

# British Government's Attitude to Post-War Refugees

*“If the Jews were allowed to remain here [in Britain] they might be an explosive element in the country, especially if the economic situation deteriorated.”*

Herbert Morrison, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, May 1945

- British politicians grappled with how Britain should handle Holocaust refugees, during and after the war. Consider the quote (left) when answering:
  1. What does Morrison mean by this statement?
  2. What does it suggest about the British government's attitude?

Enquiry Question:  
**How did refugees and migrants support themselves and their families in post-war Britain?**

Lesson Title:  
**Working in Britain: Economic Opportunities for War Refugees**



German woman, Frau Dorries, at a British Refugee Camp, October 1945, IWM

# British Government's Attitude to Post-War Refugees

- Around 60,000 – 80,000 refugees from central and Eastern Europe remained in Britain by 1945, half of them German
- Ministers argued often about whether war refugees (many Jewish) should be returned (or expelled) to their home countries
- But some stated that to expel refugees to Europe would be inhumane, especially children (e.g. Kindertransport) and/or elderly groups



For example, Trude Silman came to Britain from Czechoslovakia (accompanied by her aunt) as a child refugee in 1939, age 9. Her parents were both killed in the Holocaust. By 1945, she spoke fluent English and had become friendly with various host families.

Politicians considered how expelling refugees would impact young individuals like Trude. How would she survive? Who would take care of her?

# Post-war British Problems

- Britain had a severe labour shortage after the war, especially in the transport network and the newly created National Health Service (NHS)
- Many cities had been destroyed by aerial bombing and a programme of rebuilding began, needing workers
- Britain recognised it could naturalise current refugees within its borders, and open its doors to more refugees, but that also takes resources (processing paperwork) and has long-term impact on resources (e.g. pensions)



‘Elevated view of bomb damage’ in southern England, 1945, IWM

# Post-war Immigration

- Naturalisation of pre-war refugees (1947) meant they had no limits on work or benefits, but could not yet receive British citizenship
- Polish Resettlement Act (1947) provided considerable support for over 250,000 Polish refugees (many of them Polish troops) to rebuild their lives, including citizenship, benefits and pensions
- European Volunteer Worker Scheme (1947-50) allowed around 80-91,000 men and women (often from displaced persons camps in Europe) to work in essential industries (agriculture, textiles, coal mining and domestic work)
- Another 50,000 refugees from the Soviet Union, Romania and Czechoslovakia arrived in the UK, many were survivors from concentration camps and opposed the new communist governments

# The Challenges of Remaining in Britain

What would have made it hard to return home, stay in Britain or move to another country?

Think of and record **three reasons** that people may have returned home, stayed in Britain or moved somewhere new.

Remember to think about everything we have learnt so far about the political landscape of Europe in the mid-1940s, Britain at the end of the war, and attitudes towards refugees.

It's also important to think about if refugees were able to make the choice themselves or had to do what they were told.



Londoners queue for food, 1945, IWM



# Four Case Studies: Opportunities in Britain

One of the key considerations people had to think about was if they would be able to make a living to support themselves and their families.

We will look in groups at four case studies of refugees who chose to either remain in Britain or leave, and the how the opportunity to work helped make their decisions.

Each group will present their case to the class and reflect on the questions on this slide.

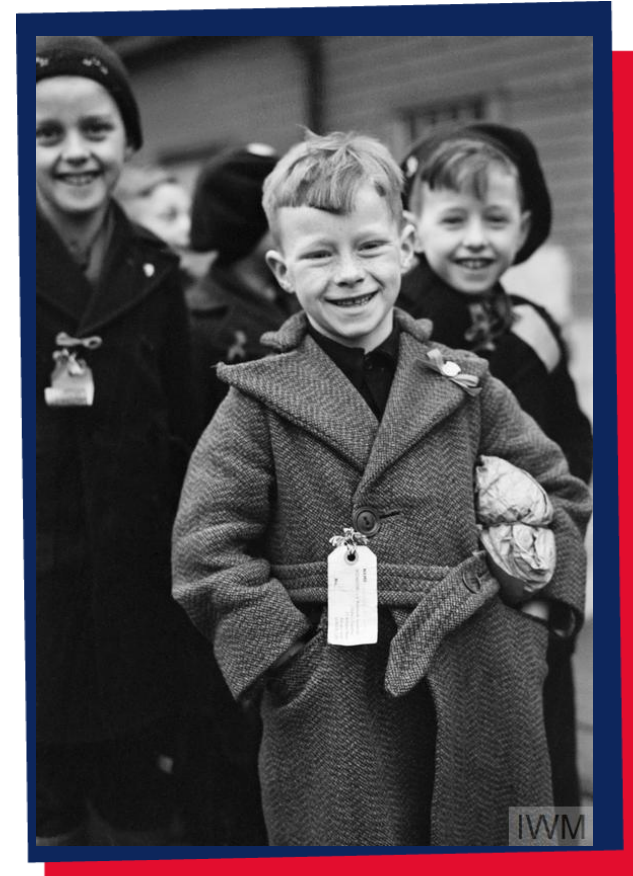
Consider:

- What do you think their main challenge was to make their decision to remain or leave?
- How much agency did they have to make their own choice?
- How important do you think building a career was to your case study?
- Do you think their experience in their careers helped them settle into their new country?

# Summary: How did refugees and migrants support themselves and their families in post-war Britain?

Having listened to these testimonies, how would you characterise refugees' and migrants' experiences of making a new life in post-war Britain?

- What possibilities were there for them?
- How important was finding work to their future?



Dutch child refugees arriving  
in Britain, 1945, IWM