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Towards a 'Pragmatic Cosmopolitanism': Rethinking Solidarity with Refugees in  
Olga Grjasnowa's *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (2017)

**Abstract**

This article examines **Olga Grjasnowa's** depiction of the **2015 'refugee crisis'** in *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (2017), focussing on how this German-language writer of Russian-Jewish extraction offers a nuanced understanding of **refugees'** motives for flight. Further to this, the article explores the novel's implied critique of **cosmopolitan memory** and **multidirectional memory** (Levy/Sznaider; Rothberg) as an underpinning of contemporary humanitarian activism and empathy with refugees. **Gott ist nicht schüchtern** instead promotes a 'pragmatic cosmopolitanism' that in harking back to states' obligations under the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention recalls **Hannah Arendt** and present-day political philosophers such as Seyla Benhabib.

Towards a ‘Pragmatic Cosmopolitanism’: Rethinking Solidarity with Refugees in  
Olga Grjasnowa’s *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (2017)<sup>1</sup>

A recent definitive report from the United Nations and World Bank, *Pathways for Peace* (2018), paints a grim picture of a world characterized by a cataclysmic upsurge in violent conflict, protracted humanitarian crisis, and retarded or even reversed development:

In 2016, more countries experienced violent conflict than at any time in nearly 30 years. Reported battle-related deaths in 2016 increased tenfold from the post–Cold War low of 2005, and terrorist attacks and fatalities also rose sharply over the past 10 years [...] If current trends persist, by 2030—the horizon set by the international community for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—more than half of the world’s poor will be living in countries affected by high levels of violence.<sup>2</sup>

Emblematic of this sorry state of affairs, of course, is the horrific conflict in Syria that began in 2011 at the time of the Arab Spring, and which continues to kill, maim, and displace many thousands. Following the brutal suppression of protests against the

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr Sebastian Wogenstein for his careful reading of a draft of this article and helpful suggestions and corrections. I am also indebted to the two anonymous reviewers for MLR, whose comments vastly improved the article.

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, 2018, ‘Executive Summary’, iii

<<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

Assad regime, a civil war erupted that soon morphed into a barely containable wider conflagration. The ensuing devastation exposes the human cost of today's global geopolitical instability and rivalries, including the internationalization of regional conflicts, the proliferation of non-state armed groups motivated by extremist ideologies or religious fundamentalism, and extensive violations of international humanitarian law.

If in the 1990s it seemed that conflict could be 'managed' through targeted 'humanitarian interventions'<sup>3</sup> by coalitions of western states citing inviolable human rights, as in Kosovo in 1999, then today pessimism or even cynicism reigns supreme. Multilateralism, universalism and their most accessible philosophical and political expression—cosmopolitanism—are out of favour in the context of the 'war on terror' after 9/11, widespread anxiety about livelihoods following the 2008 financial crisis, and nativist reactions (frequently exploited by politicians) to increasing numbers of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Populations in Western Europe and North America imagine that their worst fears are interconnected and mobile—hence the desire to seal borders and hunker down. Yet the world beyond cannot be staved off forever. In the summer of 2015, conflict in Syria, the Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan—as well as environmental degradation and food insecurity—pushed between 1 and 2 million people to set off for Europe.<sup>4</sup> Almost all European nations endeavoured to prevent migrants from entering or sought to move them on to their neighbours. Very often, the

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<sup>3</sup> Aidan Hehir, *Humanitarian Intervention: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to be precise, of course. FRONTEX recorded 1 802 267 border crossings for 2015, but that may include a number of multiple attempts by the same people. See <<https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-map/>> [accessed 30 October, 2018].

new arrivals were caricatured by politicians and parts of the media as parasites, rapists, or potential terrorists.

Germany appeared to be different. With uncharacteristic boldness, Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the country's borders to more than one million people and announced to sceptics 'Wir schaffen das!'. (Britain promised to resettle 20 000 Syrian refugees<sup>5</sup>—Turkey had accepted more than 2 million, and Jordan 750 000<sup>6</sup>). Opinions differed as to why Merkel had chosen to buck the European trend so dramatically. Many commentators noted her allusions to the historical obligation imposed by Germany's Nazi past to offer sanctuary to those fleeing persecution. Others emphasized that images of refugees recalled not only German perpetration but also German suffering, namely the forced displacement of around twelve million ethnic Germans from central and eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> Finally, some observers suggested more prosaic causes, including the Federal Republic's need to boost its workforce, given an ageing population, and Merkel's desire to underline her own and Germany's leadership role in Europe.

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<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/5000-refugees-arrive-since-syrian-scheme-expanded>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>6</sup> [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/FactSheetJordanFebruary2018-FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/FactSheetJordanFebruary2018-FINAL_0.pdf) [accessed 30 June 2018].

<sup>7</sup> Christiane Florin, interview with Andreas Kossert, 'Flüchtlingstrecks wecken kollektive Erinnerungen', zeit online, October 23, 2015 <<http://www.zeit.de/2015/43/flucht-fluechtlinge-zweiter-weltkrieg-vertreibung-kirche>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

In any event, iconic images of Merkel posing for selfies with thankful refugees<sup>8</sup> were soon superseded by the sobering realisation that public sentiment towards the new arrivals was in fact as sharply divided in Germany as in other European countries, with significant hostility in some quarters that manifested itself in attacks on asylum-seeker hostels and individuals. Merkel faced a political backlash from her own party, the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), and its sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU). Only a few weeks after she had insisted that Germany was open, her government reinstated border controls with Austria and pressured other European countries to set up transit camps. On New Year's Eve, mass assaults perpetrated by foreign men on women in Cologne fuelled growing popular discontent. The protest group Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident (Pegida), the anti-immigration party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and more mainstream conservative politicians—but also liberals and campaigners for women's rights—suggested that the mostly Muslim refugees were a danger to German women and to western values. Nine months later, in September 2016, Merkel suffered a crushing defeat in state elections in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, as the CDU was forced into third place after the AfD. Now represented in nine state parliaments, the AfD had benefited from the electorate's anxiety about 'Islamist terrorism' following a shooting spree by an Iranian-German which had killed nine people in July, the worst of a bewildering cluster of attacks over the summer months. And in the 2017 Federal elections, a dramatic swing to the AfD led—after lengthy

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<sup>8</sup> Merkel famously posed for a selfie with Syrian refugee Anas Modamani. Modamani later sought an injunction to prevent Facebook from allowing the image to be posted on its site after defamatory 'news stories' linking him to terrorism. [Melissa Eddy, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/06/business/syria-refugee-anas-modamani-germany-facebook.html>> (accessed 30 June 2018)].

