

Those Who Count: International and National Administration of the League's 1922 Census on Displaced Persons from the Russian Empire

ANASTASSIYA SCHACHT

Introduction

Flight and displacement, though by no means an »invention« of the twentieth century, reached unprecedented magnitude,¹ as old empires collapsed under the rubble of the World War I and new states emerged or re-instated their long-lost sovereignties.² Alongside Syrians in the Near East,³ Armenians fleeing the Turkish genocide,⁴ Turkish and Greek flight, and exchange and displacement in Asia Minor,⁵ around a million refugees from the collapsed Russian empire fled the hardships of Bolshevik revolution, which was marked by civil war, famine, and unravelling political violence.⁶ »Russian« refugees collected in Europe's capitals: Berlin, Vienna, Prague, and others.⁷ Their legal precarity of not being attached to a factually existent state made them, as Phil Orchard puts it, »nonpersons under existing international law«, and created an all-new challenge for national bureaucracies. These were supplemented by the developing non-governmental organisations and international administrations,⁸ which included a broad variety of private charities over diasporic networks, as well as non-governmental relief organisations like the Red Cross and the League's High Commission (Nansen Commission), both of which

stepped up to fill the void that governmental players could not.⁹

When confronted with the challenge of post-World War I migration, local bureaucracies often fell short in mounting an effective response. There are three major reasons for this. First, the general reconfiguration of post-imperial bureaucracies across the European continent placed public administrations under stress as they restructured logistically and economically and sought to reinvent themselves in light of the new political borders.¹⁰ Second, in the ideological sense, the long-accumulated impact of the nineteenth century's nationalist delineation between domestic and alien populations, alongside the war-inflicted radicalisation of animosity towards such aliens, contributed to a general unwillingness of the State to engage with uninvited foreigners.¹¹ At the same time, under post-war realities of mass displacement, no government was free to turn a blind eye to the matter, and whenever national bureaucracies had to engage with refugees, their intervention repertoire was hampered by economic and logistic restraints.

The relief work was thus willingly delegated to either private charitable associations or to international players such as the Red Cross, the International Labour

Office, or the High Commission for Refugees of the newly created League of Nations. The High Commission took over the coordination of humanitarian work with displaced persons (DPs) and refugees, hoping to establish itself as a mediator between the local and the supra-regional, as well as between state bureaucracies and non-governmental relief organisations. There was also an aspiration to position the League's Commission as an internationalist knowledge hub, a clearing-house that could, in the long run, not only offer relief, but a ›durable solution‹¹² for the refugee crisis. To build up a reliable knowledge on the demographics of Russian refugees, the League's High Commission for Refugees issued a census that was unique in its conception. Up to that time, censuses on populations of individual states had been taken for statistical needs of those respective governments and by means of public service officers. This census, however, demanded that national bureaucracies cooperate with international players in collecting necessary data, as the census would be carried out across several countries instead of one. This attempt at counting targeted an unusually dynamic and insufficiently documented population that could be reluctant about sharing data, for fear of legal consequences due to their precarious residence in each country. This census was, in summary, a unique enterprise, both in its long-term mission to offer a durable solution for managing refugee populations, but also in the ways in which it would be set up and operated.

This article reconstructs how the administrative efforts of the census on refugees and DPs from the Russian empire was designed; how it operated administratively on the ground; and how it was supervised and reflected upon by the League's officers. Source-wise, I draw upon the Commission's internal documentation from the League of Nations Archive in Geneva, as well the Commission's correspondence with national administrations and other international organisations that, at the time, carried out humanitarian relief for refugees. Most notably among these were the Refugees Office of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Red Cross.

I also use the Commission's correspondence and negotiations with other offices within the League – most notably, the Treasury. These materials are of particular

interest with regard to practical conflicts between individual census administrators on the ground, whose specific understandings of the League, the Commission, the census, and the humanitarian relief in general diverged from the general plan. Whenever census-related communications reveal tensions between corresponding actors or irregularities in delivering data to Geneva, I delve into subsets of documents to reconstruct and interpret these state- and actor-specific cases.

The intersection of the Commission's plan for the census, the administrators' perceived roles and duties, and the Treasury's attempt to save the whole enterprise from both bankruptcy and blame all offer insights into the process of creating and negotiating the new inter-war multi-lateral refugee regime.¹³

The text discusses how initial considerations and staff-related practices of the League impacted the planning, design, and operation of the census. The initial intent behind the whole enterprise had sought to provide local governments and non-governmental humanitarian players with clear and reliable data, which would, first, facilitate immediate relief measures and, second, give way to better strategic planning of local and intergovernmental solutions to the refugee crisis. However, the tools, fiscal means, and staff pool available to the High Commission affected what was feasible. I argue that strategic decisions as to what personnel could be used – and how this staff then operated with local officials on the ground – had a considerable impact upon the quality of the data the census procured. Instead of immediate relief for already-strained local bureaucracies, humanitarian workers and refugees, the census created new, short-term stresses. However, precisely through this actor cacophony, the census pioneered an experiment with international aid – a particularly interesting example of an attempt at multi-lateral humanitarian work in the making.

Empire abroad: Refugees from the Russian empire in scholarship

Being the first mass flight in the troubled twentieth century, ›Russian‹ refugees have been the topic of considerable academic interest, just as they were

prominent recipients of political and popular attention back in the day. They were particularly visible due to the sheer length of their flight, as well as the romanticised imagery of otherwise-privileged classes — politicians, scholars, artists — being forced to flee and mingle with soldiers and ›common people‹.¹⁴

In attempting the near-impossible task of outlining a historiographic draft of state of research on the humanitarian effort on the inter-war refugee relief, one must, of course, mention Cabanes' »The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism«. The text provides a nuanced overview of the multilayered legal, logistic, economic, and political challenges posed by the flight from the collapsed empire prior to the emergence of a system of international governance at the League of Nations.¹⁵ International efforts — and the struggle to make sense of and manage this massive refugee movement — have been the focus of many recent studies spotlighting the responses of particular nations in various scenarios as they employed their economic, political and administrative capacities in this unique historical context. Tania Konn-Roberts discusses the British attempt to offer relief to Russian refugees from the viewpoint of inter-war colonialism, as British officials misdirected and posted fleeing civilians in camps on Egyptian soil, which in those days was under British colonial protectorate.¹⁶ Martyn Housden studies the refugees stranded in Constantinople and reconstructs the League's attempts at relief and repatriation¹⁷ as an early manifestation of the UN's major strategy for mass-flight movements.¹⁸ Pinar Üre also uses the example of Turkey — another newly established entity wrapped up in and strained by its own ongoing state-building — to trace how the logistical and administrative challenges of dealing with refugees contributed to the formation of the state's policies on citizenship.¹⁹

The abundance of references and thematizations in scholarship, however, reveals certain blank spots in research when it comes to specific aspects of international administration of humanitarian refugee relief. The research so far is rather moderate, for example, on the debates around, and execution of, refugee repatriations. In the already strained and volatile post-Great War political landscape, accommodating a large, impoverished population of displaced persons from a state that was, for many, either a former claimant

of the imperial domination or a recent adversary at war created considerable anxiety. The ideal scenario — and here, Nansen appears to be on the same page with local authorities across the European continent — would have been to repatriate all the refugees back to either their newly installed sovereign successor states or, in case of ethnic Russians and those nations of the empire who failed to acquire their own internationally recognised statehood,²⁰ back to Russia — or whatever was left of it. Until at least mid-1921, European governments had sought to cooperate with anti-Bolshevik governments, whose legal, pragmatic, and geographical scope of action kept shrinking throughout the course of the civil war. The continuing influx of refugees fleeing west, however, polarised local political discourses and instigated typical anxieties about epidemics, refugee-caused job scarcity, of course, the political infiltration of Bolshevik propaganda.²¹ Repatriation diplomacy, however, presupposed a dialogue with the de-facto power-holders: the Bolsheviks. Repatriation from European cities to Soviet Russia, supervised by the International Red Cross, soon began, adding displaced populations to the general chaos.

Trains filled with "repatriates" (the term reflects the tacit presumption that these people were returning by their own will and not forced to do so by local authorities) would run through Poland and the Baltic states, often getting stopped at the border of Bolshevik-run territories.²² Reports of Bolsheviks persecuting the returnees would then travel back along the railway, stirring concerns as to whether such "repatriation" was acceptable from a humanitarian point of view.²³

Confronted with the humanitarian impossibility of repatriation in this underdefined and politically volatile setup, both national and international players were forced to consider alternative solutions to the refugee crisis of the early 1920s.²⁴ The main goal for the High Commission, therefore, was formulated as »dispersal of the refugees from places where they were living in destitution to places where they could obtain employment«. ²⁵ To meet this aim within budgetary constraints meant obtaining the most precise information possible on the numbers and demography of refugees stranded across the world, particularly — as was most often the case with the League²⁶ — Europe.

