

Refugee History: The 1930s Crisis and Today

Policy paper - December 2017

Today there are more people displaced from their home than at any point since 1945. The majority of the world's refugees are fleeing states where mass atrocities are being perpetrated, are at risk of taking place, or have already occurred.¹ Simultaneously, climate change, natural disasters and internal conflict are generating more refugees, internal displacement and other irregular population movements. The UN's refugee agency, the UNCHR, has said that the rate at which solutions are being found for refugees and internally displaced people has been falling since the end of the Cold War. A growing number of people are being left in limbo.² Continued failure to adequately respond to the global challenges posed by increased population movements will cast long shadows over this government and the rest of the international community.

Although the combination of challenges facing the world today are unique, we can usefully look the past for points of comparison that may enable us to make better policy decisions. As today, 1930s Britain found itself in a rapidly changing world: its imperial influence was in decline, totalitarian powers were on the rise, while at home the country struggled to deal with the effects of devastating depression and growing antisemitism. As with other democracies, Britain responded with inward-looking priorities driven by narrowly defined national interest. This included refusing to recognize the growing urgency of Europe's refugee situation as hundreds of thousands of Jews and dissidents sought to escape Nazi persecution.

Drawing on detailed archival research conducted by the University of East Anglia, supported by Protection Approaches and the Pears Institute for the study of Antisemitism, this occasional paper asks what history might be able to offer to those seeking solutions to today's challenges.

To what extent has the United Kingdom, which played such a pivotal role in the post-1945 'human rights revolution', honoured the advances and upheld the promises made to try and redress the failures of the 1930s?

Our work suggests that lessons learnt and global commitments made after the Second World War and in the wake of the Holocaust are being forgotten. But we also argue that the United Kingdom has an opportunity, as it did in the 1930s, to show political leadership at home and on the international stage.

The UK and Refugees: 1930s to today:

Britain's history of engagement with refugees since the 1930s shows how, after state obstructionism in the lead up to the Second World War, the country became one of the international leaders in the drive to create a new system of international order and protection for refugees. The UNHCR scored some notable successes in its first decades of operation. However, since the mid-1980s and the end of the Cold War numbers of refugees and the internally displaced have been

increasing, and nations have responded by tightening their immigration regimes. In turn this has led to a weakening of international institutions and a retreat from principles of 'burden sharing' during refugee crises. During this next parliament, the UK will redefine its policy towards mass displacement as the country prepares to withdraw from the European Union. We pose a series of questions here, and in our accompanying occasional paper.

Questions for today:

If Britain wants to claim that liberal democracy is a compelling political system, and that it offers a genuine alternative to repressive regimes, should and could Britain better uphold its rhetorical commitments to those fleeing such regimes?

Does the UK's withdrawal from the European Union necessarily mean that Britain will retreat from the international conversation and collective action beyond its borders?

Or, if 'Brexit Britain' really is to become a more 'global Britain', could this translate into the UK taking a strong leadership role in one of the world's most pressing and

seemingly intractable problems?

Research continues to indicate that significant sections of the British public are committed to making welcome vulnerable strangers coming to Britain. How might government support the voluntary sector in welcoming refugees and asylum seekers and working with them to build a new life in Britain?

Is it possible to reduce Britain's refugee intake while holding true to its humanitarian principles? Is there a different way of approaching the challenges presented by mass crisis movements of people than by raising the drawbridge?

Points for reflection:

- We believe Britain has the opportunity to take an international lead in promoting a burden-sharing solution to the current global refugee situation whether at home, with partners in the EU or in throwing its full weight of support behind the UNHCR .
- We remind the UK Government and its EU partners that how they choose to respond to the plight of vulnerable people reaching Europe's shores will be recorded in domestic, international and human rights history.
- We urge the UK government to use an evidence-based approach, including historical evidence, to inform future policy regarding reception and resettlement of asylum seekers and refugees.

About:

Refugee History hosts a broad and multi-disciplinary experts directory and offers historical perspectives on contemporary refugee issues. It is driven by a core principle, that 'In order to find solutions to the current challenges posed by human displacement, forced migration and refugee movement, we need to have an evidence-based conversation that draws on expertise, research and experience'.

Pears Institute for the study of Antisemitism at the University of Birkbeck was founded in 2010 on the principle that the study of antisemitism is vital to understanding all forms of racism, prejudice and xenophobia.

Protection Approaches is charity that defends the rights of peoples in the UK and around the world who are violently targeted because of their identity.

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1. [Mass atrocity crimes are genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and serious war crimes. Maintaining Momentum; UK Atrocity Prevention Policy, Protection Approaches \(2017\)](#)
2. www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html