

Humanitarian was never enough

Stonebridge, Lyndsey

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Humanitarianism Was Never Enough: Dorothy Thompson, *Sands of Sorrow*, and the Arabs of Palestine

If governments get the idea that they can expropriate their citizens and turn them loose on the kindness of the rest of the world, the business will never end. A precedent will be created; a formula will have been found.

—Dorothy Thompson, “Escape in a Frozen World,”
Survey Graphic, 1939

“Politics,” said Aristotle, “is the art of discerning what is good for mankind.” The problem of the Arab refugee can make or break support for the west in the most critical strategical area, economically and politically, on this globe.

—Dorothy Thompson, Syracuse speech, 1950

In 1950, the American Council for the Relief of Palestinians produced the first international documentary on the Palestinian refugee camps, *Sands of Sorrow*.¹ Directed primarily at Christian churches and charities, the film’s tone was lightly didactic, its images striking and ethnographically attentive. An early example of the then relatively new genre of humanitarian advocacy, *Sands of Sorrow* invited its audience to focus on the human consequences of the mass displacement of the Palestinian Arabs.

That moral injunction came with some authority. The film was introduced by the journalist Dorothy Thompson, famous in the war years for her political internationalism, anti-Nazi campaigns, and tireless support of Jewish refugees. Expelled from Germany in 1934 for describing Hitler as an inconsequential little thug, Thompson held cosmopolitan sympathies that were rarely less than theatrical. It was Thompson who crashed an American-German Bund hate rally in Madison Square Gardens in 1939, laughed in the faces of the mob, and had to be escorted out under police protection. She wrote the first book on modern refugees, *Refugees: Organization or Anarchy?* (1938), read and admired by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Sigmund Freud, who read it as he was himself about to become a refugee.² Her reports from Europe are often credited with helping persuade Roosevelt to set up the Evian Conference in 1938, the final, futile effort to do something to help the mainly Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. Thompson described Evian’s failure as “the most cataclysmic event of modern history.”³ When, twelve years on, she spoke of the Palestinians as “wretched casualties of political change” in her introduction to *Sands of Sorrow*, she did so with the voice of one who had some claim to speak in the name of worldly compassion.

For Thompson, there was a clear moral and political continuity between her support of Jewish refugees in the late 1930s and her advocacy for the Palestinians in the early 1950s. Others disagreed. Amid accusations of anti-Semitism, she lost friends, work, and political influence. Today, many see the silencing of a bold humanitarian advocate in her story, and it is not difficult to understand why.⁴ An arresting film documenting a forgotten suffering, an uncompromising international humanism, a narrative arc that begins with the totalitarian politics of an imploding Europe and runs to the desperate fallout of that history in the Middle East: at first sight, there is much in Thompson's story that has contemporary resonance. Thanks to the exponential growth of cosmopolitan human right rights sentiment since 1948, one argument might run, we can now appreciate Thompson's stand in a way her contemporaries simply could not. Her visionary multidirectional worldly compassion has now come of age.

In this essay, I offer a directly contrasting interpretation of the lessons to be drawn from Thompson's refugee advocacy. Thompson was remarkably consistent on one particular point: refugee crises, whether in 1938 or 1948, could not be solved by humanitarianism alone. If she was out of kilter with her contemporaries and compatriots in the late 1940s and early 1950s, this was not because she had a preternaturally developed empathetic global consciousness but, to the contrary, because she grasped the limits of humanitarian feeling in the context of the failure of the postwar human rights regime to protect the most vulnerable, those refugees with no buy-in to the sovereign state power politics of the latter part of the century. There is, indeed, a lesson about the modern progress of global sentiment to be gleaned from her support of Palestinian refugees, but it is one about the inability of humanitarian sentiments to deal with the political realities of mass displacement in the mid-twentieth century.

Two human rights histories bisect in Thompson's biography: the history of humanitarianism and the history of the modern refugee. Humanitarianism, as Michael Barnett puts it, "went global after World War II." As the Cold War and decolonization shifted the geographies of power, the principle of "borderless humanitarianism" was accepted by states keen to maintain influence beyond local frontiers.⁵ Simultaneously, the rapid expansion of film, photography, TV, and radio harnessed the bureaucracies of care and aid developed in wartime Europe to postwar discourses of universal humanity, teaching the world how to feel for the suffering of distant others. *Sands of Sorrow* has a small place in this early chapter of modern humanitarianism.

Yet, as a film that advocates for Palestinian refugees, *Sands* is also a direct product of the inability—or unwillingness—of the postwar human rights regime to truly globalize its moral and political mission. The new political roadmaps for the distribution of care did not follow the distribution of displaced people beyond the frontiers of Cold War influence.⁶ A fragile humanitarianism was all that was left to the Palestinians, who fell to one side of emerging international refugee legal and political infrastructures. To shift the human rights narrative of the midcentury to include this history is to encounter the messy reality of a set of multidirectional memories that refuse to settle neatly in the world's consciousness. "The symmetries between the various terms—Shoah/Nakba, displaced person/refugee, law of return/right of return, UNRRA/UNRWA," Gilbert Achcar has written, "should give us pause, even if the

two situations are not perfectly symmetrical.”⁷ The scandal of Dorothy Thompson (and there can be no doubt that many found her truly scandalous) was that she paused.

The ambivalent legacies of postwar humanitarianism have been the subject of much historical critique since the late 1990s. Thompson caught on to the fact that enthusiasm for worldly compassion masked a deeper political problem very early on. She also grasped the particular politics at the heart of the relationship between refugee and humanitarian history: refugees are not simply one humanitarian crisis among many but the symptom of the failure of the postwar human rights regime to deal either with the violence of state formation or the persistence of nationalism. In the story I tell here, the tragedy is not that Thompson and her allies made a film about the suffering of Palestinian refugees that failed to move the hearts of the Cold War world, but that her lesson about the politics of refugees failed to move legal, strategic, and diplomatic minds.

Today, the consequences of that failure are all too evident. Just as Thompson predicted in 1938 (in the epigraph above), a formula has been found, and refugees are routinely turned loose on the capricious kindness of the world. As Ayten Gündoğdu and others have noted, efforts to address refugee crises of the twenty-first century have been accompanied by the conspicuous rise—and the conspicuous failure—of a “compassionate humanitarianism centered on suffering bodies.”⁸ All too often, those suffering bodies are presented as context-free. Thompson was one of the first critics of the affective architecture of a humanitarianism that worked to suppress the history of the very political violence that gave it cause. She believed that the traumas of her age derived less from a compassion deficit than from the demolition of the bonds between citizenship, sovereignty, and the nation. An international human rights regime that disavows its own complicity with the ongoing violence of nationalism, she would finally maintain, could only fail.⁹

Empathy in Gaza

If critiques of humanitarian empathy are now as commonplace as the failure of political compassion, it is worth recalling how a very specific geopolitical rationing of moral sentiments took shape in the mid- to late twentieth century. In 1961, eleven years after the filming of *Sands of Sorrow*, Martha Gellhorn travelled to the Middle East. Gellhorn was visiting Jerusalem to report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann for *The Atlantic*. One of the first journalists to enter Dachau and an impassioned chronicler of Europe’s dispossessed, Gellhorn never wavered in her support of Israel. On her way to Jerusalem, she toured the United Nations Refugee and Works Agency’s (UNRWA) Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Gaza. The year 1961 was a conspicuous moment in the development of postwar human rights sensibilities. Thirteen years after the signing of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and the foundation of Israel, Eichmann’s trial pushed the Holocaust into the world’s consciousness, setting a new threshold for how human rights were to be understood and imagined. As the sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider have argued, the cosmopolitan human rights sensibility we know today began to crystallize around the memory of the Holocaust in the later part of the twentieth century.¹⁰

Gellhorn captured the sentiments of this moment well in her article on Eichmann for *The Atlantic*. “It is impossible to convey the anguish felt only by hearing of the anguish suffered,” she wrote. Eichmann was “the fact and symbol” that taught that only private conscience can guarantee “the dignity of man.”¹¹

