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History matters… but which one? Every refugee crisis has a context

Executive Summary

• Faced with reports of current numbers of migrants coming to Europe, many have searched for historical comparisons.

• These comparisons are often stripped of their context, and are as a result counter-productive or misleading.

• Both the Kindertransport of 1938 and Hungarian refugee crisis of 1956 have been misleadingly cited as precedents to be emulated by policy-makers today.

• Rather than drawing a straight line between two superficially similar events, we should pay more attention to the context of refugee crises, and ask what is distinctive about them.

• Reference to history can nonetheless point to some long-term continuities in responses to refugees, such as:

• Refugees are by definition an international problem, but states have always resisted any obligations imposed on them by outside actors. International organisations have a poor record of making states admit refugees they don't want to take in.

• Economic prosperity breeds greater tolerance to strangers, and recession and austerity have the opposite effect.

• Voluntary humanitarian work with refugees was and is often a dire necessity, but has always proved inadequate in material terms.

• In spite of states' persistent resistance to international solutions, the current crisis is unlikely to be successfully managed with anything other than a European-wide, even world-wide, programme of agreed responsibilities and the provision of generous resources.

INTRODUCTION

For months, newspapers and screens have been filled with images of displaced and distressed people seeking refuge in Europe. It is estimated that more than 4 million people have left Syria since 2011. They are fleeing a brutal civil war, which has seen ruthless attacks on civilians and to date at least 200,000 dead (and very likely more; numbers are disputed and difficult to estimate). Over 6 million are internally displaced inside Syria. Of the over 4 million Syrians registered as refugees by UNHCR, a growing (but still relatively small) proportion have been trying to reach Europe, along with other migrants from the Middle East and Africa. Frontex, the European border security force, has reported over 500,000 illegal border crossings into Europe in the first nine months of 2015, compared with 280,000 migrants detected at EU borders in the whole of 2014. Media coverage of this increase has zoomed in and out of so-called flashpoints in Italy, Greece, Hungary, Germany, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia – a belt around southern, central and eastern Europe that has functioned as a demarcation line of sorts between different parts of Europe.

In the face of these numbers and images, many commentators have gone in search of historical parallels and precedents. Indeed, Europe's twentieth century offers many refugee crises and enormous population movements to choose from, either during or after military and civil conflicts, and an array of states' and international organisations' failures to deal with them. This essay looks at some of those precedents, and argues for the use of caution in the way they are applied to current events. Does the history of refugees offer insights for the European refugee crisis unfolding today?

IN SEARCH OF CRISES PAST

From some vantage points, all refugee crises look the same. We are familiar with timeless images of bedraggled men, women and children, carrying a few bags of possessions, cramming into whatever transport is available, tired, hungry and sick from the disasters they left and the long journeys they have endured, sleeping rough on the way, herded into reception centres or camps, receiving blankets or food from a handful of volunteers, and causing fear and panic wherever they arrive. Details such as their skin colour, mobile phones, and the logo on the volunteers' armbands may be different today, but there are plenty of similarities with previous crises.

"This is not the first refugee crisis we have faced, and nor will it be the last", wrote Angelina Jolie, UNHCR Special Envoy, and Arminka Helic, British politician and former refugee, in *The Times* on 7 September. "From Europe to America, our countries are built in part on a tradition of helping refugees, from the aftermath of the Second World War to the Balkan conflict of the 1990s." They and others have tried to highlight a 'tradition of helping refugees' by drawing on positive historical precedents. For example, in late August the *International Business Times UK* published a photo gallery of "Britain's history of welcoming refugees". It featured a series of 20 photographs of refugees in the UK, arranged chronologically from the 1922 arrival of refugees from Smyrna in Plymouth, to a 2015 portrait of a young Syrian woman about to start studying at university. The short text at the beginning and end criticised David Cameron's use of the term 'swarm' for the most recent arrivals, and presented data to show that migrants needn't be a drain on a country's resources. There is no commentary that explains or links these very different scenarios. All we see are groups of Jewish children, of survivors of Bergen-Belsen, of Vietnamese war orphans, all beaming with relief and gratitude.

In spite of its good intentions, the feature has some troubling implications. What exactly are these photos saying about Britain's refugees policy? That as long as the refugees are grateful and productive they are welcome? What about the sick, elderly, unproductive or ungrateful? What about all those who have been turned away? Is this portrayal going to help convince British voters that the UK should accept, in the short- and probably the long-term, significant numbers of Syrians, Afghanis, Iraqis, Eritreans, or Somalis, who are leaving their countries for a range of reasons and want a better life? The British government is falling woefully short of understanding and managing immigration in a positive and constructive way, but these naïve and uncontextualised images of past arrivals are unlikely to improve matters.

