

Lesson 1 - How did the British government react to refugees and Holocaust survivors in the 1930s and 1940s?

British Attitudes and Actions towards Refugees and Holocaust Survivors

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives:

- To create a shared environment of open inquiry
- To enable students to share their knowledge and preconceptions of the Second World War, the Holocaust and their attitudes to refugees and Holocaust survivors
- To encourage students to analyse and synthesise a range of information and grapple with the complexity of British refugee policy, war, and the demands of displacement on refugees and governments
- To challenge simplistic judgements and narratives

Introduction

Refugees are a vulnerable population who have often experienced war, genocide and displacement within one or more countries. As a result, they have complex needs that often host societies and receptive nations struggle to meet due to the large economic cost and potential impact on local communities. Before, during, and after the Second World War and the Holocaust, political leaders in the USA, Canada, UK, Australia and other nations were confronted by the fact that hundreds of thousands of people were trying to flee persecution, war and genocide. However, 'refugee' was not a legal category at that time, which meant that governments were not legally obligated to support or protect these groups. As a result, communities and charities actively sought ways to raise money and support for those fleeing Europe for safety in Britain.

This lesson aims to open up discussion around the attitudes towards refugees beyond the conventional 'push and pull' factors of immigration. First, students will explore why nations were reluctant to accept refugees, and then learn about the three key ways that British authorities handled wartime refugees (strict immigration controls with visas, detention of

refugees, and humanitarian evacuations). This lesson then explores the final element, humanitarian evacuations, with a close examination of the 'Kindertransport', which is often portrayed within British culture today as an overwhelmingly positive and redemptive example of British wartime actions towards refugees. However, the Kindertransport is problematised in this lesson by exploring its emotional impact on survivors, so that students are confronted with a more nuanced history about this humanitarian child evacuation. Specifically, an interview with Polish-born Kindertransport survivor, Martin Kapel, recounts his terrifying experience of aerial bombardment at his host family's home in Coventry in 1941; this allows students to consider how even after reaching Britain, Martin was not safe, but for different reasons. Students are also tasked with considering how Britain today commemorates the Kindertransport, and whether a Kindertransport memorial accurately reflects the nuanced impact of that wartime evacuation upon survivors.

This lesson therefore forms a solid foundation for understanding the global context in which refugees, and migration as a concept, was shaped by the devastation of the Second World War and the Holocaust, with particular focus on Britain. The lesson encourages students to grapple with differing views on refugees and migration in Britain, through independent and student-centred teaching and learning to develop their historical understanding. This lesson also allows them to grapple with complexity and generate their own questions in their search for authentic understanding.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 12 and above. It is devised for History classes.

Timings are suggested on the basis of a one hour lesson, and may need adapting based on circumstances.

Prior knowledge is not needed. However, the notion that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore, challenge and resolve misconceptions.

This lesson could be divided. If the students have already been taught about the Holocaust, then teachers could use slides 1-11 as a quick recap, and then begin the lesson about British attitudes and actions to refugees and migrants on slide 12.

Resources:

- Guidance Notes and Lesson plan
- Lesson PowerPoint
- Print Outs PowerPoint

Lesson Plan

Challenging Histories and a shared space for learning (5 minutes)

Before the lesson begins, it is important to set the foundations for the learning process ahead, including being aware of the potential challenges of discussing elements of British history. Explain that British history can be contentious and cause emotional reactions. Exploring the past means we encounter voices, ideas, and interpretations that we may disagree with or even find offensive. It is important to acknowledge this and feel able to express this in an appropriate way. Encourage students to be open to understand different perspectives, even if they may not agree with them.

Acknowledge and explain that how we look at the past depends on where we are in the present. Students might have knowledge, ideas, feelings, experiences, heritage related to a given historical person, context, or event which inform or steer their judgements. To ensure a classroom in which historical study can be open and honest invite students to agree to the following guiding principles for historical learning (Slide 1):

- To be conscious that we each have a unique perspective based on our own circumstances, but that nobody has more or less importance in this class.
- To let the facts inform you and lead your learning, rather than finding facts to support a prior viewpoint.
- Avoid the use terms like 'we' to refer to historical figures, peoples – as historians it is necessary to be impartial so the language used is important.
 - i.e. refer to 'the British' rather than 'we'. This helps to separate ourselves from the study and avoids unintentional othering or subconscious bias.
- Accept that interpretations and feelings about what we study can and will differ. This is ok!