Gellhorn felt little of this evolving sensibility in the UNRWA camps she visited. In her long report, “The Arabs of Palestine,” also published in *The Atlantic*, she barely bothered to disguise her impatience with a group of refugees whose experience, in her view, paled against that of those Europeans whose misery she had so passionately documented during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Measured against that memory, well cared for by the UNRWA, the real scandal of the refugees for Gellhorn was not their suffering but the way in which they were being used as political pawns by Arab states hostile to Israel.¹² Gellhorn’s dismissal of the suffering of the Palestinian Arabs was hardly unusual among Western commentators. The rather convoluted terms through which she justifies that dismissal, however, suggest how a particular affective economy was already shaping the emergence of Holocaust memory within wider debates about rights and justice in the early 1960s. Gellhorn withholds her sympathy from the Palestinian refugees because she thinks they withhold theirs from Israel’s Jewish survivors:

The fancy word we use nowadays is “empathy”—entering into the emotions of others. I had appreciated and admired individual refugees but realized I had felt no blanket empathy for the Palestinian refugees, and finally I knew why . . . It is difficult to pity the pitiless . . . My empathy knew where it stood.¹³

The cultivation of empathy is still frequently evoked as a moral requirement for the development of a caring humanitarianism.¹⁴ While morally imaginative sentiments have long been associated with humanitarian causes, Gellhorn’s “fancy word” reminds us that each manifestation of human rights or humanitarian feeling has its own historical valence and emotional regime. The immediate postwar humanism that accompanied the human rights developments of the 1940s drew on the idea of a self that could relate to others as part of its moral underpinning, although, as Roland Burke has argued, it was not until the failures of human rights politics became clear in the 1970s that an impassioned empathy galvanized a new generation of human rights advocates.¹⁵ Yet, as Gellhorn understood as early as 1961, as much as empathy might be wished for in the recognition of historical injury, as a “fancy word” it was also a useful guide for rationing support for different groups of people. Just as the historical justice memory disputes that characterize current debates in Israel/Palestine were beginning, feelings too were settling into new historical formations. The issue was not only the presence or absence of compassion but its geopolitical economy—where it went, and how it was traded.¹⁶

Another mark was made on the human rights’ timeline in 1961, this time pertaining to law rather than feeling. While the Eichmann trial was laying the ground for the cultural and affective memory work that would tie the Holocaust to rights consciousness, legislators were busy attempting to complete the protection of the rightless begun with the 1948 Declaration. Three months after Eichmann’s ashes had

been thrown in the sea, on August 30, 1961, the UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness was signed, originally by only a handful of signatories, including Israel.

The UDHR had granted the right to nationality to all, but it had not made explicit provision for refugees, many of whom were further complicating international relations even as the drafters worked on the Declaration. While the many of the war's refugees, including Jewish survivors, still languished in former concentration camps, a further set of brutal population transfers accompanied the establishment of new ideological and geopolitical borders in an increasingly chilly Europe. The partition of India in 1947, the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the fallout from Japan's defeat in the East and the Chinese civil war simultaneously created new generations of the displaced across the world. Three years after the UDHR, the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, the so-called Magna Carta for refugees, attempted to codify refugee status for this new postwar reality. The Convention intended to catch those who had fallen out of the UDHR, but what it actually did was create two categories of refugees. As G. Daniel Cohen notes, "the label 'political refugee'" began to connote "fascist or communist persecution, heroism, and escape, whereas non-European refugees, most of them left outside the scope of the international refugee regime, were perceived as hapless victims of territorial partition, revolution, and war."¹⁷ One group of refugees became the subjects of human rights law, the other objects of humanitarian attention.

In the case of the Palestinians, the bifurcation between rights and charity had stark and direct consequences. The 1951 Convention exempted "refugees from Palestine who fall under the auspices of UNRWA."¹⁸ It was mainly the Arab states that argued for the exemption, and for good reason: the Convention, like those on statelessness that followed in 1954 and 1961, offered naturalization in a new country or return home as solutions to the rightlessness of displacement. On the one hand, for the Arab states, keeping the Palestinians out of the legislation was a means of resisting the path that led to naturalization. Others, on the other hand and unsurprisingly, were as keen to keep the option of return in political amber—despite the famous, and now infamous, UN General Assembly Resolution 194 passed in December 1948 granting the Palestinians just that right. Whatever the political intentions, the consequence of the exemption was to push the refugees further away from the discourses of citizenship and sovereignty underpinning human rights law, and so further out of politics. These consequences were experienced directly on the ground. As first the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), working with United Nations between 1948 and 1950—just as *Sands of Sorrow* was filmed—and then the UNRWA attempted to disassociate politics from aid in their work with Palestinian refugees, a new category of person emerged: the refugee who could claim the right to aid on condition she renounce her right to citizenship.¹⁹ The so-called depoliticization of Palestinian refugees turned out to have thoroughly political consequences.²⁰

Ten years on, the 1961 Convention was supposed to plug the leaks in global rights protection, specifically by fixing the anomaly whereby only the de jure stateless were protected by law, while those considered stateless by choice, the de facto stateless, were not protected.²¹ The Palestinian exemption, however, still held. If few observers picked up the irony of this consolidation of human rights legislation in 1961 for the Palestinians, this was because many had simply stopped thinking about them in the

terms of recovering citizenship and sovereignty that underpinned the postwar human rights regime—their problem had been pushed elsewhere ten years earlier. By the time Gellhorn was touring the camps, pity and its more psychologically sophisticated cousin, empathy, albeit backed up with a formidable aid infrastructure, was all that the world had to offer the Palestinians. Small wonder, perhaps, that the educated refugees to whom she spoke were uninterested in developing their global feelings for the historical suffering of other peoples.

Place the development of the global memory in human rights consciousness alongside the history of refugee law, and the growth of cosmopolitan sympathies around the memory of the Holocaust begins to look a little less like the unqualified success story it is frequently assumed to be. The affective history of human rights bifurcated at the point at which the problems of statelessness and citizenship—problems that human rights supposedly attended to—became depoliticized. As the capacity to feel the suffering of victims expanded, thanks in no small part to the emotional and moral power of the Eichmann trial, the willingness to engage politically with the violence not only of genocides but of sovereign nation-states diminished. If the Eichmann trial marked the moment cosmopolitan human rights began to find its objective correlative in the memory of the Holocaust, Gellhorn's failure of empathy—both her own and that of her Palestinian interviewees—reminds us of the extent to which the rights-sensitive “global Leviathan” prized by Levy and Sznajder in their account of the virtuous growth of human rights memory was already circumscribed from the very beginning.²²

In 1949, Hannah Arendt, in terms echoed by Dorothy Thompson at the time, pointed out that the “welter of rights of the most heterogeneous nature and origin” of new UN rights regime (“whose lack of reality is rather conspicuous”) overlooked “the one right without which no other can materialize—the right to belong to a political community.”²³ Deprived of this right, refugees sink into a “dark background of difference” (in Arendt's striking phrase), subjects of weak international law, and objects of frequently capricious empathy.²⁴ From this angle, some might say, the development of empathy as a moral marker is not just the prompt for rights we are so often urged to cultivate; historically speaking, it was a “fancy word” that covered up the world's failure to negotiate political terms for the new human rights order in the last century.

Sands of Sorrow

This context renders the making and screening of *Sands of Sorrow* in 1950 something more significant than its already powerful historical claim, made at the beginning of the film, to be the “first motion picture of the Palestine Arab Refugees.” The silencing of refugees by modern humanitarian practices is now well acknowledged.²⁵ What this early film confirms is the extent to which in the case of Israel/Palestine the origins of that silencing were so closely tied to the removal of the Palestinian refugees from legal and political history. Shot shortly after the UNRWA began operations in May 1950, the film is a striking example of the “split humanitarian personality” G. Daniel Cohen has described as shaping humanitarian perceptions of the Palestinians refugees in the immediate post-1948 period. Recoiling from the postwar Jewish refugee crisis in

Europe that had left survivors trapped in Displaced Persons (DP) camps or stranded in boats on the Mediterranean, a “philo-Semitic” turn circumscribed advocacy for the Palestinians; the miserable plight of a new group of refugees, to recall Achcar’s difficult symmetries, had to be kept separate from the historical scandal of the ongoing and blatant disregard for the fate of Jewish survivors.²⁶ In enforcing that separation, *Sands* is a film that says much precisely by what it refuses to say.

