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Calais Writers, *Voices from the 'Jungle': Stories from the Calais Refugee Camp*. London: Pluto Press, 2017. vi + 266 pp. Figures and index. £75.00 U.K./\$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7453-9970-6; £14.99 U.K./\$21.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-0-7453-9968-3.

Review by Benjamin Thomas White, University of Glasgow.

If you wanted to pick a vantage point, in the late 1930s, from which to understand the imminent collapse of the Third Republic, then a good place to start would be one of the camps for refugees and ‘undesirables’ that sprang up across France in those years. Refugees and undesirables were often the same people. Hannah Arendt, a Jewish refugee from Germany since 1933, was interned at Gurs in 1940; Arthur Koestler, born to a Jewish family in Habsburg Budapest, was interned at Le Vernet d’Ariège after reporting on the Spanish civil war. Hundreds of thousands of Republican refugees from that war were disarmed as they crossed the Pyrenees in the cold first months of 1939 and interned in barbed wire enclosures on the beaches of Roussillon (men) or in remote inland camps (women, children). Koestler, writing soon after his escape to England, entitled his account of Le Vernet *Scum of the Earth*, for this was what Europe’s most vulnerable people had been turned into by their treatment at the hands of the Republic.[1] Arendt drew on her own experiences when she analyzed European politics in the age of totalitarianism, and took up the same phrase: stateless refugees became “rightless, the scum of the earth”, and by failing to protect them, liberal democracies announced their own loss of faith in liberalism and democracy.[2] In France, what the ‘undesirables’ experienced—pursuit and internment by radicalized security forces already cooperating with their Nazi German counterparts, rightlessness in the face of a callous state bureaucracy, and demonization by a democratic government lurching into nationalist authoritarianism—indicated that the Republic was moribund long before parliament voted plenipotentiary powers to Marshal Pétain in July 1940.

A similar vantage point on French politics today can be found by following undocumented migrants and asylum-seekers. They may be contained in state installations, from Centres d’accueil et d’orientation (welcome and orientation centers, CAOs) to Centres de rétention administrative (administrative detention centers, CRAs); or they may be dispersed, under the ‘aucun point de fixation’ policy, which prevents any attempt by *exilés* to establish themselves autonomously of state control. (French activists often choose the term *exilés* as a conscious rejection of the highly politicized discourse around the categories ‘migrant’ and ‘asylum-seeker’.) That the two options of administrative immobilization or unsettled clandestinity are the only ones available is largely because of the global media attention received by the most notorious encampment of *exilés*, the Calais ‘Jungle’. This site, which has passed through several phases of informal settlement, state intervention, and physical destruction, housed as many as 10,000

people at its height, in squalid conditions. In March 2016 a portion of its tents were demolished by the state and replaced by securitised container accommodation for 1,500 people. In October of that year, these were removed and the rest of the site bulldozed. Some of its inhabitants successfully made their way to other countries. Others were taken into the custody of the proliferating state agencies created to control them, or are still living informally, at Calais or elsewhere, subject to constant harassment by the security forces, including seizure or destruction of their belongings and any materials for shelter that they may possess.

It is state policy, as articulated by President Macron in a speech at Calais in January 2018, for undocumented migrants' choices to be limited to these two.^[3] The effect is to reduce anyone who remains outside the control of the state bureaucracy to rightlessness. The policy's authoritarian implications can be seen not just in the abuses suffered by *exilés*, but also in the central state's disciplining or dismantlement of any local government measures to support undocumented migrants (whether at Grande-Synthe or in Paris), and in the increasing criminalization and harassment of humanitarian workers and voluntary associations trying to offer assistance as basic as food, clothing, and a chance to wash to those who stay outside the control of the asylum and immigration bureaucracy.

There is a growing body of literature on this subject, ranging from blog posts by volunteers and activists to reports by NGOs like Médecins sans Frontières, from academic research to creative arts productions.^[4] A museum exhibition, 'What remains of the 'Jungle'?', will open in Oxford on the day the UK leaves the European Union in March 2019. As is always the case in situations of forced displacement and clandestine migration, though, the voices of those most affected—the *exilés* themselves—often go unheard, or are tightly mediated. *Voices from the 'Jungle'* exists to offset this imbalance.

