

400 Years of Refugee Movement to the UK Timeline Resource, June 2018

This timeline provides an overview of the major moments of refugee intake in the United Kingdom. When it comes to the numbers of refugees taken in, approximate figures are listed as historical documentation is often inconsistent on exact figures

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1660s-1900

In the time before the 1905 Aliens Act, immigration to and from Britain was unrestricted during peacetime, and so while the idea of refugees existed in popular imagination, it was not reflected in law or in barriers to entry. During this period the majority of migration came from other European countries, with religious and cultural differences and fears that ‘strangers’ would take work often mediating local responses to refugees. Following significant levels of Jewish immigration post-1880, this rhetoric would lead to the development of the 1905 Aliens Act.

1687

Huguenots

Numbers:

- 40,000-50,000

Context:

- Following the revocation of the 1598 Edict of Nantes in 1685, it was clear the Protestant faith would no longer be peacefully tolerated in France.
- Peaking in 1687, French Protestants (Huguenots) left the country, with substantial numbers moving to Britain which had a prosperous economy and favourable religious climate at the time.

Reception:

- Many Huguenot refugees were skilled craftspeople, artisans and professionals who brought with them great skills that contributed to the growing urban economy of British cities.
- With the majority of the British population working in agriculture, there was little competition economically with the Huguenots. They were thus generally accepted to the UK with little opposition.
- In the East End of London and Norwich, where textiles were significant industries, new arrivals were not always welcomed.

- While willing to assimilate to some extent in Britain, the Huguenots founded several French Protestant schools and friendly societies to maintain some connection to their roots.

1789-93

French Nobility and Clergy from the Revolution

Numbers:

- Unknown

Context:

- The 1789 Revolution saw some nobles seeking safety in Britain, but these early emigrés tended to be seen as cowards who had over-hastily abandoned their king and country. With the radicalisation of the revolution in 1792, sympathy increased.

Reception:

- After 1792 the emigrés benefited from active public support. Edward Burke became the figurehead of a movement to support them, while the novelist Fanny Burney promoted a national subscription scheme for their relief. Supporting the refugees was depicted as an act of patriotism and a national duty.
- The refugees were supported by a significant cross-section of the public and government ranging from the Treasury, British Catholics and Anglican ministers to the upper nobility and private philanthropists and individuals. A Committee for the Relief of French Refugee Clergy and a parallel organisation to support other refugees was created in 1792.
- In the south of England in particular, taverns and manor houses became temporary refuges.
- With the growing threat of war with France, concerns over the political and national loyalties of the French refugees increased and resulted in the Aliens Act 1792, which insisted on the registration of foreigners. The registration had to be renewed every six months, and foreigners who came under suspicion could be deported.

1848

European Political Exiles

Numbers:

- Unknown

Context:

- In the mid-19th Century, revolutions across Europe in France, Germany, Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire led to high numbers of exiles seeking refuge.
- These refugees were politically active and included those seeking independence from the autocratic imperial regimes of central and eastern Europe.

Reception:

- London became an important centre for politically active refugees. It was the site of the creation of several nationalistic and political societies.
- Many refugees had a desire to return to their home countries once the political climate was right, thus using Britain as a base to stay connected with other exiles.

1847-1855

Irish Immigration

Numbers:

- 300,000

Context:

- The Irish potato famine caused over a million deaths and over one million to emigrate, with the majority moving to North America, but large numbers also came to Britain's main cities - notably Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow and London.
- The Irish are not normally understood as refugees, but as pauper immigrants.

Reception:

- Irish immigrants stood out from the rest of the Victorian British population in terms of both poverty and religion. Many lived in slum areas in already overpopulated districts, only able to obtain poorly paid and casual work in agriculture, in the building trade - particularly the expanding rail networks - and at the docks.
- The Irish were represented in popular media and by politicians as feckless drunks, religiously backward and political agitators. They struggled to integrate into British society as a result of this hostility.