Produced by the American Council for the Relief of Palestinian Refugees, effectively an umbrella organization for a number of Christian charities, as its title announces, *Sands* is a film that really knows how to evoke sorrow—there is no shortage of visual cues for empathy here. It is a beautiful film, well aware that if it is to reach out to its audience’s charitable heart, it needs to pull viewers in through the containing frames of its filmic art. Paul Klee tents in the sands, monochrome food queues, a montage of interiors and faces, ruins and sanctuaries: the assemblage of modernist techniques and ethnographic detail put together so masterfully by the film’s director, the broadcaster, diplomat, and *Reader’s Digest* correspondent for Palestine in 1947, Theodore A. Morde, were typical of the new realism attempting to give concrete form to the pathos of a new humanitarian age. Morde was acutely attuned to the power of the historically poignant image as well as to recent cinema history: one scene with a kindly priest husbanding a group of white-shirted, long-legged boys, for example, looks as though it could have been directly lifted from Roberto Rossellini’s neorealist classic *Rome, Open City* (1945).

To an extent, the film draws on the pathos of the visual archive of the preceding decade of refugee crises, with its images of fleeing Spanish Republicans, the panicked refugee crowds in Czechoslovakia that Gellhorn had written about, Jews fleeing National Socialism, bombed-out European civilians and, more recently, the displaced persons still stranded in Europe, not least, the Jewish survivors struggling to reach Palestine. If, as with many humanitarian documentaries from the late 1940s and early 1950s, *Sands* has a ghostly feel, this is because its images are sticky with the recent past. Yet, tellingly, the film also differs significantly from contemporary refugee camp documentaries coming out of Europe in the later 1940s. Postwar life in the camps for Europe’s liberated Jews was beyond miserable. Often housed in former concentration camps, the survivors languished while the new world order engaged in an unedifying game of push the problem/refugee quota elsewhere: the partition of Palestine, the creation of Israel, and the Arab-Israeli war eventually became that “elsewhere.” But the films that came out of Europe’s camps often told another story, less about wretchedness and more about new beginnings. The focus in films such as *The Persecuted* (1946), produced by George Kadish, was on an actively self-creating community of people: sports teams play, conspicuous numbers of newborn babies are pushed in makeshift prams and held up to the camera to smile, festivals are observed, classes taught, meetings are held. As Dan Stone has shown, postwar refugee camps became “sites of Jewish history.”²⁷ *These Are the People* is the title of another film, which includes David Ben-Gurion addressing a meeting. These are the people retrieving their past for a collective future.²⁸

In contrast, *Sands of Sorrow* occupies a refugee limbo time where death rather than resettlement sits on the horizon of the near future. The footage opens with scenes of



Figure 1. Children “old beyond their years” drinking milk in Gaza. Still from American Council for the Relief of Palestinians, *Sands of Sorrow* (1950).

the distribution of relief in a refugee camp and ends with a shot of two sickly children who, we are told, were “dead a week later” (fig. 1). The deadly consequences of mass displacement could not be clearer. The semblances with recent atrocities, and their moral and political lessons are all present, but with the new quietly stated implication that the plight of the Palestinians throws doubt on the moral claims of the postwar new dawn for human rights. The narrator, John Martin, closes the film with these lines: “One hears a great deal about the highest principles expounded in the Four Freedoms. Let it not be said that civilization will long permit the kind of freedoms enjoyed by the Palestinian Arab refugees today.”

Ultimately, however, the film refuses the very connection between recent and present rights abuses that it also evokes. At least as telling as the opening up of sorrowful comparisons is the way in which its political and historical connections are ultimately contained or neutralized. Directly targeting an American audience, with an assumed limited range of geopolitical and cultural understanding, its makers were always going to set limits on the story the film would tell. That some of those involved played intriguing roles in the United States’ brief, covert, pro-Arab maneuverings in the early years of the Cold War also had an impact on the ordering of the story boards.²⁹ Morde worked for the OSS (Office for Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA) in Istanbul during the war and would later become the U.S. government’s advisor to Egypt’s leadership and its ambassador in Washington. Support for Egypt’s role in the humanitarian effort is tacit in the film, which opens with a scene of food distribution clearly administered by Egyptian officials. At the same time, the film mutes any specific reference to geopolitics, relying instead on a conspicuous showering of biblical references to generate a sense of shared religious and cultural history

between the latest exiles in the Holy Land and the American Christian congregations who were *Sands*' target audience.³⁰

Thompson's involvement in the Middle East was also actively encouraged by the State Department at the time of her visit to the refugee camps in late 1950.³¹ In her introduction, Thompson reports that she had just returned from the Middle East. In fact, her contributions were written, regretfully, before her tour to ensure a Christmas-time release. While Thompson endorsed *Sands of Sorrow* with passion and authority, her own position was to become increasingly political in the wake of her visit. Shortly after her return, she established the American Friends of the Middle East, an anti-Zionist organization with its own CIA caseworker, the gentile co-partner of the equally implacably anti-Zionist American Council for Judaism, with whose executive director, Elmer Berger, Thompson worked closely.³² Thompson never disguised the fact that her advocacy for the Palestinians was also a criticism of Zionism. It was precisely because she made this connection, she claimed, that few editors were interested in her writing on the Middle East. Political tact on this issue was not her strong point. In a spec to Ben Hibbs of the *Saturday Evening Post* in December 1950, she complained testily:

One cannot, of course, write about the Middle East without mentioning the problem of the Palestinian displaced persons, who today constitute a third of the population of Jordan and a tenth of the population of Lebanon. In the Zionist book there are no Palestinian refugees, of course; they all left "voluntarily." However, I shall not expect you, or anyone else, to publish an article which says that the Israelis committed horrible atrocities, of which sections of their own press have openly boasted; or that they stole three quarters of the land and property of Palestine, which they have just now received a \$35,000,000 loan from the Export-Import Bank to improve; or that the center of communist propaganda in the Middle East is in Haifa. No, no. I shall write only of the Arab world, with, I trust, proper objectivity and detachment.³³

Hibbs might have been forgiven for concluding that "proper objectivity and detachment" were far from guaranteed in any ensuing article.

As a film of humanitarian advocacy, however, *Sands of Sorrow* was required to perform its objectivity by generic definition. This is why perhaps its most striking feature is the omission of any historical and political account of how the people in the film became refugees in the first place. The refugee communities *Sands* records so attentively appear to have emerged out of the deserts, caves, and ruins as if by some dark miracle. There are no perpetrators, causes, politics, or history in the film; only consequences, people, and suffering. The scenes may be brutally immediate, "actual and unrehearsed" (as the voice-over puts it) episodes of daily struggle and suffering, but when it comes to accounting for historical events the film adopts a mythic idiom. This land was theirs for centuries, Martin tells us, "then the tragedy of war descended on that land, and made them wanderers." It is hard to think of a more grammatically passive way of parsing a civil war. Not once is the word "Israel" mentioned. There is no violent conflict in *Sands of Sorrow*: no fighters from either side are visible, no British soldiers, and no Jewish people.



Figure 2. Hind Husseini teaching girls at Dar-el-Tifl. Still from American Council for the Relief of Palestinians, *Sands of Sorrow* (1950).