The challenge of managing the mass displacement at this national and international level, despite local strains, nevertheless produced at least one considerable administrative novum. In the near-post- and inter-war reality of restrictive passport regimes, the coordinating effort of the High Commission and individual authority of its head Fridtjof Nansen brought to life the well-known Nansen passport.²⁷ Limited and inferior to some national passports as it might have been,²⁸ an internationally issued and recognised document of this kind became an object of dearest desire a decade later, as the international order failed to give protection to Jewish citizens expelled from or fleeing the Nazi persecution.

Another central juncture of the underlying article concerns the *administrative* and *administering* practice of census-taking.²⁹ As such, a census must be regarded as an application of scholarly operations to political practice. This yields a hybrid product of a statistical practice that was applied to a certain large groups of people for enabling more effective, deeper-penetrating policing, as well as the creation and management of social order.³⁰

In the Russian and Soviet context,³¹ most research over the years has focused on the censuses of 1897 (the empire's first and last comparatively universal census after the 1861 abolition of serfdom)³², and of 1937 (which was prohibited from publication and used as quantitative evidence for the demographic impact of Stalinist terror).³³ Much academic and journalistic attention was given to the individual republics known to have suffered the most violent repressions, famine, and demographic changes.³⁴ A compelling niche for future research might open through comparing the first Soviet census of 1926 with demographic data procured by means of the League's 1922 census on otherwise-uncounted refugee populations.

In the Russian-speaking, mostly Soviet historiography, the anti-Bolshevik exodus remained a highly politicised topic until the second half of the 1980s, when the political reforms in the USSR began to look to anti-Bolshevik refugees as a cultural »missing link« between the post-Communist present and the slandered, but eagerly desired, pre-Communist past.³⁵ As the brief spell of democracy did not last, more recent research has re-gained its somewhat didactic critical undertone.³⁶

What is remarkable, however, is that both Soviet-era and post-Soviet scholarship in Russian have largely ignored the international dimension of the humanitarian efforts expended upon both post-imperial refugees and Soviet citizens in the inter-war period. The narrative of Russian-speaking academic community largely follows the Soviet self-construction of Russia as an autarkic self-sufficient state, the displaced people of which have never benefited from international charity and humanitarianism, be it through the League, the Red Cross, or through other governmental and charitable private organisations.

Russian scholarship frequently focuses on Soviet attempts at cultural diplomacy and propaganda abroad,³⁷ but largely glosses over the fact that throughout the inter-war decades, former subjects of the empire were receiving humanitarian aid both within and beyond the confines of the Soviet state, through individual countries' governments, as well as initiatives such as the ARA-organised famine relief; the League's Health Committee fighting typhus in Soviet Russia and the High Commission; and many other non-governmental actors engaging with relief for refugees and displaced persons.

Post-1917 refugees, often referred to as emigrants, thus continue living a half-life in the Russian historiographic discourse — entrapped between nostalgic sentiment and poorly hidden reproach, only loosely attached to the places they fled to, and with their interactions never contextualised. Nonetheless, they continued enriching, straining, transforming, and exerting pressure on local and international administrations wherever they landed.

Order by knowing – Design of the questionnaire and the counting of refugee labour

The new post-Great War Europe struggled through a multitude of interconnected crises of political, cultural, and economic transformation, arguably constituting a form of *polycrisis*³⁸ — if not global, then continental. The war dismantled formerly established rules of imperial co-existence, unhinged national movements and brought new players to actively engage with the

reorganisation of Europe, which continued to dominate international politics of the day.³⁹ The struggle of governments to accommodate stresses and respond to challenges incited the rise of nongovernmental players, whose engagement in humanitarian work was dearly needed.

The League of Nations sought to establish itself as an authority with functions of mediating, overseeing, and coordinating. It was a clearinghouse with representative functions, including standing guard over the new regime of civil cohabitation between nations, and was also occasionally an addressee of individual pledges. Russian refugees joined many other common and lay people across the continent in sending letters and telegrams directly to the League to ask for its assistance. One typical example was a group of struggling refugee intellectuals residing in Lausanne who appealed to the League asking for assistance in finding employment in 1921 — one of many appeals to which the League's officials could not respond in a satisfactory manner.⁴⁰

The League's self-imposed mission and design did not necessarily foresee the active mechanisms or budgets necessary to engage with the low-entry-barrier character of these petitions. On behalf of the High Commission for Russian Refugees, Nansen himself expressed his dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in his report of 1922, while also pointing out that the fiscal constraints had shaped — indeed, severely limited — the effectiveness and selection of measures the Commission could engage with.⁴¹ The Commission's budget thus had to be recalculated and enlarged along the way in 1921, 1922, and 1923.⁴²

Due to the League's positioning as the paragon of the new international regime and its lack of resources for smaller-scale interventions, various League bodies, including the High Commission for Refugees, sought to position themselves ›above the battle‹. As numerous refugee petitions to both the High Commission and the League's Secretariate show, this self-perception did not necessarily fit the popular imagination of what the League and the Nansen Commission were, or what they could do. The Commission was expected to offer humanitarian relief on the ground, but was arguably rather poorly designed for this.

The census-taking initiative, however, complied perfectly with the mission of a supervising and

knowledge-providing supranational clearinghouse that sought to advise nation-states and their administrations. In late 1921, the League's High Commission for Russian Refugees approached governments and, where possible, steered at liaisons with individual public offices responsible for this matter, with the goal of taking an international census of ›Russian‹ refugees abroad over the first half of 1922. Aiming to improve the effectiveness of relief — whether for refugees or societies hosting them — the census strived to participate in, but was at the same time fully dependent on, the cooperation between private charities and local, national, and international administrations.

Given the much-lamented scarcity of budget at the Commission's disposal⁴³, each country hosting refugees from the collapsed Russian empire was carefully assigned one delegate — a person to mediate between the Commission's agendas and local authorities and bureaucracies. In many cases, these delegates simultaneously held posts within other charitable or humanitarian organisations, most commonly the Red Cross. The High Commission built an additional level of administration that took on an agile role in the local bureaucracies by uniting its forces with the International Red Cross Society, the International Labour Office and a series of occasional purpose-focused organisations while maintaining a surveying function. The Red Cross had the personnel; the League had the supervisory role and potential contacts to governments; and the ILO, another actively involved international organisation, promised to aid in prospective employment of the refugees once the census provided a reliable overview of this labour pool.⁴⁴

The High Commission approached local governments, suggesting that they assign individual officials to function as contact persons on the governmental level, while ensuring that such governments — and, down the hierarchic chain of bureaucracy, local public administrations — could be reached by the international representatives. At the same time, the Commission assigned its own delegates to ›keep in touch with the Government representatives and with the organisations of Russian refugees themselves.‹⁴⁵

In their locations across Europe and beyond, the League's delegates filled a legal and practical void by taking a somewhat ambivalent position; Their

engagement was welcomed, as it spared national bureaucracies the necessity of managing the refugee crisis all by themselves with their limited capacities.

Responding to considerable differences in modes of how individual states accommodated refugees within their territories, the census designers suggested that two separate census instructions be sent out. One instruction was aimed at states that accommodated Russian refugees in camps, in which cases the Commission addressed their correspondence and instructions to local authorities in charge of those camps. The other was sent out to governmental representatives in states that exercised no camp accommodation for refugees, but rather opted for private or smaller-scale charity-based hosting.⁴⁶

The degree of local enthusiasm for and engagement with the census varied considerably from state to state. Some states provided meticulously protocolled data and submitted it well before the due date, while some merely mentioned rough approximations, claiming that any more precise accounting was utterly impossible. Finnish authorities, for example, printed and circulated their own questionnaires adapted from the forms communicated by the League. These local questionnaires, issued in Finnish and Russian, ran a total of 16 questions, compared to the seven in the League's documentation. Finnish officials thus used the opportunity of the census to procure additional data on refugees' qualifications and skills, especially their command in foreign languages. In this country, local authorities and the Red Cross advertised the census by explicitly addressing improved prospects of paid jobs as an incentive for refugees to cooperate with census-taking authorities.⁴⁷

Germany, although usually communicating with the High Commission very actively and openly on the problematics of the massive refugee population within its borders, pleaded that it impossible to collect exhaustive data. It claimed to host a contingent of half a million refugees from the former Russian empire, and operated six large camps for mass accommodation; data from these camps could thus be procured from camp administrations. At the same time, however, a huge proportion of refugees resided unregistered and unaccounted for outside of camps, whether with relatives or in private diasporic and general charitable

organisations. State ascription of some ›Russian‹ refugees in Germany proved equally difficult, as some formerly imperial Russian subjects had emigrated from the newly restored and independent Polish state, actively opting against the Polish citizenship they might have acquired otherwise.⁴⁸ Were these persons to be considered Russian refugees – and counted in the census and prospective relief actions – or were they to be legally treated as a Polish minority? German officials thus deemed it impossible to provide exhaustive numbers for anyone not coming from the six camps' administrations. These camps reported their data while at the same time being dissolved per decree of the German government, rendering the situation even more incomprehensible and the data even less reliable.

