Refugee Week

The Heritage and Contributions of Refugees to the UK – a Credit to the Nation

Introduction

Refugees have made a massive cultural, social and economic contribution to life in the UK in the last 450 years, despite often negative government and popular responses. Many famous household names are evidence of the presence of refugees: Camille Pisarro, Sigmund Freud, Frank Auerback and Arthur Koestler to name but a few.

Refugees in British History

1560-1575

Spanish soldiers executing Dutch Protestants at Haarlem, 1567.

Dutch Protestants fled religious persecution in the Spanish Netherlands and settled in London and east England.

1665

Jewish people were allowed to settle in England, provided that they converted to Christianity. Those Jews who settled in England were mostly of Spanish and Portuguese origin, but living in the Netherlands. This group of refugees introduced fish and chips to the UK.

1685-1700: The Huguenots

Some 100,000 French Protestants, known as Huguenots, fled to Britain and Ireland from the persecution of Louis XIV. They settled in London, Bristol, Canterbury, Dover, Ipswich, Exeter, Norwich, Plymouth, Rye, Southampton, Derry and Dublin. Classed as non-political immigrants, Huguenots were prohibited from inheriting landed property, subject to double taxation and extra subsidies.

The French Huguenots arrive on the English beaches - 1685

The Huguenots brought with them an organisational talent, knowledge of industrial processes, a determination to succeed in spite of being uprooted. They engaged in numerous activities: the art of silk weaving, copper engraving, hat making and bleaching, dyeing and colouring. Huguenots reintroduced and developed market gardening vegetables, fruit and flowers that they supplied to London and other cities.

Their contribution to British society is still evident today. Seven of the twenty-four founders of the Bank of England were Huguenots. The first Governor of the Bank of England, Sir John Houlbon , was a son of Huguenot refugees. David Garrick, the Shakespearean actor who has a theatre in London named after him and John Holland, who improved microscope design and who's name lives on in Dolland and Aitchison were both descendants of Huguenots.

1780-1900

Roman Catholics and aristocracy fled the 1789 French Revolution and came to Britain. They were later joined by people from the French monarchy restoration movements.

"Refugees have made a massive cultural, social and economic contribution to life in the UK."

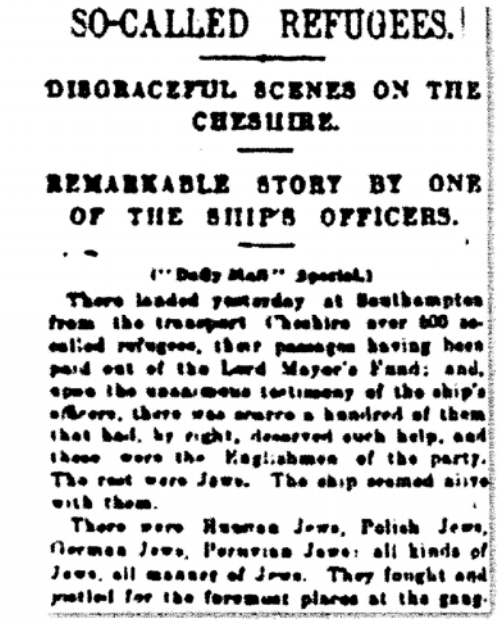
1848-1880

The year of revolutions, 1848, caused royalists, socialists, republicans and liberals to seek sanctuary in the UK, fleeing from conflicts across the European mainland. Among the exiles was a prominent political dissident who fled charges of high treason in Germany, Karl Marx. Victor Hugo, a politician and political writer, best known for his inspirational work, "Les Misérables", fled France after Napoleon III's coup in 1851.

Until the 1880s, the prevalent attitude in British politics was one of 'liberal tolerance' towards foreigners, including refugees fleeing political persecution.

1880-1914: Russian Jewish refugees

During the 1880s, tens of thousands of Russian Jews fled pogroms and sought sanctuary in Britain. Jewish people also fled Poland, Romania and Galicia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the end of the nineteenth century, more than 200,000 eastern European Jews had arrived in the UK and settled in towns such as London, Leeds and Manchester.



SO-CALLED REFUGEES.

DISGRACEFUL SCENES ON THE CHESHIRE.

REMARKABLE STORY BY ONE OF THE SHIP'S OFFICERS.

("Daily Mail" Special.)