What we see instead is refugee despair without a cause. For all that the film's images pull the refugees' suffering into its frame, at exactly the same moment its commentary and context push recent political violence out. Ariella Azoulay has written powerfully of how in concealing at least as much as they revealed, the "orphaned" photographs of the Nakba were "an essential part of the event itself."³⁴ The lack of context to the visual imagery of 1948 colluded with the Palestinians' expulsion from both space and history.³⁵ *Sands of Sorrow* does this too. The first documentary footage of the Palestinian refugees directed at an international audience makes care, not cause, its theme and purpose. Even its principal actors, the local doctors, nurses, administrators, and teachers whose work is presented as both noble and a point of identification for the film's charitable U.S. audiences, tread lightly on the history that gave them their mission. One sequence, for example, is dedicated to the work of the celebrated campaigner, philanthropist, and advocate for girl's education Hind al-Husseini and her famous Children's House, the Dar-El-Tifl, in East Jerusalem.³⁶ We see images of Husseini teaching at a blackboard in the sun, neat lines of comparatively healthy children, women sewing, girls keenly reading, active boys digging (fig. 2). We are told that Husseini created the home after having found the children "wandering in the streets and hills in the weeks after the hostilities." We are not told that the first fifty children were the orphaned survivors of the infamous Deir Yassin massacre when, in April 1948, the Irgun and the Stern gang had murdered an estimated 250 men in the village. By contrast, Thompson had already outraged many in the United States not only for reporting the massacre but for comparing it to the Nazi massacre at Lidice.³⁷

There was good reason for this particular omission. It would hardly have been

helpful to remind viewers of Thompson's capacity for tactless poor judgment in some of her advocacy: most of the Lidice children did not end up in a well-run orphanage but in Chelmo extermination camp. But with this silence, the film also reflects a general reluctance among charities and NGOs to acknowledge Israeli aggression in this period.³⁸ Nor was this one-eye-shut compassionate gaze restricted to humanitarian groups such as the American Council for the Relief of Palestinians. The muting of cause and context evident throughout *Sands of Sorrow* was part of the developing narrative that framed the fate of the Palestinian refugees as a humanitarian issue only, and not a problem of states and sovereignty. Twice the film makes reference to lost and future citizenship: the "former citizens of Palestine" must "be taught now to be useful citizens of tomorrow" we are told. But any possible terms of that citizenship (and the question of what those terms might be in 1950 was a pertinent one) were already lost to a developing "humanitarian reason," to adapt Didier Fassin's term.³⁹ In the end, it is the call for empathy, for sorrow not political responsibility, that prevails. Only Thompson, in an appeal that follows the film, refers to "ourselves, who helped create them [the Palestinian refugees]."

Compassionate humanitarianism, private conscience, a commitment to the dignity of man, empathy, all these human qualities were assumed to underpin the human rights mission of the midcentury. With the Palestinian Arabs it was not simply the case that these qualities were in short supply. Concern with the plight of the refugees was not always lacking; nor indeed was it always assumed that humanitarian relief alone was the answer (fig. 3). But by the 1950s a pattern was already forming in Western responses to the refugees: either their plight was blamed mainly on the Arab states (Gellhorn's position in 1961 was frequently assumed common political wisdom) or, when concern came, its terms transcended the causes of the crisis. "Responsibility lies, not with the Zionist nationalism or Arab irresponsibility or British intransigence or American Opportunism, but with the wickedness in all of us and the history in which we are all involved," wrote the British campaigner, leftist, and publisher Victor Gollancz, in a letter to the *Times* in March 1949.⁴⁰ Gollancz was an empathy extremist; indeed on several occasions his capacity for experiencing the suffering of others nearly cost him his mind—"just be one of those human beings," he had urged of the Jewish refugee crisis in 1938.⁴¹ Such empathy was ultimately as agentless as *Sands of Sorrow*: the wickedness of the world, like orphaned children appearing in the middle of Jerusalem as though from nowhere, or crowds of people pushed on the road having experienced a nameless catastrophe, assumed a suffering that knows neither beginning nor end. As the call to feel for the fate of others went up at midcentury, along with the new human rights declarations, treaties, and conventions, a weightless theology came to claim the refugees and stateless for postwar humanism.

Recently, *Sands of Sorrow* has had a digital revival and now appears on a number of human rights websites.⁴² This is part of the crucial work of building a global archive that documents not only the Nakba but the fact that responses to 1948 across the world were more complex and varied than dominant historical narratives suggest. Yet however much we might now want to claim *Sands of Sorrow* as one of the earliest attempts to put the plight of the Palestinians before the new court of globalized human rights opinion, it is also true that in concealing as much as it revealed (to recall



Picture Post, 25 June, 1949

Two Little Pawns in the Complex and Fashionable Game Called 'Cold War, or Strip Jack Naked'
 Their names are Yusuf Mahrum (7) and Ahmed Mazid Azazah (nearly 12). They are Arab refugees from Palestine. Some say there's nearly a million of their kind, dumped like garbage in the bare desert of the Arab lands. Few starve. But few smile. Relief workers keep them breathing. But nobody tries to give them a life. Some Arabs, perhaps, find them useful counters for bargaining in the cold war against Israel.

WHO'LL HELP THE REFUGEE ARABS?

Picture Post sent journalist A. L. Lloyd and photographer Charles Hewitt to the Middle East. They saw desperate thousands of refugees barely kept alive on relief. They saw the best part of a heartsick nation squatting in the desert, waiting for plump gentlemen round a shining table to make a move.

A NATION has gone into exile. A home-loving people have turned themselves into refugees. In the metropolitan streets and the flat-topped desert villages of Palestine, the Arabs—men, women and children—have, in the old phrase, stared, cried out, and run as it were doomsday. Since May last year, for months on end, the tired and dusty columns had been pouring across the Jordan in their hundreds of thousands, and fanning out all over the Middle East. The wealthy ones had left first, gone farthest. Their big mouth-organ-fronted cars took them all the way to the smart hotels of Beirut and Damascus. But the poor ones, queer-looking objects with strange eyes and blistered feet, just crossed the river into Transjordan and squatted on the burning sand. Now, the Arabs say there's nearly a million re-

fugees. The Jews say half-a-million would be near the mark. But 800,000 (out of Palestine's total non-Jewish population of 1,200,000) seems to be a commonly accepted figure in the official councils. It is a lot of people to be in mortal misery.

What were they fleeing from? What drove them to take the terrible step that left the better part of them dumped like garbage in the stony deserts of Transjordan and Syria? Was it the terror of bombardment? Was it fear that the Irgun might cut loose again and massacre the villagers and dump the girls in the wells, as they did at Deir Yassin? Were they driven out at the point of the bayonet as the war reached their doorsteps? Or were they advised by their own leaders to leave home because in a few weeks they'd be back as conquerors, while any who

Continued overleaf

Figure 3. "The best part of a heartsick nation squatting in the desert, waiting for plump gentlemen round a shining table to make a move." Picture post photo essay from June 25, 1949, courtesy of Getty Images.

Azoulay's terms), its humanitarian aesthetic also helped normalize Palestinian suffering.⁴³

Between 1948 and 1951, the Palestinian refugees fell out of international law and into a humanitarian mystification. Touring the German camps housing the "last remnants" of Europe's Jews in 1945, David Ben-Gurion infamously described the refugee-survivors as "a mob and human dust without language and education, without roots and without being absorbed in the nation's visions and traditions."⁴⁴ The rhetoric was brutally clear: the survivors were mere dust and ashes, particles waiting to be given new form and life by the nation. Five years on, the sands of sorrow in the Palestinian camps, the human sediment of another war, were the historical corollaries and partners of their formless European refugee predecessors, not (just) because they

shared a dire history but because they too were left stranded, the fragments and leftovers of a chapter in the modern history of political sovereignty that was yet to sort itself out. For Ben-Gurion's refugees, only a home modeled on the European nation-state could transform the dust back into men; Hind al-Husseini's orphans, by contrast, were left stranded in the sands of humanitarianism. These are not separate histories requiring equal empathetic cosmopolitan response but the twinned consequences of the same history of a global failure to re-imagine the bonds among nationhood, sovereignty, citizenship, and rights at midcentury.

"The Calamity Jane of the international set": Dorothy Thompson

Of course I am being hit in the soot for raising the problem of the Arab refugees.
But refugees to me are refugees.