Academics and policy-makers too have looked for and found historical yardsticks for the current 'historical moment'. Consider, for example, the "Five history lessons in how to deal with a refugee crisis" offered by Alexander Betts, Professor in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies and Director of Oxford's Refugees Studies Centre. Serendipitously dipping into the history of the twentieth century, Betts identified 5 "solutions" for past refugee crises which should be applied to the present. They include the Nansen passport, given to under half a million stateless people, mostly from Russia and Armenia, after the end of the First World War; the resettlement plan developed after initial disasters of drowning 'boat people' from Indochina in the late 1980s; and the 'burden-sharing' agreement between European states to take on refugees fleeing 1990s post-break-up Yugoslavia. Each of these precedents, according to Betts, offers hope and insights into "how, as new challenges arise, there are opportunities to develop new standards, guidelines and approaches." "There is a lot to be learned from history", he wrote in another article. "We have learned a lot over the last 70 years." But what exactly have we learned from this history? How far are those past events comparable with current developments? In what way can they guide us in the present with solutions? In what way have preparations and responses improved? Betts doesn't say.

1938 AND 1956

Two previous crises in particular have been filling the papers in the last few weeks: the refugee crises of the Second World War, and the Hungarian refugees of 1956. Let's consider each in turn.

A much-repeated and highly problematic reference point in recent coverage have been the refugee crises during and after the Second World War – or, more accurately, specific rescue missions within it. In the British press, a favourite 'precedent' has been the so-called Kindertransport, the rescue efforts which brought around 10,000 mostly Jewish children from central Europe to the UK in late 1938 and 1939. "Why don't we launch a Kindertransport scheme for Syrians?", asked Ed West in *The Spectator* on 1 September. A few days later, Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi, was quoted in various papers that the "UK must emulate Kindertransport to aid refugee crisis." By 21 September, more than 100 rabbis were urging the British Prime Minister to accelerate and expand British plans to take in refugees, once again referring to the Kindertransport as a model and "our beacon for hope in the values of Great Britain." In recent House of Commons speeches and debates about migration policy (such as on 3 June and 24 June, and at length on 8 September and 9 September), the Kindertransport is used as evidence of Britain's "proud tradition" of taking in refugees.

The example appears again and again, but without reference to its context, the Kindertransport model is misleading at best. The refugee crises of the 1940s were indeed unprecedented in size, scale and consequences. They comprised many different movements by different groups: refugees, expellees, deportees, evacuees, concentration camp inmates, prisoners of war. By some calculations, as many as 60 million Europeans were involuntarily moved from their homes during the war or immediate post-war period. In eastern-central Europe alone, between 1939 and 1948 some 46 million people were uprooted through flight, evacuation, forced resettlement or deportation. In Germany, by the end of the war over 25 million people were by some measure 'in the

wrong country'. These numbers included the forced labourers freed by the Allied troops (7 million of whom found themselves in the western occupation zones; those in the Soviet zone remained uncounted), and the over 12 million ethnic Germans who had been expelled from their homes in eastern and southern Europe and sent into the rump of the defeated country. Europe presented a messy, complex map of many millions of people out of place, which in practice meant many millions of attempted journeys to reach home or safety across a continent in ruins and in the grips of a military and civil war. Countries in southern, central and eastern Europe, most affected foreign occupation, genocide and war, particularly felt the consequences of this dislocation.

No European country in a position to offer shelter has reason to be proud of its history of rescue. Countries such as Britain and the United States did much to prevent immigration by turning desperate people away. In 1938, at a doomed conference in the French spa town of Evian, delegations from 32 participating nations – Britain among them – failed to come to any agreement about accepting the Jewish refugees fleeing the Third Reich. Delegates were sympathetic to their plight, they said, and urged others to find a long-term solution, but were unwilling to ease their own immigration restrictions. The outbreak of war then made any joint agreement even more unlikely. Throughout this time, most European borders were tightly shut, and millions of people were turned away, often to certain death. Selective memory has nonetheless helped to cement the Kindertransport as "a beacon" in British consciousness. In reality, it was a rescue operation organised by a number of private, philanthropic and religious organisations, not an official state programme. Under pressure from these groups, Neville Chamberlain's government temporarily waived immigration visa requirements for a limited number of unaccompanied children from central Europe. The organisations had to fund the operation and find sponsors and homes for the children themselves; they stopped when their money ran out, and when the outbreak of war made their task impossible. Comparisons of 1938 with today might be justified, but are hardly cause for celebration. For millions, much worse was to come.

