

Introduction

Refugees are awkward. Their arrivals are typically unpredictable and hard to anticipate, they raise immediate logistical difficulties, and frequently give rise to difficult diplomatic and political situations. Often arriving with nothing, without enough language or understanding of the receiving country's culture to function at more than a basic level, many are reliant on support from strangers, voluntary organisations and the state until they are able to establish themselves. Sometimes refugees can fill gaps in the economy and therefore quickly find employment, at other times they are perceived as a significant strain on already overburdened resources. Crises force people to move who are not the world's typical migrants: the elderly, the sick and disabled, infants and children, pregnant women. Many of those fleeing their home have to also surmount bureaucratic hurdles at every step, hurdles that are often reinforced by physical barriers: borders, barbed wire, fences, tunnels, water or armed guards.

Some of the issues refugees face are shared with those of other overseas migrants, but their levels of immediate need, their unprepared departure and the sometimes traumatic experiences they carry with them set them apart from the wider body of migrants.

Their recognised vulnerability meant that right across the twentieth century there were those who responded with generosity and openness, mobilising the resources necessary to allow refugees to build a new life in Britain. Often such actions were articulated within what was depicted as Britain's long history of tolerance and of welcoming refugees. As we shall see, not only was this welcome often partial and highly questionable, but this picture of a tolerant Britain was not always used to support more refugees entering Britain. Sometimes quite the reverse.

The awkwardness of refugees long spilled over into the ways in which scholars dealt with them, and, for most of the twentieth century, if they were not completely overlooked, they often sat on the margins of academic study. Within Britain each cohort of refugees prompted a smattering of contemporary sociological or socio-medical studies without them

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becoming the object of sustained academic study. It took the late twentieth-century explosion of Western humanitarianism, driven by the growing number and persistence of refugees worldwide, to open up a new academic field of ‘refugee studies’. The foundation of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* in 1988 was emblematic of its coming of age as a multi-disciplinary area of study, but its focus was, and remains, primarily contemporary.¹ So while refugee studies has broadened and deepened since then, history has continued to sit very much on its margins.

But in the last fifteen years or so we have seen a welcome expansion of historical interest in refugees coming to modern Britain, driven in no small part by the pioneering scholarship of Tony Kushner.² In particular his writing foregrounded the experiences of refugees themselves and questioned Britain’s status as a ‘tolerant’ or ‘welcoming’ country, while his work with Katherine Knox used Hampshire as a focus to demonstrate how histories of refugees might be used to join up local experiences with national and international developments.³ Peter Gatrell’s global history of refugees meanwhile created an exemplary account not only of the emergence of population displacement in the twentieth century but also its construction as a problem by governments, humanitarian agencies and the public alike.⁴ At the other end of the scale Jordanna Bailkin’s study of British refugee reception camps offered a close up view of camp life and was a timely reminder of the importance of these institutions across the twentieth century and their place in fostering what Mica Nava termed ‘visceral cosmopolitanism’.⁵ Alongside these monographs sits

¹ Roger Zetter, ‘Refugees and refugee studies—A label and an Agenda’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1: 1 (1988) 1–6, 2.

² See for example Tony Kushner and Kenneth Lunn (eds.), *The Politics of Marginality: Race, the Radical Right and Minorities in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 1991); ‘An alien occupation: Jewish refugees and domestic service in Britain, 1933–1948’, in J. Carlebach et al. (eds.), *Second Chance: Two Centuries of German-Speaking Jews in the United Kingdom* (Tubingen, 1991) 553–578; Tony Kushner and David Cesarani (eds.), ‘The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain’, *Immigrants & Minorities*, Special Issue, 11 (1992) 1–22; Tony Kushner, ‘Refugees from Nazism and British labour’, in M. van der Linden and Jan Lucassen (eds.), *Racism and the Labour Market: Historical Studies* (Oxford, 1995) 581–620; Tony Kushner and Katherine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide: Global, National and Local Perspectives in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1999); Tony Kushner, ‘Refugees, language and power in twentieth century Britain’, in A. Kershen (ed.), *Labour, Language and Migration* (Aldershot, 2000) 29–56; Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester, 2006).

³ Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*; Kushner and Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide*; Tony Kushner, *Journeys from the Abyss: The Holocaust and Forced Migration from the 1880s to the Present* (Oxford, 2017).

⁴ Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford, 2013).

⁵ Jordanna Bailkin, *Unsettled: Refugee Camps and the Making of Modern Multicultural Britain* (Oxford, 2018); Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference* (London, 2007).

