

*In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates*. Jana K. Lipman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020. ISBN 9780520343665.

Jana Lipman, Associate Professor of History at Tulane University, is the author of an important and highly regarded social history of the United States naval base at Guantánamo (*Guantánamo: A Working-Class History between Empire and Revolution*, 2009). In that book she traced the conditions under which local Cuban men and women from the neighboring city worked at the base, alongside migrant workers who were recruited from Jamaica in large numbers before and especially after the Cuban Revolution.

In her latest book, Jana Lipman writes about Southeast Asia and the fortunes of Vietnamese men, women, and children who fled Vietnam after 1975 and who were scattered between Malaysia, the Philippines, Guam, and Hong Kong. Drawing upon a wealth of primary sources in half a dozen archives, she has written a fine study that shifts the focus away from the well-known sites of Vietnamese refugee resettlement in North America, Australia, and Western Europe. She is interested in how Vietnamese refugees negotiated the upheaval of population displacement and how they sought to come to terms with the conditions in which they found themselves in refugee camps and other settlements across Southeast Asia.

Lipman is careful to situate her research in the extensive literature in refugee studies. She considers the multiple definitions attached to the flight of Vietnamese: were they “refugees” as per the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, having a “well-founded fear of persecution?” Or were they to be understood as “boat people,” “illegal immigrants,” or “economic migrants,” whose dubious claim to refugee status rendered them vulnerable to being returned to Vietnam against their will? She traces a fundamental shift from the international recognition of Vietnamese as *prima facie* refugees in 1979 to an agreement ten years later that they were “asylum seekers” whose claim had to be established with greater rigor. This often entailed a laborious process during which refugees were held in camps and

detention centers across the region. Lipman proceeds to ask pertinent questions about who makes decisions about how to “manage” refugees in sites of “temporary protection” and who has the power to devise and implement what have come to be called “durable solutions” to crises of mass population displacement. These solutions include resettlement in a third country and repatriation to one’s country of origin.

One of the things that makes this a significant contribution to refugee history is Lipman’s careful delineation of social and political differences between Vietnamese refugees. Indeed, she opens her book with two vignettes from different time periods to make this point. In the first, from 1975, a small group of refugees housed in a refugee camp on the island territory of Guam demanded that they be repatriated to Vietnam rather than be held indefinitely pending resettlement in the United States. In the second, twenty years later, a large group of refugees who had spent years on the island of Palawan protested that they were being denied the opportunity to resettle and now faced repatriation, after it had been determined that they had not established a “genuine” fear of persecution. In the bureaucratic language of the time, they were “screened out.”

Far from being passive objects of external intervention, Vietnamese refugees made themselves heard, whether by publicizing the ordeal they suffered during their escape and incarceration or by demanding that their human rights be respected. In Hong Kong, for example, which was a British colony until 1997, the government developed a reputation for deterring refugees from seeking asylum, on the grounds that only one in ten were “genuine refugees.” Conditions in the Hong Kong detention centers were deliberately harsh and oppressive – women were vulnerable to sexual assault from prison guards – to “persuade” refugees to return to Vietnam. But the repatriation program went ahead under what was known as the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA), endorsed in 1989 by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR congratulated itself on

a job well done. Refugees in Hong Kong responded with protests and went on hunger strike, which reached a peak in 1994, and mobilized international public opinion, at least up to a point. This included publicity efforts made by Vietnamese American activists who deployed the language of human rights to ask why the United States government had abandoned its support for the ongoing struggle against communism and by supporting the CPA had left the remaining Vietnamese refugees to an uncertain fate.

Refugee camps for Vietnamese refugees were also scattered across other parts of Southeast Asia. Lipman demonstrates that the social world of the refugee camp was fluid and heterogeneous, comprising (in the case of the Philippines Refugee Processing Center [PRPC] on Bataan) UNHCR officials, Philippine military, camp administrators, international NGOs, foreign teachers, Filipino teachers, and market vendors, as well as families from other parts of the region. It was, in other words, “a veritable international village.” Refugees in Palawan, for example, enjoyed a degree of autonomy, but they, too, complained of poor conditions. Individual humanitarian aid workers did their best. One outcome was the creation, in 1996, of a dedicated, albeit short-lived, settlement for Vietnamese refugees on the island, known as Viet Ville. By the second decade of the new millennium, however, most of the refugees in Palawan had managed to gain admittance to the United States.

Lipman also has valuable things to say about other implications of creating and maintaining refugee camps, which often existed (and continue to exist) in an uneasy tension with local host communities. She points out that the above mentioned PRPC “had a greater long-term impact on the Bataan region and the Filipinos who worked there than on the Vietnamese within the camp.” (p. 105) In short, the history of refugees and refugee camps must be understood in a broader interpretive framework, one that takes proper account of the multiplicity of actors.

Readers of *The Middle Ground Journal* might also like to know that Lipman has written about camps closer to home, so to speak. I draw attention to her article, entitled: “A refugee camp in America: Fort Chaffee and Vietnamese and Cuban refugees, 1975-1982,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 33, no. 2 (2014), 57-87, in which she discusses refugees’ engagement with incarceration on United States soil.

Lipman’s book is a major contribution to refugee history. It offers a clearly written and carefully contextualized account of the encounters and interactions between the various elements in the international refugee regime: government authorities, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and refugees themselves. Her book will also be of considerable value to teachers and researchers interested in contemporary human rights issues in relation to the treatment of refugees, as well as to anyone seeking a fresh perspective on the history of Southeast Asia. It contains useful maps and several compelling photographs. It is clearly and sensitively written. *In Camps* has already found a place on my list of recommended reading for advanced undergraduate courses and for graduate classes in refugee history and world history. I recommend it unreservedly.

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