

## Book Review: The Outsiders: Refugees in Europe since 1492 by Philip Ther

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### Recommended Citation

Hare, J. Laurence () "Book Review: The Outsiders: Refugees in Europe since 1492 by Philip Ther," *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 96 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol96/iss1/15>

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**Ther, Philip, *The Outsiders: Refugees in Europe since 1492*. Princeton University Press, 2019. ix + 342. Hardcover, \$29.95.**

History is relevant again, or at least it seems to be. Just six years after Jo Guldi and David Armitage's *The History Manifesto* famously criticized historians for focusing too much on short-term projects and neglecting to use the full power of their field to speak to the present day, a surfeit of new works has appeared drawing on deeper lessons to explain the most concerning maladies of the twenty-first century. Among these is one by Philipp Ther, a historian of modern Germany who has written some important histories of ethnic cleansing in Europe and of the continent's difficult escape from the legacy of dictatorship. In 2015, he was confronted with the parallels between his historical subject matter and the present moment when he saw firsthand the waves of migrants from Syria struggling to find shelter amidst the democracies of the European Union. Not only did the scale of the humanitarian crisis unfolding before his eyes remind him of past incidents he had studied, but also the debate among Europeans over how to respond struck him as familiar. At the same time, Ther noted that the treatment of this wave of refugees marked a departure from the idealistic rhetoric about human rights that has prevailed in recent decades. In order to address both the apparent similarities and discrepancies, Ther has created a richly-detailed synthesis of the "long legacy" of refugees in Europe. In *The Outsiders*, he reaches across five centuries to "identify the factors that determine when either favorable or unfavorable conditions tend to prevail for refugees, and to explain the causes for these vicissitudes" (p. 9). Along the way, Ther provides a highly-accessible history that serves to illuminate the titanic shifts underway in today's Europe.

Ther begins his narrative in 1492 with the series of mass flights sparked by the Spanish *Reconquista*. With this point of departure, Ther signals his desire to focus on the history of refugees in the context of several modern trends, including identity formation, state consolidation, and globalization. The book's focus lies mainly with movements across state lines, with particular

emphasis on the factors that produce flight and the reception of host states. The author rightly acknowledges that a history of refugee experiences over the long term is elusive given the dearth of source material, but he nonetheless intersperses individual stories across each of his chapters, thus enriching his analysis. The book is divided into chapters treating religion, nationalism, and politics as key analytical themes. Even as Ther stresses the importance of economic and other practical factors shaping refugee episodes, he always sees a role for identity and ideology, either as informing the departure of refugees or determining the quality of their reception in host countries. While there is a lot of historical overlap across the chapters, the three themes create a rough chronological framework to the narrative, with religion playing an outsized role in refugee movements through the nineteenth century, nationalism subsequently becoming a central feature through the mid-twentieth century, and political motives becoming salient in the Cold War era. Of course, all three are clearly at work in the twenty-first century, so Ther is able to gather his threads in a final chapter and reflect on the events of the last three decades. Each chapter provides a nearly exhaustive account of refugee episodes, with the level of detail increasing dramatically in Ther's coverage of the twentieth century. This encyclopedic approach can make for some tedious reading at times, but it succeeds in building a general sense of the central importance of refugee experiences in European history and in raising awareness of its continuities.

Perhaps the most important contribution that Ther makes to the broader discussion of migration and flight is that he conveys so well its deep complexity. Like all good historians, Ther avoids the temptation to seek grand theories. The past is messy, and the movement of peoples over time even more so. At any given moment, a host of factors shaped the success or failure of attempts by refugees to flee across borders and integrate into a new home. Yet Ther finds this complexity instructive. For instance, he shows how attempts to distinguish between migration and refugee

flight was often less than helpful, and he provides a new typology for understanding the scope of refugee activity that helps us identify more clearly who belongs in this category. In another particularly fascinating passage, he argues that defending the rights of refugees solely on the grounds of universal notions of human rights is not sufficient. He explains, “Right-wing nationalists are currently setting the tone of the debate, and with them neither normative nor humanitarian arguments are of any avail” (p. 268). Instead, based on past examples, advocates for refugees today might fare better with a mixed strategy combining humanitarian and practical arguments.

*The Outsiders* deserves a wide readership. As it is not highly technical and is replete with historical stories, it is appropriate for undergraduates taking courses on European history or the history of migration or human rights. However, it seems intended to go beyond the classroom and appeal to an informed but non-specialist audience. For these readers, Ther wishes to explain, but he also seems to want to persuade. As he moves through his historical examples, he frequently shifts back to the present to draw direct parallels for readers following today’s events in the news. He often shifts to the example of migration policy in the United States to help American and European readers make meaningful comparisons. He wants the citizens of potential host countries to see themselves in a wider world, to understand who their neighbors are, and to empathize with their plight. Ultimately, Ther reminds us what historians can do for the present. They invariably muddy the waters and make simple answers seem more elusive, but they also help us see that the troubles of our times are not unprecedented, that our societies have faced similar challenges in the past, and that we can learn from them to forge a more positive legacy.

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