and acrimonious negotiations—to an unstable grand coalition of the CDU, CSU and Social Democrats, followed by repeated threats from the CSU to withdraw support for Merkel’s refugee policies. In September 2018, neo-Nazi violence flared in the streets of Chemnitz after a (Cuban-)German man was murdered by an Iraqi and a Syrian, with large anti-refugee rallies taking place over a number of days as well as pro-democracy counter-demonstrations.<sup>9</sup> State elections in Bavaria and Hessen in October confirmed a shift away from the two broad-based ‘People’s Parties’ of the post-war period, the CDU and SPD, and a significant increase in popular support for the AfD (and, in response, for the pro-refugee Green Party). Finally, Merkel announced at the end of the same month that she would not stand again as a candidate for Chancellor at the finish of her electoral term in 2021. This triggered a drawn-out race to succeed her as leader of the CDU in which hardliners on migration were at the forefront.<sup>10</sup>

As Germans argued about Merkel’s migration policy, marched in support of the recent arrivals, or—as elements of the AfD did in Chemnitz—incited pogrom-like violence, clichés proliferated. For one side, the refugee was an interloper, a destroyer of German values and German culture, or almost certainly a fanatic planting a bomb, wielding a knife or weaponising a car—for the other side, the refugee was a victim, a survivor, or even a hero of sorts. Amidst all this stereotyping and counter-stereotyping, predictably enough, refugee voices themselves were generally talked over or misrepresented. This is what Lilie

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<sup>9</sup> Louise Osborne, ‘Chemnitz to host anti-racism gig as Germans urged to take a stand’, *The Guardian*, 02.09.2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/02/chemnitz-to-host-anti-racism-gig-as-germans-urged-to-take-a-stand>> [accessed 3 September 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Guy Chazan, ‘Rivals for Merkel’s CDU job make their pitches to party members’, *Financial Times*, 16.11.2018, <<https://www.ft.com/content/50bede24-e983-11e8-a34c-663b3f553b35>> [accessed 22 June 2018].

Chouliaraki and Rafal Zaborowski, in an analysis of media coverage from 2015, describe as “‘bordering’”: bordering by silencing, by collectivization and by de-contextualization’.<sup>11</sup>

Olga Grjasnowa’s 2017 novel *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* is most obviously a response to this muting of refugee voices and, more generally, to the erasure of migrants’ diverse backgrounds, circumstances and motives. This is a biographical complexity that Grjasnowa herself embodies—though, as discussed later, the novel consistently undermines any automatic presumption that one minority can speak for another, any more than the ‘majority’ German political establishment and media can presume to grasp the diversity of migrants’ experiences. The author arrived in Germany as a child in 1996 as one of around 200 000 ‘jüdische Kontingentflüchtlinge’ (Jewish ‘quota refugees’) who, from the early 1990s to mid-2000s, were permitted to immigrate from the former Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> She speaks Russian and some Azeri (she grew up as part of the Russian minority in Azerbaijan), and writes in German. She is married to Syrian actor Ayham Majid Agha, who has resided in Germany since 2013 and is unable to return to his home country on account of his opposition to the Assad regime. It was her husband, Grjasnowa emphasises in interviews, who provided her with the quotation from the second sura of the Koran that became the title of the novel—believing himself to be God-like, Syrian dictator Bashar Hafez al-Assad does not recoil from inflicting the most extreme punishments when his people refuse his command.

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<sup>11</sup> Lilie Chouliaraki and Rafal Zaborowski, ‘Voice and Community in the Refugee Crisis: A Content Analysis of News Coverage in Eight European Countries’, *International Communication Gazette*, 79:7/7 (2017), 1-23 (p.1).

<sup>12</sup> See <<https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurzdosiers/252561/juedische-kontingentfluechtlinge-und-russlanddeutsche?p=all>> [accessed 30 October, 2018].



The detailed analysis of *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* that follows opens with a discussion of its author's evident intention to humanize 'the faceless refugee' by narrating extensive backstories for her two Syrian protagonists, Amal and Hammoudi—the former an actress and the daughter of a businessman with ties to the Assad regime; the latter a plastic surgeon whose permission to travel is revoked by the secret police. To this extent, Grjasnowa pursues a more or less conventional concern with the (negative) representation of minority groups—this concern is frequently highlighted by advocacy groups, charities, NGOs, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as well as by socially-engaged writers and intellectuals. In the German context, this concern is articulated in a corpus of 'refugee crisis' novels, including Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (written before, in fact, but published coincidentally in late 2015 just as Syrians and others began to arrive in large numbers),<sup>13</sup> Jula Rabinowich's *Dazwischen: Ich* (2016) and Peter Härtling's *Djadi, Flüchtlingsjunge* (2016)—both aimed at adolescents—Manfred Theisen's *Checkpoint Europa* (2016), Fridolin Schley's *Die Ungesichter* (2016), Abbas Khider's *Ohrfeige* (2016), Navid Kermani's 'travel reportage' *Einbruch der Wirklichkeit* (2016), Benjamin von Wyl's *Land ganz nah* (2017), Christian Torkler's *Der Platz an der Sonne* (2018), Usama al Shahmani's *In der Fremde sprechen die Bäume arabisch* (2018), and Günter de Bruyn's *Der neunzigste Geburtstag* (2018). Almost invariably, these novels thematise the representation of refugees, indict the dehumanising impact of asylum procedures, and encourage readers to put themselves 'in the shoes' of those fleeing conflict and persecution.

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<sup>13</sup> See Gary L. Baker, 'The Violence of Precarity and the Appeal of Routine in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen*', *Seminar*, 54:4 (2018), 504-521.

Grjasnowa's original contribution to this growing corpus is twofold. First, she embeds a resolute focus on the individual within the larger context of violent conflict and humanitarian crises described at the outset of this article, and—more abstractly—in relation to the flows of people and communication back and forth across borders, economic interdependence, and regional and global geopolitical transformations that characterize contemporary transnationalism. Second, Grjasnowa's insistence on the compromise and even complicity that marks the lives of real people cautions against romanticising the refugee as the agent of a utopian globalism. This idealisation—which instrumentalizes refugees even as it seeks to elevate them—has historical antecedents, of course, evoked by the novel's intertextual references to Jewish exile, and it is more than occasionally a feature of humanitarian discourses in the present day.

Further to this, however, I argue that *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* invites critical reflection on the emphasis on traumatic memory that nowadays infuses popular and scholarly discourses on human rights, at least in western countries. (There are other philosophical underpinnings, of course—at the very end of this article, I reference the recent revival of interest in Hannah Arendt and the work of political scientists such as Seyla Benhabib, Michael Walzer, Jeffrey Isaac focussed on the political implementation of human rights rather than on foundational or metaphysical arguments for why they should be regarded as universally valid). In general terms, I suggest that Grjasnowa's novel both promulgates what Natan Sznaider and Daniel Levy term 'cosmopolitan memory'<sup>14</sup>—invoking the Holocaust to animate a defence of human rights everywhere—but also calls into question its own affective dependency on this utopian vision. More specifically, the text undermines its own primary

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in a Global Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006).

narrative device, which is a version of what Michael Rothberg calls ‘multidirectional memory’—how Holocaust memory may frame other atrocities, in this case the horrific abuses being perpetrated by the regime and other parties in Syria, and foster new transnational solidarities.<sup>15</sup> As an alternative to what now appears as an over-investment in memory—focussed on individual suffering, the production of empathy, and hoped-for transnational solidarity—the novel styles a pragmatic cosmopolitanism relating more prosaically to the obligations of states. In *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, the reader is asked to endorse, again, the foundational humanitarian proposition that asylum is not contingent on the possibility of empathy but is an inalienable human right that states are bound to respect not just in the abstract but in practice.

