

## **Fortress Britain or Migratory Haven? Genocide survivors' experiences of migration to the UK**

*Long ago, people in England sent their children by train with labels around their necks, so they could be taken care of by complete strangers in the countryside where it was safe. They will not have forgotten how to treat strangers' (Paddington, 2014).*

The image of British people being welcoming to strangers is a persistent one, as highlighted in the film *Paddington* above, but most notably about the *Kindertransport*, the name given to a series of rescue efforts between 1938 and 1940 which brought thousands of unaccompanied Jewish refugee children to the UK. Much reference has been made to these rescue efforts, highlighting the role of the UK as being a beacon of hope and welcome (Kushner & Knox 1999). However, the last 30 years has seen the UK become protectionist regarding its borders and increasingly unsympathetic to the plight of 'strangers' from around the world. This protectionism can be seen in the volume of legislation passed by Parliament in this period. Between 1905 and 1971, there were only four significant pieces of law relating to migration. Between 1971 and 2009 there were nine new acts brought into power, with five of these being introduced after 2000. Not only this, but the 2016 UK referendum on the membership of the EU highlighted the tensions around immigration. This conflict was highlighted by the 'leave' campaign's deliberate conflation of EU migration and the refugee crisis, especially UKIP's 'Breaking Point' poster which showed a queue of mainly non-white males to suggest the EU had failed to prevent migration to the UK. The strapline of the poster reads "We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders". The picture was taken in Slovenia, in 2015 and showed refugees who had just crossed the border from Croatia.

There exists a perception of the UK as being a welcoming nation to those seeking refuge from violence, but how much this is a reality appears to vary according to which view of history is considered. Holocaust survivors living in the UK are revered and held up as shining examples of humanity who were saved by the British, both by their military forces and by the provision of safety by the UK. However, at the same time, the last 30 years has seen the UK become increasingly protectionist regarding its borders and increasingly unsympathetic to the plight of refugees from around the world. This chapter will examine what has triggered and sustained this narrowing viewpoint through an examination of the UK immigration legislation of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By seeking to separate the rhetoric from the

reality relating to immigration policies, this chapter explores whether there was a time when the UK was a welcoming nation to those seeking protection from persecution. The experiences of genocide survivors are examined, as they are those individuals who are most likely to be seen as 'ideal victims (Christie 1986), in that they are innocent victims of state violence and hence are most likely to be received positively by the UK population. The data in this chapter derives from a broader study examining the post-migratory experiences of genocide survivors living in the UK

### Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The 1905 Aliens Act introduced the first set of immigration control measures to the UK, designed to prevent criminals or 'undesirables' (such as lunatics, vagrants and prostitutes) from entering the country. A focus of this legislation was to prevent Russian Jews settling in the UK following their expulsion to the Pale of Settlement. In Parliamentary debates about the Act, Prime Minister Arthur Balfour suggested that the incoming Jewish migration was 'alien immigration which was largely Jewish... [who remain] a people apart' (Klug 2013 n.p.). Hence refugees (particularly Jewish ones) at this time were viewed with suspicion and distrust, especially in terms of their willingness and ability to integrate (London 2001).

Between the first and second World Wars, immigration into the UK was governed by the 1914 and 1919 Aliens Acts (and subsequent Aliens Orders). The 1914 Act was an emergency provision which came into force in the early days of the First World War and effectively delegated immigration policy to the Home Secretary. As a result, the UK's position was 'not having a policy', meaning that immigration decisions were subject to the restrictive or compassionate whims of the Home Secretary. Therefore, decisions and arrangements were made at an individual level (London 2001). This state of play continued with the 1919 Act, with a slight change of practice wherein power was devolved to immigration staff working at ports of entry. At this point, before the Second World War, the UK's response to refugees and forced migrants was piecemeal at best, with no 'rescue operations' planned or mobilised.