- Discussion should be based on the facts. Use evidence to support your points to avoid making unfair or inaccurate assertions.

It is also important that students show respect and acceptance of one another in the classroom in order for them to feel comfortable sharing thoughts and ideas. To create a space of shared learning in which each member of the class is valued, invite students to agree to the ground rules outlined on Slide 2).

The aim is to encourage openness and create space for students to share their ideas and personal experiences, but without obligation and in an environment that is comfortable, supportive and non-judgemental.

Slide 3 – Lesson Title: British Attitudes and Actions Towards Refugees and Holocaust Survivors

Starter (10 minutes)

Give students 2 minutes to create a definition for both refugee and migrant in pairs (Slide 4). Ask a few students to share their definitions and then reveal the 'official' definitions. Do they match what students thought?

Activity (optional) – this activity is designed to get students to think about experiences that refugees and migrants face, some of these will be unique and others will be shared. Using slide 5 students will consider the question 'what do refugees and migrants experience?'. This activity can either be done as a class activity, individually or in pairs (see print out). Some prompts for this could be:

- Able to bring money
- New language
- New culture
- Being a minority
- Bring possessions

Information recap – WWII and the Holocaust (10 minutes)

The Second World War provided a chaotic and violent context in which the genocide called the Holocaust was made possible. (Note: every genocide in recorded history happened within or during a broader context of warfare). Therefore, it is important to explain the key events and nations involved in the Second World War in order to better explain how the Holocaust

happened and its impact upon refugees. Work through slides 6-11 from the front, allowing students to ask questions as you do.

Slides 6 to 11 are designed to summarise the key points of the Second World War, including how Nazi Germany invaded and occupied territories and bordering nations within western and eastern Europe.

Slide 7 is a map from 1941 to 1942, which demonstrates the significant authority that Germany held in terms of the territories it conquered it ruled and occupied. You may wish to highlight the significant territory that Germany held, and its expansive intentions towards Soviet Russia. It's important to point out to the students that not all nations under German control agreed with German rule. Many complied with Germany authority simply as a way to avoid further confrontation. Other nations, such as southern Vichy France or Norway, created 'puppet governments' which stated they were independent, but ultimately collaborated with Nazi authorities. The reasons for collaboration are complex; some complied and actively worked with Nazi leaders in order to avoid further violence against their civilians, while other leaders believed that siding with Germany could bring financial and trade opportunities to their respective nations. This map depicts the power that Germany held in Europe, which would have been intimidating to many nations, including Britain.

Slide 8 introduces students to start thinking about the civilians of Europe and how they must have felt as tensions rose and Europe headed to war. Ask the students to think about who were Hitler's enemies, this will allow students to consider any previous knowledge they have of this time period. Slide 9 will go through the answers.

Slide 9 offers students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge; before revealing the groups of people targeted by the Nazis, you may offer a small mindmap activity by asking the students to identify targeted groups. This activity will provoke students to consider their own awareness of Holocaust history, and whether what they've seen in films, TV, or read in books or on the internet is 'true'. Slide 10 summarises key details about the Holocaust.

Slide 11 recentres the students' focus back upon the actions that people would have taken in face of such violence. Read the quote by Victor Klemperer then give the students a minute to discuss with a partner. Feedback their ideas. The goal of this discussion is to stimulate students to think about how language becomes important in war, particularly the danger of dehumanising language and how things can build from words to actions.

What did Britain do to help refugees? (25 minutes)

Slides 12 to 22 provide context about how the British government treated migrants and refugees fleeing war in Europe. These slides reveal that the British government struggled with how to best help and assist refugees, particularly as many within Britain were not necessarily receptive to the idea of welcoming foreigners (this is a theme that will be developed and explored within the subsequent lessons).

