On April 12, 2020, the British prime minister, Boris Johnson, was released from a London hospital, where he had received treatment for severe coronavirus symptoms. In a public statement, Johnson lavished praise on the National Health Service (NHS) and its doctors, nurses, and staff. In particular, he singled out two nurses, “Jenny from New Zealand” and “Luis from Portugal,” for helping to save his life. Discerning political observers noted that Johnson’s loud cheering for the popular NHS would drown out criticisms of his government’s early missteps in responding to COVID-19. The nurses’ status as migrants also drew attention, with left-wing commentators arguing that while in power the Conservatives had done little to recruit needed healthcare workers from around the world to the NHS, even as false allegations surfaced on social media that the two nurses were not registered to work in the UK.

Readers of Peter Gatrell’s outstanding book will find even more meanings in this episode. They will learn that the NHS has relied on migrants from its beginnings in the 1940s: an early chapter opens with a Latvian woman who endured forced labor in Nazi Germany, landed in a displaced persons camp, and then moved to the UK, where she eventually became a nurse and proud contributor to the NHS. They will discover that in the decades that followed, many other migrants came to the UK from the Commonwealth countries (e.g., New Zealand), as well as from southern Europe (e.g., Portugal). And in moments like Enoch Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech of 1968, they will hear not-so-distant echoes of current anti-migrant voices in Britain. All this supports Gatrell’s larger argument that one cannot understand migration in Europe today without grasping its history since the Second World War, just as one cannot understand this era of European history without studying migration.

The book begins in 1945, amid the rubble and ruins of war. Gatrell mentions the conflict itself only in passing and the prewar world not at all; having written several books on refugees in the early twentieth century, he would be well positioned to look for deeper continuities in the history of European migration. But the emphasis here is on explaining and historicizing the present—on showing how the current state of migration across Europe is neither unprecedented nor unexpected if one looks closely at the continent’s recent past. This history emerges through twenty-four fast-moving chapters, which are grouped into five historical periods: 1945-56, 1956-73, 1973-89, 1989-2008,
and 2008-the present. Although most chapters are organized around one region or country, a handful examine the lived experience of migrants and include “People Adrift: Expellees and Refugees,” “Privileged Lives, Precarious Lives,” and “Belief, Bodies, and Behaviour.” The book also has eleven maps, dozens of photographs, and nearly seventy pages of endnotes.

A great strength of this book is its commitment to writing a history that encompasses all of Europe, and not just its western half (tellingly, the UK is called the “European periphery”). Gatrell’s expertise in Russian and Soviet history serves him well. But the book also devotes much space to what migration has meant for Scandinavia and especially southern Europe, long an exporter of labor but in recent years an important destination for migrants. With its continental ambitions, the book ranges easily from the suburbs of Moscow to the shantytowns of Lisbon, and from coal mines in Czechoslovakia to automobile factories in Sweden. Throughout, Gatrell underlines commonalities and connections between different regions. He is eager to show how migration transformed eastern and western Europe in similar ways, underscoring the continent-wide significance of urbanization, the limited control of states over flows of people, and the contribution of migrants everywhere to postwar economic growth. Even the end of European colonialism—typically a history limited to Belgium, France, Spain, the UK, and other Western imperial powers—can be extended to eastern Europe if the collapse of communism is seen as “another kind of decolonization” (p. 10), with similar consequences for the former colonizers.

Frequently narrowing the focus, Gatrell highlights key episodes in the history of nearly every European state. Some cover familiar events and groups: expellees and refugees in newly formed West Germany, the celebrated Windrush generation in the UK, angry pieds-noirs in France, and Turkish guest workers in a now prosperous West Germany. A powerfully written chapter is dedicated to the death of Yugoslavia, which turned half the population of Bosnia-Hercegovina into refugees and exacted a huge psychological and emotional toll from those who fled. Elsewhere Gatrell draws attention to often-overlooked groups of migrants, such as Cypriots in Britain and Albanians in Greece. These also include people who picked the losing side in colonial wars (harkis for France, Moluccans for the Netherlands), came to Europe, and encountered deep racism and dismal living conditions. Such stories form a rich tapestry, but for Gatrell the larger pattern is a worrisome one, in which receiving countries always retained a large degree of discretion over whom they would accept and under what conditions. The existence of larger organizations, most notably the United Nations and European Union, has done little to curb the power of individual states, and migrants themselves have had little say in debates about who belongs and who does not.

Yet migrants have always been adaptable, resilient, and creative, and this book amply documents the lives they made in Europe. Biographical sketches allow us to follow in their footsteps and hear their voices; the story of Polychronis Boubouridis, for example, traces his early years on the eastern edge of the Black Sea (in what was then the USSR), his postwar deportation to Kazakhstan, and his decision, late in life, to move to Greece. Gatrell does not dwell on the causes of migration—in the chapter on Yugoslavia, for example, ample use of the passive voice makes it nearly impossible to understand what triggered massive forced displacement. He is much more interested in what it means for people to stand between two worlds. Importantly, migrants emerge here as active, not passive: they attend schools, establish churches, form associations, open restaurants, send money home, and build communities. They are political, if in multiple directions; in the face of official indifference and public hostility, they make “integration happen for themselves, from the bottom up”
The book’s final section examines Europe’s turn against migration over the past decade. Following the lead of historian Leo Lucassen, Gatrell describes the rising anger against migrants not as foreordained but as a “perfect storm” brought about by the convergence of multiple factors, including growing social inequality, fears of Islamist terrorism, and the emergence of far-right political parties. Much of this had roots in earlier decades. But the pervasive feeling that migration is harmful and the prevalence of xenophobic rhetoric in mainstream politics seem to herald a new era. Gatrell is especially critical of the European Union, which has worked hard to protect the mobility of its citizens while limiting the mobility of those outside it through greater surveillance, border controls, and deterrence. Contemplating the many failures and high human costs of these measures, he drops his usually measured tone: “As the archipelago of camps and detention centres spread across the continent and farther afield, the founding fathers of closer European integration—many of them having had direct experience of Nazi persecution before and during the Second World War—would surely have turned in their graves at what their successors had done in the name of Europe” (p. 338).

Migration, this book shows, has “unsettled” Europe. But Europe would have been poorer without it. This last statement can be read literally: Gatrell repeatedly argues that migrants “made an indispensable contribution to European prosperity” (p. 453), fueling France’s Trente Glorieuses (its three decades of postwar growth) and shoring up the UK’s health care system. It can also be read figuratively: migrants have enriched the continent’s foodways, football, fashions, and faiths, to name just a few areas. The willingness of many European governments and voters to forget these contributions is thus a repudiation not just of the rights of migrants and the obligations due to them, but of European history since the Second World War. One can only hope that this timely, learned book reaches the audience it deserves.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
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