shaped by economic (labour shortages), political (as an enabler and promotor of these movements), and social factors (e.g. family ties).

Returnees: Actors of Social Change?

One emerging topic in the work of historians is the impact of returnees on their home and receiving countries. In his extensive book, *Unsettling of Europe: How Migration Reshaped a Continent* (2019), Peter Gatrell argues that migration has been a fundamental force in shaping modern Europe. It has led to the creation of new communities and cultures and challenged traditional notions of national identity, generating both conflict and opportunity. Migration is viewed as both a cause and a consequence of societal transformations (Manning and Trimmer 2020). Various historians have reached similar conclusions regarding the positive effects of migration (cf. Lucassen, Feldman and Oltmer, 2006). However, certain case studies demonstrate that neither immigration nor return migration generates unambiguous favourable results or leads to significant social change in the receiving countries. For instance, Cerase's (1974, p. 245) case study on returns from the US to southern Italy found that 'returned migrants cannot function as vehicles of social development'. In general, the potential impact of refugee returnees on the social or economic development of the origin country is rarely achieved (Mielke 2023; Van Houte and Davids 2008).

Historians have examined the short- and long-term impact of newcomers (including returnees) on the social fabric of host societies (Manning 2013; Lucassen and Lucassen 2014). The social historian Leo Lucassen (2021, p. 431) argues that migrants, including 'repatriates', had a more profound infrastructural impact on the receiving societies. Returnees bring 'new cultural experiences' ranging from technology to food and from ideologies to bureaucratic practices to the receiving society (ibid.). Lucassen particularly focuses on 'organisational migrants' –bureaucrats, soldiers, missionaries, and international skilled workers or NGO employees– whose migratory pattern is primarily determined by their organisational affiliation. Many organisational migrants moved through imperial networks and left their homeland only temporarily. African American soldiers who spent one or two years in Germany post-World War II provide a compelling example of the influence of cross-cultural migrants as they experienced a non-segregated society while in Germany. They were able to date White women and were treated equally by the locals. This experience enlightened them to alternative ways of living outside of their own racist society. Upon returning to the US, many of these African American soldiers became involved in the Civil Rights Movement (Lucassen 2021, pp. 433-435). Another example provided by Lucassen (ibid.) includes the French colonial experts who upon their return to France shaped the development of France's migration and integration policies. These colonial experts became advisors in Muslim affairs affiliated with the CTAM (*Conseillers Techniques pour les Affaires Musulmanes*), perpetuating the colonial divide between Western and non-Western societies that has subsequently become a key aspect of categorising immigrants since the 1970s. This practice was not unique to France, as all colonialist countries can trace their colonial legacy in contemporary migration and citizenship policies.

Diaspora Groups, Homeland, and the Myth of Return

Overall, scholars have recognised the significant contribution of diaspora communities in shaping and promoting a global cosmopolitan culture. The formation of diasporas, as outlined by Manning and Trimmer (2020), is essential for understanding the main patterns and cycles in the complex and diverse world of global migration and, more broadly, the heightened interconnectivity of various localities, socio-economic structures, and political systems.

Another issue studied by historians is the displacement and the repatriation or non-repatriation of minority and exile communities. Historically displaced and exiled communities – especially those who have suffered mass expulsions such as Armenians, Kurds, Palestinians, and Christians from the Middle East – hold a ‘nostalgic’ desire to return to their ‘imagined’ homeland, while also acknowledging the emergence of substitute locations (Chatty 2010, p. 294). According to Cohen (1997), these minority groups are classified as a classical ‘victim diaspora’ due to their traumatic exile and the strong sense of victimhood incorporated into their diasporic identity. Nostalgia fosters attachment to a home space, which is an essential component of diasporic consciousness. Thus, home is depicted as a mythical space of blurred memories at both the individual and collective levels. Memories are crucial in shaping diasporas and preserving diasporic identities. Diasporic consciousness is constructed on the basis of what Maurice Halbwachs (1992) refers to as ‘recollection’ or culturally embedded memories (Erl1 2011). Halbwachs argues that these recollections foster continuity and self-awareness within the group. Memories of the homeland and family stories are transmitted within a socio-cultural habitus (Bourdieu 1977, p. 53), where diasporic consciousness is fostered across generations. Second-generation immigrants, who were born in diaspora and have never seen their parents’ homeland, view home as a mythical space. I contend that for exiled populations, home is thus tied to the past and anchored in familial and cultural memories.