Some of the refugee problems were solved after the war, but the context of those solutions was very different from anything going on today. In 1945, for only the second time in the century, national priorities and international concerns briefly coincided. Most European states were at their most vulnerable, weakened and bankrupted, and dependent on international handouts. The [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration](#) (UNRRA), a short-lived international organisation with a uniquely bold brief, tied the US and the other big powers into a joint arrangement to provide a substantial programme of international aid, at the centre of which stood the return of people to their homelands. Ambitious national reconstruction programmes not only expanded states' capacities and obligations for their citizens, but also created outlets where refugees could be put to work. Europe's dislocated people across the continent supplied the booming post-war economies with labour. The West German 'economic miracle' of the 1950s was to a large part sustained by the enormous pool of refugees in the country. Other countries also made targeted use of migrant labour. Over 80,000 refugees came to Britain under the 'European Voluntary Worker' scheme, recruited directly from the continental refugee camps to work in the National Health Service, in agriculture, mining, iron, steel or

textiles. In the following decades, foreign worker or 'guest worker' schemes brought millions of migrants into the big northern European economies, until the 1973 oil crisis and subsequent recession brought those recruitments to a halt.

The refugees leaving Hungary in the wake of the 1956 revolt against the Soviet-backed Hungarian government have become another favourite talking-point since interest in the current crisis spilled over from Italy and Greece to Hungary. It all seems so pertinent: then, in 1956, around 200,000 refugees left Hungary and made their way on foot and by train to Austria and other neighbouring countries; now, in 2015, hundreds of thousands of Syrians are making the same trek, their troubles exacerbated by Hungary's closed border.

Some are invoking 1956 to attack the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, for his hard-line refusal to take in any refugees. Pointing to the "stunning hypocrisy of Mitteleuropa", Paul Hockenos in a *Foreign Policy* piece on 10 September argues that Hungary's "shrill" anti-refugee proclamations stand in stark contrast to its moral obligations. Not so long ago, "when they were at their lowest", they themselves had "depended on the kindness of strangers". Now, he insists, they are being "deliberately disingenuous" in their resistance to an EU-quota system for taking in refugees.

Others see 1956 as a reminder that there is a much better way of handling refugees, a time when, unlike now, European nations were eager to do their bit and take their share. In early September, in a post for History Workshop Online the historian Becky Taylor wrote about the responses to the Hungarian refugees as "another way of responding to refugee crises than building fences and ever-strengthening the borders of Fortress Europe." In 1956, a combination of sympathetic media, public compassion and pressure from an active UNHCR helped to find these refugees new countries, homes and jobs, all in a matter of months. Taylor concluded that it is "time for the UNHCR and national governments to re-visit some of the characteristics of the Hungarian relief operation…". Less informed but making a similar point, CNN's Tom Lister also thought the 1956 example was relevant today: the Syrians heading to Austria in September walked a "well-trodden route", taken by those "desperate Hungarians" 59 years ago. The Hungarian crisis became "the template on which the international community would handle later refugee crises" – although, he admitted, it "set a standard rarely matched since."

Whatever you may think about Hungary's, Britain's or Europe's current responsibilities for people fleeing brutal violence, war and poverty, the two scenarios are hardly comparable. Present numbers far outweigh those of the Hungarians in 1956 in scale. Where in 1956 European countries saw white, middle class, Christian Europeans on their doorsteps (with whom, in the case of Austria, they had jointly run an empire in then living memory), today they are trying to stop far greater numbers of non-Europeans of various shades, many of them Muslim. Religious and cultural differences between refugees and potential hosts provide immigration opponents with pretexts they could not have used before. Most importantly: context matters, and the context of the Hungarian refugee crisis could hardly have been more different. As the first major refugee crisis of the Cold War, 1956 was a major propaganda victory for western governments. The 1951 Convention Relating to the

Status of Refugees – the main legal document defining who a refugee is and the protection they are entitled to, which had come into force just two years earlier – provides asylum to people fleeing political persecution. Refugees from Communist regimes were the perfect victims to fulfil its criteria. Neither the Soviet Union nor Eastern Block countries signed the Convention until after the end of the Cold War. It was hardly surprising that the UNHCR, the organisation created to uphold and implement the Convention, sprang into action when the Hungarian refugees arrived in the West, welcoming them as victims of totalitarianism and boosting the organisation's *reason d'etre*. Austria, then one of the main receiving countries and today used as an example to shame Hungary's (and Britain's) lack of compassion, had only in the previous year regained its full sovereignty after post-war occupation by the war-time Allies. It too, like the UNHCR, had to prove itself and its anti-Communist credentials. The Hungarian refugees could not have arrived at a better time.