### Second World War

As Hitler came to power in 1933, the League of Nations established the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees from Germany, recognising the threat that Hitler posed to the Jewish community in Germany. James McDonald, a United States diplomat, was assigned to

be the high commissioner but resigned in 1935 as a result of the frustration he felt regarding the lack of cooperation he experienced from other nations in respect of the Jewish refugees (Marfleet 2006). In his resignation letter, he wrote very clearly about the ongoing persecution of Jews and non-Aryans in Germany and again called for responses from all League nations (Marfleet 2006). Most governments ignored this plea, and the British Government explicitly rejected the request. In 1937 a message was sent from the British Government to the embassy in Paris which reinforced that the official policy was to do nothing which would trigger further immigration (Marfleet 2006). Even following the annexation of Austria by Germany, officials in London were still of the view that an increase in migration would trigger social and labour problems. It was at this point that the Home Office introduced a visa system to control the entry of Jews from Germany to 'avoid creation of a Jewish problem in this country' (Marfleet 2006; 135); the disturbing repetition of the Nazi language of 'Jewish problem' is noted here. Alongside this reluctance to become involved in another nation state's problems, there was also a perception that things in Germany and Eastern Europe were not as bad as the people described, which led to some viewing migrants as liars (Engelking-Boni & Paulsson 2001).

Tabitha, a Holocaust survivor, spoke about her experiences to Jewish women who had escaped to the UK following the Kishinev pogroms in the Russian Empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Following her talk, one woman said, 'You know my dear you told us lots of things, I'm sure that half of it is true'. This comment stopped Tabitha from talking, because, 'I thought, well, if *these* women...and these were women who were survivors themselves...they went through something themselves, and *they* didn't believe me...' (Tabitha, Holocaust survivor from Hungary)

It must be acknowledged at this point that the UK was not alone in being reluctant to host any refugees from Hitler's regime; the USA had a similar policy and stance. Indeed, the invitations to the 1938 Evian Conference on Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany stated quite clearly that 'no country would be expected to receive a greater number of immigrants than is permitted by existing legislation' (Marfleet 2006; 135). At the conference, most countries rejected any changes to refugee legislation, maintaining that they had already taken in large numbers of refugees, an untrue statement. In Britain, between 1933 and 1939, only 10,000 refugees were permitted to reside in the UK, with most of these being intellectuals, artists

and upper classes such as bankers and financiers, all with the assurance that they would not be a drain on the public purse (Kushner 2006). At the conference, only the Dominican Republic made a substantial offer to take in 10,000 refugees to work the land and become rural settlers (Marfleet 2006). Following the November pogrom (organised persecution of Jews) known as Kristallnacht in November 1938, the UK reluctantly agreed following public pressure to participate in a programme to help the remaining Jews of Germany to escape. However, the Government were still insistent that they should be directed out of Europe, and hence, away from the UK (Kushner 2006). This programme became known as the *Kindertransport* programme, an informal name for a relatively large-scale rescue mission which placed almost 10,000 Jewish children from Germany and the annexed areas on trains and boats to the UK. However, this decision was not without its detractors. Comments from the public recorded in the mass observation archive, point to a reluctance from some people to accept the child refugees into the UK, with one female observing, 'I think people feel sorry for the children now, but they won't like it when their children start to find work, and they find so many Jews in the market at the same time. I think thousands of people feel, too, that these refugees are having a far better time than the children of the unemployed – I do' (Kushner 2006; 155).

This perception of refugees having a better life than members of the host society is an enduring one; in January 2015 the *Daily Mail* ran a story highlighting how asylum seekers were being housed in a 'luxury hotel' with reviews on the website *TripAdvisor* highlighting the asylum seekers' potential criminality and how paying guests were being downgraded as a result of the asylum seekers being housed there (Baker 2015).

What is rarely considered about the *Kindertransport* is why the UK government at the time rejected calls to allow the parents of the children to come with their children. Instead, the *Kindertransport* project is held up as a model of British generosity to the Jewish people. The implications of not considering the illogical nature of UK immigration procedures at this time means that connections are not made with current inconsistent asylum procedures, where some claimants appear to be privileged over others, depending on the nature of their claim. This inconsistency is illustrated in recent cases where individuals have made an asylum claim to the UK Border Agency because they are gay and have been persecuted and attacked in their own country, and were told by the Border Agency that they needed to prove they were gay, or that they could not be a lesbian because they have had children (Cohen 2015).