Another dimension of diasporic consciousness is what Vertovec (1997) defines as the awareness of decentred attachments – ‘multi-locality’ that connects dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups at global level in different localities. This awareness of decentred attachments demonstrates how diaspora groups can affiliate with multiple localities to position themselves physically and emotionally in different contexts. For scholars on transnationalism (Portes et al. 1999, p. 219), subjective evaluations by migrants of their homelands and self-identification play a vital role in their decision to return and their reintegration process. Numerous studies have been conducted on the perception of homeland among Turkish returnees. Kilinc (2014) shows in her article how second-generation Turkish-Germans constantly renegotiate their identities. Ayse Parla (2013) explored the concept of homeland among Bulgarian-Turkish returnees. She noted the ambiguity surrounding the ‘original’ location of homeland and emphasised that its location changes in both individual itineraries and across migrants who belong to the same migration wave and often mistakenly viewed as a monolithic entity.

The myth of return constitutes an essential part of diasporic consciousness, serving as the final piece of this analytical puzzle. This institutionalised discourse and well-established

rhetoric are particularly prevalent among exiled populations who view their stay in host countries as temporary. Madawi Al-Rasheed (1994) explains in her study among Iraqi Arab and Assyrian refugees in London that the myth of return within a diasporic community is dependent on past refugee experiences and the group's relationship with its country of origin. Historians commonly use the term 'myth of return' when discussing non-return of exiled communities. Adherence to this myth is a powerful discourse in the diasporic consciousness. While the mythical portion pertains to the imagination of home or homeland, the real aspect displays the act of returning (ibid., pp. 200-201).

Drawing from literature on diaspora and transnationalism, historians also focus on issues related to belonging, changing identities over time, and relationships between diaspora and homeland, as well as the roles of diasporic organisations, 'homeland-oriented diasporic humanitarianism' (McCallum Guiney 2023), 'collective remittances' (Galstyan and Ambrosini 2023), and memory – all of which are relevant to the issue of return/non-return. For instance, there exists a vast body of literature on the right of Palestinians to return to their homeland, restitution (reclaiming their confiscated property), and compensation (Chatty 2010). While this scholarship is distinctive in light of the Palestinians' status, the same issues are pertinent to the displacement experiences of numerous minority groups and are deemed essential for returns.

Historical Methodologies for Decentring the Study of Returns

Historians have proposed various approaches to studying migration. The same methods can be applied to suggest some basic points for developing a historical approach to study return migration and the politics of return.

Methods for studying returns

Historians Jan Lucassen, Leo Lucassen, and Patrick Manning (2010, p. 18) argue that migration can be studied using a framework that covers a long period, wide geographical range, and a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The authors emphasise the significance of **longitudinal studies, an all-encompassing and inclusive global approach** that also critiques the dominance of Western historical writing and highlights the need for a multi-disciplinary framework.

Another method was proposed by Stephen Castles (2008). Castles argued against the fragmentation in migration studies and highlighted the failure to understand the historical nature of migration in migration scholarship, leading to false assumptions of one-way causality and an inability to understand the overall dynamics of migratory processes and their embeddedness in processes of societal change. Castles proposes an interdisciplinary approach, known as '**migration systems theory**' to study both ends of the migratory flow, which is sensitive to historical formations such as 'prior links between sending and receiving countries based on colonisation, political influence, trade, investment, or cultural ties' (ibid., p. 5).

One important approach proposed by historian Patrick Manning (2003) is the '**relational world history-writing methodology**'. This method calls for an analysis of both

local and global historical forces, as well as the experiences of individuals who attempted to utilise or oppose these forces.

Historian Klaus J. Bade notes that traditional historical migration research focused on movement in geographic spaces and spatial mobility. However, the emergence of transnationalism in the 1990s led to a shift towards micro-historical approaches that focus on social spaces, including meso-level network theories and theories and typologies of transnational social spaces and migrant identities (Bade 2001, p. 9810). Bade proposes that **historical migration research** should study the longitudinal patterns of migration movements, their volume, trajectories, and structures, as well as the behavioural patterns of migrants in relation to their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, e.g., region, class, group, and gender (ibid., pp. 9810-9811).