—Dorothy Thompson, letter to Elmer Berger, American Council
of Judaism, January 31, 1950

While she gladly gave her time and name to *Sands of Sorrow*, Dorothy Thompson's own politics directly contradicted the prevailing ethos of the film. To run her writing back over the history I have just described is to catch a glimpse of another way of thinking—and feeling—about rightlessness and statelessness, a way that refused to depoliticize either the Palestinian refugees or the postwar politics of the nation state. Thompson counted herself as a realist. "Realism demands that one must contemplate the fact with more than a horrified humanitarianism," she wrote in "Refugees: A World Problem," the *Foreign Affairs* article that partly prompted Roosevelt to set up the Evian Conference in 1938.⁴⁵ "For too long the refugee problem has been largely regarded as one of international charity. It must be regarded now, and in the coming years, as a problem of international politics," she claimed again in a speech in 1943.⁴⁶ This was a constant refrain in the years that followed. For Thompson, realism meant never losing sight of the fact that the modern refugee problem was rooted in the febrile nation-state politics of the midcentury. For that stubborn insight alone she deserves a place in wider histories of postwar rights, internationalism, and the Cold War today.

While Thompson's absence from either international or feminist history has much to do with her dramatic turn to anti-Zionism after the war, the intense energy of her commitment to the issues of her age has also made her difficult to place. Feminist, activist, moralist, internationalist, and one time Woman of the Year (the glorious 1942 Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy film of that title is based on her), her passions were wide, forthright, and often extravagant. Her friend Phyllis Bottome once remarked on her messianic qualities.⁴⁷ Not for nothing, perhaps, did President Obama choose to end his toast at the 2015 White House Correspondents Association dinner with "the words of the American correspondent Dorothy Thompson: 'It is not the fact of liberty but the way in which liberty is exercised that ultimately determines whether liberty itself survives.'" Thompson had a rhetorical gift for reflecting the United States back to itself in the light it imagined it might look best from abroad: democratic and committed to liberty. The internationalist gesture was not always appreciated. The joshing macho sports writers in the 1942 movie describe her (unlovingly) as "the Calamity Jane of the international set."⁴⁸

But Thompson's passionate advocacy for refugees went beyond the staging of internationalist moral sentiment. Her later anti-Zionism and pro-Arab stance, and the accusations of anti-Semitism that both attracted, have clouded the fact that her understanding of the politics of the refugee situation was remarkably consistent. Yet in the end—and this is why her story resonates so keenly now—Thompson found it difficult to think herself out of the historical situation she analyzed so clearly. If horrified humanitarianism was not enough and brute politics too brute, what new kinds of political imagination might instead speak to the age of the refugee? A difficult enough question in the mid-twentieth century, today the challenge of thinking through the global experience of refugeedom beyond either the limits of well-intentioned empathy or the failing politics of human rights is newly acute. Thompson's example proves how difficult it was, even for the most passionate and imaginative of writer-activists, to think about the uneven symmetries between different historical groups of refugees—here European Jews and Palestinian Arabs—within the opposing political categories of national citizen and refugee. “Only a world of sovereign states that had categories of people called ‘citizens’ and were intent on regulating population flows could produce a legal category of ‘refugees,’” Michael Barnett writes in his study of the UNHCR.⁴⁹ I want to end this essay by suggesting how Thompson gives us a measure of the difficulty of thinking beyond that world in the mid-twentieth century.

Thompson had been documenting the unraveling of European securities about citizenship and statehood since the 1920s and 1930s: this was, to an extent, her motif. The first piece she ever filed was about the British Zionist movement, inspired by a group of committed Zionists she had met on the boat that took her from her East Coast Protestant youth to a politically charged Europe. In the years that followed, in a series of regular columns for the *New York Post*, the *New York Tribune*, and the *Ladies' Home Journal*, as well as a regular broadcast for NBC, she vividly brought the reality of Europe's implosion home to the United States. Thompson's mastery of the complicated politics of unfolding events was formidable. But it is as a writer as much as a political thinker that she also merits attention. Thompson's writing, particularly when she adopted a novelistic as well as journalistic idiom, was keenly attuned to the art of revealing the lives, minds, and motivations of those who found themselves pushed outside the category of European citizenship. Here she is, for example, at her best, in 1938 describing Herschel Grynzpan, the boy whose assassination of the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris provided the pretext for *Kristallnacht*:

I want to talk about that boy. I feel as though I knew him, for in the past five years I have met so many whose story is the same—the same except for this unique desperate act. Herschel Grynzpan was one of the hundreds of thousands of refugees whom the terror east of the Rhine has turned loose in the world. His permit to stay in Paris had expired. He could not leave France, for no country would take him in. He could not work because no country would give him a work permit. So he moved about, hoping he would not be picked up and deported, only to be deported again, and yet again. Sometimes he found a bed with another refugee. Sometimes he huddled away from the wind under the bridges of the Seine . . . Then a few days ago, he got a letter from his father. His father told him that

he had been summoned from his bed, and herded with thousands of others into a train of boxcars, and shipped over the border, into Poland. He had not been allowed to take any of his meagre savings with him. Just fifty cents. "I am penniless," he wrote to his son.

This was the end. Herschel fingered his pistol and thought: "Why doesn't someone *do* something! Why must we be chased around the earth like animals!" Herschel was wrong. Animals are not chased around the world like this. In every country there are societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals. But there are none for the prevention of cruelty to people.⁵⁰

Herschel starts as an example of a general experience: "one of the hundreds and thousands of refugees." He becomes particular not only through his unique act of violence but because of the way Thompson, using free indirect discourse, zooms in on his experience, following his relentless moves, and eventually imitating his thoughts directly: "So he moved about, hoping he would not be picked up and deported, only to be deported again, and yet again," "This was the end." Where for Gellhorn in 1961 empathy was a "fancy word" in the affective power economy of the postwar Middle East, for Thompson in 1938 the art of imagining other minds through careful prose was an advocacy strategy. It worked, up to a point. Broadcast on the *General Electric Program*, her talk raised \$40,000 for Grynzpan's defense. (Thompson donated the excess to Anna Freud's War Nurseries project in London.)

Hannah Arendt would later also evoke societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals in a discussion of the flimsiness of midcentury rights for the stateless. Few refugees were interested in human rights, she observed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951); indeed, the more rights deprived they were, the more obvious the case became not for more rights but for their own national community.⁵¹ Arendt too was particularly drawn to the Grynzpan family's tragedy. Readers of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) will recall that out of all the testimonies she heard from the witness stand in 1961, only "the shining honesty" of Zindel Grynzpan's (Herschel's father) account of his expulsion really touched Arendt, who had also campaigned for his son in France before her own imprisonment in Gurs camp and her later escape from Europe. "This story took no more than perhaps ten minutes to tell, and when it was over—the senseless, needless destruction of twenty-seven years in less than twenty-four hours—one thought foolishly: Everyone, everyone should have his day in court," she wrote.⁵²

Critics have read this as a lapse in Arendt's characteristic steely antisentimentalism, prompted by traumatic memories of her own border crossings and those of her friends, notably Walter Benjamin.⁵³ It is more likely that what Arendt experienced listening to Zindel Grynzpan was what she called compassion. Compassion, she wrote in *On Revolution* (1963), doesn't generalize the suffering of other people but is direct and singular. Although "politically speaking," compassion is "irrelevant and without consequence," Arendt thought that when guided by political reason, compassion could help forge the solidarity necessary to establish "a community of interest with ['with', note, not 'in'] the oppressed and exploited."⁵⁴ Pity, by contrast, was a perversion of compassion, a sentiment once permitted to drive politics—as in the French

Revolution—capable of inspiring the cruelest manifestations of virtue. It was too easy to be enchanted by one's own capacity for pity, Arendt thought, far harder to forge a reasoned politics of communal compassion.⁵⁵ Arendt did not write about empathy directly. But if pushed, she might have described compassion as the basis for a dialogue with those stripped of the political privileges of citizenship, a socially mindful empathy, perhaps, with the potential for a mutual conferring of rights, and pity as a “fancy word” capable of as much harm as good, cheap empathy if you like, with no rights-exchange in prospect. Pity, she also noted, is eloquent, loquacious; it prefers to chat about its achievements rather than measure them in historical and political terms.

