



Refugee History:
The 1930s Crisis and Today

About:

Refugee History hosts a broad and multi-disciplinary experts directory. Contributors to our blog are members of our directory or guest experts, meaning that all our content is driven by evidence, expertise, and experience, rather than emotion or opinion.

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1. Executive summary

It is never possible to directly draw lessons for the present from the past – each period is unique and offers its own challenges, opportunities, and ways of thinking about the problems society faces. However, history can helpfully offer up examples for consideration, allowing us to look differently at present events, and point to potential policy solutions.

Britain's political and social engagement with issues of migration and refugees is approaching a critical juncture as it seeks to redefine itself outside of the European Union. Drawing on papers held in the National Archives at Kew and research conducted by the University of East Anglia, this occasional paper suggests lessons from the past offer insight to the challenges of today. Four case studies point to four parallels between Britain's responses to the plight of vulnerable people fleeing discrimination, violence, and insecurity in the 1930s and today. Finding solutions to the issues raised by human displacement, forced migration and refugee movement is not easy. This paper argues that an evidence-based conversation that draws on historical expertise, research and experience will enhance current efforts to address today's global challenges.

The need for global leadership toward the protection of civilians from mass atrocities is urgent. This paper offers a way forward.

2. Questions for today

Since the First World War each decade has seen significant movements of refugees – people fleeing civil war, mass atrocities, political repression and civil breakdown. The UN’s refugee agency UNHCR reported in 2016 that the number of displaced people – 65.3 million— was the highest ever recorded. At one out of every 113 people in the world it surpassed even post-World War II numbers. The majority of these were, and still are, hosted by neighbouring countries: Turkey, with 2.9 million refugees hosts the largest number; while Lebanon, where one in six people are refugees, has the highest per capita population of refugees.¹

Although each new cohort of refugees is commonly treated as exceptional, refugees have become a fact of life in the modern world. Despite refugees’ highly visible presence today, their place in the world is contested. The 1951 Refugee Convention gave those fleeing persecution the right to refuge, but did not spell out who must provide that refuge. Who is responsible for refugees after they have left their country of origin? Does Europe, or Britain, have any responsibility for people fleeing violence, environmental collapse and economic chaos in the Middle East or Africa?

The vote for Brexit began a process of Britain withdrawing from the European Union. But, does this 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?

How the British government responds to crises overseas matters. It shapes British society, influences international partners, and gives it credibility on the world stage. 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?

The idea that Britain is seen by migrants as a ‘soft touch’ because of its welfare system has become pervasive in popular imagination and political debate. In Britain, public perceptions of immigration are already highly inaccurate, with the majority believing the immigrant population in the UK to be double its actual level.² Rising anti-Muslim rhetoric linked to anti-refugee and anti-immigration sentiment effects domestic social cohesion as well as Britain’s international identity. At the same time Britain’s much-admired and thriving civil society supports a diverse range of third sector organisations and individual volunteers working with refugees and asylum seekers, including the expanding City of Sanctuary movement. This indicates 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?

The new Government has promised to ‘reform current asylum procedures’. Believing that ‘those able to reach the UK and seek asylum are less vulnerable than those who remain in regions of risk’, the Conservative 2017 manifesto pledged to ‘prioritise those who seek asylum from overseas rather than those who have reached the UK’. At the same time it positioned itself as ‘the only party that commit to reducing the country’s refugee intake’.

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 raising the drawbridge?

Can we usefully look to history to help us answer these questions?

3. Explaining the 1930s

As today, 1930s Britain found itself in a rapidly changing world, as it saw its imperial influence decline, the rise of new, and totalitarian, powers, and as it struggled to deal with the effects of a devastating global depression. The balance of power in Europe and on the global stage saw a shift away from the internationalism of the 1920s – embodied in the formation of the League of Nations - to more inward-looking priorities driven by national and identity politics.

The League of Nations had been formed in 1920 as a result of the cataclysm of the First World War. As well as being tasked with protecting minority populations living within the newly independent states of Central and Eastern Europe, the League constructed the first internationally recognised system for the protection of certain refugees. Through its 'Nansen' passport for stateless refugees, and by vesting in its High Commissioner for Refugees the authority to perform certain consular functions on their behalf, the League created the bones of a structure which would allow the stateless to remain citizens of the modern world.