Historians have explored connections between the past and present in various methods. Nancy Foner (2005) identifies two approaches she terms ‘**then-to-now**’ and ‘**then-and-now**’. The former is a temporal perspective that highlights the role of history and its evolution in explaining contemporary phenomena. In the latter approach, comparisons are drawn between historical events and social and cultural patterns of the past and the present to identify similarities and differences. However, the aim is not necessarily to explain the present through the lens of the past (Bertossi et al., p. 4160).

Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell (2022) propose a ‘**refugee-focused approach**’ to develop historiographies of migration and analyse how migrants interacted with the refugee category while experiencing and negotiating displacement. Banko and colleagues emphasise that in the early period, historians had a policy-driven and institution-centric approach to refugees. This resulted in various publications on different aspects of the interwar refugee regime, such as the League of Nations’ operations and the prehistory of legal and institutional establishment including UNHCR, but that refugees were not considered in these studies (ibid., p. 6). For instance, there is limited understanding of the experiences of Greeks and Turks during the involuntary population exchanges of the 1920s. Although previous studies offered critical knowledge, the authors argue that they overlooked displaced individuals and the socio-economic, cultural, and political worlds that refugees helped to create. By exceeding the State’s power, the concept of ‘**refugeedom**’, as coined by the authors, encourages a global perspective. This includes focusing on global events and processes that led to mass population displacement as well as global and diasporic connections that acknowledge non-state-centric experiences and practices (ibid., pp. 2-3).

Decontextualising migration and return historiographies

Developing a historical approach to migration and returns necessitates critically examining migration and return historiographies, including academic literature. This critical engagement with the existing wealth of literature will open new avenues for writing history from the perspectives of actors excluded from writing their own history. Understanding migration and returns from the perspective migrants and returnees, co-writing down their experiences, and

giving these experiences an analytical power should be a keystone of a historically-informed academic research.

Pluralising & decentralising history

The prominent Africanist historian Terence Ranger (1994) was one of the first scholars to critically analyse the problematic legal categories of refugees and underscore the need to integrate refugees and returnees into the mainstream of social history. Similarly, historian Paul Kramer (2020) encouraged fellow historians to think *with*, not just *of* refugees. The concept of refugeedom aims to provide refugees with their rightful place in history by decentralising and pluralising it (Banko et al. 2022, p. 8). Pluralising history involves shifting the focus from knowledge production channels produced in the Global North to the Global South to explore new epistemologies and adopt a more inclusive approach toward studying and discussing the history of migration. This approach also aims to pluralise geography (Cole 2021).

In line with pluralising the histories and historiographies² of migration, the history of migration as we know it is dominated by the history of groups that were literate and thus had their history somewhat written down and documented. To move beyond this limited approach, it is necessary not only for migration historians, but also for other disciplines studying migration and returns, to make clear the historicity of each case in their methodologies. A perspective from the Global South sheds light on categorisation issues in the aftermath of decolonisation. The politics of categorisation have operated over time and space, necessitating a global approach to their examination.

Limited functionality of legal definitions: incorporating microhistories into the general framework

Historians have problematised formal legal and administrative definitions and terminologies and their dominance, analysing them as manifestations of the refugee regime, which are products of the nation-state order (cf. Banko et al. 20-22; Soguk 1999; Haddad 2008; Zetter 1988). Lucassen and colleagues (2010) highlight the limitations of existing formal categories in explaining the complexity of migrants. They argue that, like labour migrants, refugees rely on information and expectations about work and opportunities from their personal networks when making decisions. The authors emphasise that all refugees have both political and economic motivations. A historical perspective elucidates that socio-politically constructed dichotomies of migration – regular versus irregular, economic migrant versus refugee, voluntary versus involuntary – obscure the intricacies of migration.