#### Refugee (back)stories

In common with Grjasnowa’s earlier novels—*Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* (2012; *All Russians Love Birch Trees*, 2014) and *Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe* (2014)—*Gott ist nicht schüchtern* comprises multiple and interwoven plot strands that connect the lived experience of the migrant to contemporary economic, geopolitical and other structural transformations at the local, regional and global levels. In *Der Russe*, recent arrivals redefine Germany as a quintessentially transnational space and create a migrant solidarity through their narration of a variety of traumatic histories even as the novel also suggests the limitations of this therapeutic mode.<sup>16</sup> In *Die juristische Unschärfe*, the

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> See my ‘The Possibilities and Pitfalls of a Jewish Cosmopolitanism: Reading Natan Sznajder through Russian-Jewish writer Olga Grjasnowa’s German-language Novel *Der*

cosmopolitan potential of today's epoch-defining mass movements of people, is still more explicitly qualified. A sharp distinction is made between those in possession of a western passport, and with sufficient resources, and those who lack everything.<sup>17</sup>

In *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, Hammoudi returns home after training in France as a plastic surgeon, to renew his passport before he takes up a prestigious position in Paris. In Syria, his documents are retained by the regime; he is unable to travel back to his French (Jewish) girlfriend Claire and, following the outbreak of war, he sets up a makeshift hospital before being forced to flee by Islamic State fighters. Hammoudi travels to Athens via Turkey and joins other refugees on the 'Balkan route' to Germany where he is murdered by right-wing extremists. Amal's story is told in alternating chapters, at least initially until the novel's structure disintegrates in parallel with the collapse of any semblance of order in Syria itself. Amal is distinctly privileged. She is independent and financially secure, a successful TV actress, and able to rely on her father's contacts after she is arrested for taking part in a demonstration—though she is sexually harassed, forced to beat another inmate, and made to endure a mock execution.<sup>18</sup> Shortly after her release from detention, Amal becomes estranged from her father when she discovers that he had lied to her and her brother Ali about her (Russian) mother having abandoned them, and that he has a second family. She leaves for

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Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt (All Russians Love Birch Trees)', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 23:5-6 (2016), 912-30.

<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of *Der Russe* and *Die juristische Unschärfe*, see my *Transnationalism and German-Language Literature in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), pp. 121-31.

<sup>18</sup> Olga Grjasnowa, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2017), 93-7. Hereafter page numbers in brackets after quotations in the main body of the text.

Beirut, where she encounters Youssef—a one-time date in Damascus, an opponent of the Assad regime, and the grandson of a Palestinian woman who fled the establishment of Israel in 1948—and together they pay people smugglers to bring them from Turkey to Europe. Their criminally unseaworthy ship sinks, and they wash up in Italy. Finally, they arrive in Germany—with Amina, a baby whose mother drowned—and Amal finds work as a presenter on a daytime TV show: *Mein Flüchtling kocht* (my refugee cooks). The novel's protagonists Hammoudi and Amal bump into one another—for a second time, following a brief encounter in Damascus—and end up in a hotel room together, where Amal's narration of her perilous Mediterranean crossing and how Amina's mother drowned inhibits their likely intention to make love (299-300). Shortly after, the two refugees meet very different fates. Hammoudi is killed by neo-Nazis while Amal turns down a career opportunity in the United States and resolves to settle in Germany with her 'new' family Youssef and Amina.

On a general level, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* reminds its—most likely non-minority German—reader that refugees are not a homogeneous mass but rather come from a variety of countries and have quite different experiences of the journey to Europe:

Die illegale Einwanderung ist geregelt, wenn auch nicht von den europäischen Regierungen. Es gibt eine Hierarchie der Flüchtlinge. Syrer kommen meistens in ganzen Familien und in Booten an, die ein wenig besser sind und nicht ganz so überfüllt. Sie gehören der ehemaligen Mittelschicht an und haben kleine finanzielle Reserven, die ihnen die Flucht ermöglichen. Pakistaner und Afghanen überqueren das Mittelmeer in extrem seeuntauglichen Booten, und teilweise sind diese so vollgepackt, das die Menschen nicht einmal Platz zum Sitzen haben [...] Ganz unten in der Hierarchie befinden sich die Menschen aus Zentral- und Nordafrika. (264-5).

In this passage, and in similar excursions throughout the text, the third-person narrator adopts an authoritative tone that most likely incorporates the author's self-assigned mission to promote a more nuanced understanding of arriving refugees. At the same time, these insights also relate the plights of individuals to legal frameworks that criminalize them ('illegale Einwanderung'), the impotence of states to 'manage' the movement of people, the parallel economy of human trafficking, and—of course—how the 'Hierarchie der Flüchtlinge' replicates long-established hierarchies of race, with Africans inevitably at the bottom.

Beyond this broadly sociological overview, however, the novel weaves a dense web of backstories for its Syrian protagonists, adding both substance and qualification to its elaboration of their journey to Europe. Here, the novel's strikingly detailed exposition of the convoluted interaction of political, professional and personal factors motivating Hammoudi's and Amal's flight offers a corrective to the typically reductive portrayal of 'the refugee' in media and political discourses—as 'vulnerable outsider' or 'dangerous outsider', to cite a Council of Europe report on attitudes across Europe in the summer of 2015.<sup>19</sup> In essence, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* works against any sentimentalisation of refugees as hapless victims as much as it works against their stereotyping as scroungers, criminals or terrorists.

Hammoudi in particular might easily be presented as (more) deserving of our sympathy (than others fleeing Syria). He is the heroic doctor tending to the wounded in an improvised hospital in Deir az-Zour, the government stronghold in eastern Syria contested by state forces and the Free Syrian Army, but also by Jabhat al-Nusra (al Qaeda) and the rival

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<sup>19</sup> Myria Georgiou and Rafal Zaborowski, 'Media Coverage of the "refugee crisis": A Cross-European Perspective', 2017, <<https://rm.coe.int/media-coverage-of-the-refugee-crisis-a-cross-european-perspective/16807338f7>> [accessed 30 June 2018].