In Constantinople – where the majority of Russian imperial refugees in the new Turkish republic were concentrated – Red Cross officers taking the census issued their own questionnaires in Russian and gave the immediate work of data collection to selected refugee representatives. These representatives were assigned to counting one of three differentiated population groups. One focused on adult men fit for potential employment. Another refugee representative counted women (who were legally less eligible to work), children under 14 (not yet allowed to work) and men over 55 (no longer able to work). The third group of census-taking representatives was set to oversee, correct, and complete already-submitted forms before the collected data was forwarded to local authorities responsible for the census-taking (who would then forward the data to the High Commission). Here, like in Finland, authorities sought to directly address the refugee population and encourage compliance with the census taking by branding the census as the first step of the League's program to offer refugees fixed employment.⁴⁹ Obviously, this was one of the major incentives for organising the census, but it remains open whether this promise-making on the League's behalf was a fair incentive; neither the High Commission, nor the League in general, were designed to provide jobs in local countries or to pressure national bureaucracies into changing their job-market modalities to incorporate unemployed refugees from the Russian empire. However, the name of the League – and especially the name of Fridtjof Nansen, the head of the High Commission – could improve the otherwise-

reserved opinion of the stateless contingent and potentially enhance their compliance with the census.

Other states – or rather, Commission delegates within them – seemingly failed to acquire and forward data in time, ignoring or forgetting about the questionnaires from Geneva. Austria, for example, had to be repeatedly reminded of the census. The delegate here initially claimed that they did not have a number of Russian refugees worthy of counting or intervention (we will return to this statement by the Austrian delegate in a brief while). Data from Austria thus returned with considerable delays, making it nearly impossible to publish consolidated results by the initially-set date of March 1922 and protracting any further effective intervention and strategic planning on the refugees' behalf.

There was, therefore, a wide variance in which local governmental and non-governmental authorities responded to the census task from Geneva; how they procured data and incited compliance; which design and language adaptations they opted for; and what degree of precision and validity their data provided. This polyphony of approaches makes for a unique and quite telling account of possibilities, restraints, tensions and expectations that shaped interactions between various levels of national and international bureaucracy in the inter-war period.

The primary objective for the census thus was to obtain knowledge about the labour pool that Russian refugees represented and what they could offer wherever the need for a workforce was reported. This pragmatic aim singles out the refugee census out from other, more traditional statistical surveys European and North American states have been taking on their populations in an increasingly systematic manner since the eighteenth century.⁵⁰

Accordingly, the questionnaire designed by the High Commission did not include any questions on topics unrelated to labour that can usually be found in universal censuses, such as housing. Data on civil status and religion were expected, but as we shall see soon, these expectations did not translate into results. The matter of housing was in part decided – although arguably in a suboptimal way – by the fact that many countries resorted to mass accommodation of refugees in camps. This type of accommodation – occasionally labelled 'concentration camps' in the instruction documents

for census-taking delegates of the High Commission – was pretty similar to more present-day scenarios in that it used existing but vacant facilities, most notably army barracks, and involved its own level of hierarchy. Delegates representing the High Commission (who were often also officers of the International Committee of the Red Cross) were encouraged to engage with camp authorities for the provision of reliable and quickly attainable data on refugees, such as their marital status, their professions, etc. Particular emphasis was given to the importance of speed of collecting data in hopes of eliminating the danger of multiple entries for the same persons under the census.⁵¹

With the administration of the camps entering the debate, the census was simultaneously expanded to include the level of local police authorities, further contributing to the complex entanglement of players. Police and public administration officers were of crucial importance for the second scenario of how the census could and should be taken, where mass accommodation was completed with further housing options in private or smaller-scaled charitable organisations. In such cases, the census data fully relied on the readiness of local administrations to cooperate. The Commission left it up to the delegates to decide on specific policies – for example, whether to collect data only through the camps, through local authorities, or some combination of the two. Such considerable action space soon proved to have its own, largely unavoidable shortcomings, given both the scarcity of resources and the League's explicit unwillingness to cooperate with the authority of national and local administrations; I will speak about this in the next chapter of this article.

Speaking of further specificities of the census design, it is essential to have a look into the questions asked and forms intended to carry the responses.

A decision was made to single out children under 14 – that is, those considered legally too young to work (question 1.c).⁵² Census takers were also instructed to provide data on the number of refugees with no realistic prospect of employment (question 3) and, within this group, those unable to work for reasons of injury or old age (question 4). They were also instructed to provide data on the size of expenditures by state or by private charitable organisations sustaining these two groups of unemployed refugees (question 7).

The questionnaire designed by the High Commission demanded that the census takers obtain and submit nominal rolls in addition to general numbers of Russian refugees in each participating state. Additionally, the document dispatch contained three standardised forms, labelled A, B, and C, and a standardised List of Occupations, numbered from I up to XXVI and at times marked by subchapters.

Census takers were requested to keep to the List's categorisations when providing information on refugees' training and labour backgrounds. These inquiries explicitly applied to the subject's last occupation while in Russia, as opposed to their employment since they left. For individuals with multiple professions, the High Commission suggested that »the most important« one be registered, an interesting chance for upward mobility – should the intended post-census relief effort find a vacancy for a given refugee, this refugee would then be automatically matched with this occupation. To verify information provided by refugees, census takers were invited to check whether these refugees' papers were at the authorities' disposal, or whether an organisation »to which the refugees belong« could testify for them.⁵³

Forms A, B, and C, in fact, provided anything but a tabular visualisation of the seven questions from the general questionnaire. Form B, for example, integrated the separately-provided List of Occupations into question 5, which examined the distribution of those with no prospect of employment by their professions at home by profession, gender, minority (number of children under 14), religion, and marital status.

Although the census was neither intended nor designed to be universal in nature, its consolidated data might in fact provide an exceptionally deep insight into the demography of the refugee population across the European continent and beyond – at least, if the compliance of national states and local authorities within these is accounted for. Indeed, this was precisely the sore point of the High Commission's census.

Given the lack of personnel to carry out the counting, delegates designated to take the census had to find ways to collect the data they needed. In some countries where mass accommodation in temporary camps was common, the data could be obtained from those camps' administrations. However, many more refugees were unregistered, or lived in private accommodations –

entirely out of reach for local authorities. If they could be reached, it was through charitable contributions to locally operating non-governmental charitable organisations. With no technical personnel of its own, the High Commission had to rely on the willingness of local governments to provide infrastructure, such as postal service, or for data so that charitable actors could complete gaps in the information provided by state bureaucracies. An additional challenge was seeking refugees' compliance in cooperating with a measure targeting long-term improvement but yielding hardly any immediate relief. The success of all these endeavors came down to a clear understanding by the Commission's local delegates of what the work on the census was – and what it was not.

Disordered Staff: Contested agencies of multipurpose Officials

By the autumn of 1921, the High Commission's officials had prepared and dispatched letters with instructions and forms for the census. The information was circulated to two levels – or rather, types – of authorities: the delegates representing the Commission, and the state-affiliated officials or otherwise authoritative figures holding public functions in the countries hosting refugees from the Russian empire. The first set of draft letters was dated October 1,⁵⁴ with responses to the census questions expected to flow back at the nearest possible time by the end of that calendar year. However, reality quickly interfered with this plan.

The first considerable difficulty arose from the very nature of the staff that the High Commission decided to assign with the task of the census. The League's system for pooling, employing, paying and overseeing its staff was rather complex. (This system got its share of critique after the League was dismantled and its assets transferred to the newly found United Nations in the late 1940s, when the UN took over, upscaled and financially boosted the many-layered model of personnel originating from the League's experiment at the international administration in the inter-war period.)

One crucial peculiarity of this model is the multiple modalities in which a civil servant could be attached

to their technical body within the League – for what duration, in which capacity, for what pay if any, and whether or not under the League's oversight and instruction? Much of the research so far has highlighted the clashing loyalties between civil servants who were expected to handle inconsolably contradictory expectations in the spirit of international commonality while representing some nation and its interests.⁵⁵ Another aspect that has only recently received scholarly attention was the firmness of a civil servant's attachment to the core personnel of the League; being an honourable expert and not a paid employee increased the flexibility of international administrators' actions.⁵⁶ In the 1920s, when the census on Russian refugees was commissioned, this system was continuing to evolve. Recent efforts have focused delegating tasks like the census to such loosely-attached experts and their own networks impacted the process, the practical outcome, and the general sentiment about the whole census endeavour.