But if there had been any optimism surrounding the creation of the League, and any commitment to it as the vehicle for solving international issues, this had dissolved by the mid-1930s. By then the League's effectiveness had been fatally undermined by a toxic combination of the after-effects of the Great Depression, deep divisions over how to respond to the twin challenges of communism and fascism, and the ongoing insistence of the major powers, including Britain, to put their own national interests first.

Consequently, by 1938, when it was perfectly clear that tens of thousands of people, mainly, but not exclusively, Jews, were on the move, desperate to escape Nazi-controlled Europe, the League was unable to act [*Case Study 1*]. Individual countries kept their visa regimes largely intact, insisting on proper documentation for all incoming migrants, including escapees from Nazism. For Britain this meant that refugees had to prove that they would not become a charge on the public purse, and that they weren't

suffering from a long list of diseases and infections, or 'mental deficiencies' [*Case Study 2*]. Exemptions were available for those able to find a sponsor, women willing to act as domestic servants, and, of course, for the famous Kindertransport children.

Despite the popular post-war rhetoric which combined Britain's tradition of welcoming refugees with a narrative that the second world war had been fought to protect the Jews, contemporaries saw things rather differently. In the 1930s, the UK's duty was to its citizens, not strangers. As with today's refugees, Jews fleeing Nazi Germany had to fulfil stringent and inflexible bureaucratic requirements to be granted entry [*Case Study 3*]. In the face of active government hostility and antisemitism the work of voluntary organisations and individuals providing financial and social support and a network of welcome for refugees is striking [*Case Study 4*].

There are an estimated 500,000 to 600,000 family and individual case files in the archives of Britain's mainly Jewish organisations, documenting efforts to secure visas and refuge for refugees in the United Kingdom before the outbreak of the war. Of these, an estimated 80,000 were successful, but often only on the understanding that they would emigrate as soon as possible to a third country. For those granted entry but unable to leave due to the outbreak of war, many were plunged into years of uncertainty: with no permanent legal status in Britain, they struggled to rebuild their lives. Even so, these were the fortunate ones: as Viscount Samuel put it, in a House of Lords debate in 1945, 'out of that vast reservoir of misery and murder, only a tiny trickle of escape was provided'.⁴

1. UNHCR, Global Trends Report, 2016, www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016
2. IPSOS/MORI poll, Aug 2014, www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/perceptions-are-not-reality-things-world-gets-wrong
3. www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-kate-ferguson/general-election-manifestos_b_16965006.html / Protecting populations from identity-based violence: A review of the 2017 general election manifestos, Protection Approaches, May 2017
4. House of Lords, 6 Dec. 1945.

4. Case study one:

Failures of internationalism and multilateralism

In the 1930s a European state's authority to control its own borders, and a state's treatment of its population within those borders, was sacrosanct. This principle of state sovereignty meant the international community was unable to challenge the treatment of people under Nazi government. It also meant that there were no international mechanisms requiring Western powers to open their borders to refugees once they had left Germany. Consequently, the League of Nations' proposal for a burden-sharing approach to the refugee crisis in 1936 - arguing 'all members of the international community have the duty to assist those states most heavily burdened by refugees' - fell on deaf ears.⁵ Today too, the absence of strong international institutions able to push for global resettlement solutions heightens the danger for displaced people unable to find refuge, and leads to a concentration of refugees in places of first resort.

In the post war years it was clear that mistakes had been made. New institutions and mechanisms were created that would provide global leadership. The United Nations, its refugee agency UNCHR, and the 1951 Refugee Convention, were all part of a collective effort to create a global rules-based system that could avert future refugee catastrophe. Today the future of these institutions and Britain's role on the global stage are being redefined. The current rate at which solutions are being found for refugees and internally displaced people has been on a falling trend since the end of the Cold War, leaving a growing number in limbo.⁶

Then: The Évian Conference, France, 1938

The Évian Conference, called by President Roosevelt and held in July 1938, was conspicuous for its failure to protect refugees from Nazism. Motivated by a desire to divert refugees away from the United States, the conference, attended by thirty-three countries, aimed to persuade more nations to ease their entry restrictions for German and Austrian Jews.

As today, the issue was not a lack of information about the scale of the refugee exodus – what the international community lacked was the political will to either individually or collectively tackle the challenge of offering safety to those persecuted in Germany and Austria. Speaking for the British, Lord Winterton, characterised the refugee crisis as 'mainly a humanitarian one', thus refusing to acknowledge the direct political cause of the crisis – the Nazi's explicit and increasing persecution of its Jewish population and of its political opponents.