Moreover, while the saving of 10,000 children's lives is in no doubt a good thing, the celebration of the *Kindertransport* as a rescue mission neglects the reality of the situation where the vast majority of the children had their parents murdered and were left in an unfamiliar country, not fully understanding what had happened to them (Kushner 2006). Even in cases where children were reunited with their parents, the relationship often broke down because of the long separation and trauma caused by the Holocaust. Children were unable to bond with their parents, who had become strangers, and parents struggled to reconcile their memories of their child who was now several years older and a stranger to them.

For Rebecca, a *Kindertransportee* whose parents survived the war, returning to Germany was,

'like the *Kindertransport* in reverse...suddenly, everything familiar had disappeared; home, parents, language. Every familiar signpost had vanished. My parents, who were nice people, they wanted a sweet little four-year-old and hadn't a clue how to handle an adolescent off the rails' (Rebecca, *Kindertransportee* from Germany)

Therefore, the UK's refugee response to the Holocaust should not be remembered with rose-tinted spectacles, but rather, that the majority of these children became orphans in a foreign land, their families murdered, and homes destroyed.

Moreover, the children who arrived here were often not treated very well by their host families, who often saw them as free labour:

The first foster family was an elderly rector in Kent, who...became very ill and died and his very much younger wife who had no children of her own didn't want to look after children and was very cruel to us. She didn't want us anymore, so they had to find somewhere else.' (Rebecca, *Kindertransportee* from Germany)

Also, some who were over 16 were interned for a short period as an 'enemy alien'; a knee-jerk policy of the British Government which did nothing for the security of the country and served to isolate those who had fled to the UK from Nazi-occupied Austria and Germany.

Did you know about the 'enemy aliens' that we were labelled as in England? Some guy sitting in an office, some mandarin in Whitehall, soon as the war broke out came to a conclusion that 'how do we know that these 10,000 children aren't spies? So we were labelled as enemy aliens, then we had to go to the police to

register ourselves...We were on a curfew throughout the war we had to be indoors by 11 pm and whenever we moved house, changed jobs we had to go to the police and present this book until eventually, they said 'no, I don't think they are spies after all. Every move we had to do we had to report. (Henry, Kindertransportee from Austria)

This classification of individuals as 'enemy aliens' was only applied to those of German or Austrian descent; other countries were deemed victims of Nazi aggression and therefore not enemies of the allied forces. As Henry mentions above, they were regulated and subjected to stricter control. In some cases, refugees were interned in camps; some 27,000 were interned in total, despite the vast majority posing no risk whatsoever. Moreover, a letter to the *New Statesman* in 1943 complained of 'foreign Jews in our midst', with ill-mannered behaviour such as noisy late-night parties which impinged upon the respectability of the Englishman's home (cited in Macklin 2003; 281).

Overall, the UK's approach to migration from the turn of the Century until the post-war period was not, as has been remembered, one of benevolence and care but rather, holding a consistent line wherein refugees would only be tolerated if they served the interests of the UK. The narrative at this time was one of concern over the impact of migration on the fabric of British society, in particular for employment and finance, as well as matters relating to assimilation by refugees by generally hiding their 'foreignness' as much as possible (London 2001).

#### Post-war developments

Two key events shaped the UK's later refugee regime. Firstly, the refugee crisis following the Second World War, which resulted in thousands of refugees (known as displaced persons) scattered throughout Europe, and this led to the development of the 1951 United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. This Convention defined who is a refugee, their rights and the legal obligations of signatory states, initially only dealing with those who were displaced as a result of the events of World War Two. The Convention rights were later extended by the Bellagio protocol in 1967 which broadened the Convention's scope for the signatory countries to all people, and at all times. Most governments at this stage presumed that the refugee problem would disappear given time, once the displaced

peoples of the Second World War had dispersed and been resettled. Indeed, there was a period of relative stability that lasted until the 1970s (Marfleet 2006). Refugees (with a few exceptions) came mostly from the territories of the Eastern bloc, and they were few and far between due to the 'non-departure regime' of the (then) USSR (Castles & Miller 2009). Consequently, it was easy for the UK to welcome such refugees, notably as they served as politically expedient propaganda to highlight the corruption and oppression of the Eastern bloc countries (Castles & Miller 2009).