Lyndsey Stonebridge's literary history of statelessness in the twentieth century and an expanding number of shorter studies that often take as their subject the experiences of a single refugee cohort or historic moment.⁶ And in parallel to this expanding literature on refugee history we have seen the spiralling interests and growing theoretical sophistication of historians of twentieth-century Britain both generally and particularly, as scholarship now gropes towards the end of the twentieth century to include histories of 'race', identity, multiculturalism and domestic humanitarianism.⁷

Given all this why, then, another book on the history of refugees in twentieth-century Britain? In part this book was in fact a response to this growth of the field, as despite all developments in scholarship there exists no single standard work that draws together the histories of refugees coming to Britain in the twentieth century with the insights of historians of twentieth-century domestic Britain. By writing a history of refuge to Britain this book aims to fill that gap. In doing so it offers a legible account of the arrival and treatment of four key cohorts of refugees between the 1930s and 1980s. Across its chapters it explores British responses to refugees from Nazism, Hungarians, Ugandan Asians and refugees from Vietnam, and considers their experiences in the light of key changes in British society across these five decades.

Why the focus on Britain when other countries have taken in far more refugees? In part because of all the countries in Western Europe Britain – with the exception of Ireland – was the only one that, as an island, had control of its borders. Thus insulated from the mass population movements that followed the First World War and preceded and followed the Second World War, it could exercise choice over who it allowed to enter

⁶ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *Placeless People: Writing, Rights and Refugees* (Oxford, 2018). See, for example, *Immigrants and Minorities*, Special Issue, 34 (2016) on Belgian refugees; Kevin Myers, 'The hidden history of refugee schooling in Britain: the case of the Belgians, 1914–18', *History of Education* 30: 2 (2001) 153–162; Kevin Myers, 'The ambiguities of aid and agency: representing refugee children in England, 1937–8', *Cultural and Social History* 6: 1 (2009) 29–46; Becky Taylor, 'Don't just look for a new pet: the Vietnamese airlift, child refugees and the dangers of toxic humanitarianism', *Patterns of Prejudice* 52: 2–3 (2018) 195–209.

⁷ See, for example, Matthew Hilton et al., 'History and humanitarianism: a conversation', *Past & Present* 241: 1, (2018) e1–e38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty040>, accessed 5 Feb 2019; Kieran Connell, *Black Handsworth: Race in 1980s Britain* (Oakland, 2019); Emily Robinson et al., 'Telling stories about post-war Britain: popular individualism and the 'crisis' of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28: 2 (2017) 268–304; Nick Crowson et al., 'Witness Seminar: the voluntary sector in 1980s Britain', *Contemporary British History* 25: 4 (2011) 499–519; Daisy Payling, 'City limits: sexual politics and the new urban left in 1980s Sheffield', *Contemporary British History* 31: 2 (2017) 256–273.

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and who it chose to keep out. When we combine this with its widely proclaimed and long-held belief in itself as a liberal democracy *par excellence*, its imperial strength in the first half of the century and continuing global pretensions in the second half, we are presented with an opportunity. Given that Britain had a choice over the refugees it accepted, what can this tell us about the translation, or not, of its values into practice? What can its policy choices tell us about the preoccupations of government? And, when refugees arrived in Britain, how did the public respond to their presence? With a much vaunted ‘welcome’, or something less expressive of liberal democratic values?

Focussing on refugees’ relationship with British society and institutions allows us to historicise not only the changing experiences of refugees themselves but how Britain also changed over this time. While small numbers of refugees entering a country creates few ripples, when thousands appear in a few weeks or months, then government, voluntary agencies and the wider British public are forced to take note. And to act. Consequently, the arrival of a particular cohort of refugees can tell us a great deal about the society receiving them. Looking at the reception of refugees in Britain is an obvious route to asking questions around the extent and limitation of a country’s welcome of strangers. Yet this book argues for the value of pushing analysis further, for exploring the potential offered by the arrival of refugees for considering a far wider set of historical problems. Indeed, the responses of the British state and society to the arrival of successive groups of refugees in the twentieth century begs sustained historical analysis. Assumptions by both Jewish voluntary organisations and Whitehall that refugees fleeing Nazism were solely the responsibility of the Jewish community and their sponsors, as much as the expectation that 20,000 Hungarians within a few short weeks in the winter of 1956–1957 would be found employment or that Ugandan Asian arrivals in 1972 might need protection from the National Front, all speak volumes about profound shifts in British society across the twentieth century. Unpicking the historical processes underpinning these assumptions leads us, for example, to think about the changing nature of the welfare state, the relationship between voluntary organisations and government, the role of pressure group politics, or the relationship between national employment levels and the reception of foreigners. Similarly, concerns over, for example, the behaviour of Hungarian refugees and ‘teddy boys’, or of the political motivations of young volunteers in the reception camps in 1972, or the development of a training programme for Vietnamese social workers can offer new insights respectively

into the ‘juvenile delinquent’ scares of the 1950s, the debates over counter-cultural politics in the 1970s and the New Left and the rise of municipal multiculturalism in 1980s Britain.

