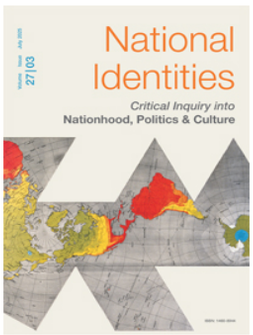

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'Are you sure that happened here?': popular memory of Britain's refugee history

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ABSTRACT

Britain's refugee history is generally remembered as fair. But was it? As the Second World War began, 70,000 German and Austrian nationals – most of them refugees – were labelled 'enemy aliens'. And in 1972, the British government resisted admitting Asian Ugandans even though they were British passport holders. These are two cohorts of refugees many refer to when they speak of Britain as a country that 'used to welcome refugees' and evoke a mythological 'golden era' of refugee history. Refugees fleeing to Britain in the past however faced hostility and hardship similar to that faced by contemporary refugees.

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Introduction: 'we used to welcome refugees'

British popular memory of its treatment of refugees is that it did the right thing in the past. History programmes, novels, feature films, comments on blogs, and social media posts for the most part recount a time when Britain welcomed refugees, provided a safe haven, and understood its responsibility to save people facing persecution in other countries. British people who advocate for refugees evoke a mythic past in which Britain in the Twentieth Century was principled but has lost its way now. When the British government unleashes anti-refugee rhetoric and policies in the present day, activists on social media often claim: 'We used to welcome refugees'.[1]

But Britain's historic responses to refugees show that there were few times when Britain actually welcomed refugees. The intention of the activists posting these messages – of course – is to persuade people in Britain that they have a responsibility to welcome refugees by evoking instances when Britain *should* have welcomed refugees. The threats to human rights and life that the earlier refugees faced in their pre-migration countries is now acknowledged; few people would argue today that Second World War Refugees or Asians expelled from Uganda in 1972 should not have been given safe haven. But the reality is that, when those refugees sought refuge in Britain, they were not welcomed; many of them were turned away.

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In the 1930s notes Rachel Pistol (2020),

> the British were reluctant to accept refugees who might either compete with the British labour force or become a charge on the state. Most immigrants arriving in Britain during the 1930s had to either have money or connections or be willing to work in service.

Sara Cosemans (2021, p. 213), writing about British East African statelessness, notes that when people talk about the Asians expelled from Uganda, 'it is overlooked that only Asians with UK passports and citizenship status could enter the UK. They did not enter the UK as refugees, our collective memory notwithstanding, but as migrants'. And, she continues, 'often UK passport holders without citizenship, never entered the UK'. Refugees in Britain and people from refugee families find their histories revised and erased. 'Refugees themselves, often, by necessity and circumstances, marginal figures, rarely can shape the dominant images others hold of them – especially as their representations are fashioned more by myth than reality', writes Tony Kushner in *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (2006, p. 1).

The British popular memory of refugee history that I examine in this article, therefore, is the popular memory of non-refugees – of the people who can provide refuge, and sometimes grapple with the question of whether they (or their predecessors) did, and the question of what it means to do so now. I explore this memory by looking at material produced by refugee advocacy organisations as well as at films, literature, newspaper and magazine articles, and social media posts about Britain's past reception of refugees and its present-day depiction of them.

I am approaching this research as the descendant of two generations of refugees – both my parents and all four of my grandparents were refugees from Nazi Germany. At the same time, I do not want to classify my work as an auto-ethnography, a term often applied to the work of people from a non-dominant culture, and rarely applied to the work of people from a dominant culture.[2] While I mention some of my personal experiences in this article, it is, for the most part, about the beliefs that British people who are non-refugees express to audiences who they assume to also be non-refugees. My creative practice as a writer of fiction and non-fiction focuses on the interaction between those seeking and providing refuge. In particular, I am interested in the emotional constructions of those who have the ability to provide refuge, and what they believe about their collective past.

Britain, in fact, has admitted few migrants who could be categorised as refugees. Most migrant groups admitted to Britain, as the data below will show, numbered between 2,500 and 25,000 refugees. Even the Kindertransport, which Kushner (2018, p. 183) has called 'the most remembered refugee movement in Britain' and 'the only one that is now recalled with any intensity' brought only 10,000 unaccompanied children to Britain from Nazi-occupied Europe. The relatively low number of children admitted came about, points out Kushner (2018, p. 186), not because any upper limit was set by the government, but because the refugee organisations who fundraised for the rescue effort and found foster homes for the refugee children 'could not afford to take any more.'