There landed yesterday at Southampton from the transport Cheshire over 800 so-called refugees, their passages having been paid out of the Lord Mayor's Fund; and, upon the unanimous testimony of the ship's officers, there was scarce a hundred of them that had, by right, deserved such help, and those were the Englishmen of the party. The rest were Jews. The ship seemed alive with them.

There were Russian Jews, Polish Jews, German Jews, Peruvian Jews: all kinds of Jews, all manner of Jews. They fought and battled for the foremost places at the gang-

The influx sparked the first attempts by the UK to limit the ability of exiles to find sanctuary in the country. In 1905 an Aliens Act was passed marking an end to liberal acceptance of foreigners. However, an amendment to the act excluded refugees from being refused asylum on the grounds of not being able to support themselves.

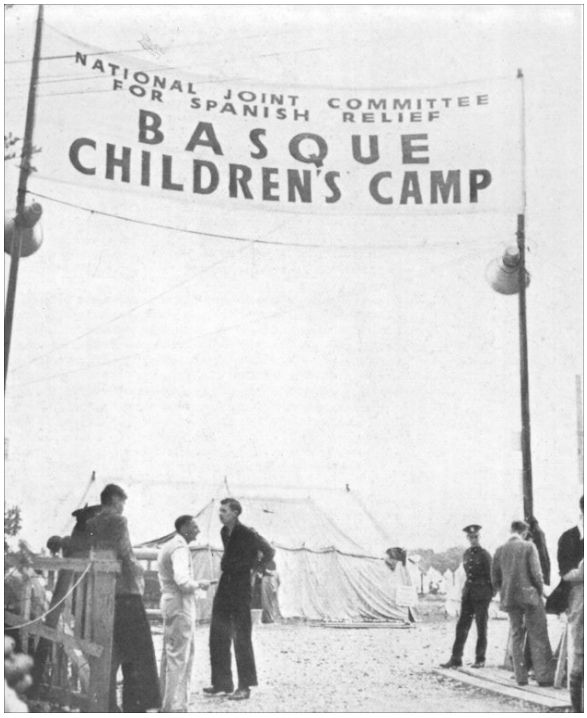
Jewish refugees left a legacy of economic contribution to the UK. Many became tailors or shoe-makers. Some, having personal experience of appalling employment practices and social conditions, campaigned in Britain for social justice by setting up unions and getting involved in local politics.

Sir Montague Burton (1885-1952), founder of Burtons, was one of several Russian Jewish immigrants who built enormously successful businesses from humble beginnings. The Russian born polish refugee Michael Marks arrived in Britain in 1882 and after working as a pedlar, opened a shop in 1894 with the Englishman Tom Spencer. By 1900, Marks and Spencer had 36 outlets and in 1926 it became a public company.

Michael Marks

1914-1918: the First World War
More than 250,000 Belgian refugees fled to the UK, escaping the fighting of the First World War. However, other foreigners were not treated so warmly. Under amendments to the Aliens Act, Britain interned some 32,000 men for being 'enemy aliens'.

1937: Basque refugee children



The main entrance to North Stoneham Camp at Eastleigh, Southampton.

Some 4,000 Basque refugee children fleeing General Franco's fascism in the Spanish Civil War arrived in the UK. There was huge public sympathy for the children who were housed initially in a large camp near Southampton. One of the children of this group is the Conservative politician, Michael Portillo.

1933-1939: Jewish refugees

Recent press reaction to asylum seekers arriving in Britain seems uniquely virulent. Surely the UK gave a welcome to refugees in the past – such as those fleeing Nazi Germany?

The British government was slow to respond to the persecution of Jews in Europe in the 1930s and the Second World War. Eventually, some 50,000 people fleeing Nazi Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia were admitted.

In 1938, following the Nazi annexation of Austria, the British government introduced a visa requirement to restrict the refugee influx. However, following violent atrocities against the

Jews on 'Kristallnacht' the government introduced a programme to allow children and some other categories to be exempt from the visa regulations.

For some Jewish refugees who reached Britain, the war brought more horrifying experiences. In the feverish xenophobia aroused by the war, the government interned some 27,000 Jews as 'enemy aliens' alongside Nazi sympathisers until public protests led to their release in 1943.

Jewish refugee businessmen were notably successful in developing interests in the depressed areas of the north of the country, while in London, the textile industry expanded due to their input. Thorn Electrical Industries established by Sir Jules Thorn, an Austrian Jewish refugee is now a household name. Yehudi Menuhin, a son of East European refugees who fled to America, was knighted in 1985. he established the prestigious Menuhin School of Music from where several now very well known musicians received their training, and he became one of the most well known and well loved musicians in Britain.