The second key event was the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, which led to an extended period of political instability sending shockwaves throughout Europe. As conflicts arose out of the collapse of the communist states throughout Eastern and Central Europe (most notably the former Yugoslavia), asylum processes in Western Europe and the USA became more politicised and resulted in changes to national legislation, temporary rather than permanent protection regimes and diversion to safe '3<sup>rd</sup>' countries through a restrictive interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Castles & Miller 2009). The new nation-states that arose from the ashes of the Cold War tended to be exclusionary and based on principles of nationality that resulted in more displaced people (Sales 2007). Migration at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> Century tended to be homogenous groups of migrants, resulting in specific ethnic communities developing such as the Jewish communities of Manchester and London, and the Ugandan Asian community in Leicester. However, modern migration has produced an unprecedented number of migrants from a wide range of different countries, which resulted in not only an expansion of the number of ethnic groups but also differential statuses, spatial distributions and responses by local communities and service providers. The interplay between these factors has been called 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2007).

Early integration policy emphasised the importance of migrants maintaining links with co-nationals or co-ethnics. However, later policy moved towards a more assimilationist stance as a result of a backlash against multiculturalism (Cheung & Phillimore 2014). The nationality and immigration legislation which followed the Second World War, especially from the 1990s onwards defined and redefined British citizenship in several ways. The state began to have a central role in constructing an ideology within which minority ethnic communities were seen as a threat to British identity (Dwyer 2003). Indeed, Dwyer (2003; 157) argues that, "the British state has implemented a series of Acts that have negatively impacted upon the

citizenship rights and status of legally resident minority ethnic citizens and simultaneously sought to exclude non-white people from beyond the geographical boundaries of Britain, attaining formal legally defined citizenship.”

#### Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century onwards

Since the 1990s the regulation of asylum seekers and refugees has become increasingly restrictive with the volume of displaced people increasing as a result of proliferation in the number of conflicts and the closing-off of other migration routes (Castles & Miller 2009). The process of determining who a refugee is based on the assumption that it is possible to distinguish between refugees and what is termed ‘economic’ migrants and therefore between forced and voluntary migration, which in reality is very difficult to do (Sales 2007). Indeed, the violence and conflict which force people to flee to new countries are often the results of poverty and economic instability, which also propel individuals to move in search of security and a better life (O’Reilly 2012). Moreover, the process of determining refugee policy, while based on humanitarian principles, is in reality often more based on foreign policy and concerns over upsetting or offending ‘friendly’ countries; for example, the UK government refused to accept refugees from Chile in 1973 due to the alliance with General Pinochet (Sales 2007).

When the war in the former Yugoslavia broke out, the UK took a relatively protectionist response in accepting refugees from the area, grudgingly accepting 2500 refugees temporarily. Rather than a lone individual who could have migrated for any number of reasons, there were now several hundred Bosnian refugees arriving in communities, whose plight had been the focus of news reports for several months. As a result, it is unsurprising that there was curiosity about these new people and their experiences. Sefik, a survivor from Bosnia migrated to the UK in 1994, along with his immediate family. When asked about his reception in the UK, Sefik replied:

“Welcomed, I think it is the right word, I think. We were provided with everything we could expect. We were basically treated like everyone else, I would say.” (Sefik, from Bosnia)



Sefik's experiences highlight the impact of different asylum regimes; as he was part of a broader United Nations project which brought Bosnian refugees to the UK, his resettlement was supported significantly more than those who had experienced the Holocaust, or the Rwandan genocide. This was because the Bosnia project housed co-nationals and co-ethnics together in communities, rather than the random dispersal pattern that the current asylum policy dictates. Being based in an area with others from the same cultural background facilitated integration into the host country. Also, there was less hostility directed at the Bosnian Muslims who arrived in the UK at this time. This reduced aggression was due, Baker (2017) argues, to the media and political representation of dangerous Muslims being from Palestine and 'Arab' territories such as Libya or Iran. The more European Bosnian Muslims were therefore not perceived as a threat to British life, mainly as they were seen as victims of Milošević's aggression (Baker 2017).