I begin this article by looking at present-day emotional responses to the Kindertransport, then look at who could be admitted to Britain as a refugee during the Second World War and who could not. A 'forgotten' episode in British history follows: Second World War refugees who were admitted to Britain, but labelled 'enemy aliens' and sent

to British internment camps. A second 'forgotten' episode is the resistance that the British government had to admitting Asian Ugandan refugees in 1972 who actually held British passports. The next section looks at Britain's unique history of empire and the impact of that history on its response to refugees. I then look at how refugee advocacy groups unintentionally repeat anti-refugee narratives as they try to refute them. The conclusion considers whether a more honest assessment of Britain's failure to respond to refugees can lead to the kind of principled response it lays claim to in its popular memory.

Arrival: the emotional resonance of the Kindertransport

In Liverpool Street Station in London, where many of the children rescued by the Kindertransport arrived, a bronze caste statue known as 'The Arrival' shows five children flanked by suitcases, musical instruments, and a teddy bear. A plaque[3] on the statue reads:

Children of the Kindertransport

In gratitude to the people of Britain for saving the lives
of 10,000 unaccompanied mainly Jewish children
who fled from Nazi persecution in 1938 and 1939

'Whosoever rescues a single soul is credited
as though they had saved the whole world'
Talmud

Dedicated by.
Association of Jewish Refugees
Central British Fund for World Jewish Relief
2006.

When I mention to British people that my father came to England from Germany as a child, they usually brighten and ask, 'Was he on the Kindertransport? In novels like W G Sebald's *Austerlitz* (first published in the UK in 2001), a man gradually regains his memory of the family he was separated from as a child in Prague and recalls his journey to England with the other children who were rescued. A video from the BBC show *That's Life!* from 1988 showing Nicholas Winton meeting the children he helped save in a rescue effort known as 'the Czech Kindertransport' has been viewed over 42 million times on YouTube. Matthew Reisz (2024), whose father was one of the children saved by Winton's efforts, has characterised the *That's Life!* episode as 'cheesy uplift'. It is, as some have said of *Schindler's List*, framed as a Holocaust story with a happy ending.[4] However, as Reisz also notes, 'it was hard not to be moved.'

While the encounter between Winton and the children he saved might have been (as Reisz suggested) manipulative, the emotion expressed by all involved seems quite genuine and spontaneous. After Winton, in the front row of the show's audience, is told he is sitting next to one of the children he saved, he begins to weep. Then we see presenter Esther Rantzen say, 'Can I ask: is there anyone in our audience tonight who owes their life to Nicholas Winton?' The entire audience surrounding Winton rises, while Winton, by then almost 80 years old, turns to see middle-aged versions of the children he helped to find refuge.[5]

Given the emotional power of this moment, and the fact that Winton's story does not just reveal his altruism, but also a kind of humility and stoicism much valued in British society, it is unsurprising that almost a decade after Winton's death at the age of 106, a feature film about him has been released. Starring Anthony Hopkins as Winton, the trailer shows Winton entering a reproduction of the TV studio where he was re-united with the children he had saved, then flashes back to 1930s Prague where steam pours out of train engines and children about to become refugees stand on street corners. The colours in the flashback scenes are grey and blue – colours, notes cinematographer Giana Cullen (2020), that signal 'coldness, isolation, and sadness'; they also evoke a monochrome palette similar to those in early Twentieth Century films. In these scenes, we return to a lost world that is somehow familiar to us from previous cinematic depictions. From those previous depictions, we know what is about to happen and therefore both understand the danger faced by the refugees, and comprehend what Winton must do (Bleeker Street Media, 2024). We are seeing a past where we know that escape is possible because this is a film about a man who, with others, made it possible for 669 children to flee on the Czech Kindertransport before the war began and the transports ended (Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, 2024). Reisz (2024), while critical of the film, points out that:

> It reconstructs the rescue itself touchingly enough and shatters some common myths. Contrary to the comforting idea that the Kindertransports were a shining example of British decency in welcoming persecuted refugees, we get to see how hard it was for Winton to charm or bully the immigration authorities into speedily granting visas, and to find foster families and sponsors willing to provide £50 for each child to ensure they would not be a burden on the public purse. It also makes clear that Winton was not a one-man band but ably supported by people such as Doreen Warriner and Trevor Chadwick who ran the Czech end of the operation and faced far greater physical danger.

One Life (2023) does then – while very much focussing on Winton's emotions – offer a perspective on the Kindertransport that also confronts Britain's failure to offer an adequate response to needs of families trying to flee continental Europe. It is also the only depiction of the Kindertransport I have seen that looks at what it was like for the parents of the rescued children to separate from their children in order to save them. Finally, it shows the child refugees themselves as fully realised people with futures and pasts and memories of how they came to be among a small group of children who were rescued.