Due to both the scarcity of funds and the League's aspiration to act as much as possible by merely assisting or hinting local administrations into a desired direction, the High Commission decided to resort to the census, not to its core staff. Instead, these were delegates and officials that the Commission oversaw vis-à-vis communication and oversight of census-taking procedures in their respective countries. Although the naming suggests otherwise, the difference between these two groups was far from distinct. Though the League paid for personnel costs, delegates were often co-affiliated with other organisations, and at times their primary affiliation was even with those other organisations. The Viennese delegate, had representation from both the Nansen Commission and the International Red Cross. Although attempts were made to find representatives within governments, the most suitable local officials were in some cases affiliated with some other institution – the Bulgarian point of contact, for example, was a bishop in Sofia.

The understanding of roles, responsibilities, and intended action spaces also varied greatly. Of the three newly-independent Baltic states bordering the collapsing empire, Latvia did not put an official in charge of refugee issues, but instead a representative; Estonia's representative was a head of the Interdulg in

Narva near the Russian border,⁵⁷ a camp for temporary mass accommodation; and Lithuania assigned neither delegates nor officials. In mid-February 1922, as collected data on the census was flowing in from other countries, the High Commission finally managed to find a fitting delegate from Lithuania. Thomas Frank Johnson, the Secretary of the High Commission, contacted Zévi Aberson, a Geneva-based representative of the *Conférence Universelle Juive de Secours*,⁵⁸ asking for his mediation in threading the census with local authorities. Aberson then activated his governmental contacts with the Minister for Jewish Affairs Max Soloveichik (Maksas Soloveičikas). Soloveichik then then outsourced the census to his soon-to-be successor as Minister, scholar Jules (Julius) Brutzkus.⁵⁹

The plan to have a quick and concise census had to be recalibrated for a variety of reasons. The issue of whom the Commission engaged as its delegates, and then subsequently tasked with collecting data, was quite central. On some occasions, the initially-arranged representatives and officials would step down amidst the send-out of the census documentation, sometimes becoming completely unreachable from Geneva.

The aforementioned bishop of Sofia, Stephan Gheorghieff,⁶⁰ did not respond to correspondence from the High Commission, which then attempted to reach him through the Bulgarian Consul General with an initial letter informing Gheorghieff of the forthcoming census and instructing on the essentials of census-taking procedure; the Consul then forwarded the initial letter informing Gheorghieff of the forthcoming census and instructing him on the essentials of census-taking procedure. The letter, however, was returned to the Geneva office of the High Commission in mid-January 1922 due to the bishop's incomplete postal address.⁶¹

By March, there was still no response from the bishop or any Bulgarian officials. The High Commission's Secretary Thomas Frank Johnson wrote to Paul Gentizon, a Swiss journalist from Lausanne working in Bulgaria. Gentizon took over the function of the Commission's delegate for a brief period of two months⁶² before handing the position over to yet another journalist, J.W. Collins, who worked at *The Times*.⁶³ Yet another letter from Geneva went to Dimitri Mikoff, the Bulgarian representative to the League's General Assembly,⁶⁴ asking for his intervention. This request yielded results

at last, forcing the Bulgarian secretariat in Geneva to step in and ascertain that the census documentation be duly delivered to Gheorghieff (and the delivery confirmed in writing).⁶⁵

Data from Austria did not come back in the expected timeframe either. The initial response to the circulation of census questions came in November, but it contained an expression of concern by the delegate on location, Henri Reymond, that it would be difficult to collect inquired data, given the lack of cooperation and an assigned vis-à-vis in the Austrian government.⁶⁶ A few months prior, Egon von Pflügl, the Austrian representative to the Secretariat of the League of Nations, had communicated that Austria was not interested in any particular effort on behalf of refugees, citing their rather marginal number.⁶⁷

In response to Reymond's concern, the Deputy Secretary of the High Commission, Edouard Frick, approached Pflügl again, inquiring for support on Reymond's behalf and explaining that the delegate was already and operating in Vienna, and willing to cooperate with the local authorities.⁶⁸ By the end of the same month, Reymond in turn reported to Geneva the felicitous appointment of a state-affiliated official, Dr. Montel, with whose help the census could now be operated in due course⁶⁹—only for Dr. Montel to disappear again until urged to return in March of the next year. This time, Thomas Johnson of the High Commission pressed Reymond for information, explicitly reminding him of the previous concern, calling for intervention on Reymond's behalf and, finally, reminding the Reymond of his promise to deliver data at the closest time possible.⁷⁰

Reymond's response did not dissipate the tension, but rather intensified it. Here, another circumstance became evident, one that proved to be more challenging than the delegates' sudden changes of career paths, disappearances, and lack of punctuality amidst the census project. Namely, it was not clear how well the delegates actually understood their task and mission, particularly alongside their professional duties and loyalty with regard to their multiple affiliations. Like many in the same position, Henri Reymond was also a representative of the International Red Cross.

The report Reymond sent in reply, though it was addressed to the High Commissioner, actually went to

the Secretary-General for the foreign mission of the ICRC, Lucien Brunel. It was titled »The Relief for Russian Refugees in Austria«⁷¹ and opened with the following passage:

En réponse au No.7 du questionnaire générale que vous nous avez adressé en novembre dernier sur la question des Réfugiés Russes en Autriche, nous avons l'honneur de vous communiquer ci-dessous quelques renseignements sur l'action de secours aux Réfugiés Russes en Autriche.

Reymond began with a brief general statement on the lack of differentiation between refugees and locals in their need for humanitarian work in a war-ravished, poverty-stricken Austria. He then listed four organisations that had been most noticeable in their work on behalf of the target groups.⁷² It was only in question 7 (the one concerning relevant humanitarian organisations offering refugee relief in the country in question) that Reymond provided estimated expenditure numbers for two such organisations. Both operated under the auspices of the Red Cross, Reymond's second organisational affiliation. No data with respect to any of the demography-related questions from 1 to 6 was ever addressed in the letter.

Johnson's annoyance is palpable in his response, which followed six days later and was over a page in length. His closing paragraph was entirely dedicated to enlisting the previous communications with the delegate. Reymond had gone back on his promise to deliver. This made it impossible to calculate Austrian data and process results, which had been preliminarily finished in the same week of March. In addition to this, upon delivering some data, the delegate only provided a response to one question, the last of the seven.

Apparently, Johnson's wrath had an impact. Within the same week, the delegate forwarded – this time directly and not via his usual intermediary station with the ICRC – two letters with handwritten tables covering questions 1-5 for the federal lands of Lower Austria, Tirol,⁷³ and Upper Austria⁷⁴ (containing 409, 16 and 136 refugees, respectively). In his response to Johnson's heated reprimand, Reymond pledged that he and his government-affiliated colleague Montel would strictly adhere to the degree of detail demanded by Geneva.

He cited an illness (one that kept him in Geneva for six weeks) in further excusing his delay, and a broken agreement with Austrian police officials that they would deliver raw data by February 15. The police had failed to meet their deadline, and Reymond emphasized that he did not want to disturb the officials all too often by following up, before finally lamenting the refugees' own unwillingness to provide data.⁷⁵

After one more response from Johnson – somewhat milder, but urgent enough – the rest of the missing data from Austria was flown to Geneva in several batches throughout April 1922.

Henri Reymond, the Austrian delegate, is a particularly illustrative example of the challenges that the High Commission had to manage in operating the international census via multiple actors with varying degrees of responsibility, action spaces and also agencies. This case also provides us with an insightful perspective on the crucial problematics of the League's model of administration, with dual roles complicating inter- and intra-state communication during these founding years.

Resorting to dual and even multiple uses of experts was already necessary from the viewpoint of scarce budgeting, though it opened a problematic dilemma of multiple and occasionally colliding loyalties. Debate on these double-bind problematics in international officials emerged as early as in the days of the League. An illuminating, and quite systematic, analysis of this particular aspect came from Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer throughout the 1930s, followed by a full book dedicated to successes and failures of the inter-war experiment in international bureaucracy.⁷⁶ While expert attention is usually dedicated to the national / international dimension of officials' conflicting roles while serving the League, the management of the census on Russian refugees epitomizes crucial aspects of this dilemma of roles.

Henri Reymond took over the role of the High Commission's delegate while also performing in the same role for the International Committee of the Red Cross. Subtle details in the communication point at Reymond's personal weights and allegiances resting more with the Red Cross than with the League. Unlike similarly double-affiliated delegates in other countries, Reymond wrote his letters on official pre-printed paper and used stamps

of the ICRC. Except for overdue and urgently-demanded census data, these communications were circulated not directly, but via an intermediary player – the ICRC's Secretary General for foreign missions, Lucien Brunel. On only one occasion throughout this heated exchange did Reymond actually explicate his affiliation with the League in addition to the Red Cross – in a letter from early December 1922⁷⁷ that provided him with a much-wanted liaison to Dr Montel in the Foreign Office. Even then, Reymond ran his League affiliation as a »Délégué du Dr Nansen«, not of the Commission.