A focus on microhistory will offer novel epistemologies for interdisciplinary research to grasp how migrants and returnees engaged and negotiated with ‘legal definitions’. Different agentic responses are shown in historical case studies. Migrants caught in situations of displacement engaged with the legal definitions imposed on them in disparate ways. For example, Palestinians adopted the term ‘refugee’ to draw attention to their exile and resist local

² Here, the author deliberately used the plural form to show the multiplicity of histories that can be accounted for human movements.

integration or resettlement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016). Additionally, there has been a productive discourse on Palestinians' usage of the term *Nakba*, which refers to the 1948 mass displacement. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon initially resisted using the term, seeing it as a permanent status for their temporary situation, preferring 'returnees' (see Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007). In contrast, repatriates in India during the Partition era rejected the 'refugee' label and demanded to be recognised as full citizens (Rahman and van Schendel 2003). This difference in the perception of a legal, hierarchical label can only be understood through a historical study that examines the counter-narratives developed within migrant communities in relation to the legal classifications imposed upon them.

State-building processes occur by externalising groups from the imagined community and deporting them from the territory, following a logical sequence. Studies have also examined the impact of refugees on shaping states. For instance, Benjamin Thomas White's (2017) work on the French mandate period of Syria illustrated how French officials established a 'buffer zone' in Syria to consolidate colonial rule by settling Armenians. The placement of refugees prompted a reactive response among Syrian Arabs who constructed the notion of a 'Syrian nation', viewing Armenian refugees as both a threat and an example of Syrian hospitality. This interaction played a significant role in the formation of the State, as White (*ibid.*) notes. Examining the involvement of Assyrian refugees in shaping modern Iraq, Laura Robson (2017) analysed how the British and French colonial authorities, with the approval of the League of Nations, relocated Assyrian refugees to remote border regions in northern Iraq to consolidate their State power. The British viewed Assyrian refugees, who were forcibly displaced from present-day Turkey (Hakkari, Bothan region), as a valuable resource in combatting Iraqi resistance. This narrow-minded approach bolstered British control during their mandate, but it also reinforced the call for an independent Iraqi state, resulting in the 1933 Simele massacre of Assyrians. This event was later cited by Raphael Lemkin as a prime example when he presented his legal definition of 'genocide' to the League of Nations conference on international criminal law in Madrid (Safi 2018).

Another aspect that needs to be included in micro-histories of migration and return is the aspirations, experiences, and encounters of refugees and how they give meaning to each segment of the mobility. Banko et al. (2022) correctly assert that refugees' own experiences with space, networks, and institutions, the meaning of diaspora, as well as return for refugees who have embarked on repatriation journeys, are part of global histories of displacement. Another trope that has received considerable attention in micro-historiographies is the meaning of 'home' or the idea of homecoming and imagined returns, which offer dominant insights into the idea or myth of return and practices at the individual and group level (cf. for 'homecomings' studies by Cerase 1967; 1974; Stefansson and Markowitz 2004; Conway et al. 2005; Newbury 2005). Studies on 'ethnic/diasporic return' include those by Tsuda (2009). Studies on the construction of 'home' include those by Hammond (2004), Christou and King (2010), Stefansson (2006), and den Boer (2015).

Concluding Remarks

Historical research is well-suited to providing comprehensive explanations of the socio-economic processes and political developments that have shaped migration and return trajectories. As an interdisciplinary approach, the historical analysis of (return) migration is vital for examining patterns of continuity and change in migration and return policies from a longitudinal perspective, as well as for understanding the agentic responses of migrants and returnees.

Two questions are at the forefront of migration scholarship. How much history has been integrated into the field? To what extent have historians included various types of micro histories of (return) migration in their studies? In recent years, there has been a multidisciplinary effort to incorporate the lived experiences of migrants into the history of migration. It is important to consider the perspectives of those who have personally experienced migration to gain a full understanding of the phenomenon. These experiences serve as first-hand accounts of what occurred during their journey and upon their arrival. Each discipline studying migration should consider posing a similar inquiry about the extent to which history is fully incorporated as a fundamental element in their epistemology. Additionally, how do these studies use micro-level experiences and historiographies in their theories? These and other related inquiries can be further explored. This conceptual note sought to explain the importance of history in migration studies, while also highlighting some key questions and preliminary remarks for understanding (return) migration from a historical perspective.

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