

January 2016

www.fmreview.org/destination-europe

Migrants, refugees, history and precedents

Colin Bundy

There is much about earlier migration crises that today's European policymakers might profitably recall.

It was in the nineteenth century that a recognisably modern form of **mass** migration was made possible by new forms of transport, colonial settlement and the expansion of the United States (US). Between 1846 and 1914, over 30 million migrants left Europe for America. For decades, this migration was largely unimpeded, and the most important paper carried by the immigrant was not a passport or identity document but a steamship ticket.

However, by the late 19th and early 20th century, the US and other countries sought to control immigration, to be more selective as to who might enter, on what

terms and with what rights. This shift to border controls, quotas, literacy tests and the like was accelerated by the First World War and the 1917 Russian Revolution, which created Europe's first refugee crisis. Between 1914 and 1922, perhaps five million refugees were created; and in 1923 the 'unmixing' of peoples between Greece and Turkey saw 1.7 million people moved in both directions. The inter-war years also saw the first norms and institutions developed to manage the phenomenon of stateless migrants: a High Commissioner for Refugees and the issue of Nansen passports.



British troops pass Belgian refugees on the Brussels-Louvain road, 12 May 1940. (From the collections of the Imperial War Museum.)

But that earlier human tide was dwarfed by the flood of misery created during and immediately after the Second World War. In the first four years of the war Germany and the USSR “uprooted, transplanted, expelled, deported and dispersed”¹ some 30 million people. By May 1945 there were well over 40 million refugees in Europe, homeless, uprooted and in flight.

In 1918, borders were invented while people on the whole were left where they lived (with the major exception of the Greek/Turkish population exchanges). At the end of the second war, the reverse took place. With the exception of Poland, boundaries remained largely intact, and people were moved instead – all across central and eastern Europe. The term ‘ethnic cleansing’ did not yet exist but this is what took place as politicians engineered more ethnically homogeneous nation states.

Two aspects of this crisis are noteworthy. First, an extraordinary exercise was carried out by the Allied Command and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). By 1947, UNRRA was running nearly 800 resettlement camps, housing seven million people. Through herculean efforts, by 1951 only 177,000 displaced persons remained in the camps. Millions had been resettled; even more were repatriated; and significant numbers emigrated. Secondly, by 1951, a new legal and institutional framework existed in order to respond to the phenomenon of refugees, with the creation of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to succeed UNRRA and the passage of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

At that time there was a collective political will in the face of emergency, and a sense of humanitarian responsibilities in the wake of the horrors of war and the Holocaust. These delivered solutions. Sadly, political will and humanitarian impulses are in short supply today.

From about 1950 to 1973, European nation states prospered during the longest sustained boom that global capitalism has ever experienced. Up to this point, for about 300 years, European states were sources of

mass emigration – conquering, colonising and settling swathes of the less developed world. But now West and Northern European nations hungrily welcomed foreign workers; they became countries of immigration and settlement, their immigrant populations growing at the same rate as in the US during its years as a classic immigrant nation.

Although by the 1980s asylum seekers from Africa, Asia and Latin America were entering Europe, European states remained – comparatively speaking – largely insulated from events in those continents. But in the 1990s, Europe was suddenly precipitated into its third refugee crisis. It had a number of components: firstly, the break-up of the Soviet bloc and the wars in what had been Yugoslavia; secondly, wars by Western powers in Iraq and Afghanistan which made those two countries the largest sources of refugees; and thirdly, 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’ which triggered a wave of new attempts to restrict, control and deny entry. As night follows day, the new apparatus of control led to efforts by migrants and refugees to find other ways to enter; harsher border controls, desperate migrants and opportunistic smugglers are intimately linked.

Finally, we can identify a fourth refugee crisis in Europe, dating from about 2011, with a spike in 2014-15. Its components include war in Syria; failed or fragile states in Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo; a growing inability of states in the Global South to handle their refugee populations; and the rapid establishment of new routes for mass migration through the Balkans and Eastern Europe towards favoured destinations like Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the UK.

A European crisis, indeed: but still, of the 18 million refugees and the 27 million IDPs in the world, 80% are located not in Europe but in poor countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America.

Colin Bundy colin.bundy@gtc.ox.ac.uk
Honorary Fellow, Green Templeton College,
University of Oxford www.gtc.ox.ac.uk/

1. Judt T (2005) *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. Heinemann.