The formulation of Reymond's March report on relief also reveals that his understanding of his agency and mission are aligned much better with that of a Red Cross officer rather than with that of a League official. The League sought, through the census, to create a clear, systematic view of the state of affairs, demography and labour potential of the imperial refugees dispersed across the world, and most visibly in Europe. This act of knowledge creation through ordering may be bureaucratic in spirit, but it is also quintessential for public administration on a larger scale. Reymond seemed to be more focused on more active forms of relief, despite the Commission's scarcity of funds in this regard.

This disagreement on modes of operation arose alongside the census affair, as evidenced by one letter in which Edouard Frick rectified Reymond's assumptions on his role as the League's official. In response to an appeal by Reymond for funds to support an individual refugee's travel to France, Frick pointed out the impossibility of pursuing individual cases without jeopardising the broader scope of the High Commission's interest and desired intervention. Frick explained that it was, to a certain extent, a question of the scale of intervention, as well as the subsumed missions that an official had to align with the larger scope and mission of their organisation:

Nous ne croyons pas que le représentant du haut-Commissaire doive, en aucun cas, usurper ces fonctions; tout ce qu'il peut daire, c'est de recommander aux organisations indigènes de soutenir l'effort fait par les sociétés de bienfaisance russes existances, ou les efforts individuels qui le méritent. Tous les fonds don't la Société des Nations

*dispose sont des fonds gouvernementaux affectés à des buts précis et qui ne peuvent, en aucun cas, être détournés vers une activité purement humanitaire. [...] Si, en Autriche, c'est le secours humanitaire qui est nécessaire aux réfugiés russes, nous aurons le regret de devoir vous dire que le Haut Commissariat n'a pas d'objet en Autriche.*⁷⁸

Turkey's aforementioned way of promoting the census put subsumed functions and self-imposed agency in international bureaucracy on a similar collision course. In Constantinople, just like in Vienna and many other capitals across Europe, the function of a delegate to the League rested with a person already representing the International Red Cross. On many other occasions, this decision might have been perfectly valid and actually very astute. Red Cross experts had both the first-hand experience of semi-activist work in dire conditions and long-established organisational legitimation, which the young League and its High Commission lacked.

In the case of the census, however, counting people in order to get a clear view of how many of them could pursue self-sustaining employment was not perceived as a mission in itself, nor as a fundament for informed long-term policy planning – but rather as a start and occasion for the relief campaign proper. The tool of creating statistical knowledge thus made little sense to officials who were used to operating humanitarian work in the field, and the League's usual wish to proceed unobtrusively, allowing its experts a broad *laissez-faire*, did not contribute any clarity.

This tilt towards institutional self-perception as a relief-giver, not an international bureaucrat doing statistic measurements, became noticeable with the Bucharest delegate, Dr. Bacilieri. This expert was also closely affiliated with the Red Cross, and it is apparent that he also perceived his own individual mission as an international officer in charge of ›Russian‹ refugees as more in alignment with the action scope of the Red Cross than that of the League, with a greater focus on immediate and smaller-scale relief.

An internal note by Henry Stoyan Lassitch, the League's Yugoslav official, written on behalf of the Romanian representative, accompanies fiscal documentation on the accounting between the League

and the Red Cross. It indicates that the work this delegate was pursuing in his affiliation with the High Commission was rather insignificant, and largely coincided with his activities as a representative of the Red Cross.⁷⁹ Owing to the delegate's total disappearance from communication with the High Commission for over three (summer) months in the year 1922, the League's Treasury was advised not to reimburse the Red Cross for a respective share in salary it claimed for Bacilieri's representative function.

Accounting troubles also arose with Reymond in the Vienna office. When balancing the accounts of the High Commission for the fiscal year 1922, the League's Financial Section noticed that disproportionately large expenditures had been submitted for refund by the Viennese representative. While other offices, such as the Constantinople and Estonia offices, balanced their accounts for staff salaries and for mailing out and collecting census questionnaires, Reymond, for some reason, had not billed the Austrian authorities for any expenditures. Given his numerous remarks about the difficulty of obtaining data from the local police or administrators from federal provinces, such negligence in balancing the expenditures for exhaustive negotiations with local bureaucracy is rather stunning. Instead of submitting for reimbursement of his diplomacy with local public administrations, Reymond submitted a well-assorted, very detailed enlistment of individual train tickets he purchased for refugees traveling to various locations across the continent where they expected employment offers.⁸⁰

For Reymond's bills of 1922, several Treasury documents persistently refer to ›individual assistance to refugees‹,⁸¹ occasionally bearing handwritten notes in red ink stressing that such assistance neither accorded with the High Commission, nor rested within the scope of the League's intended intervention.⁸² Apparently, these expenditures were only partially accorded with the Red Cross; the latter persistently attempted to shift the costs of Reymond's interventions, and when that failed, tried to split them between the two organisations – a measure that was grudgingly accepted so as not to harm the public image of the League.⁸³

Census Results, Assessment, and Attempts at Post-Census Data Usage

Amid these struggles, collecting the data for the census lasted several months longer than initially expected. Austrian results came in late April, those from Greece and Latvia arrived by the end of June, and those of Finland by mid-July 1922.⁸⁴ The results the High Commission initially intended to publish as the complete data in late March were thus more of a work-in-progress, with the numbers also highly approximate.

An overview table was circulated between the League and the ILO on how many refugees there were with no realistic prospect of work in their present country of residence, as well as the distribution of relief measures for these refugees by public or private charitable sources. These results clearly showed drastic gaps in the data and limits in what individual delegates could do with their data acquisition, relying as they did upon the benevolent cooperation, and often only fragmentary knowledge, of local authorities.

Neither France nor Hungary provided data concerning refugees' distribution by gender, or on the category of minors legally unable to work. The French delegate, Hanglaise, claimed the original forms were impossible to use, as he was confined to the data provided to him by the Paris-based Committee of Zemstvos and Municipalities (Zemgor), and their membership data did not convey the level of detail requested by the High Commission.

Hanglaise also pointed out the discrepancy between the estimated and counted number of refugees within the French territory. The estimate had spoken of approximately 65–70.000 refugees in total, of which 20.000 would be expected to reside within the four regions where the delegate managed to procure data: Paris, Corsica, Tunisia, and Marseille. The census, however, yielded a figure of 9.149 persons, with many refugees denying contact and data collection out of fear of legal persecution.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, in Germany, only data from the Berlin district could be used, leaving the rest of the country entirely unmarked and unaccounted-for.⁸⁶ Self-reported total numbers of refugees in Germany and Poland, the largest of which were 600.000 and 400.000

respectively, were accompanied by a disclaimers that they could be only seen as rough approximations, with no practicable possibility of a more accurate count.⁸⁷

What the data did show was the variation between how different countries approached the necessary task of a large-scale refugee relief. In Czechoslovakia, for example, 5.016 refugees with no prospect of work were sustained at the public's expense – i.e., by government funds – and 400 lived on contributions from charities or private organisations. In Estonia, the situation was the opposite, with 679 refugees sustained by public funds and 6.948 in private accounts. Hungarian data made a special addition to the figure regarding public funds, indicating »various international organisations« and no governmental players.⁸⁸ Though it is enlightening and thought-provoking, this was never the information the census was designed to obtain.

Some refugees' fear of disclosing their data to the census, of which the French delegate wrote, sprang in part from their strained life conditions and in part from the certain degree of visible discord and variation in how the census was carried out and presented to the public from state to state. We have mentioned how Turkish officials presented the census to their refugee contingent by promising immediate relief from the League; such relief was neither intended as the tool of a census, nor was it feasible given the Commission's usual lack of funds. It caused its own host of issues, as unattainable promises to vulnerable populations undermined compliance and, in the long term, the credibility of both local actors and the League, further diminishing refugees' readiness to engage with unproven humanitarian initiatives.