They were often from highly educated backgrounds in Germany and Austria and brought with them a great love of the arts. Many enriched the cultural life of Britain considerably. These refugees included the conductor Sir George Solti , the publishers Paul Hamlyn , Andre Deutsch, Walter Neurath and George Weidenfeld , and the philosopher Karl Popper. Some of the foremost artists and sculptors in Britain in the 20th century descended from Jewish refugees - like David Bomberg, Sir Anthony Caro, Sir Jacob Epstein, and Lucian Freud.

HISTORIC NEWSPAPERS


BRITAIN BECOMES
DUMP FOR THE
NAZI EXILES
'PLANES
COST FARM
A SWOOP
INFANTILE
PARALYSIS
SPREADS, BUT
"DON'T PANIC"


DAILY EXPRESS
FREE
LUXURY HOLIDAYS
£35 TICKETS
STOP THE
ASYLUM
INVASION

1939
Nearly 100,000 refugees from Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway came to the UK, fleeing from the advancing Nazi German army. Almost all of them returned in 1945 at the end of the Second World War.

1939-1950: Refugees from communism - Poles
Some 250,000 Polish refugees settled in the UK. They arrived during the Second World War or came in 1945 as part of a group of Polish soldiers who fought in the British army. Later, Polish refugees fled the new communist government in Poland.

The Poles were the focus of special treatment among refugees fleeing communism as they had been Britain's allies in the war. The government passed The Polish Resettlement Act in 1947 which provided considerable support for the refugees to rebuild their lives. The Poles were instrumental in building new houses, filling labour shortages and laying the foundations of British post-war society.

1945-1960
More than 50,000 refugees from the Soviet Union, Romania and Czechoslovakia arrived in the UK. Some of them were living in refugee camps at the end of the Second World War and did not want to return to their home countries. Other refugees were political opponents of the new communist governments in Eastern Europe.

The British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR), the basis of the present day Refugee Council, was established in 1950 to assist in the resettlement of displaced people after the war.

1956: Hungarians
Some 21,000 Hungarians who fled their country following the 1956 uprising against the communist regime were among the most well received refugee groups in post-war Britain. British industries were keen to employ foreign workers to fill labour shortfalls during a period of economic growth.

BCAR was expanded from eight to more than three hundred workers to help with the resettlement of Hungarian refugees. Within months of arriving, more than three-quarters had found jobs assisted by the active involvement of the Ministry of Labour. Most of the Hungarians were industrial workers, but one exile, Geza Gazdag, founded the Vanderbilt Racquet Clubs in New York and London.

1972: Ugandan Asians
In 1972, Uganda's military dictator, Idi Amin expelled 80,000 Asians. The British were reluctant to admit the refugees, even though the majority were highly skilled and had British passports. The Conservative government was worried that the refugees would upset already volatile race relations. The government considered settling the refugees on the Solomon Islands in the Pacific, or the Falklands Islands. Britain eventually

Ugandan Asians held British passports but were met with rising tide of racist abuse in the UK.

admitted 28,000 Asians, many of whom settled in Wembley in Middlesex, and Leicester in the Midlands.

Ugandan Asian refugees arrive in the UK in 1972

Politicians like Enoch Powell fuelled xenophobic attitudes and the rise of the National Front.

In resettling Ugandan Asians, the government took the unprecedented step of creating no-go areas. The incomers were dispersed around the country to "green" areas where public hostility against them was likely to be low.

Despite the general hostility of their welcome, the success of Ugandan Asians in establishing businesses in Britain has been notable. Many succeeded in finding work, with some 37 per cent of men in managerial positions in 1981, according to a study[1].

1973-1979: Chileans
Some 3,000 Chileans fleeing the violence of General Pinochet's regime were allowed to enter the UK. However, despite their small numbers, their presence has left a lasting legacy.

The exiles came to Britain mainly through links with the international labour movement or academic programmes set up by the World University Service and therefore the group included a large number of academics as well as working class people sponsored by trade unions. Among them was Carlos Fortin, a former minister of the overthrown Salvador Allende government, who became head of the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex.