1881

Jewish Immigration

Numbers:

- 120,000-200,000 (many came to England as a stopping point before ultimately settling in America)

Context:

- The persecution of Jewish populations throughout history meant Jewish refugees had been coming to the UK throughout previous centuries.
- A much more significant number of Jewish immigrants came from Eastern Europe and Russia after 1881 when Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, which led to Jewish pogroms. A total of over two million Jewish people left Eastern Europe in this time for the USA, Canada and Western Europe.

Reception:

- Jewish immigration was largely concentrated in London and the East End as several Jewish charities and communities already existed there.
- Jewish immigration was not welcomed, even by existing Anglo-Jewish communities, resulting in Jewish populations forming tight-knit communities. This hostility lessened gradually as public opinion eased, and integration became easier.
- A significant number of refugees were repatriated to Russia by the Jewish Board of Guardians as it was believed only those Jewish individuals who faced direct persecution had the right to come to Britain as refugees.
- The 1905 Aliens Act was developed in response to this Jewish immigration, representing an end to open immigration to the United Kingdom.

1900-1951s

The period spanning the World Wars saw the creation of the highest number of refugees the world had ever seen, in part because the end of free movement across borders brought with it compulsory passports, visas and other travel documents. During hostilities, individuals were forced from their homes as invading armies made the land uninhabitable. The collapse of the Ottoman, Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian empires as a result of the First World War created ethnic, political and religious refugees and stateless persons. This prompted the League of Nations to create the post of High Commissioner for Refugees, and subsequently the Nansen passport for stateless persons. The rise of fascism in Europe, and the actions of Franco's Spain and Nazi Germany saw political dissidents, as well as Jewish and other persecuted minorities, fleeing across and out of Europe. Forty million people were displaced by the Second World War, and newly created refugee organisations – the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and its successors, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – aimed to solve the problems of Europe's displaced populations. This period saw Britain in a complex relationship with refugees as successive governments attempted to simultaneously preserve British interests and become a cooperative member of the international community. At the same time, British voluntary organisations worked hard to enable refugees to come to the country and to establish new lives in Britain.

1914-1918

Belgians

Numbers:

- 240,000-250,000

Context:

- The German invasion of Belgium in 1914 resulted in widespread displacement. Belgians attempted to find refuge in France and Britain in fairly equal measure.

Reception:

- Britain felt obliged to assist their ally not only as recompense for failing to prevent the German invasion, but also to show the strength of 'Great' Britain. However, the reception and support of Belgian refugees was left to local voluntary organisations which had sprung up.
- Belgians were accepted based on whether they had lost their homes, if they were of good character and if they passed a medical examination.
- Despite the large number of Belgian refugees, their presence had little long-term impact as the overwhelming majority returned home at the end of the war.

1933-1945

Refugees from Nazism

Numbers:

- c.90,000

Context:

- The coming to power of the antisemitic, anti-Communist Nazi party caused displacement from as early as 1933. The Nuremberg Laws in 1935, the Anschluss with Austria and Kristallnacht in 1938 prompted more departures of Jews and political dissidents from Germany and Austria, while the annexation of Sudetenland created significant numbers of Czech and Jewish refugees.
- British immigration law did not distinguish refugees from other immigrants, and so those fleeing were expected to pass medical and income tests in order to gain entry. Only one-tenth of those applying to come to Britain were granted entry.
- International tools for dealing with refugee situations were not equipped to handle the fallout from the Nazi regime: the League of Nations lacked sufficient political influence, while the US-convened Évian Conference in July 1938 only served as a platform for individual nations to justify their restrictive immigration policies.
- After the Anschluss and invasion of Czechoslovakia, Britain tightened its visa requirements, enforcing the requirement for immigrants to have visas approved before moving to the UK. Most were granted entry under transit visas and were expected to leave Britain for a third country within a defined period. The outbreak of the war saw thousands of refugees stranded in the UK with no right to establish a new life in Britain.
- Political refugees were given priority for visas in the UK; significant numbers of women were able to gain visas as domestic servants, and the *Kindertransport* saw 10,000 unaccompanied children being granted entry from Germany and Austria.