Consequently, while this is a book with refugees at its heart it is not a book *about* refugees. Rather, it is a book about the country refugees found refuge in or were barred from. The years covered by the book take us from Britain as a global imperial power to Britain as a post-colonial nation sitting within the European Union. Underwriting this shift was a perpetual tension between assumptions of British dominance on the world stage and fears of decline and of shrinking prestige and influence. Early twenty-first century popular rhetoric has taken for granted the idea that refugees and immigration sit at the heart of many of Britain’s contemporary challenges, whether that be issues of identity and citizenship or entitlement to housing and welfare. In arguing for the importance of understanding the place of refugees within modern British history and society, this book takes this presumption at face value while also challenging the idea that refugees have been the *cause* of, for example, accommodation shortages, unemployment or welfare abuses. Throughout, the book argues that macro-level decisions over who was allowed entry, the process of how refugees were received and resettled and the individual experiences of refugees were heavily engrained with, and mediated through broader assumptions, trends and changes within, British society.

To this end, this book looks in detail at four groups of refugees: refugees from Nazism in the 1930s, the Hungarians fleeing Soviet invasion in 1956, the Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin in 1972 and refugees from Vietnam who arrived in Britain after 1979. This is not to suggest that there were no other significant arrivals of refugees, for there were many, including Displaced Persons (DPs) from across Europe after 1945, the Czechoslovaks of 1968, Cypriots and Chileans from 1974, Tamils and Kurds from the mid-1980s, and Bosnians and others fleeing the collapse of communism in the early 1990s. Nor is it to argue that the impact of the chosen cohorts of refugees on British society was greater than that of other migrants, most notably from Ireland and from Commonwealth nations, who were making Britain their home during these decades. Rather, this book contends that to explore Britain’s differing responses to these four cohorts of refugees – all of whom arrived within a defined timescale and in such numbers that their presence required a response from both voluntary organisations and the state – reveals some of the fundamental shifts experienced in British government, institutions and society over the core decades of the twentieth century.

Refugees and Immigration

The twentieth century was a time when refugeehood was to become a normal state, not only for the tens of thousands who made their way to Britain but for millions of people globally as the consequence of world and civil wars, decolonisation, and state and environmental collapse.⁸ This was a century that saw the death of the general principle of freedom of movement across international borders, a development that in the process formally separated ‘economic migrants’ from ‘refugees’, however fuzzy the distinction may have been in real life. This newly constructed international order – underpinned by passports, visas and entry restrictions, which became standard requirements of international travel in the years after 1919 – often forced refugees into the gaps created by the novel political identity of ‘statelessness’.⁹

The awkwardness of refugee history is partly revealed in how it both intersects with, and is distinct from, the wider history of immigration control and migration to Britain. Here it is useful both to reflect on the instability of ‘refugee’ as a legal category over the century and to think about how it intersected with the ways in which Britons received foreigners. Throughout, we need to remember that all too often popular understandings of ‘refugees’ did not always map easily onto their legally defined status. Layperson definitions of refugees consistently centred around the plight of a person or people forced to leave their homes through war, persecution or other externally imposed misfortune and who become in need of a place of refuge either temporarily or permanently.

In contrast to the stability of this general understanding of what constituted a refugee, the legal position of people popularly understood to be refugees remained on continually shifting terrain across the period. This was a terrain that was formed of both international and national regulatory contexts. At the international level, after 1920, the League of Nations worked hard to establish internationally binding protocols governing the treatment of refugees, as well as developing specific mechanisms and tools – such as the Nansen passport – to protect the stateless. However, in the face of the continuing dominance of the British and French imperial systems, the lack of engagement of the United States and growing nationalism and protectionism it remained hamstrung. We

⁸ Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, ‘We Refugees’ [1943], in Marc Robinson (ed.), *Altogether Elsewhere. Writers on Exile* (London, 1994) 110–119; Stonebridge, *Placeless People*; John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge, 2000).