The immigration system has over the past few decades increasingly developed a bifurcated approach, wherein the social and economic benefits of migration are welcomed at the same time as the proposal and implementation of increasingly harsher measures to deter asylum seekers (Home Office 2002). Alongside this, the New Labour rhetoric, particularly under Gordon Brown, was one of citizenship which needed to be 'earned' (Brown 2008). Indeed, the 2009 Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act emphasised 'temporary residence' and 'probationary citizenship' as being steps on the way to earn citizenship. Even the terminology of the forced migrant has a significance, with 'refugee' having an everyday meaning of someone who has left their home country because of fear of violence and persecution, and an exact meaning in law, which is interpreted in an increasingly narrow way in the UK. In addition, there is a gendered nature of the refugee definition, which reflects male dominance and experience and makes specific assumptions about gender roles (Sales 2007). The asylum claims of women rest on 'gender stereotypes of accepted and 'believed' roles' (Edwards 2003; 57).

Most importantly, gendered forms of persecution are not included in the Convention categories within the definition. While gender persecution is increasingly being recognised, the responses to women at border controls are unpredictable at best (Cheikh Ali, Querton & Soulard 2012). For example, women are often expected to describe and explain their stories

of persecution (which often contain violent sexual abuse) to an unknown person, usually, a male who identifies the slightest inconsistency as evidence of falsehoods (Sales 2007).

Halima vividly describes this, giving the following conversation as an example:

“Why have you come to the UK?” he asked.

“There is war in my area. I had a problem with the Government. They wanted to kill me. My village was attacked and my family too. I had to flee the country.”

“Are you married...Any children?”

“I am married. But we have no children yet.”

“Where is your marriage certificate?”

“I don’t know. It may have been with my father, but he was killed.”

“Look, are you married or not? There’s no marriage without a certificate...you can’t prove you’re married without a certificate.” (Halima, Survivor from Darfur)

The insistence on documentation from a woman who was known to come from a war zone seems at best, ignorant, and at worst, cruel. Moreover, women’s residential status is often conditional upon their husband’s status, and this dependence can lead to further victimisation such as domestic abuse, where a woman may have to remain in a violent relationship to stay in the UK (Sales 2007). More generally, refugee policy requires refugees to prove their vulnerability in some way, and the refugee identity is not necessarily sought because of a sense of solidarity with others, but because that status and identity facilitate access to services that are denied others (Sales 2007).

There was no specific asylum (as opposed to refugee) legislation until the 1990 Asylum and Immigration Act, which introduced the concept of the deserving/undeserving asylum seeker and triggered the start of the dispersal of asylum seekers to areas outside the south-east of the UK (Fletcher 2008). Later, the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act removed rights to social assistance benefits from those who were subject to immigration control and replaced them with a voucher scheme. The effect of this Act was to widen the gulf ‘between the social rights enjoyed by UK citizens and those available to asylum seekers’ (Dwyer 2003; 161). Hence displaced people are effectively excluded from the mainstream social welfare system while

at the same time, their entitlements to support within the asylum system have been reduced (Dwyer 2003). The other key aspect of the Act was to introduce the concept of 'no-choice' dispersal, whereby asylum seekers would be dispersed and housed throughout the UK to prevent the overloading of services in London and the south-east of the UK. The act also removed the responsibility for meeting asylum seekers' basic social security and housing needs from local authorities and moved them to the newly created National Asylum Support Service (NASS). NASS became responsible for dispersing asylum seekers to reception areas across the country, but typically in urban areas with available housing stock (Phillimore & Goodson 2008). This process has been widely criticised as it removes migrants from cultural groups and support, and the relevant dispersal areas are chosen on broadly economic grounds (Phillimore & Goodson 2008). This process inevitably means that migrants are sent to areas which are already experiencing poverty and a lack of resources, leading to the perception that asylum seekers are draining valuable resources from the host population. This was illustrated in January 2016, wherein several media sources reported that asylum seekers in Stockton and Middlesbrough were being targeted as a result of living in properties whose doors had been painted red by the housing provider, Jomast (Norfolk 2016;p1). The resulting targeting by the local population was not an intended consequence of the 'red doors' but was foreseeable. By painting the doors red, Jomast identified the properties as being likely to house asylum seekers and therefore more vulnerable to attack from those in the community who perceive asylum seekers as being 'bogus' or a drain on local resources.