For His Majesty's Government... the United Kingdom is not a country of immigration. It is highly industrialised, fully populated and is still faced with the problem of unemployment. For economic and social reasons, the traditional policy of granting asylum can only be applied within narrow limits.

- Lord Winterton, Évian Conference speech, 6 Jul 1938.

It was not only the United Kingdom which expressed a reluctance to take more refugees. Country after country set out both their sympathy for the plight of the refugees, and the impossibility of a solution being their particular responsibility. French delegates, emphasising their country's long tradition of asylum, argued they had now reached 'the extreme point of saturation as regards admission of refugees'. The smaller European countries - Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland - all stressed how they sympathised with the refugees, but their size precluded taking in refugees. The Australian delegate said they were only interested in British immigration, bluntly stating that the country 'did not have a racial problem and did not want to import one'. Only the Dominican Republic, keen to find settlers for its under-populated hinterland, offered to substantially change its immigration policy and take up to 100,000 refugees.

Rather than promoting any state-led solution, it was argued that refugees' best hopes continued to lie with the private refugee organisations. At Évian, Britain urged the conference to help finance private emigration and settlement schemes. There was no acknowledgment either that the scale of refugee movement was so large private initiatives were now woefully inadequate, nor that the crisis could only be resolved if each state rose above its individual national interests and engaged in concerted multi-state action.

Today: The United Nations World Humanitarian Summit, Istanbul, 2016

In May 2016, the United Nations World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) was held in Istanbul, organised by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The Summit convened 9000 participants from 173 countries, including 55 Heads of State and Government, hundreds of private sector representatives, and thousands of people from civil society and nongovernmental organisations. Its goal was to fundamentally reform humanitarian aid and improve international responses to global crises.⁷

Set against rising figures of mass displacement and in the midst of increased irregular migration across the Mediterranean, it was hoped that the Summit would bring representatives to an agreement on how best to uphold responsibilities towards refugees.

The WHS, rather than being state-led, was a multi-stakeholder driven process. This brought advantages and disadvantages. Despite the energy brought by so many participants with grassroots experiences, even before the summit began, experts were sceptical. It was argued that the blueprint for a one-off global meeting ignored the recent successes made through multilateral state-led decision-making, such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals, both of which came after a series of multiyear negotiations.⁸ On the eve of its opening, International NGO Médecins Sans Frontières publicly withdrew, disappointed that the summit neglected 'to reinforce the obligations of states to uphold and implement the humanitarian and refugee laws which they have signed up to'.

Nevertheless, important milestones were met. Human displacement was acknowledged to be a development issue as well as a humanitarian one.⁹ At the WHS, the often ignored or ambiguous challenge of internal displacement was firmly on the agenda. Perhaps the most tangible outcome was the 'Grand Bargain'; a deal by which aid providers such as UN bodies, IOM, national and international NGOs and the Red Cross, agreed to increase their efficiency in return for provision of less ring-fenced and more multi-year financing.¹⁰

But despite these normative and financial steps, states failed to buy in to the Summit's goals and once again chose to place the onus of responsibility - and implementation of activities - upon non-governmental aid providers. Globally, refugee policy would remain reactive and driven by national interests.

5. League of Nations Committee on International Assistance to Refugees, Report, 3 Jan 1936.
6. www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html
7. www.agendaforhumanity.org/summit?_redirect_whsres
8. John Norris, The U.N.'s World Humanitarian Summit Is a Total Mess, Foreign Policy, 19 May 2016 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/19/the-u-n-s-world-humanitarian-summit-is-a-total-mess/>
9. Elizabeth Ferris, Policy brief: In Search of Commitments: The 2016 Summits, The Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for Refugee Law, Nov 2016 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Policy_Brief_3_A4_final.pdf

5. Case study two:

Children and vulnerable refugees

Mass atrocities, persecution and war affect everyone in the society in which they occur. But they are particularly damaging for those with the least personal, social, and financial resources. In the 1930s a focus on due process – notably the stipulation that ‘aliens’ were not to become a charge on the public purse – prevented tens of thousands of Jews lacking funds or a sponsor from finding safety in Britain. The most vulnerable – those without good social connections, the poor, those with disabilities and the old – were the least likely to be able to comply with standard visa requirements. Those who did manage to enter were likely to be seen as a potential drain of public resources and blamed for fuelling antisemitism.