Reception:

- Within Britain, antisemitism in sections of the government and the public meant the Home Office was very reluctant to accept Jewish refugees. Even after the outbreak of war and after the scale of the Nazi programme of extermination became known, the British government continued to resist the entry of Jewish refugees.
- This differs greatly to the reception of non-Jewish refugees from Poland who, like those from Belgium, were accepted as innocent victims of invasion after the outbreak of the war.
- Many refugees – along with others seen as ‘enemy aliens’ – were interned in detention camps after May 1940.

1945-1948

Polish Refugees

Numbers:

- 150,000

Context:

- The Polish Resettlement Act of 1947 was developed to officially legislate the rights of Polish refugees, which included access to unemployment benefit, housing, work, and the ability to bring dependents to the UK.
- Alongside this, Britain accepted over 90,000 ‘displaced persons’ who did not want to return to their Communist-controlled country of origin. Displaced persons were accepted on labour schemes on

the basis of their fitness and ethnic identity, so Jewish survivors of the death- and concentration camps found it particularly hard to be accepted under these programmes.

Reception:

- Like the Belgian refugees of WWI, there was wider sympathy for Polish refugees who lost their homes to the Nazi invasion. Similarly, Polish soldiers were valued fighters alongside the British army which had earned them the right to seek refuge in the United Kingdom.
- Initially, refugees were forced to stay in Polish Resettlement Camps set up in former air force bases. 265 camps were established across the UK which had very basic facilities.
- Britain lost a significant number of working men during the war, so refugees were welcomed into jobs. The Committee for the Education of Poles was also established to assist Polish children with integration into UK society.

1951

Refugee Convention

- World War II had created such large-scale displacement that the United Nations felt the need to create international guidelines relating to the protection and acceptance of refugees.
- 26 States were represented at the conference in Geneva in July 1951. At this time, the convention defined a refugee as any person fleeing events that had taken place before 1st January 1951 '*owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted*'.
- Nations were encouraged to allow refugees the same rights to welfare, property, courts, fair treatment, education, and housing as national citizens, and to '*as far as possible facilitate the assimilation and naturalisation of refugees*'. Importance was ascribed to 'the unity of the family', encouraging nations to endeavour to unite family members or keep them together.
- While this document gave significant rights to refugees to ensure their protection, ultimately it was only a guide to national legislative policies. Frequent catch terms such as 'as far as possible' gave leniency to national legislation over immigration and refugee intake. Thus, while these international guidelines provided a loose structure for immigration legislation, the finer details of policy resided in the hands of national governments.
- An amendment made in 1967 increased the scope of the document to include refugees fleeing any life-threatening situation worldwide, rather than relating exclusively to pre-1951 conflicts in Europe.

1950-1983

The period from 1950-1983 saw a complex interweaving of political contexts that coloured the attitudes and policies towards refugee acceptance in Britain. Firstly, the Cold War created an atmosphere of geopolitical competition that resulted in bloc superpowers intervening in smaller national interests. However, this was also a period of decolonisation and a tightening of British immigration legislation to restrict the movement of people into the United Kingdom. Thus, in the following decades, Britain's attitude to refugees was very much shaped by the refugee's country of origin, their reason for exile, and the overriding political concerns of the age.

1956-1957

Hungarian Refugees

Numbers:

- 21,000

Context:

- In 1956 there was a large uprising in Hungary against the USSR's dominance over Hungarian domestic policy. The subsequent Soviet invasion led to the death of 3,000 people in Budapest. Around 250,000 people fled the country, mainly to Austria and Yugoslavia.
- This was the first major refugee incident following the 1951 Refugee Convention. Western nations, including Britain, were keen to be seen to support these anti-Communist 'heroes', while European countries, still reconstructing their economies after the war, looked favourably on the refugees, many of whom were young men ready to enter the workforce.