Jihadist group Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL). Yet the fuller picture is not as unequivocally uplifting as this snapshot might suggest. First, Hammoudi accepts the (no doubt necessary) compromise of collaborating with Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL in order to keep his clinic open, including functioning as ISIL's 'Privatarzt' (p. 218). (As an aside, the novel offers an equally nuanced portrayal of Hammoudi's brother Naji—Naji joins Jabhat al-Nusra because he believes that Islam might at least unify the opposition to Assad, and he acts contrary to al-Qaeda's reputation for brutality by bringing a wounded Syrian Army soldier to Hammoudi for medical attention. This is Amal's half-brother Nidal, who had narrowly avoided being forced by his superior to rape a woman, is wounded, and finally dies of his injuries [p. 159; pp. 175-8]). Second, it seems that Hammoudi's courageousness is motivated not (only) by altruism or his duty as a doctor, but by an urgency to distract himself from the pain of separation from his girlfriend that is overwhelming and occasionally even nihilistic. He has a brief, 'mechanisch' (p. 89) encounter with a waitress during which curiosity rather than desire precedes a rather fleeting sense of guilt. Soon after his first contact with the opposition takes place—this offers relief from his loneliness and allows him to forget Claire 'für eine Weile' (p. 101), and so he agrees to break into the mortuary to gather evidence of the regime's use of torture. Subsequently, he works day and night in his makeshift hospital 'und kann dabei endlich seine Sehnsucht nach Claire vergessen' (p. 113). Finally, his first reaction when a sniper shoots at him is to wonder whether Claire has found someone new: 'Er fragt sich, ob Claire noch alleine ist' (p. 163). Towards the end of the novel, it transpires that Claire has indeed found a new partner, with whom she now has a child. In any event, it is not at all clear that Hammoudi's bravery is much more than lovelorn self-absorption.

Amal is also relatable, albeit for different reasons. Yet her backstory, just like Hammoudi's, once again complicates any hasty (positive or negative) presumptions about the refugee's reasons for fleeing. Amal is young, independent and unashamedly secular; she

dresses in western clothes, pursues a career as an actress, and is sexually uninhibited (p. 53) and explicit about her desire to sleep with Youssef (pp. 56-9). In short, she is a Muslim that liberals in Europe and North America are likely to feel comfortable with—she embodies a version of Islam that (in the terms of the debate raging in Germany and elsewhere) is compatible with western values, including women’s rights. Crucially, she has suffered sexual abuse at the hands of the secret police—she is assaulted with a taser gun, forced to undress and groped (p. 94)—and is therefore in obvious need of protection. However, her opposition to the Assad regime is not clear-cut, or entirely free of frivolous egocentricity. Amal attends the protest that preceded her arrest largely on account of her infatuation with Youssef, and after her detention she continues to benefit from her father’s connections and to lead a life of privilege, enjoying fine clothes, Italian coffee, and a comfortable bed (p. 104). In fact, there may be a hint that her brush with the regime both titillates and reinforces a certain sense of entitlement—safely back in her flat in central Damascus, she feels ‘alive’ (p. 104), and when Youssef cries after narrowly evading regime thugs she finds that her interest in him immediately wanes (p. 120). Complicating matters still further, it is evident that her flight is not solely motivated by her fear of further persecution. She discovers that her father Bassel had been lying to her for years about her mother—he had claimed that Svetlana had forsaken them for her native Russia—and that he has a second family (pp. 133-7). What’s more, when she spies on her supposedly secular father with his other wife and children, she is shocked to discover that they are strictly observant (p. 136). Bassel fails to show up to a rendezvous to discuss the situation, and soon enough Amal quits Damascus for Beirut—it is difficult not to conclude that her estrangement from her father is a decisive factor.

Gott ist nicht schüchtern shows refugees’ lives to be far more textured than the reductionism typical of media representations—here, the novel’s multi-perspectival, dialogic form suggests the advantages of a certain kind of literature over the erasure of complexity



that characterises the news cycle. At the same time, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* also reveals the burden on refugees to replicate this over-simplification—too much nuance in their own accounts might undermine a humanitarian response based on an instinctive empathy, just as depicting the convoluted interplay of personal, political and other motives might damage a legal claim to asylum.<sup>20</sup> On arrival in Germany, Hammoudi is interviewed by the immigration authorities. The interview is a form of self-narration and even therapy, but Hammoudi also intuits that he needs to fit the required format: ‘Er schaut seiner Sachbearbeiterin einen Moment lang direkt in die Augen. Dann spricht er hastig weiter, spricht eine ganze Stunde an, die Beamtin macht sich Notizen, unterbricht ihn nicht’ (p. 287). In Amal’s case, the moulding of self to meet expectations is even more explicit. She auditions to be the hostess of a new TV show *Mein Flüchtling kocht* (my refugee cooks), along with other young women ‘mit unauffälligem Migrationshintergrund’ (p. 290)—each of them has fifteen minutes to prepare an ‘ethnic’ dish while relating her life-story. Amal knows that it is all about the ‘Vermarktung der eigenen Person’ (p. 289) and is offered a contract even after she repels the producer’s clumsy pass: ‘Für die Aufzeichnung der Pilotfolge bereitete sie mehrere syrische Gerichte zu und versprach den Zuschauern eine Zeitreise durch das noch unverwüstete Syrien’ (p. 294). For the media-savvy Syrian actress, it is immediately obvious that her latest role is to play to her German audience’s orientalising nostalgia for a Middle

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<sup>20</sup> I’m grateful to Sebastian Wogenstein for drawing my attention here to James Dawes’s *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* (2007), which discusses (in chapter two) the ethical problematics of interviewing survivors of trauma and the tension between the ‘subjective’ knowledge of the survivor and the ‘objective’ knowledge of the expert. I am grateful to Dr Wogenstein more generally for his careful reading of a draft of this article and for his generous comments and suggestions.

East of alluringly modest young women and exotic spices, inflected by a melancholic anticipation of the region's tragic ruination.

Through its interrogation of the way refugees are heroized or sentimentalized—when they are not stereotyped as scroungers or violent criminals—*Gott ist nicht schüchtern* invites deliberation on the humanitarian impulse that drives well-meaning citizens, including its author, to intervene on their behalf. At the same time, *Grjasnowa* goes beyond this conventional concern with representation and 'refugee voice'. In the next section, we examine the novel's reflections on how traumatic pasts are today mobilized to provide an ostensibly more robust underpinning for humanitarianism, but also its implied critique of the universalist and often idealising presumptions of this 'cosmopolitan memory'. This leads into a closing discussion of the text's gesturing towards a 'pragmatic cosmopolitanism' that relies not on a mobilising of memories of other atrocities—or on the production of empathy in host populations—but on a more abstract but perhaps more sustainable insistence on states' categorical obligation to offer protection to persecuted individuals in any event.

#### Cosmopolitan and multidirectional memory

At least since Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), the question of how empathy might be mobilized for 'distant others'—victims of an earthquake in far-away China, to cite Smith's example, or barrel bombs in Syria—has been central to humanitarian and cosmopolitan thought.<sup>21</sup> In recent times specifically, twentieth and twenty-first-century technologies (radio, TV, the internet, smartphones and social media) have caused scholars to consider how today's more or less instantaneous mediation of suffering is creating a global

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<sup>21</sup> See Richard Ashby Wilson, Richard D. Brown, eds., *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

consciousness of natural disasters and atrocities occurring around the world but still always in specific localities.<sup>22</sup> Anyhow, the arrival of millions of refugees means that Europeans in particular can no longer imagine that all this suffering is safely situated ‘elsewhere’.