Fear of exposure to officials also was proven justified across several countries in the years following the census. Throughout the year 1922, gradual diplomatic recognition of the newly-formed USSR went on, creating a subtle but crucial shift in the position of the refugees. None of the European powers considered forced mass repatriations in the style of those following World War II, but some repatriations began in late 1921. Presumably, these transports were provided for prisoners of war and war-displaced persons on a fully voluntary and consensual basis. While the Austrian delegate Reymond issued train tickets for individual refugees to travel across Europe instead of contributing

to the census, he also coordinated with the Ministry of Interior and Education and used the League's assistance and intergovernmental cooperation to create lists of repatriates who were to leave the country and return – or rather, be returned – to what became Soviet Russia.⁸⁹

In signing the Rapallo Treaty, Germany made a remarkable political turn that also affected its approach towards ›Russian‹ refugees. Were these refugees at all if the state from which they fled was now officially considered friendly? Moritz Schlesinger's letter to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 8 November, 1922, brings this concern to light in a harsh but clear way. Should the laws be read the way they were written, he suggests, Russian refugees in Germany would have to decide whether they were ready to take Soviet passports or not. The former group would then be seen as foreigners, rather than refugees. The latter group consisted of those who had a chance and did not use it, thus losing their claim for international protection.⁹⁰ This concern did not come to pass – at least not immediately after it was expressed. This, however, had less to do with humanitarian considerations than with the considerable resistance the German foreign office expected from the Soviet government against such semi-voluntary legalist repatriation:

nicht nur deshalb, weil sie an der Möglichkeit der ihr aus politischen und wirtschaftlichen Gründen unbequemen Elemente nicht da [sic] geringste Interesse hat, sondern weil sie bei der augenblicklichen wirtschaftlichen Lage alles tun wird, die Rückkehr dieser Elemente, deren Ausweisung der deutschen Regierung besonders gelegen ist, zu erschweren. [...] Wenn die Ausdehnung des Uebnahme-Vertrages auf ehemalige russische Staatsangehörige unter Berufung auf völkerrechtliche Gesichtspunkte angestrebt wird, dann ist es notwendig, sich bewusst zu sein, dass dieser Gesichtspunkt sich am allerwenigsten bei den Sowjetrussen durchsetzen lassen wird⁹¹

As mass deportation was impossible, the situation continued shifting. In July 1923, the League's delegate attempted to facilitate a trip by Russian refugee students from Romania to visit the Russian Scientific Institute in Berlin. The German consulate in Bucharest, however,

denied the students' visas because they did not carry legitimate Soviet Russian documents.⁹² In that same year in Poland, a law was passed that dramatically restricted the residence rights of refugees, making the right of domicile contingent on the refugee's ability to prove that they had indeed been persecuted for political reasons in their country of origin.⁹³ In order to obtain such documents, refugees had to return to the USSR – and depending on the reasons they might have fled initially, such travel might have dire consequences, given the Bolshevik governmental animosity Schlesinger so poignantly explained to his foreign office in Germany.

In response to this tightening of legal requirements, and partially building on data from its census of 1922, the High Commission started to steer the refugee community in Poland towards emigration further afield – to Canada, Argentina, and occasionally, Palestine.⁹⁴ Here, the census might have proven useful to a certain extent, but rather few refugees wanted to go so far as to leave the continent, the familiar cultural environment, and their increasingly-distant dream to return home.

The polarising tension of changing political sympathies, along with the consolidation of the Bolshevik regime and its gradual recognition by an increasing number of governments, made any efforts by the High Commission rather relative and even more moderate than initially planned.

Conclusions

The flight and displacement of ›Russian‹ refugees in the 1910s and 1920s looks disturbingly familiar to contemporary observers, revealing all the same patterns of state and public involvement, as well as xenophobic tropes of refugees being depicted as disruptive and occasionally dangerous to public order and taking locals' jobs. While this stirred up resentment and prejudice against Eastern Europeans in some areas,⁹⁵ a glimpse into the census data also reveals a pattern of what Judith Kohlenberger, in her work with Ukrainian refugees fleeing to Europe from the Russian military invasion of 1922, called ›refugee self-selection‹: pre- and mid-flight decision-making about what country to immigrate to, according to self-assessment of one's own educational and economic chances of integration.⁹⁶

In the refugee cohort of the early 1920s, debates on the limitations and benefits of mass accommodation continued in the public discourse, alongside disputations on the permissibility of deportations and, for the immediate borderlands, pushbacks into the no-man's land. Considering the broader situation, the now-familiar tropes that formed, and the international efforts to respond, the crisis around the ›Russian‹ refugees in the early 1920s appears as a sort of blueprint and a testing ground for the political issues that the scholarship usually more often finds in the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

Although the League never made concrete promises of relief, the census of 1922 stirred such hopes in some, while inciting fear in others. For the public administrations on the ground, the census must have appeared to be a fancy service of sympathy towards individuals, with international actors representing the League inquiring about data that local bureaucracies and humanitarian organisations on the ground did not necessarily have. Thus, local responses to the census varied in consistency, degree of detail, punctuality of submission, and even the design of the collected data.

The League's officials, though they conversed avidly with their census-responsible delegates across many countries, did not intervene if local officers adapted the questionnaires to include additional data for their own local purposes or engaged additional partners from local bureaucracies (for example, statisticians and police officers Austria, or refugee representatives as intermediaries in Turkey). Thus, there was a considerable variation in the quality, quantity, and timing of data delivery.

There are three major reasons for this cacophony of approaches. The first of these is the League's general strategy of treading softly with its actions on the ground; any stronger action might be considered too interventionist and impeding a country's sovereignty, and if a government withdrew from cooperation, it could only be challenged through a diplomatic affront, which the League sought to avoid by all means. Second, if a state opted to withdraw from cooperation in a project like the census on Russian refugees, the High Commission had hardly any practical tools to compel its participation. Finally, and quite typical for many of the

League's projects, the census, and the High Commission in general, had a rather meagre operational budget.

Census-taking officials were also rather heterodox in how they approached tasks that the High Commission gave them; they had to be, since they never belonged to the core staff of the League, but worked for the benefit of internationalism as an idea. With regard to the 1922 census, the League's wish to create order by creating knowledge clashed with the practical impossibility of carrying out a proper census with such limited force and funds, and with the constant movement of refugees in flight and sometimes in repatriation trains to Soviet Russia.

The very way in which delegates understood their roles and responsibilities made the census a well-intended tool that, alas, had little practical use. The boundary between obtaining information and making a practical relief effort dissolved for some delegates, only furthering the discord between the agencies, the never-explicated promises, the mounting anxieties, and the embattled hopes. With the political pendulum swinging toward an aversive and yet pragmatic normalisation of the USSR, the goal to count and help – the idea underlying and conveyed by the census – became more distant each year. The ever-strained attempts of relief and action, mostly executed by the ILO, were largely overshadowed by refugees' unwillingness to comply with plans of long-distance migration, and eventually came to a halt.

The 1922 census designed by the League's High Commission for Refugees is an interesting and, in many regards, unique artefact of bureaucratic knowledge production through ordering and counting. It is also a perfectly didactic example of an endeavour of knowledge-making that yielded the immediate result it sought – creating knowledge items – but largely failed in terms of practical impact.

Given its incentives and the actors involved in operation, the census must be seen as an attempted response by the international administration (which, in itself, was caught amidst its self-establishment process) to an international challenge resulting from one utter collapse of nationhood spilling its stress and population upon other national administrations across the continent and beyond. At the same time, many of these national players, in their own states, were going

through parallel crises of self-establishment and/or recalibration to new post-war realities.

The census of 1922 remained the only information-gathering attempt of this magnitude. The High Commission's aim to build up a long-term strategy for the refugee problem and become an arbitrator of international humanitarian relief met with the practical lack of effective tools and financing to pursue this plan, creating a contradiction that could not be resolved.

Lacking its own staff to carry out the census on the ground, the High Commission resorted to enlisting either local semi-governmental or humanitarian relief officers to deliver data. Instead of delivering immediate pressure relief to national bureaucracies or struggling refugees, the census, at least in the short term, created more work and more stress. Re-doing or expanding the census might have been a valid conceptual consideration level, but there were no practical means for it whatsoever, and the Commission's budget had already been overwhelmed by this one experiment. The 1922 census on Russian refugees must then be regarded as a particularly interesting and didactic experiment in collecting data, coordinating relief, and seeking to establish an international body – the High Commission – as an effective aid and advisor to national administrations under stress. Whether any of these objectives succeeded will remain up to the reader's own decision.