1975-1992: Vietnamese
Some 24,000 Vietnamese refugees entered the UK under a resettlement programme. The exodus from Vietnam included South Vietnamese former government officials fleeing from the communists, and ethnic Chinese people who fled Vietnam when China invaded in 1979 and they became a target for persecution. Those admitted to Britain became known as "boat people" following pictures of Vietnamese people fleeing in rickety boats across the shark-infested waters of the south China Seas.[2]

1992-1996: Bosnians
Some 2,500 Bosnians fleeing the war in the former Yugoslavia were given temporary protection status by the British government under a small quota resettlement programme.

Germany accepted more than 300,000. Several thousand other Bosnians applied independently for asylum in the UK.

1995-1999: Kosovans
More than 4,000 mostly ethnic Albanian Kosovan refugees were given temporary protected status in the UK under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme. Housed initially in resettlement centres around the country, the vast majority returned home within months. Several thousand more Kosovans applied independently for asylum.

1980s – present day
Asylum seekers from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Cyprus, Iran, Afghanistan, Iran, Ghana, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Somalia, Turkey, Congo, Burundi, Sudan, Angola, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Kenya, Algeria, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Colombia, the former Soviet Union and eastern European countries have sought asylum in the UK. They have brought with them a wealth of skills, languages, experience and knowledge.

Successive governments have tried to restrict their access to the country, and create harsher conditions for asylum seekers in the UK to deter potential newcomers. In July 2004, the fifth piece of increasingly restrictive legislation on asylum and immigration received Royal Assent since 1993.

The reality: An economic and social asset

Public attitudes

The UK hosts less than 2% of the world's refugees. Yet an opinion poll in 2002 showed that the public thought the figure to be around 26%. Reporting and commentary about asylum seekers and refugees is often hostile, unbalanced and factually incorrect. Hostile and misleading media coverage fosters and re-enforces public antagonism towards refugees and asylum seekers.

When interviewed about the negative climate for them in Britain, asylum seekers and refugees said they felt that public misconceptions, rather than lack of sympathy, were the main barrier to a better perception of refugees.

A Sudanese woman said, "The word refugee is a label. As soon as you say the word, you put a bad picture in someone's mind. There is confusion about who is genuine and who isn't. People think you come here just to claim benefits but they don't see we had better lives at home. We had jobs, status, qualifications which aren't recognised here."

Foreign workers as an economic asset

A Home Office study shows that people born outside the UK (including refugees and asylum seekers) are significant contributors to the economy. It is estimated that they pay 10 per cent more into the treasury coffers than they take out: around £2.6 billion in 2000.[3]

The Home Office Workers Registration Scheme, note the contribution of migrants to the UK economy from May – December 2004 at approximately £240 million.

In Europe in general, there is an increasing need to bring in skilled workers to compensate for ageing, decreasing populations. The British government has recognised this fact by introducing a 'Skilled Migrant Worker' visa programme in January 2002[4].

A lost national resource

When refugees leave their former homelands, their countries often lose a dynamic section of the workforce. As an Ethiopian refugee said, "The refugees of today are the Prime Ministers of tomorrow. Measures could be take to train these people to take their ideas back to their country to encourage foreign investment."

It is often difficult and costly for refugees to have their qualifications recognised in the UK, or to afford the costs of finishing their interrupted education here.

While the UK has shortages in many professions, including doctors, nurses and teachers, there are qualified and experienced

Public misconceptions, rather than lack of sympathy, are the main barrier to a better perception of refugees.

refugee professionals who cannot practice their professions because of the expense and bureaucracy involved.

Under-utilised in Britain

Many asylum seekers and refugees are well-educated and highly qualified, and almost all have some level of education (Department of Work and Pensions, 2003). A survey in 2001 of more than 200 refugees in the UK found that over half had completed a first degree or higher when they arrived in the UK.[5] This statistic increased to two thirds when subsequent study in the UK was taken into account. Almost half of the refugees spoke advanced English and half spoke and wrote in two or more languages. Barriers to employment and gaining recognition of qualifications and limited work experience in the UK are major barriers to integration of refugees.

According to CARA – Council for Assisting Refugee Academics
18 refugees have become Nobel Laureates,
16 refugees have received knighthoods,
71 Fellows or Foreign Members of the Royal Society were refugees,
50 Fellows or Corresponding Fellows of the British Academy were refugees.

More than 1,000 medically qualified refugees are recorded on the British Medical Association's database, but as few as 69 are employed in the health service. It costs £2,500 to allow a refugee doctor to practice in the UK. It costs £250,000 to train a doctor from scratch.