In *The Holocaust and Memory in a Global Age* (2006; originally in German, 2001), Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder focus on the emergence of ‘cosmopolitan memory’ in the specific conditions of the early 1990s, that is, the immediate post-Cold War era when liberal democracy appeared triumphant and even imagined itself to be ‘universal’.<sup>23</sup> For Levy and Sznajder, the recent globalisation of Holocaust memory—in museums, memorials, schools and remembrance days—as a particularly egregious example of man’s inhumanity to man, was shaping a near-universal consensus on the need to intervene wherever human rights were at risk. In essence, the two scholars argued, Holocaust memory was creating both a global memory culture beyond the nation and a new mobilising framework for humanitarianism—whether this was the ‘armed humanitarianism’<sup>24</sup> of the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, for example, or more conventional relief and rescue efforts on behalf of victims of oppression, threatened minority populations, and vulnerable groups such as refugees.

*Gott ist nicht schüchtern* similarly invokes Holocaust memory to frame its narration of present-day atrocities in Syria—sparingly, to be sure, but also strategically as an effective

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<sup>22</sup> See Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006). See also Lilie Chouliaraki, ‘The Mediation of Suffering and The Vision of a Cosmopolitan Public’, *Television & new media*, 9:5 (2008): 371-91.

<sup>23</sup> This was the thrust of Francis Fukuyama’s argument in his oft cited *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> See Robert C. DiPrizio, *Armed Humanitarians: U.S. Interventions from Northern Iraq to Kosovo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

means of engaging its reader with the horrific human consequences of the conflict. The most diffuse of these allusions is Hammoudi's romantic involvement with a French Jew. This may hint at a semi-overt discourse that posits marginalized Muslims in Europe as the 'new Jews'.<sup>25</sup> Far more explicit, however, are references to the sobriquet for the Damascus secret police HQ: 'Holocaust' (p. 84); a mention of a portrait of Assad on which he appears with a moustache 'der ein wenig breiter war als Hitler' (p. 126); a paratextual quotation (in an epigraph to a chapter) from the British Jewish historian Simon Schama citing the Polish Jewish refugee Isaac Deutscher—"“Trees have roots”, he shot back, scornfully, “Jews have legs”” (p. 143; in English in the novel)—and literary works by exiles from Nazism, including the German Jew Anna Seghers (p. 230). These multidirectional (pace Rothberg) citations of the Holocaust authorize, as it were, and frame the novel's self-stylisation as a form of literary witnessing—or cosmopolitan memory—of the human rights abuses committed by all sides in the conflict. For example, the third-person narrator records what Hammoudi sees in the hospital morgue:

Die Körper der Ermordeten sind mit Spuren der Folter übersät: mit Verbrennungen und Hämatomen, Atzungen von chemischen Substanzen, tiefen Schnitten, Striemen von elektrischen Kabeln, Blut [...] Einer Leiche fehlt das linke Auge, Hammoudi sieht, dass es herausgerissen worden sein muss, anderen wurden Gliedmaßen amputiert, die Zähne eingeschlagen. (p. 102)

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<sup>25</sup> See Uriya Shavit, "“Muslims are the New Jews” in The West: Reflections on Contemporary Parallelisms", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 36:1 (2006), 1-15.

Elsewhere, there are graphic descriptions of the deaths and grievous injuries caused by the use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons in Deir al-Zour (pp. 187-91); indiscriminate killing and rape by regime troops (pp. 158-9); ISIS beheading a young Syrian army soldier (pp. 215-6); the widespread torture and sexual abuse of detainees (pp. 93-7), and much else besides. And the indignities, injustices and injuries continue beyond Syrian borders, of course. Having made it to Europe, Hammoudi and fellow refugees are urinated on by Hungarian border guards (p. 271). In Germany, as previously indicated, he is brutally murdered by right-wing extremists.

The invocation of the Holocaust may facilitate empathy with Syrian and other refugees amongst Germans, and Europeans more generally. Certainly, the Nazi genocide of Jews has great resonance there, and in North America.<sup>26</sup> But in some other parts of world Holocaust memory is unlikely to bolster transnational solidarity—to think otherwise is to embrace the universalist conceit that underpins the notion of cosmopolitan memory. Here, it is worth considering how the novel's references to Jewish suffering are as it were 'curated' by the narrator—the protesters' more likely than not flippant, even unthinking renaming of the secret police HQ as 'Holocaust' gains in significance once the narrator suggests a parallel between Hitler and Assad and (perhaps rather implausibly) indicates that Amal is reading Seghers's *Transit* (p. 230). Far from embodying a universalist perspective, in fact, the reader is likely to infer that this 'curator figure' externalizes the subject position of the author, invoking her experiences as a Russian Jew and a migrant, here as in her earlier novels, to illuminate the contemporary global phenomenon of atrocity and displacement. Indeed, this conflation of narrator and author may be encouraged by the way the narrator appears to be

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<sup>26</sup> See Dan Diner, 'Restitution and Memory: The Holocaust in European Political Cultures', *New German Critique*, 90 (2003), 36-44.

‘copying’ Grjasnowa’s own, direct invocation of the Jewish experience in her paratextual citation of Schama (and Deutscher) in the epigraph that opens Part Three of the book, in which the references to Seghers’s *Transit* occur. (In interview with Katja Garloff and Agnes Mueller, Grjasnowa emphasizes that she considers her novel to be ‘Jewish writing’, presumably not only because ‘migration is a very Jewish topic’,<sup>27</sup> as she comments, but also because of the way the Holocaust structures her narrator’s account of the immediate causes of the persecution and flight of millions of Syrians in the present day). At the same time, of course, the narrator’s purposeful recourse to correspondences with the Jewish experience—and the apparent invitation to conflate the narrator with her author—is as likely to prompt questions about the Jewish narrator’s/author’s right to ‘speak for’ Syrian refugees as it to facilitate greater understanding and empathy. In a novel that thematises issues of representation, perspective, and ‘voice’, it is probable that this is quite deliberate.

In any event, transnational solidarity need not depend on Holocaust memory. Indeed, the narrator’s invocations of Jewish suffering—resonating with European publics and possibly embodying the author’s own experiences—are relativized, or even made to seem redundant, by other episodes in the novel in which Syrians, North Africans and other migrants shape their own ‘refugee solidarity’ as they journey together towards Europe: ‘An Bord entwickelt sich so etwas wie eine Gemeinschaft, zaghafte Bande werden geknüpft, die Menschen teilen sich die wenigen Vorräte, die sie noch haben, miteinander’ (p. 243). Here, a solidarity born of a shared experience of exploitation by traffickers is bolstered by the refugees’ mutual elaboration of their own version of multidirectional memory:

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<sup>27</sup> Katja Garloff and Agnes Mueller, ‘Interview with Olga Grjasnowa’, in Garloff and Mueller, eds., *German Jewish Literature After 1990* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), pp. 223-8 (p. 227).