Reception:

- There was a visible popular desire to welcome the Hungarian refugees warmly. There were mass demonstrations in their favour, alongside fundraising events and spontaneous shows of generosity and hospitality.
- As with Polish refugees, the Hungarians were temporarily housed in camps or hostels but were moved relatively quickly into more permanent housing, becoming benefactors of the new British welfare state.
- Charities and locally coordinated activities were organised to welcome the Hungarians in the weeks they arrived.
- While the Hungarians were welcomed, there was an expectation from the UK that the refugees would be grateful and willing to adapt to British life. This was problematic, particularly as many had been told they were on their way to the USA and Canada, both of which already had large, well-established Hungarian populations.
- After a flurry of incidents of violence, drunkenness and crime, and negative reports in the press, Hungarian refugees largely disappeared from public view and became part of the ever-more diverse British population.

1972-1973

Ugandan Asian Refugees

Numbers:

- 28,000

Context:

- In August 1972, Ugandan dictator Idi Amin gave an expulsion order to all Asians residing in Uganda.
- Although many Ugandan Asians had retained British passports upon Ugandan independence, changes to British immigration law in 1968 and 1971 meant they no longer had automatic right of entry.
- Anti-immigration domestic politics gave way to pressure from the international community and ensured that Britain agreed to accept responsibility for all UK-passport-holding Ugandan Asians.
- The reception and resettlement programme was run by the Ugandan Resettlement Board, which was staffed and funded through the Home Office.
- Ugandan Asians often reject the label 'refugee', as they were granted entry to Britain as UK passport holders, not as asylum seekers, and the term 'expellee' is often used instead.

Reception:

- The visible presence of right-wing National Front demonstrations at airports, resettlement camps and town centres in Britain gave voice to anti-immigrant feeling. At the same time, the reception and resettlement of Ugandan Asians was marked by a massive voluntary effort from the existing South Asian population as well as the wider British public.
- Military camps were used as initial reception centres for expellees while resettlement workers sought to find them suitable housing and employment.
- Dispersal policies were introduced that spread the settlement of expellees across the UK, to avoid them moving to 'red' areas which were seen as already having too-large immigrant populations. This often left them isolated, without easy proximity to familiar language, food, worship facilities and cultural events.
- Therefore, many Ugandan Asian either went directly to relatives on arrival in the UK, or quickly moved from their 'dispersed' accommodation to places with established South Asian populations, notably Leicester and Ealing in London.
- Many expellees consequently experienced poor housing conditions – including extreme overcrowding and exorbitant rents – as well as explicit racism when seeking work, while at work, or as part of their everyday lives. Despite this, Britain's Ugandan Asian population, by the end of the century, became seen as one of the most successful groups in Britain.

1974

Cypriot Refugees

Numbers:

- 10,000

Context:

- Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974 following a military coup removing the Greek Cypriot President from power. The coup, which aimed to separate Cyprus from Greece and create the Hellenic Republic of Cyprus, caused a significant number of Greek Cypriots to flee.

Reception:

- Many Cypriots held British passports and there was already a large established Cypriot population in Britain, primarily in Haringey in London.
- Incoming Cypriots largely went directly to, and stayed with, existing family or friends in Britain. They were not subject to any targeted government reception and resettlement schemes, and did not receive extra assistance from the state.
- Cypriots mainly came to the attention of authorities because of the high levels of overcrowding in housing and pressure on schools. After intensive lobbying central government granted Haringey Council extra resources to help tackle these issues.

1974-1976

Chilean Refugees

Numbers:

- 3,000

Context:

- After General Pinochet carried out a coup in 1973 many left-wing activists and supporters of Allende fled Chile as political refugees.
- In order to leave, citizens had to have a visa from their country of destination, which was often impractical for political refugees fleeing torture and extermination. Many Chileans fled to neighbouring countries where they compiled the necessary documentation, which was a very slow

process. By 1975 under 2,000 of the total 6,380 visa applications had been granted. There was a heavy dependence on voluntary organisations to overcome these 'paper walls'.