The activity on slide 12 is designed to get students to think critically about governments' attitudes towards refugees, they may use ideas from the past but also current ideas too. The students need to write down as many ideas as they can to think about why or why not a government may want, or not, to help refugees. This activity can either be done as a class activity or individually/pairs (see print out). Some prompts for this could be:

- Money to sustain them
- Accommodation needs
- The law
- Moral accountability
- During the war more people were required for work

Slide 13 introduces the three key ways that the British government dealt with refugees: strict visa controls (visas) (slide 14 and 15), detention of refugees (slide 16 and 17), and humanitarian evacuations (slide 18 and 19). Print out the note taking sheet on the print out PowerPoint (slide 4) so that as you go through the slides students can make notes on anything they think is important to remember. The goal here is to showcase the ways that authorities grappled with the influx of refugees and migrants, particularly when some leaders were suspicious of refugees' intentions in wartime Britain (especially if they were German, even if they were Jewish), or the economic burden of hosting refugees. These diverse 'methods' of dealing with refugees reveals that the confusion that the British government experienced when dealing with refugees (e.g., by interning some refugees, but welcoming others).

For example, the surveillance and detention of refugees on Slides 16 and 17 briefly explores the treatment that some refugees experienced in Britain. Some students may not have learned about Britain's detention of refugees before; it is important for them to understand that refugees don't always receive a warm welcome or the help they may need.

Slides 18 to 19 introduce the Kindertransport, and the experiences of some of those who came to Britain on the Kindertransport. Slide 18 gives an overview of the scheme. During this, it may be worth asking children to think of refugees today, for example the response to the Ukrainian

refugees. Slide 19 digs deeper into the experiences and poses the question what would students bring with them. During this discussion try to get them to think deeper than just bringing their games console, but prompt them to identify their rationale for bringing their object, including their ascribed meaning behind it.

Slides 20 and 21 introduce Martin Kapel, a Kindertransportee. Hand out Martin mind-mao activity (slide 5 on Print Out PowerPoint). Discuss the quote on slide 20 – how would the children feel being sent somewhere they couldn't communicate? On slide 21 there is a short video to watch (link here for 2m51s to 4m52: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/articles/zkctvk7>, also hyperlinked on slides and in PowerPoint notes section). As students are watching ask them to consider what dangers he faced here in Britain that he may not have had to face in Poland? Did he feel safe? This is important to consider the fact that once refugees reach a new country, they may still feel vulnerable and insecure. Feedback ideas to the class.

How do we remember the Kindertransport? (5-10 minutes – optional)

Introduce the Kindertransport story using the image and information on Slide 22. Explain that memorials are an important way that we remember events, people and parts of our history. In this activity split the class in half and debate whether this memorial to the Kindertransport is successful or not.

There are some discussion points on slide 23 for students to consider. You may wish to print the photos on slide 24 (also in the print out pack slide 5) for students to be able to see details of the memorial closer.

Summary: What were British Attitudes and Actions towards Refugees and Holocaust Survivors? (5 minutes)

Give students 2-3 minutes to discuss the following questions in pairs (Slide 25):

- Having looked at some evidence, what were British attitudes and actions towards refugees and migrants during the 1930s and 1940s?
- How has your knowledge developed during this lesson?

Having given the students time to discuss their thoughts, collect feedback from the group on these questions. This discussion provides an opportunity for students to reflect upon the three key methods (visas, detention and evacuation) that the British authorities used when dealing with war refugees and migrants.

It's important for students to recognise that British leaders and government were not 'bad' for being restrictive towards refugees. Instead, it opens up discussions about the complex and

costly needs of refugees in that time, the lack of legal framework (or legal obligation), and the important role that charities and philanthropists played in lobbying the government to change its policies. It is useful for students to recognise that there is no simple way of characterising a nation's actions towards refugees, and that those decisions are nuanced, and often policies are created based upon limited information at the time; only in retrospect can we as historians and scholars begin to better understand the choices that were made.

Learning Resources produced by Dr Chelsea Sambells and Hannah Randall, 2025.