The book is the product of an accredited course on 'Life stories' run at the 'Jungle' in 2015-16 by a team from the University of East London, home of the Refugee Archive. The course was offered in order to allow camp residents to exercise their right to education, but "it quickly became clear that course participants wanted the life stories they were telling and writing to reach a wider audience" (p. 4). This book, a "co-authored text" written by camp residents from "Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan and Syria" (p. 4) and a team of editors from UEL, is the result. The introduction describes the composition of the life stories themselves, but also the editorial discussions with the authors over how to structure the book: not as a collection of individual narratives, short or long, but in five chapters "following people's lives from childhood to the present" (p. 9), each made up of extracts from many different narratives interspersed with contextual passages written by the editors. These were also "checked and, where necessary, edited by the authors" (p. 8). It is worth stressing this collaborative approach: it doesn't eliminate the power imbalances inherent in a project like this, but it shows that the editors are aware of them and have tried to meet them ethically. One issue that was perhaps unavoidable is gender imbalance. A large majority of residents at the 'Jungle' were men, and the minority of women were further underrepresented among course participants. The result is that only one woman's testimony appears here: the editors express hope that a book focusing on women's experiences of the 'Jungle' might one day be published.

The five chapters are illustrated with photographs taken in and around the camp by the authors themselves. They start with the authors' home lives (chapter one), then document their journeys to get to Calais (chapter two). Two chapters cover the experience of arriving at and settling into

the 'Jungle' (chapter three) and of living there and attempting to leave (chapter four), while the final chapter (five) covers their lives after leaving—including the ways in which the camp continues to figure in their imagination, and, for some, in their daily activities.

What were the authors fleeing? In some cases it was poverty, forced conscription or a general low-grade persecution as a member of a particular ethnic or religious group. In other cases, it was more targeted persecution, as with the Afghan author Shaheen, threatened with death after refusing to assist the Taliban, or Milkesa, persecuted by the Ethiopian government for his work as an educator and cultural activist belonging to the Oromo: the country's largest ethnic group, but poorly represented in government. Still others fled war, like Mohammed Ahmed from Darfur, or Muhammad, a Syrian Kurd. Some of the accounts in this chapter are brief—authors perhaps not wanting to stir up difficult memories, or create trouble for others still at home—while some, like that of Milkesa, are detailed and structured narratives.

The authors' journeys brought a different set of difficulties and vulnerabilities, and a more comparable set of experiences. Some narrators had the resources to begin their journeys by air, but only to Europe's 'near abroad', like Safia and her family, who flew from Afghanistan to Istanbul: flying into the EU itself was not possible, so even for these more affluent exiles, the journey involved arduous stages by land and sea. For others even reaching the southern shores of the Mediterranean had already involved months of travel and waiting, often in danger: the author calling himself Africa took three months to get from Sudan to Libya, where he got stuck, eventually continuing to Egypt. Crossing the sea, by the short Aegean or long central Mediterranean route, was more dangerous still, with the worst conditions always experienced by African travellers. Once Europe had been reached, the difficult journeys continued, stop-start, with treks overland, short hops by taxi, bus transfers arranged by state authorities, or train tickets paid for like a regular traveller.

At every stage of their journeys the authors were vulnerable in many different ways. Some were exploited or threatened by the agents and smugglers they had paid to assist them. Irregular and insecure travel left them open to theft and assault. Some were robbed or blackmailed by other *exilés*. State security forces—border guards and police—were a constant threat, both on the way to Europe and within it. This threat was judicial (everyone tried to avoid being fingerprinted, because under the EU's Dublin Convention any asylum-seeker can be returned to the first member state where they have been documented), but also extra-judicial, with arbitrary violence being commonplace: "The cruelest police in the world are Iranian police", Shaheen from Afghanistan wrote (p. 65), but other accounts make clear there is stiff competition for that title. But journeys also had positive aspects, in the relief of escaping danger, the pleasure (however mitigated) of reaching the EU, or the shared experience of travel and the ties of companionship formed along the way.

The Calais 'Jungle' was nobody's destination. Authors ended up there because of the town's proximity to the UK, which all the authors hoped to reach, whether because they had family there, spoke some English, or believed that it would be an easier place to settle and find work than other European countries. One, going by the pseudonym Refugees' Voice, was attempting to return to the UK after living there for years as an asylum-seeker then leaving for Italy, discouraged by the glacially slow progress of his asylum claim. [5] Some of the authors stayed in the camp briefly, others for quite a while, but none, arriving there, saw it as more than the next temporary pause in their journey. It was not a place to settle into, but a new situation to be

learned: how to get shelter and food, how to communicate with friends and family, and, most important, how to move on.

The authors' accounts stress different things. Not all had much to say about the 'Jungle': Milkesa, so articulate and detailed in his narratives of home and the journey, distilled his stay in the camp into the single sentence "My time in the 'Jungle': it was from insanity to death" (p. 111). But others wrote at length about the camp. Muhammad, from Syria, described his surprise at finding "no houses, no electricity; there were just shelters and some tents and strange people (so many strange and scary faces)". Injured during his journey, cold, and frightened of robbers, he was deeply dejected to arrive in "a place that belonged to the European Middle Ages" (p. 113). But as he familiarized himself with the dreadful conditions in the camp, he also began to make social connections, especially among other Syrian Kurds, that would sustain him.