Reception:

- Many Chilean refugees were politically at odds with the UK Conservative government in 1973, and thus none were accepted until the arrival of a Labour government in 1974. Regardless, when they arrived in the UK they were seen as communists and not welcomed warmly by the wider population.
- Still attempting to resettle Ugandan Asian refugees, Britain was only willing to accept 3,000 refugees from Chile. Government funds were dedicated to rescuing Chileans from political persecution.
- Reception and resettlement efforts were placed in the hands of the British Council for Aid to Refugees, but refugees from Pinochet's regime also received support from local Chilean support groups, which were often composed of trade unionists and left-wing activists. The World University Service worked to support Chilean refugee academics and find them work in universities.

1979-1983

Vietnamese Refugees

Numbers:

- 21,000-24,000

Context:

- American intervention in the Vietnam War had made for a complex geopolitical conflict, making Vietnam a proxy war for the larger Cold War.
- When the Viet Cong took Saigon in 1975, the UNHCR intervened to move the South Vietnamese population from the country to escape the advancing army. By 1979 ethnically targeted policies and relocation programmes caused hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, from both North and South Vietnam, to leave. Families and individuals escaped on often overcrowded boats where they were preyed on by pirates and in danger of sinking, or they escaped overland to neighbouring countries.
- Unable or unwilling to accept the number of refugees that were arriving by boat, neighbouring nations implemented boat 'pushbacks' that led to the deaths of refugees at sea.

Reception:

- Britain initially agreed only to take refugees who could prove a connection to the UK, and accepted responsibility for 'boat people' rescued by British merchant ships in the South China Seas. When Margaret Thatcher came to power in May 1979 she initially resisted this policy, insisting that the international community take responsibility for the issue.
- As a result of the Geneva Conference in July 1979, Britain agreed to take 10,000 refugees from camps in Hong Kong. Further refugees were accepted as part of the UNHCR's Orderly Departure Programme.
- Circulation of 'boat people' images became the focal point of identification with these refugees, painting them as victims and survivors rather than freedom fighters, in contrast to earlier refugee groups such as the Hungarians.
- The declining role of the state in Thatcher's Conservative government meant much of the work of resettling refugees fell to volunteer organisations, with refugees receiving no additional government funding after their initial 12-week reception period.

- The UK was in recession. Employment levels were low and local authorities with heavily reduced budgets were unprepared for, and incapable of, helping to re-settle refugees.
- Unfamiliarity with British society and significant language barriers made Vietnamese integration a challenge. Many refugees came from working backgrounds that had little application in the UK. These matters were worsened by the policy of dispersal which left many Vietnamese refugees isolated and far from co-nationals.
- Facing hostility from the wider population, high levels of unemployment and cultural unfamiliarity, many Vietnamese refugees turned to family or other Vietnamese refugees for support.

1980-2000

The crumbling of the Soviet Union and then end of the Cold War, and a growing number of post-colonial conflicts, saw another shift in the nature of the refugee experience. Government-sponsored arrivals of refugee groups started to be replaced by a growing number of individual asylum applications. The fall of communism saw many individuals choosing to leave Eastern Europe as restrictions on travel fell. Of greater concern, however, were the refugees created by the rise of civil conflicts in failed Soviet states, as well as failed post-colonial states further afield. Several national governments became weakened in the absence of superpower support in the post-Cold War era, leading to what the UNHCR identified as a 'proliferation of identity-based conflicts'. Internal displacement increased dramatically, as did illegal trafficking, as refugees attempted to reach safe havens. By 1999 there were 20-25 million displaced individuals from over forty countries. This, combined with the increase in restrictions on immigration to Britain from outside of Europe, ended the possibility of reaching safety through economic migration. At the same time, the complexity of processing so many individual asylum applications fed into, and drove, ever-stricter visa regulations, with many politicians choosing to paint the refugees of this era as economic migrants and not as genuine refugees.