Ein Eritreer, der auf seiner Reise ein bisschen Arabisch gelernt hat, erzählt vom lebenslangen Militärdienst in seinem Land und der Willkür der herrschenden Klasse. Die Syrer berichten von Fassbomben und Giftgas, bis schließlich die Erinnerungen an glücklichere Tage alle Erzählungen verdrängen. (p. 243)

None of the refugees makes any mention of the Holocaust, and the narrator also refrains from framing their suffering in this way, on this occasion. On a general level, it seems that in Gott ist nicht schüchtern Grjasnowa extends a trend that scholars have discerned in her earlier books, and in the work of her peer group of Jewish writers in German from the former Soviet Union—Jewish suffering is related along with other historical and contemporary traumas rather than as the primary focus.<sup>28</sup> More pertinent to the present discussion, however, is that

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<sup>28</sup> See Sebastian Wogenstein, 'Negative Symbiosis? Israel, Germany and Austria in Contemporary Germanophone Literature', *Prooftexts*, 33:1 (Winter 2013), 105-32. See Stephan Braese, 'Auf dem Rothschild-Boulevard: Olga Grjasnowas Roman *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt* und die deutsch-jüdische Literatur', *Gegenwartsliteratur - Ein germanistisches Jahrbuch/A German Studies Yearbook*, 13 (2014), 275-97. See Oliver Lubrich, 'Are Russian Jews Post-Colonial? Wladimir Kaminer and Identity Politics', *East European Jewish Affairs*, 33 (2003), 35-52. Jonathan Skolnik offers a more nuanced reading of the interaction between Holocaust memory and the memory of other traumas in Grjasnowa's *Der Russe* in his chapter 'Memory without Borders? Migrant Identity and the Legacy of the Holocaust in Olga Grjasnowa's *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt*', in Katja Garloff and Agnes Mueller, eds., *German Jewish Literature After 1990* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), pp. 123-45. Skolnik's chapter usefully contrasts with the preceding chapter in

the novel ‘provincializes’ Holocaust memory as a European preoccupation in order to emphasize that refugees have their own frames of reference, and tell their own stories. (Stef Craps makes a similar argument relating to the supposed ‘universalisation’ of Holocaust memory in his 2013 book *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*).<sup>29</sup>

While it might be argued, of course, that the Holocaust has become so universal that it frames all trauma, these moments of refugee solidarity more likely suggest that as far as cosmopolitan memory is concerned it is the mode—story-telling—rather than the content that is important. Yet this risks a further idealisation—that the mutual narration of trauma can miraculously transcend refugees’ different experiences of precarity and privilege, including the fact that different memories of suffering are in competition as often as they facilitate one another. Memory doesn’t have to be a zero-sum game—but in reality, it frequently is. Here again, the novel undermines its own (potential) cosmopolitan fantasy. It is no surprise, given the hostility between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East, that the expulsion of Jews from Damascus after 1948 is not—cannot be—brought into dialogue with the dispossession of Palestinians following the establishment of the state of Israel, even though the narrator’s allusions to the two memories are only one page apart in the novel (pp. 56-7). But there are also other tensions in the region that are less familiar to the outside world but just as enduring. When Amal arrives as a refugee in Lebanon she is reminded by the chef in the

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the same volume, by Elisabeth Loentz, which argues more conventionally that Holocaust memory is not central to *Der Russe*. [‘Beyond Negative Symbiosis: The Displacement of Holocaust Trauma and Memory in Alina Bronsky’s *Scherbenpark* and Olga Grjasnowa’s *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt*’, in Garloff and Mueller, pp. 102-22].

<sup>29</sup> Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).



restaurant where she works that Syria had occupied his country and was responsible for fuelling its civil war: ‘Das, was ihr erlebt, ist nichts im Vergleich zu unserem Leid’ (p. 181). Amal grasps that it is necessary for the story of Lebanon to be told—because it would otherwise remain overshadowed by other episodes, including the conflict in Syria—but her unvoiced reproach that suffering cannot be compared (p. 181) simply confirms the almost inevitable competition between the two memories. The novel’s intended—German or European—reader no doubts hope for a cosmopolitan resolution of the ‘Middle East traumas’ juxtaposed in the text, but once again this is most likely a form of wishful thinking that simply confirms his or her privilege.

#### A Pragmatic Cosmopolitanism?

Gott ist nicht schüchtern suggests that framing refugees’ experience as ‘relatable’—capable of being subsumed into European Holocaust memory—and ‘narratable’ may ultimately undermine the principle that asylum is an absolute right that must not be subject to the vagaries of empathy. Put differently: it should not be necessary for the refugee to ‘have a story’, be ‘likeable’, or be someone we can ‘identify with’. In parallel, the novel suggests that the abstractions of cosmopolitan and multidirectional memory that infuse much contemporary humanitarian thinking may in any event tend to idealize (certain) refugees, privilege certain memories, and over-emphasize solidarity between marginalized groups. Above all, Grjasnowa draws attention to the woeful inadequacy of a humanitarian discourse overly reliant on ‘memory’ to address the actual legal and physical vulnerability experienced by migrants, refugees, and stateless people.

Yet the novel does not conclude that we should simply give up altogether on humanitarianism. Instead, allusions to three well-known German exile writers (one Jewish: Anna Seghers; two non-Jewish: Erich Maria Remarque and Bert Brecht) and a clear choice

Amal makes at the end of the book, reorients the reader's attention away from memory and back towards the unsentimentally 'political' focus in the decades following the defeat of Nazism on the state's fundamental obligation to protect those fleeing persecution—namely the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol.<sup>30</sup> The effectiveness of present-day humanitarian responses to mass displacement, it is implied, depends less on expressions of solidarity than on the watchfulness of concerned citizens as they monitor their governments' adherence to international norms. This 'pragmatic cosmopolitanism' is certainly less emotionally satisfying than empathy, but it may also be more sustainable.

Gott ist nicht schüchtern names Anna Seghers' *Transit* (1944) and Erich Maria Remarque's *Die Nacht von Lissabon* (1962) as the two books that Amal took with her when she fled Damascus for Lebanon, Turkey and Europe (p. 230). In *Transit* and *Die Nacht von Lissabon*, based on their authors' experiences, would-be-emigrants endure listlessly in the ports of Marseilles and Lisbon, waiting for transit papers, using up their limited resources, relating their stories to one another, and engaging in futile affairs.<sup>31</sup> This is what Hannah Arendt calls the 'deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and

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<sup>30</sup> For more information, see UNHCR, *The 1951 Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol*, <<http://www.unhcr.org/uk/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html>> [accessed 30 October, 2018].

<sup>31</sup> In 2018, director Christian Petzold released a film adaptation of Seghers' *Transit*, set in a present-day Europe in which Nazis are in charge. The film draws a clear parallel between the postwar period and today's political situation in Germany and Europe, including the rise of the AfD and the hounding of refugees.

actions effective'.<sup>32</sup> In *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, Amal and Youssef appear similarly 'worldless' as they stagnate in the harbour district of the Turkish city of Izmir, along with thousands of their compatriots (pp. 229-33). Here, the reader might ask whether this depiction of refugees' lack of agency unwittingly replicates the stereotype of helplessness that the novel's elaboration of its protagonists' backstories otherwise works to deconstruct. As will be discussed shortly, however, a spontaneous but consequential decision Amal takes in the closing pages of the narrative reasserts her determination to shape her own fate.

