Reckoning with Refugeedom – Artist Commission

Background

Reckoning with Refugeedom, 1919-75: Refugee Voices in Modern History is an AHRC-funded research project based at the University of Manchester, led by Prof. Peter Gatrell. Conceived as a refugee-centred perspective on the modern era, this project proposes a bold, timely and original approach, drawing on unexplored personal testimonies of women and men, and on interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives to lay stronger foundations for refugee history.

The project aims to address the following challenges and questions about refugees in modern history:

- How did they express themselves? And where and how did they do this?
- What knowledge did refugees use to make claims on institutions, on one another and on non-refugees?
- Did they present themselves as victims, as marginalised, as invisible, or did they take a more active role in debating their position?
- Have these refugees become historians of their own displacement through making their voice heard and recorded?

These questions have not been addressed before by historians and so refugee crises continue to be poorly recorded in history, leaving refugees poorly represented. This project aims to put the stories of refugees from this period of history at the centre of the project by using unexplored personal accounts of women and men that will make the narrative of refugee history stronger.

The project will do this through bringing these historical personal accounts, ‘refugee voices’, from the archives to scholars and the general public for the first time. It will connect these smaller personal stories to wider historical events and these accounts alongside the policies and interventions of governments and non-governmental organisations (NGO’s).

The source material for the research will include the voices of refugees from different backgrounds through petitions, letters and personal correspondence that considers, how refugees spoke out, how they engaged with history and issues around how they came to be displaced, their understanding of the personal and political consequences of ‘being refugee’.

Four linked case studies will reflect different moments in this period:

- Refugees reaching France between the two world wars ('the League of Nations refugee regime');
- Displaced Persons in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War (the ‘pre-UNHCR era’),
- The enlarged internationalised refugee regime during the 1950s and 1960s ('early UNHCR'),
- India in the aftermath of Partition ('non-UNHCR').