see something of its ineffectiveness in Chapter 1 as the refugee crisis of the 1930s deepened.¹⁰ The League's post-war successor, the United Nations, was more successful, benefiting from the backing of the United States and the emerging Cold War that made concerted Western action both politically imperative and morally attractive. It was from this context that the 1951 Refugee Convention and its guiding body, the UN Refugees Agency UNHCR, emerged, and we explore their influence through the Hungarian and Vietnamese resettlement schemes in Chapters 2 and 4, in which Britain participated as one of the Convention's original signatories.¹¹

Within the context of the Cold War the international regimes developed to manage refugees worked relatively smoothly. But as cracks in the international order began to show by the mid-1980s the refugee regime similarly began to show significant signs of strain under growing and sustained movements of people. Within Europe the shift in the international climate was exemplified in the European Community's 1990 Dublin Convention, which ushered in a regime of fingerprinting and registration of all asylum seekers. We pick up the Dublin Convention's effect in the book's conclusion, when we see how it reflected and reinforced an increasingly punitive Europe-wide approach to asylum seekers.¹²

More important for most of the century, certainly at a day-to-day level, was the national context of immigration control in which the reception – or refusal – of refugees took place. For Britain, from the passing of the first modern piece of immigration legislation, the Aliens Act 1905, until the 1960s this was almost entirely framed around its imperial interests.¹³ The 1905 Act may have exempted those seeking admission 'solely to avoid persecution or punishment on religious or political grounds', but its more lasting legacy was its distinction between the right of entry to Britain of imperial subjects, which was unrestricted, and that of 'aliens',

¹⁰ Although more optimistic readings of the impact and legacy of the League of Nations can be found in Claudena Skran, *Refugees in Inter-War Europe: The Emergence of a Regime* (Oxford, 1995).

¹¹ For the history of UNHCR's post-war predecessors see Jessica Reinisch, 'Internationalism in relief: the birth (and death) of UNRRA', *Past & Present* 210: Suppl. 6 (2011) 258–289.

¹² See, for example, comments by the UNHCR, www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=49c0ca922 and of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, www.ecre.org/component/downloads/downloads/112.html, accessed 2 Dec 2015.

¹³ Although, for a discussion of exceptions see Jacqueline Jenkinson, *Colonial, Refugee and Allied Civilians after the First World War: Immigration Restriction and Mass Repatriation* (London, 2020).

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which was subjected to control.¹⁴ It was its successor, the 1919 Aliens Act, and the accompanying 1920 Aliens Order that were to set the tone for the interwar immigration regime and beyond. This legislation treated all aliens exactly the same and refused to recognise refugees as a separate legal category.¹⁵ As we shall see, it was the Aliens Order – along with Ministry of Labour insistence that an alien could not take up work that could be performed by a British subject – that governed the arrival of refugees from Nazism to Britain.

The immediate post-war years saw the distinction between British citizens and aliens maintained, with the rights of the former to entry to the metropole made explicit in the 1948 British Nationality Act. But as the implications of unrestricted in-migration from its Commonwealth and colonial possessions became clearer, the British state shifted its concern away from aliens and towards its former imperial subjects. The 1962, 1968 and 1971 Commonwealth Immigration Acts each marked successive steps on the way towards severing the relationship between British colonial and Commonwealth populations and their automatic right of entry to the ‘mother country’. By 1971 certain categories of British passport holders could not expect any more rights of entry to the country than aliens, and after Britain’s entry to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, they could often expect a good deal fewer. And as we shall see in Chapter 3, these legislative changes were to be of central importance to the Ugandan Asian expellees seeking to come to Britain.

Making a distinction between popular conceptions of refugees and the legislative and international frameworks governing their movements also allows us to historicise the discursive, as well as the legal, relationship between refugees and other migrants, particularly ‘economic’ migrants. As we will see in Chapter 1, resistance to the arrival of large numbers of Jewish refugees in part stemmed from fears that they presented economic competition to the British workforce at a time when Britain was still struggling to emerge from the depression. By contrast, in the immediate post-war period government and popular attitudes towards incoming

¹⁴ Aliens Act 1905, s.1 (2).