As for Thompson, then, for Arendt the point is not that feelings are necessarily cheap but that without politics they miss the reality of a world in which nationalism has (to borrow from Thompson) turned the comity of nation-states into a “jungle.” Nationalism, Thompson wrote in 1938, was “turning the world into a jungle and the refugees are merely people forced to run away from one part of the jungle to another part of it. Their personal tragedy can only serve one great social purpose. They are and should be recognized as an advancing crowd shouting a great warning: The jungle is growing up, and the jungle is on fire.”⁵⁶ Imagining—or compassionately particularizing—the Grynzpans' plight mattered for both Thompson and Arendt, I would argue, because their story captured not (or not only) a suffering to be empathized with, but a moment when it became clear that the European nation-state was failing. Their plight, in other words, marked the historical moment when it began to become apparent that another model of political community needed to be thought.

Thinking that alternative proved difficult. If one version of nationalism caused the refugee crisis, many believed that only another version would cure it. Thompson was among them. The photographs of hearty-looking refugees engaged in acquiring new manual and agricultural skills accompanying her piece in *Survey Graphic* were entirely in keeping with the principles of resettlement that governed much of the refugee agenda in the 1930s (fig. 4). Far from being “devoid of sovereignty” (the phrase is Levy and Sznajder's) like the refugees in *Sands of Sorrow*, and, indeed, in many representations of today's refugees, these are people clearly en route to somewhere else, preferably somewhere with plenty of farming opportunities.⁵⁷ *There Is Only One Answer* was the title of one of Thompson's wartime pro-Zionist pamphlets, and that answer was already “a reality” in Palestine.⁵⁸ If refugeedom was the limit case of an existence with no juridical or political visibility and the point at which the imagination could only falter—hence Herschel Grynzpan's tragedy—at this point for Thompson, as for many revisionist Zionists at the time, only the building of a nationalist home could negate exile.

That belief changed rapidly when she first visited Palestine toward the end of the war. “I assure you,” she wrote to Ted Thackrey, her editor at the *New York Post*, “that the situation there is *not* the way it has been presented by many of the Zionists. It is one of the most complicated and difficult problems on the earth today.”⁵⁹ The immediate postwar period revealed two bitter truths to Thompson: first that the politics of brute nationalism still trumped efforts to realize a global sovereignty based on humanist principles, and that as a consequence, second, the mass displacement of entire populations was set to continue. “I have, indeed, said I think I could endure



Figure 4. Refugees retraining, from *Survey Graphic*, special number “on the challenge to democracy” (1939). The British Library Board, P.P.6392.ebm, p. 41 © and courtesy British Library Board.

another world war but I certainly could not spiritually endure another post-war,” she quipped: for “hideous as are the horrors of war—and they become increasingly monstrous—there is something peculiarly debasing in war continued against the helpless and unarmed after hostilities have ceased.”⁶⁰

Thompson recognized early on that new human rights regime had not ended the misery of the helpless and the unarmed but had simply pushed them onto new roads and into new camps. “For years a committee of the United Nations has been laboring to create a United Nations charter containing ‘rights,’” she complained in a furious talk given in the May 1950 to a group of churchwomen in Syracuse.⁶¹ Despite this, “during and since the Nuremberg trials, more persons have been displaced and

deported than Hitler even had time to displace or deport.”⁶² “There is no orderly and humane manner in which ten million people can be dispossessed of their homes and property, torn from their neighbors and associations, from the landmarks of their childhood and the graves of their ancestors, and settled in an already overcrowded country, vast areas of which had been completely destroyed by war.”⁶³

In a talk given at Harvard Law School two years later, Thompson delivered a final blow to the myth that the new world order had got a grip on the territorial violence of the age: “The establishment of a power from an Arab Majority to a Jewish minority could only be accomplished by *force, not by the fiat of a U.N. majority, and certainly not in the name of self-determination or democracy.*”⁶⁴ The underlining in the original is Thompson’s own on the manuscript: the State of Israel created by *force*, not by the hollow power of any new global Leviathan. Her anger goes beyond the sense that anyone could or should have behaved any better; the self-declared Cassandra of her age was familiar with historical disappointment. Her despair is deeper and has to do with her intuition that any sovereignty gained by a minority at the expense of a majority would at best only be a form of pseudo-sovereignty. The world had fought its war in the name of “self-determination and democracy” but had failed to reinvent them as principles for a new and, in many ways, just as dangerous world. Thompson’s concluding words to her Syracuse audience in 1950 echo through to the present with a prescient clarity:

As long as [the Arab refugee problem] exists there will never be alleviation of tension between the new state of Israel and the Arab world. And out of the despair and misery of these mass camps will come new terrorist movements, new types of mass-camp men, to bring new social and human problems. The phenomena of the exile and the mass camp can be seen from Germany in the heart of Europe, in the Middle East, and in the Far East. And it is a phenomenon that can be more deadly for human civilization than the atom bomb.⁶⁵

Against the prevailing direction of travel, Thompson understood that horrified humanitarianism was not a cure but a symptom of the failure to comprehend the depth of what would turn out to be a permanent refugee crisis in the twentieth century. She also understood that postwar internationalism would founder so long as it disavowed the violence of its own political project. The “mass-camp men” were the mirror images of the uneasy sovereign subjects of the new world order: their fates tied by a history of violence and despair.

Conclusion

One can do anything with refugees if you know how they feel

—Dorothy Thompson, Notebooks

Dorothy Thompson saw a coherence in the patterns of twentieth-century statelessness that few others were willing to acknowledge at the time. But it did not follow that she more than anyone else could lift herself clear of the psychopathologies of modern nation-state formation. In March 1950, just a few months before *Sands of Sorrow* went into production, she published a now infamous article in *Commentary* magazine, “Do

Israeli Ties Conflict with U.S. Citizenship? America Demands Single Loyalty.”⁶⁶ The theme of double loyalty was familiar to readers of *Commentary*, as too were many of the issues raised in Thompson’s piece: worries that the separation of citizenship and nationality was importing bad European models of sovereignty both to Israel and the United States, and concerns that Israel would be viewed and judged as a mere outpost of the West’s Cold War sphere of influence, were common topics in *Commentary* and among the postwar community in which Israel was a lively, but hardly settled, topic of debate.

The article pivots on an image of American citizenship that is everything the European nation-state is not. Europe went wrong, Thompson suggests, when the state elided with the nation: minorities were stripped of citizenship, national identity became the organizing political principle, democracy collapsed and tyranny reigned (again, the analysis is very close to Arendt’s). By contrast, she claimed, in the United States “nationhood and statehood are co-joined” and there are “no minorities.” Israel, she continues, threatens this because it suggests the prospect of double citizenship for American Jews. It is hard not to hear the return here of the very anti-Semitic fantasy that Thompson, in her pro-Zionist period, argued that the creation of Israel would end: in their own country, “the Jews would not feel that they have to carry the nation around in their own bosoms, but could actually leave it if they didn’t profoundly care for it—leave it, where it belongs, on a *soil*.”⁶⁷ Now the threat appears to be, as the Harvard historian Oscar Handlin put it in his response to Thompson’s article, a “Diaspora of the State of Israel.”⁶⁸

More interesting, perhaps, than the question of whether her criticism of Israel licensed an always-latent anti-Semitism is the struggle Thompson has with maintaining her own terms in this argument about good and bad forms of nation-states.⁶⁹ Thompson wants the United States to be a land of citizens whose freedom from national ties defines their nationalism. But as Handlin argues in his response, she comes perilously close to using the concept of “nation in its inclusive totalitarian connotation.” It was not that minorities gave up their identities in the United States, he counterargued, not that citizenship was absorbed into the nation, but that they didn’t need protecting. Minorities and their claims exist in the United States, and always have done. When Thompson accuses Israel of launching a “counternationalism of unprecedented vehemence,” what she seems to have missed is the point that had been implicit in her defense of refugees since 1938: that their very existence reveals the precariousness of tying nationality identity to state formation in the first place. As Elias Sanbar in his essay “Out of Place, Out of Time” has argued, this is exactly the lesson that Palestinian claims for national identity now make clear: such claims, he writes, “compel rejection of the idea that any national identity necessarily involves the establishment of a nation-state in accordance with the modern transformations which have convulsed Europe since the eighteenth century.”⁷⁰ Knowing how refugees feel is not just to experience their suffering; it is also to put yourself in a place where the whole question of national identity in connection to political citizenship needs to be rethought. Compassion, in other words, might entail a political identification.