Most obviously, mention of *Transit* and *Die Nacht von Lissabon*, written in German but now belonging to world literature, elevates Amal's story, as it were, by intimating that her flight is as emblematic of the mass displacement triggered by the conflict in Syria as Seghers' and Remarque's emigrant protagonists are of millions of refugees from Nazism. More specifically, however, the invocation of these two classics of exile literature indicts the continuing failure of the international community today to honour the conventions that emerged in the aftermath of the Nazi terror. In Seghers, Remarque and Grjasnowa, refugees exist in a state of limbo, without protection and agency. At the start of the final part of *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, notably, an image of heavenly constellations invokes a utopian globalism but is quickly undercut by a famous quotation from the dramatist Bert Brecht:

Der Pass ist der edelste Teil von einem Menschen. Er kommt auch nicht auf so einfache Weise zustande wie der Mensch. Ein Mensch kann überall zustande kommen, auf die leichtsinnigste Art und ohne gescheiterten Grund, aber ein Pass

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<sup>32</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt., Harvest Book, 1976), p. 376.

niemals. Dafür wird er auch anerkannt, wenn er gut ist, während ein Mensch noch so gut sein kann und doch nicht anerkannt wird.<sup>33</sup> (p. 278)

Today, just in 1940 when Brecht (himself an exile) wrote these words, states' inconsistency in extending protection to those without papers means that millions can hope only for the compassion, even sentimentality, of host populations. Amal's passage from Syria concludes in her safe relocation in Germany not because European countries had taken responsibility but because compassionate individuals—first and foremost, the charity workers who pull her from the sea in Italy (p. 25)—had chosen to act, no doubt motivated by transnational solidarity. Yet the refugee's reliance on the benevolence of others is also a form of precarity. Amal is lucky throughout her journey, but Hammoudi is not—recall his humiliation by Hungarian border guards—and that she is saved while he is murdered is entirely arbitrary.

It should not be the duty of the well-disposed individual to 'rescue' the persecuted and the displaced—and nor should the refugee be obliged to become the instrument of some manner of 'cosmopolitan redemption' for a world divided against itself. Amal's embrace of the orphaned infant Amina might at first appear to promise a cosmopolitan mixing of genealogies. In truth, however, Amal is motivated as much by (understandable) egocentricity as by any higher ideal. During the crossing to Italy she is gripped by the wish for a child (p. 245); a short time later, just after she and Youssef rescue Amina, she has a miscarriage and resolves to become the orphan girl's mother. Subsequently, her daughter becomes the means by which she reconnects with her own mother in Russia; Amal initially allows Swetlana to

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<sup>33</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Flüchtlingsgespräche* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1961), 1. Translation by Miriam Rürup, and also cited in her article 'Lives in Limbo. Statelessness after Two World Wars', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 49 (2011), 113–34.

believe that she gave birth to Amina (p. 297), but she soon confesses (p. 305). Yet all of the above is essentially irrelevant—what’s important is that the helpless child is cared for.

In the end, in fact, the key question is not whether the reader can empathize with Amal but whether her new family can be safe and even flourish in Germany. Here—and in a dialectic twist characteristic of Grjasnowa’s works—the novel’s principled critique of the generality of states’ failure to honour their obligations is transcended in its closing pages. Towards the end of *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, accordingly, there may be a hint to the reader to think pragmatically and to recognize that, today, there are distinctions to be drawn between regimes, and that these can point the way to a more robust humanitarian re-engagement. In essence, the novel redirects its reader away from a philosophical approach to human rights and towards a political approach. As James D. Ingram suggests, ‘philosophical approaches ask what these rights are, why we have them, what they are based on’, whereas ‘political approaches, in contrast, start with the problem of putting human rights into practice’.<sup>34</sup>

At least, this is one potential implication of the novel’s otherwise incongruous final episode, when Amal flies to America to take up a job offer only to take the next flight home before she even passes through US immigration. In a highly contemporary novel completed and published in 2017, it is not unreasonable to infer that this is a reference to Donald Trump’s election as US President in 2016, and to his executive order soon after his inauguration barring people from certain Muslim countries, including Syria. (Certainly, this is the final repudiation of Youssef’s idealised image, throughout the text, of the United States as a land of opportunity). Amal’s decision not to even attempt to enter may simply pre-empt her being refused, of course, However, it seems more purposeful than that. The Syrian

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<sup>34</sup> James D. Ingram, ‘What Is a “Right to Have Rights”? Three Images of The Politics of Human Rights’, *The American Political Science Review*, 102: 4 (2008), 401-16 (p. 402).

refugee makes a spontaneous but unambiguous choice to go back to Germany, as the concluding sentences indicate, also suggesting the prospect of at least a semblance of order for the return leg: ‘Sie springt auf und eilt zum Gate. Amal verlässt die USA mit demselben Flugzeug, mit dem sie angekommen war. Es wurde nur aufgetankt und gereinigt. Eine neue Besatzung kam an Bord’ (p. 309). Notwithstanding the inconsistencies manifest in official and popular attitudes—whether the ‘integration’ policies that push refugees into low-paid, dead-end jobs or, far worse, outbreaks of neo-Nazi violence—Amal knows that in the Federal Republic there is at least a basic acceptance of the state’s obligations, and she determines to make use of the rights that issue from these obligations. In this moment, Amal shifts from being an ‘object subject of compassion’ to being a ‘legal person as well as a political activist claiming the recognition of his or her international human rights’, to use Seyla Benhabib’s apposite terminology.<sup>35</sup> And she moves from being the object of the narrator’s ‘curation’ of cosmopolitan memory—made relatable in terms of the Jewish Holocaust experience—to being the true protagonist of her own story.

This pragmatic cosmopolitanism may not be as inspiring as the rhetoric of transnational solidarity, or as affecting as the appeal to traumatic memory. Yet the differences between jurisdictions are of vital practical relevance for refugees, and they define the realm of practical politics where engaged citizens—and now refugees too, exercising agency in their own cause—can agitate, confronting administrations that fail to fulfil their obligations and defending the meagre achievements of other governments while pushing for more. This is an entirely unsentimental solidarity—but it is by no means abstract or unimpassioned.

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<sup>35</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Exile, Statelessness, and Migration: Playing Chess with History from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 121.