Today UK refugee intake policy is shaped by the belief that those able to reach Europe and the UK to seek asylum are less vulnerable than those who remain in regions of risk. Refugees are still frequently seen as a burden, while growing Islamophobia reinforces anti-refugee prejudices.

Then: Child FP, 1939

In January 1939 the case of a Polish Jewish child with cerebral palsy - known simply as FP - landed on the desk of the Home Office’s medical inspector. There was trouble. This child, despite being a ‘physical defective who [would] never be able to support himself’, had been granted an entry visa to Britain. Throughout the interwar period non-British subjects – ‘aliens’ – coming to Britain had to prove that they could support themselves and would not, in the language of the day, become a charge on the public purse. Like so many refugees, those who fled Nazi-controlled Germany and Austria were limited by their government over how much of their personal wealth they could take out of the country. As a result they were dependent on finding an individual or organisation to sponsor them, acting as a guarantor who would cover all their costs.

In this case particular annoyance was directed towards these organisations, which the Home

Office had been using to vet potential refugees, and whose job it had become ‘to see that undesirables [were] not brought into the country’. While the civil servant dealing with the case argued for clemency in this instance, the organisation which had arranged the visa was to be reprimanded, and told they had ‘let down the Home Office in this instance’.

What does this small case tell us about Britain on the eve of war? A war which, if we are to believe many popular histories and political re-tellings, was fought to protect the values of liberal democracy, tolerance and humanitarianism. In fact, historians have comprehensively documented how, far from opening their borders to Jews and others under threat by the Nazi regime, the UK were reluctant to play host to populations fleeing persecution. FP, of course, as a Jewish, severely disabled and Polish child would, under the Nazi regime, have multiple reasons to fear for his life and to seek refuge.

Underlying British politicians’ and civil servants’ insistence on proper documentation and procedure, was an assumption that to give refuge to Jews would only serve to heighten antisemitism and increase diplomatic tensions with Germany. In common with today’s arguments over Islamophobia, this was often discussed as a means of protecting the existing Jewish population from further intolerance. Similar arguments were made about access to welfare support:

If public funds are used for the maintenance of these refugees, such a change of policy will give great strength to such anti-alien and anti-Jewish feeling as may be latent in this country.

- Refugees in the United Kingdom: Report by the Committee on the Refugee Problem¹¹

Today: Nujeen Mustafa, 2015

In 2015, teenager Nujeen Mustafa made headlines during her epic 3,500-mile journey to

headlines during her epic 3,500-mile journey to escape Daesh in her wheelchair, which included a perilous passage across the Mediterranean.¹² Nujeen now lives in Germany where she has been granted citizenship.¹³

Nujeen's story stands in contrast to many other young and vulnerable refugees seeking sanctuary in Europe. Early in 2017 the UK Government stopped considering resettlement applications from people with disabilities - including child refugees - fleeing war in Syria and other countries, because it claimed the UK could not cope with their needs.

The refugees who benefit from the UK's resettlement programmes are by definition the most vulnerable, and refugees with disabilities will often have specific needs... the Refugee Council knows that communities up and down the country are keen to help welcome refugees

- Dr Lisa Doyle, head of advocacy at the Refugee Council¹⁴

Under international law every child has the right to survival, protection and education, and to have their voice heard. Yet today there are now more child refugees than at any point since the Second World War; many of these children make the perilous journeys in search of safety alone. There have been accounts of unaccompanied child refugees in Greece being forced to sell their bodies in order to pay smugglers to secure their passage to Europe.

Despite such growing evidence documenting human rights violations of unaccompanied child refugees, the UK Government partially suspended its scheme to give sanctuary to the most vulnerable victims of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, while also suspending the so-called Dubs Amendment. The Dubs Amendment to the Immigration Act 2016, initiated by Lord Alf Dubs - himself a child refugee from Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia - was designed to enable a number of unaccompanied children to come to live safely in the United Kingdom. It was announced early in 2017 that the scheme was being terminated. Of the 3,000 unaccompanied children anticipated to arrive under the scheme, only 200 were settled, with a concession from government to extend the number to 350 before

closing the programme. The Government argued that councils were unable to find homes for more children despite commitments from individual councils and voluntary organisations to the contrary.