When Thompson had climbed inside the mind of Herschel Grynzpan in 1938, she understood that the new form of statelessness that had been let loose on the world

would demand new and riskier forms of imagination and identification. At its best, her writing rose to this challenge with a verve and intensity that matched the moral demands of her age. More than most, she intuited that statelessness was a trauma precisely because it cut into the deepest places of the mind—and that that made new requirements on the imagination, wherever they might lead. Finally, here she is giving a Town Hall lecture in New York in 1951, describing the necessity of entering into the mind of the Palestinian Arab refugees in terms that make one wish that she had lived long enough to have debated the issue of empathy with Martha Gellhorn in 1961 (Thompson died that year, just months before the Eichmann trial began):

In order to communicate with other peoples, you must first understand what is in their minds, in their consciousnesses, in their experience; you must be able to exercise a certain degree of what is called “empathy”—the capacity to put yourself imaginatively into another mind, to feel, at least to a degree, as they feel, and to communicate with what is already there. Otherwise what you say works like the introduction of a foreign and indigestible body, which is swiftly vomited up.⁷¹

Thompson returns in this passage to the theme that has been a concern throughout this essay: the capacity of empathy to miss its mark and be spat back at your feet not because you have failed to sorrow fairly (remember Gellhorn’s affective economy) but because you have confused your human capacity to recognize suffering with a way of living with other people in the world. You have failed, in Thompson’s words, to communicate with what is *already* there. Describing her approach to humanitarian photography Azoulay writes: “I employ the term ‘contract’ in order to shed terms such as ‘empathy,’ ‘shame,’ ‘pity,’ or ‘compassion’ as organizers of this gaze.”⁷² Her point is that the humanitarian gaze is all too frequently one-directional, blind not to the suffering of others but to “what is already there,” to the fact that it is the contracts of citizenship and sovereignty, legal and political recognition that determine how we live together, as well as our feelings. So long as statelessness is framed as the negative of that citizenship, so long as refugees are objects of pity rather than assumed to be political subjects, current claims about cosmopolitan sympathy sweeping the rightless into its virtuous vortex will continue to be as hard to digest for those who remain in the world’s refugee settlements.

NOTES

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1. See *Sands of Sorrow* website, accessed July 16, 2016, https://archive.org/details/sands_of_sorrow.

2. See Jacqueline Rose, “Displacement in Zion,” *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), 45–47.

3. Thompson, *New York Herald Tribune*, quoted in Susan Hertog, *Dangerous Ambition*:

Rebecca West and Dorothy Thompson, *New Women in Search of Love and Power* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 254.

4. A new film, *The Silencing of Dorothy Thompson*, for example, is currently in production. See *The Silencing of Dorothy Thompson* website, accessed July 16, 2016, <http://thesilencing.org/>.

5. Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), 17–18.

6. Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 86–88.

7. Gilbert Achcar, *The Arabs and the Holocaust: The Arab-Israeli War of Narratives* (London: Saqi Books, 2011), 29.

8. Ayten Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16.

9. See Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2017) for a compelling argument about the failure of the midcentury human rights regime to reckon with the violence of state formation.

10. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Human Rights and Memory* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

11. Martha Gellhorn, “Eichmann and the Private Conscience,” *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1962. For further discussion of Gellhorn in Jerusalem, see Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Judicial Imagination: Writing after Nuremberg* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1–6, 84.

12. Gellhorn, in the words of her biographer, was “deaf and mute when it came to the Palestinians.” Caroline Moorehead, *Martha Gellhorn: A Life* (London: Vintage, 2004), 327.

13. Martha Gellhorn, “The Arabs of Palestine,” *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1961.

14. Martha Nussbaum has made the case for empathy’s role in the distribution of justice most consistently. See *Frontiers of Justice: Disabilities, Nationalities and Species Membership* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), and *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013). For the connection between the development of rights and empathy, see Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), and Elaine Scarry, “The Difficulty of Imagining Other People,” in *For Love of Country?*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 98–110. For a cogent critique of the historical overplaying of the empathy argument in recent histories and theories of rights, see Samuel Moyn, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” in *Human Rights and the Uses of History* (London: Verso, 2014), 1–18.

15. Roland Burke, “Flat Affect? Revisiting Emotion in the Historiography of Human Rights,” *Journal of Human Rights* (November 2015): 26.

16. Recent literature on the history of the emotions and humanitarianism has started to reveal the complex politics of modern compassion. See Thomas Lacquer, “Bodies, Details and the Humanitarian Narrative,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 176–204; Lynn Festa, “Humanity without Feathers,” *Humanity* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 3–27; Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics,” in *Transformations: Thinking through Feminism*, ed. Sara Ahmed et al. (London: Routledge, 2000), 33–47; Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown, eds., *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

17. G. Daniel Cohen, “Elusive Neutrality: Christian Humanitarianism and the Question of Palestine, 1948–1967,” *Humanity* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 184–85.

18. Introductory Note, UN 1951 Convention on Refugees, 4, see UNHCR website, accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html>.
19. Ilana Feldman, "Difficult Distinctions: Refugee Law, Humanitarian Practice and Political Identification in Gaza," *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 1 (2007): 129–69.
20. Riccardo Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28 (June 2009): 232.
21. Guy S. Goodwin-Hill, in "Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness" notes that the 1961 convention "consolidated" basic human rights principles, United Nations Audio-visual Library of International Law, see United Nations website, accessed July 16, 2016, <http://legal.un.org/avl/ha/crs/crs.html>. See also Miriam Rürup, "Lives in Limbo: Statelessness after Two World Wars," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 49, no. 124 (Fall 2011): 121; and Eric D. Weitz, "From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1313–43.
22. Levy and Sznajder, *Human Rights and Memory*, 53. For a trenchant critique of the uses of Holocaust memory in Levy and Sznajder, see A. Dirk Moses, "Genocide and the Terror of History," *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 90–108.
23. Hannah Arendt, "'The Rights of Man': What Are They?," *Modern Review* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1949): 37.
24. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 2004), 383.
25. Liisa Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (August 1996): 377–404.
26. Cohen, "Elusive Neutrality," 184.
27. Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015), 120.
28. See "These are the People, Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Germany" (1946), accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DN7-IHLDbvA>, and "The Persecuted," accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrVIMKVINMQ>.
29. Hugh Wilford, *America's Great Game: The CIA's Secret Arabists and the Shaping of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 117–31.
30. The emphasis on a shared religious history embodied in the Holy Land was typical of the advocacy of Christian humanitarian organizations in the period. See Cohen, "Elusive Neutrality."
31. Thompson's 1950 visit to the Middle East was instigated by the American Middle East Relief organization but supported by the State Department. In a letter to George M. Baraka of American Middle East Relief, September 6, 1950, she writes, "I had a visit from Roger Tubby of the State Department to tell me that the State Department was vitally interested in my making the trip that your organization has proposed." (Dorothy Thompson to George M Baraka, September 6, 1950, box 37, Dorothy Thompson Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.) In a later letter from April 1951, she tells Stephen Penrose of the American University of Beirut that although some of her Middle East articles were blocked by the major newspapers, all were published, and "the State Department, I hear, had them all photostated and has itself distributed them widely." (Dorothy Thompson to Stephen Penrose, April 1951, box 37, Dorothy Thompson Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.)