## **Conclusion: The Indispensability of the State**

Cosmopolitan memory, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* implies, offers an inadequate basis for humanitarianism. First, while the Holocaust resonates in Europe and North America, there is a risk of hubris in trying to universalize its lessons, including the presumption of a shared understanding of human rights (e.g. the protection of minorities, gender equality, etc.). Second, when (a particular kind of) memory is privileged as the means by which western countries especially mobilize for human rights, the fate of refugees and others in need may depend on their ability to narrate a compelling past, and on their capacity to stimulate empathy. Third, cosmopolitan—and more specifically multidirectional—memory may in any event be undercut by competition between groups, or by the ways memories interact, for example when the victims of one outrage are identified as the perpetrators of another. These are dangers that Michael Rothberg explicitly acknowledges, for example in his discussion with Dirk A. Moses ‘on the ethics and politics of transcultural memory’,<sup>36</sup> and his more recent work on the ‘implicated subject’ strongly suggests a need to focus on the ways individuals are ‘entwined with and folded into (“im-plied in”)’ within persistent structural consequences and continuities of violence that complicate both the perpetrator/victim binary and transcultural solidarities constructed through memory and empathy.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Rothberg and Dirk A. Moses, ‘A Dialogue on the Ethics and Politics of Transcultural Memory’, in Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson, eds., *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders* (Berlin : De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 29-38

<sup>37</sup> Michael Rothberg, ‘Trauma Theory, Implicated Subjects, and the Question of Israel/Palestine’, *MLA Profession* (2014), <<https://profession.mla.org/trauma-theory-implicated-subjects-and-the-question-of-israel-palestine/>> [accessed 23 February 2019]. See

More than simply a critique of the current fixation on memory, however, Grjasnowa's novel also gestures towards an alternative—though by no means unprecedented—motivation for humanitarian thought and action. This is a pragmatic cosmopolitanism that focuses not on the stories refugees carry with them across borders but on the obligations of receiving states, the duty of citizens to hold their governments to account, and refugees' agency. This agency may be more easily achieved by individuals such as Amal, of course, who in their countries of origin already enjoyed privileges of social status, education and resources. Once again, the novel perhaps knowingly undercuts its purportedly more textured, 'sociological' emphasis on heterogeneity. Amal and Hammoudi are more like the well-off and well-connected migrants featured in Grjasnowa's 2014 novel *Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe*, benefiting from the economic and geo-political re-ordering of the globe even as they are targeted as a minority, than they are like the mass of refugees in 2015. The pragmatic cosmopolitanism of *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, it might be argued, thus already includes a dialectical engagement with refugees not only as subjects but also, to use Rothberg's new term, as 'implicated subjects'.

What is most salient about *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, however—with regard to the key humanitarian issue of how to respond to the future 'refugee crises' that will inevitably result from conflict, climate change and the other 'world risks' (Beck)<sup>38</sup> listed at the beginning of this article—is its call to develop a broad-based solidarity that extends beyond empathy. This is not to diminish displays of concern, or practical expressions of support. These are vital too, to the extent that they are doable by 'ordinary citizens' acting in their individual capacities. Rather, it is to grasp the need to engage politically, and collectively, and to focus (again) on

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also Rothberg's book, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), published a few months after the completion of this article.

<sup>38</sup> Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999)



norms and responsibilities rather than (only) compassion—and to not mistake pity for political engagement. In *Men in Dark Times* (1968), Hannah Arendt suggests: ‘humaneness should be sober and cool rather than sentimental [...] humanity is exemplified not in fraternity but in friendship [...] that friendship is not intimately personal but makes political demands and preserves reference to the world’.<sup>39</sup> In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt had already defined this unsentimentality as a prerequisite for solidarity with the ‘multitude’ and, ultimately, all humankind.

It is through solidarity that people establish deliberately and, as it were, dispassionately a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited. The common interest would then be ‘the grandeur of man’ or ‘the honour of the human race’ or the dignity of man. For solidarity, because it partakes of reason, and hence of generality, is able to comprehend a multitude conceptually, not only the multitude of a class or a nation or a people, but eventually all mankind.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, though it nowhere directly mentions this particular German-Jewish refugee, *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* is profoundly ‘Arendtian’, in its focus on the principal humanitarian challenge of her age and of ours—how to deal with endemic violations of human rights, mass

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<sup>39</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 25. In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt had already determined that unsentimentality is not a lack of solidarity but rather an injunction to ‘establish deliberately and, as it were, dispassionately, a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited’ [*On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 840].

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 84.

displacement, and the failure of ‘global governance’—and in its purposeful unsentimentality. Indeed, the novel’s affinity with Arendt’s is expressed through—rather than contradicted by—its frequent dwelling on its protagonists’ physical and psychological suffering. As Arendt puts it, ‘solidarity, though it may be aroused by suffering, is not guided by it’, that is, empathy with others’ pain is useful to the extent that it inspires a renewed focus on rights and principles and an impetus to mobilise: ‘compared with the sentiment of pity, it may appear cold and abstract, for it remains committed to ‘ideas’—to greatness, or honour, or dignity—rather than to any ‘love’ of men.... Terminologically speaking, solidarity is a principle that can inspire and guide action’. (In relation to the discussion above of Amal’s relative privilege, it is noteworthy that Arendt emphasises that solidarity of this kind ‘comprehends the strong and the rich no less than the weak and the poor’).<sup>41</sup>

The need for an unsentimental, political engagement in response to a scale of violations of international norms last witnessed at the time of Arendt’s flight from fascism eighty-five years ago returns us to the dismal stocktaking cited at the outset of this article—the contemporary reality of violent conflict, mass displacement, and human-rights abuses across the world’s regions. Resonating through *Gott ist nicht schüchtern* is a version of Arendt’s famous insight, from *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), that in times of extreme precarity what really matters is the ‘right to have rights’<sup>42</sup>—this is the right, as Michael Walzer puts it, to ‘have an effective state’ that is willing and able to enforce civic rights to self-expression, non-discrimination, sanctity of life and so forth.<sup>43</sup> In the absence of such a

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<sup>41</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 298.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Walzer, ‘Human Rights in Global Society’, *Internationale Politik Transatlantic Edition*, 6:1 (2005), 4-13 (p. 7).

state, Arendt suggests, a well-meaning emphasis on the inalienability of human rights is ‘hopeless idealism’, even ‘feeble-minded hypocrisy’.<sup>44</sup> Today, Seyla Benhabib speaks of ‘the hypocrisy of contemporary liberal democracies and of the postwar state system, which, on the one hand, affirms the universality of human rights, including asylum, and, on the other hand, gives nations the sovereign privilege to control their borders and engage in practices in defiance of their obligations under international law’.<sup>45</sup> Notwithstanding the discourse of globalisation—and mindful of the risk of appearing to endorse the militarized ‘humanitarian interventionism’ of the 1990s or even the bigoted nationalism of the present day—it seems that the state remains wholly indispensable.

This is most likely the most unexpected implication of Grjasnowa’s decidedly ‘worldly’ novel, with its cosmopolitan orientation and consistent framing of the local within the global. Humanitarians have little choice but to acknowledge that ‘human rights require politics, and politics requires difficult, imperfect and tragic choices without end’, as Jeffrey Isaac argues,<sup>46</sup> and to recognize that even as states everywhere disintegrate, persecute, or fail to protect, it is still necessary to engage with them (and confront them) in order to deliver a more effective expression of solidarity with the ‘multitude’ of refugees than the idealisations of cosmopolitan memory or empathetic identification have yet achieved.

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<sup>44</sup> Arendt, *Origins*, p. 269.

<sup>45</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Exile*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Isaac, ‘Hannah Arendt on Human Rights and the Limits of Exposure, or Why Noam Chomsky is Wrong About the Meaning of Kosovo’, *Social Research*, 69:2 (2002), 505-37 (p. 532).

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