1980

Tamil Refugees

Numbers:

- Unknown

Context:

- Civil war in Sri Lanka led to numerous individual applications for asylum in the UK, as Sri Lanka was a member of the Commonwealth and many Tamils spoke English as a second language and had family members already in the UK.
- Despite its Commonwealth status, visa restrictions were placed on Sri Lanka in May 1985. This process of restriction became an increasingly common response by governments whenever applications from a certain country started to rise.

Reception:

- The British press was not sympathetic, associating Tamils with the LTTE (Tamil Tigers), a group responsible for significant violence in Sri Lanka.

- A protest in Heathrow following the rejection of 64 Tamils' asylum applications of gained significant press coverage. 58 of these asylum seekers were sent back to Sri Lanka despite claims that they would be killed if they went back. The airline they arrived to the UK on was fined.
- Those who had their applications granted found their ability to work was significantly restricted until their case had been processed. The long wait, often years, made constructing a new life and proper integration into the wider population difficult. South London saw significant communities of Tamil refugees settle there.

1988

Kurdish Refugees

Numbers:

- 40,000-50,000

Context:

- State discrimination policies, active persecution, and in some cases attempted genocide against Kurds in Iraq, Turkey and Iran led many individuals to seek refuge in Western Europe.
- Many Western states were concerned about NATO bases in Turkey, meaning they were reluctant to condemn the Turkish government and intervene.
- The situation escalated in 1991 following the Gulf War, when Kurds fleeing Iraq were stopped at the Turkish border and not allowed entry. This meant that thousands of Kurds were stranded in the snowy mountain borderlands between Turkey and Iraq.

Reception:

- As with the Tamil refugees, visa restrictions were placed on Turkey after applications rose.
- Most Kurdish refugees who arrived in the UK had already spent a considerable amount of time in Greek refugee camps, many not knowing what country they would be sent to.
- The UK worked closely with the UNHCR in the conflict area to establish safe zones and facilitate the return of stranded Kurdish refugees to Iraq.
- Those who did arrive in the UK reported a lack of acceptance, meaning community centres and connections with other refugees was their main source of support. Kurdish communities grew in North London in response to this.

1992

Bosnian Refugees

Numbers:

- 1,300

Context:

- Ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina led to widespread displacement, with 4.4 million displaced by 1995.
- The UK lent aircraft to the UNHCR between 1992 and 1996 to assist in the airlift of food, medicine and goods to the people of Sarajevo and evacuate at-risk citizens.

Reception:

- Unwilling to accept large numbers of refugees, the UK stated it would only accept 1,300 and imposed strict visa requirements to ensure refugees were 'genuine'.
- There was an attempt to frame Bosnian, as well as other refugees of this period, as 'economic migrants' to avoid international responsibilities towards asylum seekers.
- Refugee intake at this time was often considered temporary; there was an intention to return individuals to their home countries once it was considered safe to do so.

1995-1999

Kosovan Refugees

Numbers:

- 4,000

Context:

- Kosovo Albanians lived in an apartheid-like situation in Serbia where they were denied access to jobs, basic services, and human rights.
- As a result, 350,000 Kosovo Albanians sought refuge in other nations, many fleeing to Macedonia.
- In 1998, Serbia intensified operations against Kosovo Albanians, with 175,000 becoming internally displaced by September of that year.
- Unable to handle the large number of refugees coming into the country, Macedonia appealed to the UN for a humanitarian evacuation programme. The UNHCR coordinated with several nations under a 'burden-sharing agreement'.

Reception:

- Wanting to stagger the intake of refugees, the Home Office agreed to welcome 1000 refugees a week.
- As in previous cases, the government operated a dispersal policy: 2,400 refugees were sent to north-west England away from the south-east, which was considered 'full'.
- Refugees were given twelve months leave to remain in the UK initially, in which time they could access employment and social assistance. However, once their homeland was deemed to no longer be at risk, they were expected to return.
- The Refugee Council and local authorities were charged with providing housing for Kosovan refugees.

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