The photographs that accompany these chapters are particularly good, illustrating the squalor of shelters and caravans and the harsh sterility of the containers that replaced them. Tents were cold and damp, and the fires residents lit (often using unsuitable materials like plastics) created the risk of smoke inhalation and uncontrolled burning. Safia, the only woman among the authors, lived in a caravan with her family of six, including a newborn baby: "It is not decent, there are big holes and it is windy... there are no toilets. We don't have anything, no washing machine for washing the clothes, and everything is dirty" (p. 120). Zeeshan Javid, from Pakistan, was not the only resident to lie to his family back home about living in the 'Jungle'. "If I show a picture of the container where I live to my mother, she will ask me to come back because she doesn't know": he told her he lived in Paris, with a house and a car (p. 119).

Another photo--the only one whose caption appears to be by the editors rather than the author who took it--shows the graffiti "FUCK POLICE" (p. 131). Residents of the camp faced heavy surveillance, frequent use of tear-gas, and regular physical threats from the French police, particularly the *Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité* (CRS, riot police). These created a universally negative impression of France among the authors that was exacerbated by an asylum bureaucracy they perceived as opaque and untrustworthy. The solidarity of French activists and humanitarians only partially offset it. Residents also faced attack by unknown assailants: Muhammad, from Syria, witnessed the consequences of one of these, when three badly beaten Syrian Kurds came to him for help because of his medical training (p. 197). Self-harm by residents, and violence between them, were also problems.

Despite the grim and insecure conditions, many authors also stressed their attempts to live an ordinary life, and make the 'Jungle' bearable: shopping or praying, making tea, sitting outside and talking, or going up an embankment to find mobile phone reception and call home. Habibi, from Afghanistan, took a picture of the lake near the camp in winter sunshine: "In a really bad place there is a beautiful place like this" (p. 146). Haris, from Pakistan, wanted his pictures to capture beauty as well as ugliness, like the sheen of electric light on wet surfaces on a rainy night (pp. 147-148). Haris also set up a shop which later became a restaurant, the Blue Lake. Other authors also kept themselves busy in the camp, volunteering or studying, and contributed to its social life.

Nonetheless, "it is a boring life, it is a prison life", as Zeeshan Imayat, from Pakistan, put it. Leaving was everyone's chief preoccupation, and some of the authors succeeded. 'Eritrea' managed to climb on top of a train through the Channel tunnel (p. 207). Muhammad gave up on

the UK, “the country that just wants rich men who can pay for smugglers... a government that does everything to keep the refugees away from their borders” (p. 202) and claimed asylum in Germany. Others entered the formal French asylum system, like Milkesa from Ethiopia, or moved elsewhere in France to rely on family support, like the Pakistani cousins Zeeshan Javid and Zeeshan Imayat: both situations full of uncertainty.

Uncertainty, indeed, remained a characteristic feature of most of the authors’ lives after they left the ‘Jungle’, and for many of them the camp retained an important place in their mental landscape. The author using the pseudonym Refugees’ Voice wrote perceptively about the camp’s final demolition:

[Y]ou have to think about it both ways, ‘Jungle’ cannot be sustainable. The ‘Jungle’ used to exist and it will exist still, but the problem is that it was too much in the media. The government did not like it to be too much in the media. That is why they wanted to remove the ‘Jungle’; but somehow the ‘Jungle’ still continues, in some places, as it used to exist for the last decade (pp. 244-5).

The staged destruction of the ‘Jungle’ was itself a media event, for an intended public that may have been French, international, or both. The author Riaz, from Pakistan, was one of 76 former residents who had just left the camp and begun a foundation course at the University of Lille: he returned during the demolition and commented on it on social media as it happened. Whatever their feelings about the camp, none of the authors saw its destruction as having been in the residents’ interests.

Overall the book is a powerful collection of testimonies, certainly depressing but offset by moments of hope, resilience, and community. As a historical source, it raises some questions that are worth thinking about for historians working with refugee testimony more generally.

One is about the organization of the book. As noted above, the editors—in discussion with the authors—chose to divide the narratives up into extracts distributed among chapters covering different stages of the journey. They are explicit about this choice (it was partly because they were working with narratives of different lengths), but it makes it hard to get a sense of any individual journey as a whole. And, notwithstanding the editors’ efforts to show that each individual’s journey was unique, it risks blurring their distinct stories into one.

The authors’ own choices of pseudonym contribute this, in a different way. Many of them use pseudonyms, for reasons that deserve absolute respect: they are in a legally vulnerable position in Europe, where a detail inadvertently revealed in a published narrative could easily be turned against them in the asylum process, and in many cases they have family or friends at home who could be endangered by association. But some of them chose names that are deliberately intended to make their experience representative of a larger refugee story: Eritrea, Africa, or Refugees’ Voice. Their reasons for doing that are well-intentioned, but as well as raising questions about how representative their stories really are (in a collection with only one female voice), it also risks making them generic.