Many refugees have academic or teaching qualifications. 754 refugee teachers are registered with London-based agencies alone (Refugee Teachers Task Force, September 2004).

Conclusion

Although it is important to guard against an impression that only successful refugees deserve our support, there is no doubt that the skills and experience that many refugees have provided have enriched our culture.

Instead of asking why people come to the UK, why they don't go to neighbouring countries, we should ask why they had to leave their countries, their families and their homes. Refugees are still people with choices, even if these choices are often limited.

As a human rights expert said, "The lesson of history is that immigrants and refugees can bring significant benefits, economic and cultural. While public debate on this issue is yet again dominated by proposed legislation to impose even tighter restrictions, it is a lesson that appears to have been lost."[6]

In addition to understanding why refugees need to be offered sanctuary, we need to recognise their contributions. Instead of asking what they take from Britain, our homes, our jobs, our benefits, we need to ask what they have given us back and added to our country. The list of the famous is only one side of

The skills and experience that many refugees have provided have enriched our culture.

the picture. All those fleeing in fear for their lives should be given the opportunity to reclaim a future.

Giving them support and opportunities will enable the refugees of tomorrow to enrich our society as the refugees of yesterday have done before them.

Famous exiles who have lived in Britain:

Camille Pissarro, painter from France;
Guiseppe Mazzini, political revolutionary, from Italy;
Victor Hugo, writer from France;
Lajos Kossuth, political revoutionary from Hungary
Karl Marx, political revolutionary from Germany
Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, political revolutionary from Russia
Peter Kropotkin, political revolutionary from Russia
Sun Yat Sen, nationalist leader from China
Sigmund Freud, psychologist from Germany
Frank Auerbach, Artist from Germany
Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, film writer from Germany
King Michael Hohenzollern, King of Romania
Emperor Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia
Arthur Koestler, author and journalist from Hungary
Oliver Tambo, Former ANC President from South Africa
Roberto Matta, artist from Chile
Irina Ratushinskaya, poet from former USSR
Wole Soyinka, writer and Nobel Prize winner from Nigeria
Geoffrey Oreyema, singer and writer from Uganda

Refugees who have made their names in Britain

Michael Marks, founded marks and Spencer
Sir Montague Burton, Burton retail
Dame Elizabeth Hill, pioneer of Slavonic studies
Andre Deutsch, publisher
Lewis Namier, historian
Sir Ernst Chain, biochemist
Sir Claus Moser, academic and statistician
Joseph Rotblat, physicist
Walter Neurath, publisher
Karen Gershon, poet
Robert Berki, political theorist
Lord Weidenfeld, publisher
Siegmund Nissel/Peter Schidlof, co-founders of Amadeus string quartet
Rabbi Hugo Gryn, leading Anglo-Jewish rabbi
Sir Alexander Korda, film director
Sir Karl Popper, philosopher
Sir Goerg Solti, conductor

Yasmin Alibhai Brown, journalist and editor
Alan Yentob, ex-BBC programmes director
Sousa Jamba, writer

Three generations of talent

Victor Ehrenberg, an eminent historian of the ancient world and refugee from Czechoslovakia
Lewis Elton (his son), educationalist, the only professor of higher education in Britain before he retired.
Ben Elton (his grandson), comedian and novelist.

Sources:

Credit to the Nation: A Study of Refugees in the United Kingdom, Refugee Council, 1997

Refugees: A Resource Book for Primary Schools, Refugee Council, 1998.

Refugees and Progression Routes to Employment, Refugee Council, 2001.

INexile magazine, Refugee Council, various dates.

Praxis/UNHCR Feasibility Study: Employing the Skills and Experience of Refugees in the International Development Sector, The Praxis Development Education Programme and UNHCR, October 2001.

Footnotes:

[1] Commission for Racial Equality report 'Roots of the future' (CRE, London, 1996)
[2] For more information about Vietnamese Refugees, visit Refugee Action www.refugee-action.org.uk
[3] Quoted in iNexile magazine, Refugee Council, April 2001 (page 12).
[4] For details of the visa programme, visit the Home Office's website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind
[5] Praxis/UNHCR feasibility study, 'Employing the skills and experience of refugees in the international development sector, Some preliminary findings.' (October 2001)
[6] Letter to *The Guardian* from Sarah Spencer, Human Rights Programme, Institute of Public Policy Research, London, 8 March 1996.