

Lesson 3 - How did refugees and migrants support themselves and their families in post-war Britain?

Working in Britain: Economic Opportunities for War Refugees

Guidance Notes and Lesson Plan

Lesson Objectives:

- To foster empathy for those who are integrating into new societies and cultures
- To enable students to share their knowledge and preconceptions about refugees' and migrants' challenges when acculturating to a new country
- To encourage students to analyse and synthesise a range of information and grapple with the complexity of migration and its impact on individuals, thereby bringing the grander narrative in history into confrontation with the subjective experiences of war and resettlement
- To challenge simplistic judgements and narratives
- To create an environment for open, shared inquiry

Introduction

After the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced and stateless, having lost their homes and often their families due to the experiences of violence and genocide across Europe. For many who survived, it was important to overcome those traumatic losses by starting fresh in a new place, preferably in a country that would not be discriminatory or prejudicial to minorities.

Meanwhile, the British government was grappling with the very severe economic impact of war; for example, rationing on meat, dairy and other household essentials lasted officially until July 1954, nearly ten years after the war had ended. And Britain had many mouths to feed. In 1945, officials were confronting the fact that Britain had already taken in hundreds of thousands of war refugees who, due to the devastation of war, and other complex factors, could not return to their original homes. Moreover, Britain was facing a labour shortage (exacerbated by the new NHS and transportation networks), alongside a nation-wide need to 'clean-up' and rebuild its infrastructure due to years of aerial bombardment. It seemed that the only resolution was not

only to naturalise the refugees and migrants who were already settled in Britain, but to also invite more displaced persons in Europe to Britain to join the labour force.

But creating a new life in a new country is an immensely difficult task, which takes time and patience. For many newcomers to Britain, their very first concern was how to support themselves and their families. Although employment was generally available, particularly for unskilled labourers, many individuals who had survived the Holocaust were young people with their whole lives in front of them. Many wanted to invest their energies in long-term careers in Britain, in roles which allowed them to excel and grow. At the same time however, they also often had families to raise, meaning that they had to innovate, retrain, and adapt their skills to ensure they could support their growing families in this new country.

After a short explanation about Britain's post-war economic problems, this lesson looks closely at four newcomers to Britain, and how they supported themselves and their families. Their stories showcase a wide range of employment experiences in post-war Britain, revealing the ways in which refugees adapted to their new nation. Students will be encouraged to consider the challenges they faced, especially in terms of finding work, which will encourage them to build empathy for foreign-born workers in Britain today. This lesson also challenges students to consider how learning new skills and diversifying one's skills and abilities can have positive consequences on their future employability.

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:

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

Lesson Plan

Introduction to the British Governments attitudes towards Refugees (10 mins)

This lesson starts with a quote on slide 1 (and accompanying questions on same slide) as a way to hook students into a debate about war refugees in Britain. Herbert Morrison, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, stated in May 1945, “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” (*Hansard*, House of Commons, vol. 396 cols. 387-8, 20 January 1944, quoted in Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews*, p. 255).

Morrison is referring to a number of key arguments that were used to justify returning refugees to their original homes. First, migrants are sometimes targeted during economic recessions because they are held accountable for reducing employment opportunities from citizens (e.g., the migrant has ‘taken my job’). Secondly, similar to most European nations, some segments of British society espoused antisemitic and racist views. As a result, Morrison is concerned that if the economic situation in Britain was poor, that it would cause social unrest within Britain (demonstrations, etc.) because people might target refugees for two reasons: economic and prejudicial/racial.

Given this provocative quote, encourage any debate among students. Provide them with opportunities to deliberate and ponder Morrison’s claims. The goal here is not to be prescriptive or expect them to dis/agree with Morrison, or with each other. However, it allows them to consider the government’s restrictive stance before the following slides provide further context and information.

Slide 2 – Lesson Title: Working in Britain: Economic Opportunities for War Refugees

Slide 3 provides contrast to Morrison’s statement by reviewing the number of refugees within Britain directly after the war ended in May 1945. Although there were 60-80,000 remaining in Britain, some officials disputed whether these individuals should be returned home: some politicians argued that many child refugees knew no other home, and many adult refugees had contributed to the British war effort during their residency in Britain. A short bio and photograph of child refugee, Trude Silman, enhances the gravity of the decisions that politicians were confronting at that time.

Encourage the students to consider these arguments both ‘for and against’ naturalising refugees in Britain in the 1940s. The goal is not to determine who is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ on these

issues, but to consider the motivations of government officials, and what they were trying to achieve by standing on both sides of the debate.

The remaining slides (4-5) add more historical context to the period, including the labour shortages and economic challenges that officials were trying to resolve in the late 1940s.

Challenges of Remaining in Britain (10 mins)

Slide 6 provides an opportunity for students to reflect on what they have learnt in this session and also the previous sessions. It may be useful for students to have their Venn diagram from session 1 for reference. Students need to think about the challenges that refugees had to consider at the end of the war as to whether they were going to remain in Britain, return to their home countries or move somewhere new. Some of these challenges may include the ability to make a living, the location of their family, the language they speak etc.

Use the sheet on slide 2 of the print out PowerPoint and ask students to write down three reasons; remaining in Britain, returning to their home country or going somewhere new, for each scenario.

Four Case Studies: Opportunities in Britain (25 minutes)

There are four case studies provided (all slides, 2-20, in the Print Out PowerPoint) based upon the experiences of four Holocaust survivors who migrated to Britain during the 1930s and 1940s. Split the class into four groups (you may want to divide them into smaller sub-groups depending on class size) and each group will have one of the case studies.

The students will take their time to read through the case study and highlight key points (Note: Although two testimonies can be watched/listened to online, transcripts also have been provided for each case study). Students should allow around 10 minutes to read through and to reflect on the following questions (also on slide 6):

- 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 their case study?
- Do you think their experience in their careers helped them settle into their new country?

On slide 3 of the Print Out PowerPoints there is a note organiser for students to make their notes in preparation to share with the class, and to make notes of the other case studies. We recommend printing at A3.

Students should then feedback to the class, sharing what they have learnt, the answers to the questions above and by taking questions from their classmates.

Summary: How did refugees and migrants support themselves and their families in post-war Britain? (5 minutes)

Give students 2-3 minutes to discuss the following questions in pairs (slide 8):

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

After providing students a few minutes to discuss in pairs, collect feedback from the group on these questions. This discussion provides an opportunity to draw connections between how each newcomer had unique demands and circumstances that dictated their ability to find and/or create work for themselves. Similar to most working adults today, this encourages students to grapple with how their dreams and choices in life can have lasting effects upon their employment, and how their employment also impacts their dreams and choices.

This is also an opportunity for students to recognise that creating a new life in a new country requires deep personal sacrifice and an ability to adapt. For example, having a successful and thriving business, or managing a company, was often the result of a lifetime commitment for post-war immigrants. Many young people today often see exceptional stories on social media, whereby influencers can become 'rich and famous' almost overnight due to digital audiences. While this may be possible today, for refugees and migrants to post-war Britain, financial success lay chiefly in determination/hard work, adapting their skills to a new country, and seizing opportunities. This encourages students to recognise the privileges and opportunities they have today in Britain are far different, and perhaps even more complex, than for those who came before.

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