11. TNA: CAB/67/3/26, 'Refugees in the United Kingdom: Report by the Committee on the Refugee Problem', 9 Dec 1939, 5. An 'alien' was the legal term for any non-British subject.
12. www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/19/nujeen-mustafa-syria-isis-germany
13. www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2017/5/58dd189f4/fresh-hope-germany-syrian-girl-fled-home-wheelchair.html.
14. www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/disabled-child-refugees-uk-suspend-entry-home-office-resettlement-unhcr-united-nations-lord-dubs-a7571451.html

6. Case study three:

The turning back of the St Louis ship and boats in the Mediterranean

The Conservative's party manifesto pledged to 'prioritise those who seek asylum from overseas rather than those who have reached the UK'. This stems from a belief that those able to reach the UK and claim asylum are less vulnerable than those who remain in regions of risk. The accusation that people fleeing persecution, who have taken initiative to reach a country of safety, are not 'real refugees' was something faced by Jewish refugees in the 1930s. Just as today, arguments that they were undesirable 'queue-jumpers', and that accepting them would open the 'floodgates' to accepting thousands more, were used by civil servants and politicians to deny them entry to Britain.

Then: the *St Louis* ship, 1939

In June 1939 the German transatlantic liner *St Louis* was prevented from docking in Havana, Cuba. The 907, mainly German Jewish, passengers had had valid entry visas for the country when they embarked in Hamburg. But the Cuban government, fearing an influx of refugees as other countries closed their borders, asserted that the incoming refugees 'intended to evade the laws of Cuba', and revoked their visas while they were at sea. On being barred from Cuba the ship tried to find port in the United States, and having been refused leave to land, turned back towards Europe. While crossing the Atlantic the passenger committee sent a telegram appeal to the British Prime Minister asking for refuge in Britain. Anxious that they should be accepted, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee telegraphed to confirm it would make the 'unusual and extraordinary commitment' to cover all the refugees' costs, should they be allowed entry to Britain.

But such feelings of urgency were not shared by Foreign Office and Home Office civil servants, whose eyes were not on humanitarian rescue, but rather on the importance of following procedure and appearing firm in the face of pressure: 'if the German government gets away with this shipload of refugees by creating an

international scandal it is extremely likely that they will continue the practice'. Behind the scenes civil servants argued strongly for the *St Louis* to be returned to Hamburg. Only then could each individual case 'be investigated by the voluntary organisations in accordance with their usual practice'. And only after normal procedures had been followed, would the Home Office be willing to grant a visa 'in the usual way'. And it was imperative that the *St Louis* was prevented from docking in Britain:

Although we have been informed that the majority of the passengers will eventually enter the United States, we have no confirmation of this statement and it is probable that a proportion of the passengers are undesirable. It would be easier to reject such individuals while they were on German soil than to refuse them admission to this country and enforce their return to Germany.

- Home Office minute on fate of refugee passengers on the *St Louis*, 12 Jun 1939.

Indeed, civil servants were preoccupied by two concerns. Firstly, that accepting these refugees would open the floodgates to unending boatloads of Jews: one Foreign Office official declared that this 'ruse, once practiced and proved successful would be repeated *ad infinitum*'. The second was one the character of the refugees themselves: were they 'a desirable or undesirable class'? Suggesting that it was more likely to be the latter, the official thought the *St Louis* might be 'something in the nature of a general jail delivery at the instance of the Gestapo'. If Britain's criteria for accepting refugees was not humanitarian need, but rather whether they would benefit or undermine British society, then this was important.¹⁵

Intense international diplomatic effort resulted in the *St Louis* being allowed to dock in Antwerp and the refugees divided between four European countries. Belgium took 214, the Netherlands 181, France 224 and Great Britain 287. By the end of the war over a quarter of the *St Louis*

passengers who remained in mainland Europe had been killed by the Nazis in Auschwitz and Sobibór; the rest died in internment camps, in hiding or while attempting to evade the Nazis.¹⁶

Today: boats in the Mediterranean

Just as in the late 1930s, irregular migration has become a contentious issue across the European continent. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) recorded 7,495 refugee and migrant deaths worldwide in 2016, almost a third higher than in 2015, and equivalent to twenty people a day. The vast majority of these died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea.¹⁷ Governments fear that in providing assistance to the boats seeking to reach Europe they will only encourage further migration. Thus in autumn 2014 it was quietly announced that the UK would no longer contribute to European rescue efforts in the Mediterranean despite the fact that the operations were able to save the lives of a thousand migrants and refugees from doomed vessels in a single day. Because many of these drownings occur in international waters responsibilities to protect these vulnerable people has fallen to non-governmental aid providers and volunteers.