Genre itself is another issue. Even divided up into extracts and scattered through the book, it is evident that some of these narratives have been strongly shaped by different genres. One is that of law: Milkesa’s narrative—fluent, detailed and dated, but also self-justifying—appears ready-

made for an asylum hearing. I say this not to cast doubt on its factuality, but to highlight the larger truth that the life stories we tell are often shaped, consciously or not, by conventions of genre. For refugees, who are repeatedly required to narrativize their experiences in legally 'legible' forms (their lives may depend on doing so), and who are also much questioned by well-meaning humanitarian practitioners, volunteers, and researchers, those external conventions can be a powerful shaping force. The imprint of other, less obvious genres is also visible: early extracts from the life story of Babak, from Iran, have a striking tone of 'positive thinking', and it is no surprise when a later extract mentions that Babak is an enthusiastic reader of self-help literature. But self-help books, with their relentless focus on individual psychology, are no remedy for the structural social, economic, and political problems that set the residents of the 'Jungle' on their perilous journeys, and left them at the mercy of hostile asylum bureaucracies in exile. The facts of the author's situation highlight the limitations of the narrative genre he is using to make sense of it, and to envisage a way out.

You could argue that the 'refugee story' has become a genre, or at least a subgenre, of its own: a tale of danger escaped, challenges and barriers overcome, and tenuous safety reached, often with an insistence on the useful contribution that refugees make to the society that hosts them. The narrative conventions of this story are often adopted by humanitarian agencies, refugee advocates, sympathetic observers, and some refugees. But it, too, risks flattening the varied experiences of very different people in very different contexts, reducing them to their 'refugeeness'. That certainly isn't the intention of the editors of this book, but they don't entirely avoid it. One reason for that is their desire to offset an image of refugees as "greedy, deceitful and dangerous" (p.6) by presenting the authors (quite understandably) in the best light: *other* refugees may have stolen from or preyed upon their fellow travellers, but no-one here admits to such behaviour. But the tendency to idealize refugees--which, to be clear, is less pronounced here than in many other cases--has its own risks. Feeding a polarized discourse, it can paradoxically make the demonization of refugees easier, as any individual demeanour attributed to a refugee can be taken as falsifying the entire 'positive' narrative and used to attack all refugees. Indeed, because of its focus on hardworking and virtuous refugees, the generic 'refugee story' risks inadvertently undermining the right to seek refuge itself, a universal human right which we all share. People who will never be able to make an economic contribution to their country of refuge still have that right, as do people who are not *nice* people. (Arthur Koestler, a brave intellectual, was an unpleasant human being.) Even implicitly, in discourse, it is dangerous to accept qualifications to fundamental rights.

This discussion takes us beyond *Voices from the 'Jungle'*, to broader methodological, narratological, and political issues for historians working with testimonies of this kind. The book remains an important set of life stories, capturing the experiences of people on the sharp end of Europe's crisis of migration policy. It gives a valuable, and distressing, perspective on the decay of political institutions in France and in Europe more widely. Arendt and Koestler would have found the situation all too familiar.

NOTES

[1] Arthur Koestler, *Scum of the Earth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941).

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Co., 1958), p. 267.

[3] “Transcription du discours du Président de la République auprès des forces mobilisées, 16 Jan 2018”: <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/transcription-du-discours-du-president-de-la-republique-aupres-des-forces-mobilisees/> (accessed 11 Sept 2018). I would like to thank Maria Hagan for bringing this speech to my attention. The discussion here draws on her research and that of other presenters at the conference ‘Structures of Protection: Rethinking Refugee Shelter’, Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford, July 2018.

[4] One powerful piece by Michaël Neuman and Corinne Torre of Médecins Sans Frontières, ‘Calais has become a cage in a jungle’ (originally published in *Le Monde*), can be found in English here: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2017/07/medecins-sans>. In 2018, *The Jungle*, a co-production of the National Theatre and Young Vic with Good Chance Theatre, had a sold-out run at the Young Vic in London before transferring to the West End, where it is still running at time of writing: <http://thejungleplay.co.uk/>. (Both sites accessed 11 Sept 2018.)

[5] It was recently reported that some asylum claimants in the UK had waited over twenty years for an *initial* decision on their case from the Home Office: ‘Revealed: asylum seekers’ 20-year wait for Home Office ruling’, *The Guardian*, 17 Aug 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/aug/17/revealed-asylum-seekers-20-year-wait-for-home-office-ruling> (accessed 11 Sept 2018).

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