¹⁵ Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act 1919 (9 and 10 Geo 5 c. 92). The Act itself simply gave the power to make Orders, and the substantive regulations were all contained in the 1920 Aliens Order in Council. For historical discussion of the impact of the Act see David Cesarani, ‘Anti-alienism in England after the first world war’, *Immigrants & Minorities* 6: 1 (1987) 5–29; and for the difficulties involved in implementing it see Becky Taylor, ‘Immigration, statecraft and public health: the 1920 Aliens Order, medical examinations and the limitations of the state in England’, *Social History of Medicine*, 29: 3 (2016) 512–533.

DPs were mediated through concerns over labour shortages and reconstruction, so that DPs were accepted not because of their position as stateless persons or refugees but precisely because they were first and foremost useful economically.¹⁶ However, the 1950s and 1960s – decades marked both by continual migration from the New Commonwealth and by Britain's signing of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention – saw the divergence of concerns over 'immigrants' and refugees. The former increasingly brought to mind 'race relations', typified in public imagination by 'dark strangers' and the 1958 Notting Hill white race riots.¹⁷ The latter remained associated with Europe, the DP camps and the Cold War.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a gradual breaking down of this apparently clear discursive division between immigrants and refugees, but this was by no means a linear process. The arrival of Ugandan Asians in 1972, following as it did on the heels of anti-immigration legislation, firmly placed their entry within debates over how Britain was being reshaped by large scale New Commonwealth immigration. At the same time, their well-publicised treatment at the hands of Uganda's unstable dictator, Idi Amin, located the expellees in British discourse as deserving refugees. In Chapter 3 we see how, as a consequence, the Ugandan Asians were variously, and sometimes simultaneously, treated as 'refugees', 'immigrants' and 'expellees'. The arrival of Vietnamese refugees between 1979 and 1983 both fitted into and complicated the picture. The resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in Britain highlighted the continued importance of the Cold War in generating new cohorts of refugees and in sustaining a wider geopolitical context in which their resettlement in the West was seen as both desirable and possible. But at the same time Conservative reactions to their entry shaped the 1981 British Nationality Act so that non-European, non-British heritage migration was even more tightly restricted.

By the mid-1980s the clearly defined refugee cohorts of the previous decades were joined by an ever-growing number of individual asylum applicants from right across the globe. Their arrival and presence was increasing testimony to the multiple ways in which Cold War politics and decolonisation could intersect and produce refugees through continual conflict, internal repression, civil war and drought. By the end of the century, with legal means to remain in Britain ever more restricted to the

¹⁶ Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain. Race and Citizenship in the Post-war Era* (Ithaca, 1997).

¹⁷ Sheila Patterson, *Dark Strangers: A Sociological Study of the Absorption of a Recent West Indian Migrant Group in Brixton, South London* (London, 1963).

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wealthy, to Europeans and to those of British heritage, claiming asylum was to become one of the few ways by which the poorer and vulnerable of the world might enter Britain. And, as the number of individual asylum applications reached 71,960 by 1999, the elision between such applicants – often now labelled ‘bogus asylum seekers’ – and economic migrants became near total.

To chart the shifting and dynamic relationship between refugees and those seen as economic migrants is important. But it offers us only one way into constructing an account of refugees’ experiences in, and relationship with, modern Britain. One of the central tasks of this book is to remind us how recentring a history of twentieth-century Britain around refugees can move us beyond a framing of their history around issues of immigration and entry. Through looking at Britain’s decisions to accept or bar refugees, we see Britain variously as a self-confident imperial power and as a country struggling to hold its place internationally in a rapidly changing world. Asking questions about the place of needy strangers in Britain lets us historicise assumptions concerning the role of the state, ideas of active citizenship and voluntary action. And while each refugee journey is unique, taken together, each individual’s journey, arrival and adjustment to a new country becomes more than a sum of its parts. Thinking about how different refugee cohorts met the challenge of making new lives for themselves in Britain allows us to examine how in the process they reshaped the places to which they moved and the institutions with which they interacted. And it is to these themes that we now turn.

The State and Its Citizens

refugees were a product of the fluidity and mutability of states’ definitions of who was deemed to be a citizen and who was not, as well as of who was economically and socially desirable (or at least tolerable) and thus eligible for support, and who was not.¹⁸

The twentieth century might be broadly and optimistically cast, despite the traumas and vicissitudes experienced across its decades, as a victory for the Left in Europe generally and in Britain specifically. Not, of course, in terms of the ceaseless march of communism as imagined by the revolutionary vanguards of the first years of the century. But rather in how the aspirations and dreams of the labour movement – for working-

¹⁸ Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch, ‘Refugees and the nation-state in Europe, 1919–59’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 49: 3 (2014) 477–490, 478.