Alongside this, policies towards asylum seekers have become increasingly draconian, with asylum payments being 70% of basic welfare benefits, the refusal of permission to work in some cases, restriction of freedom of movement and compulsory detention while asylum claims are appealed (Chantler 2010). Current asylum seeker payments are £37.75 per week for an adult, plus an extra £5 per week for a baby under one year old, and an additional £3 per week for a child aged between one and three years old (Home Office 2020). The legislation of the 1990s and 2000s also consolidated the link between immigration/residency status and welfare entitlement, a situation which was further complicated by a 'stratified system of entitlements that exists within the generic population of asylum seekers/refugees, who enjoy differential entitlements to housing and social benefits depending on formal immigration

status' (Dwyer 2003; 162). The combined effect of this is that different categories of displaced people in the UK have different rights.

Furthermore, while asylum seekers are in many ways victims in their home countries, they are often labelled as a predator upon the host country's resources and culture, rather than a victim or survivor of an offence (Fekete & Webber 2009). Asylum seekers have been the focus of political disagreements, vilified in the media (e.g. see Baker 2015) and active opposition from right-wing groups such as UKIP. This has led to a perception of those who seek asylum as being workshy or having criminal intent; this perception has not facilitated migrants' absorption into the host country and is in sharp contrast to the official British narrative as a compassionate democracy which provides a safe haven to the persecuted of the world (Friedman & Klein 2008). The tabloid press portrays asylum seekers as uneducated criminals; for example, in 2003, the Sun newspaper had the headline 'Asylum Seekers steal the Queen's birds for barbecues' (The Sun 4 Jul 2003). Also, migrants, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, are seen by the media as threatening and different. Indeed, Phillimore (2011; 582) notes that respondents in her research 'spoke of feeling criminalised as their identity as an asylum seeker was questioned, they had to tell, retell and defend their story, were detained, dispersed and then made to report to police stations'. Often, 'liquid' metaphors such as 'flood' or 'wave' are used to describe the arrival of asylum seekers in the UK, creating a potent image of a country overcome by unstoppable waves of people, leading to the belief that the land and its resources are under threat (Bleasdale 2008).

This chapter has sought to illustrate the disconnect between rhetoric and reality concerning forced migration in the UK. By using examples from genocide survivors, it has evidenced the idea of the UK being a safe haven for those who have experienced persecution is not one which is experienced in practice. In recent years, Holocaust survivors have been sanctified and idealised, often by the very publications which demonised them when they arrived (Karpf 2002), and their treatment at the time of their arrival was usually not one of welcome and care. Separation from parents, disbelief from local communities, and governmental policies which separated and identified individuals as 'dangerous' all served to alienate those who society now views as heroes and idols.

Those who experienced genocide in Rwanda or Bosnia had more chance of accessing formalised support as there has been a significant move towards managing and providing

asylum seekers and refugees the assistance they may initially require. When Holocaust survivors arrived in the UK in the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was no real concept of a refugee, with the term only being defined in the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951. While there was legislation about the admission of 'aliens', there were few regulations relating to the limitation of individual movement once individuals had been permitted to enter the UK. Controls relating to the flow of asylum seekers were introduced more recently. Thus, survivors of the more recent genocides have been subject to more stringent monitoring and also given more formal support, than the survivors of the Holocaust.

While this study is limited in its scope of survivors and lacks consideration of more recent asylum seekers from Syria and other places such as the Central African Republic, it clearly illustrates that memories of migration are rose-tinted, particularly when those memories serve to reinforce current government policy. Overall, this paper suggests that there is a feeling within society that the UK should maintain asylum for genuine asylum seekers, but these 'genuine' individuals are always in the past, never today.

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