32. Wilford, *America's Great Game*, 119.
33. Dorothy Thompson to Ben Hibbs, December 29, 1950, box 37, Dorothy Thompson Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.
34. Ariella Azoulay, *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 9.
35. See Elias Sanbar, "Out of Place, Out of Time," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (June 2001): 90.
36. The story of the school was recently the subject of the film *Miral* (2010), based on the book by Rula Jebreal and directed by the artist Julian Schnabel. Rula Jebreal, *Miral: A Novel*, trans. John Cullen (London: Penguin Books, 2010).
37. Thompson had a firsthand witness account of Deir Yassin from her friend, the journalist Vincent Sheean. Stung by attacks on her reporting (it was during this period that her columns began to be dropped amid accusations of anti-Semitism), she defended the Lidice comparison in a letter to Ben Rosenthal (March 8, 1949) of the American Jewish Congress: "The Irgun-Sternists chose to make an example of that village. They took the women and children who were spared into Jerusalem, removed their headdresses and paraded them among hoots and jeers. As a result of this performance one child fainted away and died of fright. The result was to start a wholesale exodus in the face of possible Jewish occupation. The leader of one of these groups—Menachem Begin—was afterward given a great reception in NY attended by the Mayor. He would not have been, had the facts been known. I do not think I exaggerated in calling Deir Yassin a Lidice. Nor is it, according to reports I received, the only one. But I will stick to what I can presently prove." Dorothy Thompson to Ben Rosenthal, March 8, 1949, box 37, Dorothy Thompson Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.
38. Cohen, "Elusive Neutrality," 184–85.
39. Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 2–5.
40. Quoted in Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz: A Biography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1987), 485.
41. Quoted in Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz*, 377.
42. See <http://www.palestineremembered.com/Articles/General/Story2129.html>; <https://occupiedpalestine.wordpress.com/2011/06/04/sands-of-sorrow-video/>; <http://warisacrime.org/node/52266>; <http://www.withoutamap.org/?p=237>; <http://zochrot.org/en/video/49716> (all accessed July 16, 2016).
43. Azoulay describes how the "visual ontology" of this kind of postwar humanitarianism has had lasting consequences for the framing of rights, and not least for the vexed and complex history of rights-based citizenship in Israel-Palestine. What so often lay unquestioned in the invitation to regard the suffering of victims (the arresting ethnographic beauty of *Sands of Sorrow* is again significant) was the brokering of political rights themselves. This is why Azoulay describes statelessness as a "scandalous category": "Circumscribing the discussion of Palestinians in advance through the scandalous category of 'stateless persons' amounts to accepting a narrow reading of citizenship as a 'natural' privilege possessed by the members of a certain class that administers the distribution of the good known as citizenship as if it were its own private property." Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 15.
44. Quoted in G. Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 142.

45. Dorothy Thompson, "Refugees: A World Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1938, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/69803/dorothy-thompson/refugees-a-world-problem>.

46. Dorothy Thompson, *Jews in the Family of Nations* (London: Jewish Agency for Palestine, 1943), 5. Thompson delivered the speech at the 1943 National Conference for Palestine at Philadelphia.

47. Peter Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson* (New York: Little Brown, 1991), 225.

48. Throughout the film it is suggested that the Dorothy Thompson (Tess Harding) character's humanitarian internationalism is unfeminine, deeply emasculating and un-American. The excruciating final scene ridicules Thompson/Harding/Hepburn—able to speak a dozen languages, including Arabic, and a powerful cosmopolitan player—for being unable to make breakfast for her husband. "If you could just spend ten minutes of that heart at home," pleads Spencer Tracey's character, Tess's estranged husband.

49. Michael Barnett, "Humanitarianism with a Sovereign Face: UNHCR in the Global Undertow," *International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 251.

50. Dorothy Thompson, *Let the Record Speak* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1939), 256–57.

51. Arendt, *Origins*, 371.

52. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 229.

53. Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 124.

54. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2006), 79.

55. See also Lynn Festa, "Humanity without Feathers," 3–27.

56. Dorothy Thompson, "Escape in a Frozen World," *Survey Graphic*, ed. Paul Kellogg, February 1939.

57. Levy and Sznajder, *Human Rights and Memory*, 66.

58. Dorothy Thompson, *There Is Only One Answer* (New York: American Zionist Emergency Council, 1944). Jewish emigrants to Palestine, she wrote in *Refugees*, had already demonstrated how it was possible for people who "have hitherto been engaged in commercial or intellectual pursuits to re-train themselves for agriculture and for different forms of social existence." Thompson, *Refugees: Anarchy or Organization* (New York: Random House, 1938), 101. The immediate reference here is to the Second Aliyah generation of settlers and socialist Zionists. Thompson is breathless in her admiration of the land of milk and honey that had been wrought from a hitherto untilled soil. "The Jews in building up Palestine, have actually created more *Lebensraum* for the Arabs and not less. For they have taken parched and exhausted soil and, by scientific methods . . . have *created* the land on which they live," she declared (Thompson, *Jews in the Family of Nations*, 7). It is too easy to say that the clanging ironies in the language here (the "only one answer," the cold rationalism of *Lebensraum*) can be heard with historical hindsight only. If Thompson writing in the late 1930s reads like an oracle of later catastrophes this is because, like many at the time, she simply could not imagine that refugees had any kind of home to go other than some place that at least bore a fictional semblance to the very sovereign nation states that were the cause of the problem in the first place.

59. Quoted in Kurth, *American Cassandra*, 283. As Jacqueline Rose points out, Thompson had warned as early as *Refugees: Anarchy or Organization?* that "unless the difficulties between Arabs and Jews can be cleared up and a reconciliation effected," Palestine would be no solution to the

Jewish refugee crisis: Dorothy Thompson, *Refugees*, 78–79; Rose, *The Last Resistance*, 47. By 1943, however, she had been firmly persuaded of the necessity for a Jewish state: “There will one day be a united Arabian world, self-governing and free of imperialist interference. In that world a Jewish state can exist. Arabia is under populated.” *Jews in the Family of Nations*, 8.

60. Thompson, “Arab Refugees,” MSS box 105, Dorothy Thompson Archive, 6. Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

61. Thompson, “Arab Refugees,” 1.

62. *Ibid.*, 5.

63. *Ibid.*, 5.

64. Thompson, “Arab World and the Middle East,” MSS box 107, Dorothy Thompson Papers, 4.

65. Thompson, “Arab Refugees,” 16.

66. Thompson, “Do Israeli Ties Conflict with U.S. Citizenship? America Demands Single Loyalty,” *Commentary*, March 1, 1950. Also available online. See *Commentary* website, accessed July 16, 2016, <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/do-israeli-ties-conflict-with-u-s-citizenshipamerica-demands-a-single-loyalty/>.

67. Thompson, *Jews in the Family of Nations*, 10.

68. The Ben-Gurion–Blaustein Agreement in 1950 specifically addressed this fear. Jacob Blaustein, the past head of the American Jewish Committee, publicly affirmed Jewish loyalties to the United States and Ben-Gurion agreed that there would be no Israeli interference.

69. There can be no doubt that anti-Semitism was a theme in Thompson’s later writing. Pathologizing Jewishness, in particular, became habitual for her in the 1950s. By May 25, 1950, she is writing to Maury M. Travis, darkly, of the “tragic psychosis of the Jew” (box 37, Dorothy Thompson Archive). In the *Commentary* piece she warns: “*We bring on what we fear*. Any psychologist will tell you that a primary neurosis is the fear of rejection and that when that neurosis takes hold of a person he unconsciously strives to create the conditions for that rejection.” The reference is to Jewish “neurosis,” but the passage also rather elegantly describes the logic of Thompson’s own fears. In what well may be a case of knowing your addressee, Thompson wrote to Winston Churchill in 1951: “I have become convinced that the Jews, phenomenally brilliant individually and especially in the realm of abstract thought, are collectively the stupidest people on earth. I think it must come from cultural inbreeding—perhaps physical inbreeding also—in a desire to retain a homogenous, in-group society in the midst of ‘aliens.’” Quoted in Hertog, *Dangerous Ambition*, 371. In 1943 she had tirelessly petitioned Churchill to open up supply lines to Palestine.

70. Elias Sanbar, “Out of Place, Out of Time,” 87.

71. Thompson, Town Hall Speech, January 17, 1951, MSS, folder 2, box 107, Dorothy Thompson Papers, 4.

72. Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 17.