While having little effect to deter people desperate to reach Europe, state efforts to dissuade refugees from leaving conflict-affected regions has further fed anti-refugee and anti-immigration rhetoric across Europe. In summer 2017 it was reported that British and European far-right, anti-Islam 'Identitarians' were crowdfunding to pay for vessels to turn the boats back.¹⁸

we don't need a campaign from Save the Children to encourage more migrants to take the journey. What we need are gunships sending these boats back to their own country. You want to make a better life for yourself? Then you had better get creative in Northern Africa. Britain is not El Dorado. We are not Elysium. Some of our towns are festering sores, plagued by swarms of migrants and asylum seekers, shelling out benefits like Monopoly money. Make no mistake, these migrants are like cockroaches.

- Kate Hopkins, *The Sun*, 17th April 2015

15. The National Archives, Kew, FCO371/24101/9189, minute of conference held at Home Office, 12 Jun 1939.

16. Sarah Ogilvie and Scott Miller, *Refuge Denied: The St. Louis Passengers and the Holocaust* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006, 174-5.

17. www.iom.int/news/world-fatalities-migrants-refugees-approach-7500-2016-three-year-total-tops-18501

18. www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/03/far-right-raises-50000-target-refugee-rescue-boats-med

7. Case study four:

The role of voluntary organisations

Approximately 80,000 refugees fleeing Nazi persecution were granted entry to Britain, the majority of these only gained entry because they were sponsored by one of the voluntary refugee organisations or private individuals. These organisations didn't simply act as the vital link in the chain to securing a precious visa. As with today, it was these organisations which helped refugees navigate British culture and everyday life, prompting personal, and sometime life-long, connections across national and faith boundaries, increasing understanding of difference.

Then: Worthing Refugee Committee

Everyone is aware of the desperate situation of many people in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere. They are being systematically excluded from the chance of a decent existence and even personal security. It is estimated that there are nearly three million people who have no future whatever and, for many, nothing but the concentration camp or labour under convict conditions awaits them unless they can leave their present country very soon. Although everybody is aware of the terrible problem, and many feel they would like to help in some way, few people know how they can best be of service

- 'The Problem of the Refugees: How Worthing Can Help', Worthing Refugee Committee¹⁹

So opened Worthing Refugee Committee's first fundraising pamphlet. It went on to tell how its members, under the leadership of the town's mayor, had 'already been able to rescue two elderly people who were in grave danger abroad'. In a world seemingly erupting into chaos, and where individuals could all too easily feel overwhelmed by the tide of events facing them, the Committee was evidence of how small groups of committed individuals could make a difference.

They were not blind to the challenges facing them, either from their own government, or from the wider population. Their pamphlet outlined

the existing restrictions on refugees, which demanded that they should never receive state funds yet barred them from work other than domestic employment, except where the Home Office was 'satisfied' that there was 'no displacement of British labour'. Stressing again and again the crudeness of the equation facing them – that the number of refugees they could save 'DEPENDS ENTIRELY UPON THE AMOUNT OF MONEY SUBSCRIBED' - they asked the people of Worthing:

'Can you yourself give a financial guarantee for one or more refugees?'

'Can you offer hospitality to a TRANSMIGRANT for two or three months, or a year?'

'Can you take a child into your home for a time?'

'Can you help someone over 60?'

'Can you employ a refugee domestic servant or a married couple?'

'Can you use your influence with any school to offer free education?'

'Can you help with suitable clothing?'

Worthing was not a noticeably political town, certainly not known for trade union radicalism or agitation. But this simple appeal to common humanity offered a way for ordinary people to express their solidarity with strangers in distress.

Their actions were not always popular. One Committee member woke one morning to find 'Jews Get Out', and 'Britons Before Aliens' tarred on their house.²⁰ Yet over the following years members of Worthing's Committee collected clothing, food parcels and financial donations, pooled their ration coupons, supported visa applications, and spoke up publicly about the need for international solidarity. They invited the refugees of the town for tea, took them to the cinema and on outings. They wrote to those who had come to Worthing only to be interned as enemy aliens after 1940, sending them messages of support, food parcels and continuing to look after family members. They raised enough money to buy and furnish a house for refugees in Worthing for those who could not be placed with

a family. And after the war the Committee went on to 'twin' with Displaced Persons' camps in Germany and Austria, sending parcels and personal correspondence to individuals, as well as sponsoring others to come to Britain.