The world of 2015 is different in so many ways. Far from being at their most ambitious and expansive, today's states are intent on reducing their scope and budgets after painful experiences with recession. Their manufacturing sectors no longer offer easy opportunities to put migrants to use, making western states even more reluctant to open their borders to anyone. The USA has not been part of the search for a joint policy on migrants and refugees. The UNHCR is a mere shadow of UNRRA, upholding a framework that has never fitted the complexities of the post-Cold War world, and lacking both the funds and mandate to successfully intervene in the growing refugee crises. Today, impetus for joint action within Europe lies with a fragile and weak European Union, already in the state of unravelling, certainly not driven by a collective desire to rebuild the world. At the same time, civil wars in the Middle East and the collapse of Syria and Libya have created unprecedented levels of displacement, with global consequences.

CONCLUSIONS

Invoking history and finding precedents is no neutral exercise. Every political project can find confirmation from history by selectively or mis-reading the evidence and isolating it from its context. This doesn't make it representative or useful. Drawing a straight line between two superficially similar events is at best misleading, at worst disingenuous and plain wrong. All of this doesn't mean that historical examples are of no use, but it does mean that lessons from the past have to be extracted more carefully. We should ask: what is distinctive about each refugee crisis, and what is not? What patterns and details have we seen in the past that still seem to apply today? What sorts of attempted solutions have never worked; which ones have had some success and might be used again?

The uncomfortable fact is that no historical comparison fits neatly with what is going at the moment. Europe has certainly experienced great refugee crises and enormous population movements before, but in very different contexts. Perhaps closest to the world of 2015 are examples from the end of the Cold War, such as the refugee crisis accompanying the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, and the vast population movements resulting from the break-up of the Soviet Union. But they, too, have their limitations.

Nonetheless, a number of long-term continuities stand out. A defining feature of past and present refugee crises has been this: although people on the move are by definition an international problem, states have continuously resisted any obligations imposed on them from outside. The facts of migration have always fundamentally challenged European states' notions of sovereignty, national integrity, security and cohesion, and even the very nature and functions of the state – this is unlikely to be solved in a hurry. References to past examples of open borders and successful multicultural societies could perhaps try to alleviate some fears and point to the many benefits of migration, but it is going to be slow work.

Another continuity is that international organisations have a poor record of making states admit refugees they don't want to take in. Today, UNHCR upholds a problematic legal and political framework for refugee protection which is simply not fit for the realities of the world since the end of the Cold War. Its distinction between 'legitimate refugees' and 'economic migrants' has not helped many of those arriving in Europe today, whether or not they are fleeing political persecution, nor those expected to house them. Partly, this reflects problems inherent in UNHCR's original constitution and mandate, but to a large degree the distinction between 'refugee' and 'migrant' addresses a more fundamental problem. Nowhere in modern history has there been a universal definition of what a 'refugee' is and the protection refugees are entitled to. As Gil Loescher, one of UNHCR's historians has pointed out: "As long as states are the sole arbiters of status and protection of refugees, it is difficult to see how international standards can be applied more even-handedly."

Another striking lesson is that economic prosperity breeds greater tolerance to strangers, and recession and austerity have the opposite effect. This is a crucial feature of today's developments and invites comparisons with the 1930s. David Cameron's raiding of the UK overseas budget for funding a few refugee camps in Lebanon isn't going to be sufficient; Angela Merkel's (unprecedented) decision to take in millions of Syrians will result in local resentment and political backlash unless the German state can provide enough resources for them without trimming elsewhere. And even then difficulties can persist: refugees were perceived as a burden and struggled to be integrated even in the advantageous climate of political will and economic possibilities after the Second World War. In the absence of national commitments and international agreements, voluntary humanitarian work with refugees was and is often a dire necessity. But even if this work is celebrated as both morally satisfying and politically convenient, it has always proved to be fundamentally inadequate in material terms.

If the modern history of refugees has taught us anything it is that, in spite of states' persistent resistance to international solutions, the current numbers of migrants and refugees are unlikely to be successfully managed with anything other than a European-wide, even world-wide, programme of agreed responsibilities and the provision of generous regional, national and local resources to facilitate their care. The fact that neither seems likely – the EU is near collapse, and national purse strings are tightly closed – makes for depressing times.

About the author

Further Reading

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• Stephen Castles, "The Guest-Worker in Western Europe – an obituary", *International Migration Review*, Vol.20, No.4, Special Issue: 'Temporary Worker Programs', Winter 1986, 761-778

• Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (OUP, 2013)

• Emma Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns* (Cambridge, 2008)

• Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (OUP, 1985)

• Jessica Reinisch & Elizabeth White (eds), *The Disentanglement of Populations* (Palgrave, 2012)

• John Hope Simpson, "The Refugee Problem", *International Affairs*, Vol.17, No.5, Sept-Oct.1938, 607-628

• John Hope Simpson, *The Refugee Problem: Report of a Survey* (OUP, 1939)