

## **Suffering Redemption and Triumph: The first wave of postwar Australian immigrants**

**Peter Brune, Big Sky Publishing, 2023, 436 pages**

Review by Kevin Bain

After discovering a box of his interview tapes of 25 years ago, the military historian Peter Brune was inspired to resume his project to publish the oral histories of about 40 immigrants from Europe.

They mostly came in the immediate post-World War 2 period, from the Baltic states, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Hungary, Serbia, Greece, Italy, and Croatia. Since he conducted the original interviews, most of the interviewees have passed, so these accounts are irreplaceable, and he has done them justice, with maps of individual journeys, their war histories and how they were changed, and the quest for suitable 'documents' and identities.

Brune also gives us the complicated politics, ideologies and events which buffeted them in unpredictable ways, including the post-war confrontation between 'The Iron Curtain' and the West, their post-arrival adaptations, searches for improvement, and where it took them (in 2001).

The government's population growth objective, decided in 1942, was for a 2% annual increase, 1% from births, and 1% from immigration, but the numbers of (preferred) UK migrants were inadequate. So the Australian program started with the 'Beautiful Balts', white-skinned from Northern Europe, in the Mass Resettlement Scheme of 1947-53, and the larger Special Projects Scheme 1951-53, focused on tradesmen from Germany, Holland, France, Austria and Italy.

With European reconstruction and competition from Canada and others, shortages of intending migrants continued, so the recruitment of former 'enemy aliens' from Germany began, and 100,000 Germans came to Australia from 1954 to 1961. Brune celebrates the investigations of Mark Aarons in exposing the official yet illegal selection, during the first program, of likely Nazi collaborators who were meant to be immediately arrested - those involved in the eradication of 'undesirable' communists, Jews, Gypsies and mentally handicapped people.

To Canberra, the competition to recruit 'talent' took precedence, and cutting corners made Australia a more attractive destination. This is given specific and detailed consideration in Chapter 6 'An Immoral Episode', with the clear conclusion that war criminals, quislings and traitors were in many cases considered of great benefit in the coming Cold War, and recruited to serve the Australian state.

Peter Brune is not a passive observer recording history at a distance but touches on the big human dilemmas. Kitia Altman, a Polish Jew says on p88: 'Perhaps the most critical, ethical conundrum of the Holocaust: how can one be moral or virtuous when one is under duress? All extreme and critical situations, you never knew how you would behave. It doesn't matter what you think, you would say, "I would never do that!" You never knew until you are in that situation. And no intellectual or moral preparation prepares you for the actual response.'

But resistance was not only a personal act or a military response: he highlights the Dutch nation-wide strike by the civilian population against the transportation of Jews to a concentration camp in February 1941. The leaders were executed, but this was

a brave collective stand against the Holocaust, unique in the whole period of Nazi-occupied Europe.

His book also provides the larger history: the backdrop to the war, Australian and international political context of debates and decisions, domestic policies such as the separation of married couples in job locations, and his evaluation of the over-arching 'nation-building' objective. Important points are made by Brune about the wastage of skilled and professional workers due to credentialling barriers, still claimed to operate in the dental industry today.

Despite endorsing the celebrated social and economic benefits, he is obviously not from the school of self-congratulatory 'boosterism', and we should note that the end of the White Australia Policy was still almost two decades away, with an Asian paranoia feeding enthusiasm for war in Indochina in the interim period. The dislike of Jewish migrants was common at the official level as well as pervasive in society, and Brune's account of how political leaders like Calwell and Holt, and much later Hawke and Keating, defused this by the political arts of deception, blackmail, compromise and manoeuvring is interesting.

The racism of senior officials, the RSL secretary, ACTU Secretary Albert Monk (Bob Hawke's immediate predecessor) and even northern Italians already in Australia towards southern Italians, placed restrictions on Italian immigration, even though one report said that 'so far as personal cleanliness is concerned, the Italian does not suffer by comparison with the lower class Australian.'

Financially assisted passages from the Australian government were significantly less for Italians, Cypriots and Greeks compared to British and German migrants, undermining the 'assimilation' which the government thought desirable. Although Dutch immigrants were highly favoured by Australia, if the wife or husband was of Indonesian or not 'pure European' descent, a (financially) assisted passage was not provided by Australia.

Brune hopes, in documenting these individual and trans-societal encounters, that we reflect on what can be learnt about ourselves and Australian society, which was irrevocably sent in new and different directions.

This is a book displaying deep background knowledge and fair-minded and empathetic towards its subjects, whose lives it has personalised in great detail, going far beyond a case study approach. It is elegantly written and edited without turgid prose, and a delight to read.

Kevin Bain is a retired economic analyst and university teacher. His Refugee Reading Guide is at Bayside Refugee Support. It has short summaries of about 100 books published over the last 20 years. [Check the guide out here.](#)