The work of refugee committees across Britain was recognised by the government in 1940, when it gave them a grant to cover their core outgoings. While government financial aid was vital, Worthing Refugee Committee, and countless similar organisations across the country offered something extra. Their everyday, and often mundane, work with the refugees gave a human face to British society, offering individual refugees the friendship, respect and dignity which had all too often been denied them.

Today: public and voluntary initiatives

In the autumn of 2015 the image of a rescue worker carrying the body of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi - who along with his five-year-old brother Galip and their mother, Rehan, was drowned in the family's attempt to escape their embattled home city of Kobani - encapsulated for many the horrendous choices facing those fleeing conflict. As European governments prevaricated, ordinary people began responding with compassion.

Austria, not traditionally known for its open-hearted welcome of foreigners, saw a pro-migrant march attracting 20,000 people. Germany's Flüchtlinge Willkommen (Refugees Welcome) began a scheme to match householders with recently arrived refugees, to prevent them from being ghettoised in overcrowded and isolated hostels and camps. At the end of August, football supporters in a number of stadiums across Germany unfurled banners declaring 'Refugees Welcome'. In Denmark citizens ferried refugees trying to reach Sweden in their cars or privately hired coaches, while fifteen thousand Icelanders petitioned their government to increase its refugee quota.

Britain too responded with a groundswell of civil society and individual initiatives. Tens of thousands took to the streets, still others worked to make welcome refugees in their towns and homes across the UK. Witney Refugee Action, working with Oxford-based Asylum Welcome worked to find homes on the private market to

rent and coordinated donations to help furnish those homes and welcome the families as warmly as possible. Their 'adopt-a-room' scheme saw local faith-based and other groups pledging items to furnish each room, which often extended into putting together packs of age-appropriate books to teach English for each child, welcome packs of food and toiletries, vouchers for trips out and hands-on help with everyday tasks. Local and ad hoc responses built on established initiatives, such as the City of Sanctuary movement which is active in ninety towns and cities across the UK. Acting as an umbrella, it now coordinates the work of around 320 different local authority and civil society organisations.²¹

Crucially, grassroots initiatives proved to be as transformative for those involved as for those they aimed to help. As one volunteer put it, 'My father kindly helped a Syrian family put up their shed, which was not only of benefit to them but also challenged, in a positive way, his somewhat *Daily Mail* shaped perceptions of what it means to be a refugee'.²²

Finally, perhaps the most explicit parallel between the 1930s and today was the launch, in July 2016, of the government's community refugee sponsorship scheme. This stands both as a symbol of the commitment of voluntary groups to actively enable refugees to come to Britain, and the reluctance of the government to commit resources to their reception and resettlement. Civil society groups, in order to be accepted under the scheme, need to prove an extensive and long-term commitment to each family they sponsor. Groups are expected to provide their housing, as well as 'helping them to integrate into life in the UK, access medical and social services, arranging English language tuition and supporting them towards employment and self-sufficiency'. The red tape surrounding the scheme was such that six months after its launch, only two families had been settled under it.

19. West Sussex Record Office, Chichester: ADD MSS 27,852, Worthing Refugee Committee pamphlet, 'The problem of the refugees: How Worthing Can Help', 1939.

20. Dorothy Strange, *Despatches from the Home Front: The War Diaries of Dorothy Strange*, 26 May 1939. (Monarch Publications, 1986).

21. <https://cityofsanctuary.org/2017/05/16/city-of-sanctuary-conference-and-agm-2017/>

22. www.oxfam.org.uk/blogs/2016/12/coming-together-to-welcome-refugees-in-witney

8. Leaving the 1930s behind

At the end of the Second World War the Allies demonstrated that they had learned from recent history. Mindful of the failures at the end of the First World War, the Marshall Plan ensured a proactive approach to reconstruction and did much to lay the foundations of post-war economic stability. The formation of the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to manage the 11 million people who were displaced across Europe in the summer of 1945 contained the spread of infectious diseases, and instigated a system to house and eventually resettle the majority of displaced persons. Just as importantly, commitment to multilateralism was revived. The non-intervention of the international community in the fate of Jewish and other refugees in the 1930s was accepted to have been a mistake. It was acknowledged that refugees needed international protection and the new United Nations system set out to establish a legal and normative framework to codify international responsibilities towards providing sanctuary:

- The 1951 Refugee Convention is the key legal document informing the treatment of refugees globally and is ratified by 145 states. It defines the term 'refugee' and outlines the rights of the displaced, as well as the legal obligations of states to protect them.
- UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, serves as the 'guardian' of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. According to the legislation, States are expected to cooperate with it in ensuring that the rights of refugees are respected and protected

The power of these new tools was demonstrated in 1956, when the UNHCR successfully coordinated the resettlement of 200,000 Hungarians across thirty-seven countries within a matter of months. Similarly in 1979-80, it was the UNHCR which managed the resettlement of 450,000 Vietnamese refugees. Its 1979 Geneva Conference more than doubled the number of international promises to resettle refugees from 125,000 to 260,000. At the same time mechanisms were put in place to ensure that these pledges translated into action, and, crucially, via the Orderly Departure Programme,

to reduce the numbers of people leaving Vietnam in dangerous conditions. The success of these collective efforts stemmed from a combination of strong international leadership and a significant political and public will from across a number of countries to assist the vulnerable populations, backed up with financial resources.

Britain must bear some of the blame for the failures of the 1930s, but can take some credit for establishing the UN. If its foundational involvement in the UN can be thought to show Britain at its best - working to promote international democracy and humanitarian values - its wilful undermining of the League of Nations' influence, and its refusal to be moved by the genuine humanitarian crisis provoked by Nazi's persecution of the Jews, shows Britain's less attractive face.

Britain today is at a similar crossroads. It is leading the way in its provision of humanitarian aid to the refugee and displaced communities in Syria and its neighbours, yet ended funding in 2015 for rescue ships in the Mediterranean and terminated a limited mechanism to protect 3,000 unaccompanied children in Europe. During the next parliament, the UK will redefine its policy towards mass displacement as the country prepares to withdraw from the European Union.

- **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 through throwing the full weight of its influence behind the UNHCR.
- **We remind** the UK Government and its EU partners that how they 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.

- 1933** Election of National Socialist party in Germany prompts the first refugees, beginning what became a mass exit of Jews and dissidents.
- 1933-45** Britain takes c.90,000 refugees from Nazism, including 10,000 Kindertransport children, or c.10% of those who tried to gain entry.
- 1938** Évian Conference produces no international solution to the European refugee crisis.
- 1939** *St Louis* ship turned back from Cuba, USA and UK.
- 1942** United Nations founded
- 1948** Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Convention to Prevent and Punish Genocide; National Assistance Act (UK) gives all UK residents, including refugees, rights to welfare support.
- 1951** UN Refugee Convention defines the term ‘refugee’ and outlines the rights of the displaced, as well as the legal obligations of states to protect them. Includes rights to the same welfare rights as a state’s citizens. UNHCR formed to act as the Convention’s ‘guardian’.
- 1956** Hungarian refugee crisis prompted by USSR invasion. UNHCR leads global resettlement of 200,000 refugees; UK grants entry of 21,000 over a four month period.
- 1967** Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees extends refugee status definition beyond Europe.
- 1972 –3** 28,000 UK Passport holding Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin come to Britain and resettled under the Home Office-led Ugandan Resettlement Board.
- 1973** UK joins European Community
- 1979-83** Vietnamese ‘boat people’ crisis leads to UNHCR organised resettlement programme of 400,000 refugees. UK accepts 19,000 over a four year period, and later, family reunification applicants are granted entry under the UNHCR’s Orderly Departure Programme.
- 1989-91** End of the Cold War, breakup of the USSR and outbreak of war in Yugoslavia.
- 1993** UK government agrees to accept 1000 Bosnian refugees and their families under a formal resettlement programme. They form a tiny minority of the 14,000 Bosnian asylum applications.
- 1996** Asylum and Immigration Act (UK)
- 1997** Dublin Regulation came into effect, requiring asylum claims to be lodged and processed in the country where the applicant first reached the EU.
- 2002** Nationality, Immigration & Asylum Act (UK)
- 2004** Gateway Protection Programme set up (UK)
- 2005** Responsibility to Protect universally endorsed by UNGA
- 2012** Immigration Act “updated” (UK)
- 2015** ‘Refugee crisis’ prompts UK government to promise to take 20,000 Syrian refugees under its Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme
- 2016** Immigration Act includes ‘Dubs Amendment’ to allow entry to unaccompanied child refugees; UK votes to leave the EU
- 2017** Dubs Amendment abandoned by UK government