- 1 This new dimensionality of mass displacement and flight in the inter-war decades is a common site of scholarship on refugee humanitarianism and what Claudena Skran calls the emergence of a new international regime in managing transnational humanitarian effort. Claudena Skran: *Refugees in Inter-War Europe. The Emergence of a Regime*, Oxford 2011 [1995]. It must be questioned, however, whether Europe's nineteenth century was indeed as free of mass flight as commonly perceived; Polish post-partition migration, and especially post-1830 migration, arguably exceeded the dimension of »refugee exile[s]« (ibid., pp. 15; compare to Philipp Ther: *Die Außenseiter. Flucht, Flüchtlinge und Integration im modernen Europa*, Berlin 2017, pp. 73–75, 179–191). It remains undisputed, however, that the inter-war international order faced a challenge of unprecedented scale.
- 2 For the re-arrangement of the European political map and specifically the redrawing of borders in East and Central Europe, consider Larry Wolff: *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, Stanford 2020.
- 3 For a comprehensive history of international humanitarian effort in the Near East see David Rodogno: *Night on Earth. A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930*, Cambridge 2021.
- 4 K.D. Watenpaugh: *The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927*, in: *The American Historical Review* 115/5 (2010), pp. 1315–1339.
- 5 Cf. e.g., Haris Exertzoglu: *Children of Memory. Narratives of the Asia Minor Catastrophe and the Making of Refugee Identity in Interwar Greece*, in: *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 34/2 (2016), pp. 343–366.
- 6 Numbers are not uncontested here, for a whole set of political, administrative, and purely technical reasons. Among these are the dynamics of refugees moving across states past to any registration; their self-identification as refugees; and the flexibility of naturalisation in post-imperial nation-states. Skran quotes 1122667 Nansen passports having been issued by 1926: Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe*, pp. 120. Later in this article, I will come to speak of individual nations' responses to the census that claimed roughly half a million refugees in Poland and Germany alone.
- 7 The term »Russian«, though firmly established in historiography of mass migration and history of humanitarian work, must be seen critically, owing to its over-homogenising character. Obviously, the displaced people were not only Russians, but representatives of numerous and rather diverse cultures and nations that fled from the shattered empire. Their cultural self-ascriptions, national aspirations and political programmes reached far beyond the »White« (i.e. monarchist) versus »Red« (communist) divide, but have remained profoundly understudied for decades.
- 8 Phil Orchard: *A Right to Flee. Refugees, States, and the Construction of International Cooperation*, Cambridge 2014, p. 34.
- 9 See Gatrell on, first, the mobilisation of formerly-uninvolved non-refugee members of national minorities living abroad, who stepped up to stem most diverse forms of daily humanitarian aid along the lines of perceived and cherished imagery of ethnic belonging: Peter Gatrell: *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, Oxford 2013, pp. 42–46). Second, consider his argument on the momentum of non-governmental organisations that stepped up into the interventional vacuum while governments struggled to react adequately owing to budgetary constraints (ibid., p. 21).
- 10 Peter Becker / Natasha Wheatley (eds.): *Remaking Central Europe. The League of Nations and the former Habsburg Lands*, Oxford 2020.
- 11 As Orchard puts it, »even as refugee numbers increased, traditional forms of protection within the state were being systematically dismantled«. See Orchard: *A Right to Flee*, pp. 102–104.
- 12 Cf. Skran: *Refugees in Inter-War Europe*, pp. 146–184, and Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, pp. 89–117.
- 13 Orchard: *A Right to Flee*, pp. 13–17.
- 14 On social de-stratification under the overarching nation-bound identity of refugees in the inter-war period, see Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, pp. 46.
- 15 Bruno Cabanes: *The Great War and the origins of humanitarianism, 1918–1924*, Cambridge 2014.
- 16 Tania Konn-Roberts: »Guests of the British Crown«. *White Russian Refugee Camps in Egypt, 1920–1922*, in: *Slavonica* 26/1 (2021), pp. 37–57.
- 17 The legal and administrative strain of repatriating Russian refugees as practiced by Bulgarian officials becomes a topic in Katy Long: *Early Repatriation Policy. Russian Refugee Return 1922–1924*, in: *Journal of Refugees Studies* 22/2 (2009), pp. 133–154.
- 18 Martyn Housden: *White Russians Crossing the Black Sea. Fridtjof Nansen, Constantinople and the First Modern Repatriation of Refugees Displaced by Civil Conflict, 1922–23*, in: *Slavonic and East European Review* 88/3 (2010), pp. 495–524.
- 19 Pinar Üre: *Remnants of empires. Russian refugees and citizenship regime in Turkey, 1923–1938*, in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 56/2 (2020), pp. 207–221.
- 20 On the partial possibility of repatriation to an empire's successor states, see Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, pp. 5.
- 21 Gatrell: *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, p. 58.
- 22 See, e.g., a Memorandum of April 22, 1922, by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Internal Affairs, Office for Tracking of Persons missing in war (*Kriegsvermißten-Ausforschungsstelle*) to the International Red Cross Committee delegates in Vienna and Berlin in the Folder 93, *Rapatriement d'Autriche*, ILO, C1285/181/7, League of Nations Archive.
- 23 See folder »Expulsion of Russian Refugees from Poland«, R1725-45-25659-14509, League of Nations Archive.
- 24 Secretary General, League of Nations, 1921, Memorandum, »The Question of Russian Refugees« in League of Nations – Official Journal, November 1921, pp. 1006–1016.
- 25 Fridtjof Nansen: *Russian Refugees. General Report of the Work Accomplished up to March 15, 1922*, Lausanne 1922, p. 4.
- 26 On the tacit Eurocentrism of the League's inter-war international regime, see, e.g., Klaas Dykmann: *How International was the Secretariat of the League of Nations?*, in: *The International History Review* 37/4 (2015), pp. 721–744.
- 27 Gatrell: *The Making of the Modern Refugee*, pp. 56.
- 28 On the historical role, uniqueness and limitations of the Nansen Pass, see, e.g. Kathrin Kollmeier: *Das Nansen-Zertifikat. Ein ambivalentes Schlüsseldokument des ersten internationalen Flüchtlingsregimes*, in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 16 (2019), pp. 354–362.
- 29 For a coherent two-century panorama of census-taking as a practice of counting and governing, see Gunnar Thorvaldsen: *Censuses and Census Takers. A Global History*, London 2018.
- 30 Bruce Curtis: *The politics of population. State formation, statistics, and the census of Canada, 1840–1875*, Toronto 2001, pp. 3–4.
- 31 A comprehensive classic primer on the issue is Ralph S. Clem: *Research Guide to the Russian and Soviet Censuses*, Ithaca 1986.
- 32 Juliette Cadiot: *The 1897 census – the limits of imperial control and the representation of nationalities*, in: *Cahiers du monde russe* 45/3-4 (2004), pp. 441–446. See also E.A. Briukhanova / N.P. Ivanova:

- Dokumentovedcheskii i istochnikovedcheskii analiz pervichnykh materialov pervoi vseobshchei perepisi naseleniia Rossiiskoi imperii 1897g., in: *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 442 (2019), pp. 96–107.
- 33 Tolts provides an enticing argument on relating and correcting data given by the 1937 and 1939 Soviet censuses on the number, gender composition, literacy and urban / rural distribution of the population. His analysis allows for extrapolation on the massive numbers of displaced and imprisoned populations that entirely changed the demographics of late inter-war Kazakhstan, which was the target republic of many Stalinist deportations and the »homeland« to a whole network of GULAG camps. Mark Tolts: *The Results of the 1939 Soviet Census. Two problems of Adequacy*, in: *Demographic Review* 7 (2019), pp. 100–117. For a comprehensive analysis of the 1937 census, its design and deceit choices, as well as consequences for census takers, see, in Russian, Valentina B. Zhiromskaiia / Igor N. Kisel'ev / Iurii A. Poliakov: *Polveka pod grifom »sekretno«. Vsesoiuznaiia perepis naseleniia 1937 goda*, Moscow 1996.
 - 34 E.g., for Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, see a recent analysis by Shairkul Batyrbaeva: *Tabulations of the 1926 Census Results in the Context of the 1937 and 1939 Censuses: Necessity or Deliberate Distortion?*, in: *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 93, Supplement 2 (2023), pp. 173–182.
 - 35 Elena Chinyaeva: *Russian Émigrés. Czechoslovak Refugee Politics and the Development of the International Refugee Regime between the Two World Wars*, in *Journal of Refugee Studies* 8/2 (1995), pp. 142–162.
 - 36 Natalia Surzhikova: *Rossiiskoe obshchestvo VS rossiiskoe bezhenstvo – 1914–1922gg.*, in: *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia* 9 (2017), pp. 88–98.
 - 37 This outward vector was already tangible in the inter-war Soviet attempts at propaganda abroad, as studied, e.g. by Michael David-Fox: *Showcasing the Great Experiment. Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941*, Oxford 2011, or Pavel Ratmanov: *Soviet Healthcare at the International Stage in the 1920–1940s. Between »Soft Power« and Propaganda (Western Europe and the USA)*, Vladivostok 2021.
 - 38 The term has been on the rise and under avid debate in recent years. Although it is currently being applied to contemporary challenges (see, e.g., Adam Tooze: *Welcome to the World of the Polycrisis*, in: *Financial Times* 28 (2022), URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/498398e7-11b1-494b-9cd3-6d669dc3de33>), it also is a good fit for the complexity and interconnectedness of the multi-vectoral reorganisation across the European continent in the largely European-dominated colonialised world of the post-Great War era.
 - 39 See Wolff: *The Reimagining of Eastern Europe*.
 - 40 *Les Réfugiés Intellectuels Russes. Demande de secours d'un groupe de Réfugiés Intellectuels Russes actuellement à Genève dans la misère*, League of Nations Archive, R1724-45-14205-13953.
 - 41 Nansen, *Russian Refugees*, p. 4.
 - 42 See, e.g., letter of 23 May, 1922 by Cuno de Watteville, Assistant High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, to the Secretary General of the League of Nations, R1739-45-21688-18974, League of Nations Archive.
 - 43 Nansen: *Russian Refugees*.
 - 44 Memo of 30 September, 1921, with a copy text of a telegram from Fridtjof Nansen, High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, to the Delegates in Geneva of Canada, Australia, Chili, Uruguay, Brazil, and Peru, R1733-45-16776-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 45 Nansen: *Russian Refugees*, p. 5.
 - 46 *Recensement des Réfugiés Russes dans les Camps et hors des Camps*, R1733-45-16404-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 47 Cf. *Kyselykaavake venäläisiä pakolaisia varten*, Inquiry list for Russian refugees in the folder *Census of Russian refugee in Finland*, R1733-45-17888-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 48 Letter of 22 February, 1922, by Moritz Schlesinger to the High Commission for Russian Refugees of the League of Nations, R1733-45-17887-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 49 *Instruktsiia po perepisi russkikh bezhentsev, prozhivaiushchikh v Turtanii*, Instruction to the census on Russian refugees residing in Turkey, R1733-45-17254-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 50 For a comprehensive introduction to the history of census-taking, see, e.g., Gunnar Thorvaldsen: *Censuses and Census Takers. A Global History*, London 2018.
 - 51 *Recensement des Réfugiés Russes dans les Camps et hors des Camps*, R1733-45-16404-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 52 Ibid.
 - 53 Ibid.
 - 54 Ibid.
 - 55 Egon F. Ranshofen-Wertheimer: *The International Secretariat. A Great Experiment in International Administration*, New York 1945.
 - 56 Sara Silverstein: *Reinventing International Health in East Central Europe. The League of Nations, State Sovereignty, and Universal Health*, in: Becker / Wheatley: *Remaking Central Europe*, pp. 71–98.
 - 57 Nansen: *Russian Refugees*, pp. 13–14.
 - 58 Letter of 15 February, 1922, by Thomas Frank Johnson, Secretary to the High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, to Zévi Abersson, R1733-45-19048-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 59 Letter of 15 March, 1922, by Zévi Abersson, representative of the executive committee of the Organisation Juive de Secours [sic], to Cuno de Watteville, Deputy High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, R1733-45-19048-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 60 [Sic] in the correspondence.
 - 61 Letter of 13 January, 1922, by Acting Secretary to the High Commissariat for the Relief of Russian Refugees, to The Bulgarian Consul general, Secrétariat bulgare auprès de la Société des Nations, R1733-45-16404-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 62 Communication of 3 December, 1921, by Fridtjof Nansen, High Commissioner, to the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria, R1730-45-17784-16024, League of Nations Archive.
 - 63 Letter of 7 January, 1922, by Paul Gentizon to Edouard Frick, Secretary of the High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, R1730-45-17784-16024, League of Nations Archive.
 - 64 Letter of 16 March by Thomas Frank Johnson, Secretary to the High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, to Dimitri Mikoff, R1733-45-16404-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 65 Letter of 21 March, 1922, by Dimitri Mikoff, Bulgarian Secretariat at the League of Nations, to the High Commission on Russian Refugees, R1733-45-16404-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 66 Letter of 28 March, 1922, by Thomas Frank Johnson, Secretary of the High Commission for Russian Refugees, to Henri Reymond, R1733-45-17877-16404, League of Nations Archive.
 - 67 Letter of 24 July, 1921, by Egon von Pflügl to the Secretary General of the League of Nations, R1721-45-14267-13564, League of Nations Archive.
 - 68 Letter of 17 October, 1921, by Edouard Frick, Deputy High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, R1729-45-16899-16024, League of Nations Archive.
 - 69 Letter on 28 November, 1921, by Henri Reymond, Delegate of the Red Cross Committee (sic!), to the High Commission for the Russian Refugees, R1729-45-16899-16024, League of Nations Archive.

- 70 Letter of 6 December, 1921, by Thomas Frank Johnson, Secretary to the High Commissioner for Russian Refugees, to Henri Reymond, R1733-45-17877-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 71 Highlighted by the author in the original »Les Secours aux Réfugiés Russes«.
- 72 Letter of 22 March, 1922, by Henri Reymond to the High Commission of the League of Nations, R1733-45-17877-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 73 Letter of 25 March by Henri Reymond to the High Commission of the League of Nations, R1733-45-17877-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 74 Letter of 31 March by Henri Reymond to the High Commission of the League of Nations, R1733-45-17877-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 75 Letter 4 April, 1922, by Henri Reymond to the High Commission of the League of Nations, R1733-45-17877-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 76 Ranshofen-Wertheimer: The International Secretariat, pp. 152–156.
- 77 Falsely dated with November, upon which Johnson also makes a note in his irate response in late March.
- 78 Letter of 30 November, 1921, by Edouard Frick, Deputy High Commissioner, to Henri Reymond, R1733-45-19357-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 79 Memo of 18 April, 1923, by Henry Lassitch, R1733-45-19357-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 80 Memo of 31 May, 1923, by P.G. Watterson, Chief Accountant to Sir Herbert Ames, R1733-45-19357-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 81 Statement of account of the CICR [sic] for the period of 1 October to 31 December, 1922, handwritten version, R1733-45-19357-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 82 A typewritten exemplar of the same.
- 83 See a staple of such accounts in the same folder, R1733-45-19357-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 84 Memo of 21 July, 1922, by the International Labour Office, R-201-20-3, League of Nations Archive.
- 85 Note sur le Recensement des Réfugiés Russes se trouvant sur le Territoire de la France Continentale, de la Corse et de l'Afrique du Nord, of 14 February, 1922, R1733-45-17875-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 86 Number of Russian refugees in various countries, mostly without means of existence, Folder »Census of Russian Refugees«, R1733-45-19708-16404, League of Nations Archive.
- 87 Ibid., p. 2.
- 88 Ibid., p. 1.
- 89 Cf. Lists in the Folder 93, Rapatriement d'Autriche. Delegation in Austria (Vienna). Repatriation of Russian Refugees from Austria: Transit through Poland, several transportation [sic] – correspondence, lists of repatriates. N 7, 1921-1925, C1285-181-7, International Labour Organisation, League of Nations Archive.
- 90 Letter of 8 November, 1922, by Moriz Schlesinger, Vertreter des Völkerbundes für russische Flüchtlingsangelegenheiten to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (an das Auswärtige Amt), C1247-153.1, International Labour Organisation, League of Nations Archive.
- 91 Letter of 11 January, 1923, by Moriz Schlesinger to the German Foreign Ministry, p. 2, *ibid.*
- 92 Letter of 31 July, 1923, by Moriz Schlesinger to the German Foreign Office, Department Russia (Abt. Russland), *ibid.*
- 93 Letter of 26 January, 1923, by Zévi Aberson to Frank Johnson with the Polish version of the law and its French translation in attachments, R1725-45-25659-14509, Jacket 1, League of Nations Archive.
- 94 Letter of 31 January, 1923, by Major Berdez, Delegate in Poland, to the High Commission for Refugees, p. 3, R1725-45-25659-14509, Jacket 1, League of Nations Archive.
- 95 See Jannis Panagiotidis / Hans-Christian Petersen: *Antiosteuropäischer Rassismus in Deutschland. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Basel 2024.
- 96 Judith Kohlenberger et al.: High Self-Selection of Ukrainian Refugees into Europe. Evidence from Kraków and Vienna, in: *PloS One* 18/12 (2023), e0279783–e0279783.

Abstract

Confronted with dramatic numbers of refugees from the collapsed Russian empire, national bureaucracies and emerging international organisations struggled to provide an adequate response. In 1922, the High Commission for Russian Refugees organized and carried out a census, collecting data on the population and labour potential of refugees. The following article reconstructs this unique experiment in multilateral cooperation between local bureaucracies, humanitarian organisations, and the League. Strategic decisions on the design of the census, dictated by the Commission's lack of staff and their resorting to experts who were liable for other humanitarian players, affected the census and yielded results hardly usable for effective relief action.

Key Words

International organisations, humanitarian work, League of Nations, High Commission for refugees, Russian empire, census

About the Author

Anastassiya Schacht is a historian of East Central Europe. Her previous and ongoing research covers history of psychiatry, medical internationalism, and international history of expert knowledge and public administration. She has published on international expert cooperation in the inter-war period as well as on the impact of authoritarianism upon academic communities in Eastern Europe. Her PhD, obtained at the University of Vienna, analysed the conflict origins, dynamics, and impact of political abuse of psychiatry on dissidents in the Cold War USSR; her upcoming book is scheduled with Palgrave Macmillan/Springer. Since 2024, Anastassiya Schacht has been working on a new project on rejected statehoods of the post-1917 Russian empire at the Heidelberg University.