

Lesson 2 - How did refugees and migrants come to Britain during the Second World War?

Refugees, Migrants and “Stateless” Peoples’ ‘Routes to Britain’

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives:

- To develop understanding about those who have been displaced and persecuted
- To create a shared environment of open inquiry
- To enable students to share their knowledge and preconceptions about refugees’ experiences of war, genocide and displacement
- To encourage students to analyse and synthesise a range of information and grapple with the complexity of a global war and its impact on individuals, thereby bringing the grander narrative in history into confrontation with the subjective experiences of war
- To challenge simplistic judgements and narratives

Introduction

With 120 million refugees worldwide today, it is often difficult to understand refugees’ experiences on a personal level. This lesson aims to provide students with greater depth of understanding about the subjective, complex, and often contradictory experiences of individuals fleeing persecution for sanctuary in Britain. Students will read the stories of two Holocaust survivors, John Chillag and Marion Camrass, as they navigated their way to Britain. John and Marion suffered incredible loss on their journeys (of loved ones, their homes, their childhood), but also survived the ordeal because they seized opportunities, took risks, and had a little bit of luck. This will enable students to build empathy with those who are not in control of their lives, their journeys, or their destinations.

Refugees, such as John and Marion, are often assigned to categories (as a refugee, displaced person, asylum-seeker, economic migrant, et cetera) by aid organisations, receptive nations, and their home governments, as a way to offer financial support and privileges during individuals’ complex journeys towards sanctuary. This lesson problematises these labels by asking students to identify how John and Marion would be ‘labelled’ during various stages of

their journeys. This encourages students to challenge simplistic and arbitrary labels, allowing 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.

Resources:

Provided:

- Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan
- Lesson PowerPoint
- Print out of John Chillag and Marion Camron's stories
- Print out PowerPoint
- Highlighted version of John and Marion's journeys for teachers

Needed:

- Coloured pens

Lesson Plan

Slide 1 – Lesson Title: Refugees, Migrants and “Stateless People” – People’s ‘Routes’ to Britain

Travelling to Britain as a Migrant or Refugee (10 mins)

On slide 2 students are encouraged to build empathy by imagining a German family has decided to leave to find safety in Britain, before the war broke out (September 1939), and to consider everything they would need to think about. This may include: the types of transportation

available from Germany to Britain, documentation they might need (visas), luggage they would take; and where they would go when arriving in Britain.

To help encourage their creativity and imagination, use the map of Europe in 1939 for reference (slide 3). This shows a relatively clear route from Berlin to Britain. To encourage discussion, students are asked to share their answers with a partner within a simple table (on print out, slide 2).

Bring the class together to compare their answers. It not expected that students will have paid much attention to travel documentation (referring to Lesson One's discussion about the need for exit visas from Germany and entry visas for Britain). The aim here is *not* to be historically accurate, but simply aware that such documentation would be needed in most cases for a cross-border migration. This will help students to consider that seemingly arbitrary documentation could be important – possibly more important – than the personal objects packed in his/her/their luggage.

NOTE: It is expected that students will oversimplify this activity, for example by selecting a relatively straightforward path to their destination and choosing sentimental rather than practical objects to accompany them. The goal here is to encourage openness in a non-judgmental space about how students might *perceive* a refugee's journey *before* it commences. After this activity, John and Marion's stories will be shown as extremely complex and unpredictable; this will provide a point of contrast and help to foster discussion between what students perceived a refugee's journey was, and what the reality of those journeys were. A later activity (slide 8) will explore what receptive nations should consider when refugees arrive after potentially complex journeys.

Exploring Journeys to Britain: John and Marion (30 mins)

By exploring the lives of two Holocaust survivors, John Chillag and Marion Camrass, students will understand that refugee journeys, especially during wartime, are never straightforward. They will also consider choice and agency during this activity, e.g., did they have a choice as to where they were going?

Read through as a class John and Marion's story, each student/pair will have their own copies of the stories (in the resources). They will highlight as the teacher reads whenever John/Marion move somewhere new. This is when they will consider if John and Marion are a refugee, prisoner, migrant or something else, and highlight according to the colours on slide 4.

After reading their stories, discuss as a class the similarities and differences in their journeys and experiences.

Students will then plot either John or Marion's journey onto a map (on print out, slide 3). They will use the same colours as the previous activity so that they can see understand how they were treated, or perceived, during their journeys.

There is also an additional slide (slide 6) showing a piece of artwork of a map of Marion's journey. This can be used as an extension or a homework activity asking the students to create an artistic response to John or Marion's journey, this could be in the form of a map, a cartoon strip, or story, for example.

Building Empathy with Refugees (10 mins)

This section asks the students to explore 'What we need to consider about a refugee's experience so that we can help them?'

The information on slide 7 transitions the students from thinking about John and Marion's emotional stories to considering the practical arrangements for how nations can help refugees upon arrival. Give the students in pairs a spider diagram (slide 8 of PowerPoint, and slide 4 on print outs) and ask them to consider what refugees might need when they arrive in Britain. Some prompts could be:

- The kind of accommodation
- Who is welcoming them
- The kind of food given – does it consider their dietary/cultural/religious requirements
- The language
- The experiences they have been through – do they need mental or psychological support, such as counselling?
- Whether they can remain as a family unit

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 9):

- Having looked at the stories of survivors, how would you characterise refugees' and migrants' journeys to the UK?
- How has your knowledge developed during this lesson?

- Is it possible to describe refugee and migrants' journeys in a simple way? Why or why not?

Having given the students time to discuss their thoughts, collect feedback from the group on these questions. This discussion also provides an opportunity to draw connections between how each survivor had very different, circuitous, and complex journeys to Britain, particularly with multiple unexpected stops and deviations from their original route.

This is also an opportunity to compare John and Marion's journeys to Britain with the students' original activity, where students considered the challenges of leaving Germany in 1939. You may encourage them to compare what they thought the journey would be like, as opposed to how survivors like John and Marion experienced them. This enables students to build greater empathy with refugees, and the ways that their journeys to sanctuary are often totally beyond their control, and might involve varied experiences (e.g., imprisonment) and more countries than anticipated.

This is also a moment to encourage students to reflect upon the arbitrary categories assigned to refugees during their journeys, particularly when these categories overlap. Also, can the student suggest other labels for John and Marion that might more accurately describe their experiences? Why or why not? Such questions help to prompt the students to recognise that the subjective experiences of refugees are often at odds with macro-level analysis and categorisation. This again allows students to grapple with how statistics such as 'There are 120 million refugees worldwide' is often not reflective of the considerable personal sacrifices and intimate changes that refugees undergo on their quest for safety.

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