Who could come to Britain and who was left behind

'The Kindertransport plan developed by Home Secretary [Samuel] Hoare and refugee advocates including Quakers and members of Britain's Jewish community,' writes Tasha Holtman (2014, p. 107), 'seemed likely to serve … political aims efficiently and without arousing opposition. The British public would sympathize with unaccompanied refugee children, who could enter Britain under an existing program allowing European children temporary residence for educational purposes'. Though commonly referred to as a 'British scheme,' the Kindertransport was not a government scheme. The government provided visas to the children, but, continues Holtman (p. 109):

> As ultimately implemented, the plan required a sponsor for each refugee child, an individual or organization committed to providing care and education until the child left Britain. Sponsored children under age seventeen could enter with an identity card rather than German

> travel documents or a British visa, simplifying and hastening the immigration process. From March 1939, the government also required that sponsors guarantee £50 per child to fund later emigration from Britain. Organization, finance and execution … fell to private individuals and agencies.

The Lord Baldwin Fund, founded by former Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, appealed for donations from individuals in Britain. An advertisement for the fund however reveals one of the most troubling things about the Kindertransport. The children on the Kindertransport were not orphans, but their parents could not come with them. The advertisement reassures British people that no one coming on the Kindertransport will take their jobs; the refugees are only children. While the scheme did rescue refugees, it also enacted a policy of family separation. Most (60 per cent) of the children never saw their parents again (Association of Jewish Refugees, 2022).[6] The advertisement also emphasises that it is not just for Jewish children. An appeal in the *Western Morning News* from 4 May 1939 that was carried in newspapers around Britain (Figure 1) states:

> 'Mothers' Day' is the day appointed for a great and special effort in support of the Lord Baldwin Fund for Refugees—to rescue another 500 Christian and 500 Jewish children. Please do your very best to make your local contribution a bumper one. There are still nearly 70,000 children in Germany—Christians as well as Jews—so persecuted that they are not even allowed to play in the public parks. Help to get them out—before it is too late!

Newsreels from the time reassured British audiences that the children were from middle-class homes (Gaumont British News Reel – Reuters, 1938) and that not all of them were Jewish (Gaumont British News Reel – Reuters, 1939).

There is no question that the Kindertransport was an exceptional rescue effort during a time when millions were trying to flee Nazi Germany and occupied Europe. At the same time, there is something bitterly ironic about a Mother's Day appeal that makes removing those children from their parents a condition of the rescue. It is also impossible not to wonder what the world might look like now if the victims of National Socialism had been able to find asylum in the many countries that refused them entry. Steve Paulsson (2002) observes that:

> The German Jews in the 1930s were in fact treated as 'bogus asylum seekers' (because their lives were not yet in immediate danger) and as 'economic migrants' (because, having lost their means of livelihood, they would benefit economically by coming to Britain). In effect they were treated as immigrants who were trying to jump the queue, rather than as people in desperate need.

Paulsson goes on to say that 'though Britain could not have known that Nazi Germany was going to murder the Jews, there were strong reasons for suspecting such a possibility – not least, Hitler's speech of 30 January 1939, threatening "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe,' which was widely reported at the time.'

The kinds of structures, support, and guidelines now in place to define and assist refugees internationally did not exist before 1951. While the people fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe were indeed refugees, there was no mechanism – or very little of one – to offer them asylum. If they found employment in Britain before arriving, they were granted a visa. For the most part, this involved women finding employment as domestic workers. Professionals were often not granted visas, because they were seen as taking work

Figure 1. Appeal from the Western Morning News, 4 May 1939. Image created courtesy of the British Library Board.

away from British professionals (Pistol, 2020). While some non-refugees did welcome those fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe, the refugees also faced hostility. A newspaper clipping from the *Daily Mail* in 1938 (Figure 2), resurrected on social media and blogs when refugee advocates want to show the newspaper's longstanding hostility to refugees, is headlined: 'German Jews Pouring Into This Country' and goes on to highlight the lawlessness of asylum seekers: 'The number of aliens entering this country can be seen by the number of prosecutions in recent months (Brown, 2015).'

Second World War refugees who managed to gain entry to Britain, greeted with suspicion on a societal level, would soon experience suspicion on an official level as well. Deemed 'enemy aliens' by local tribunals, many found themselves deprived of their liberty in the very country where they had sought refuge or were deported.

drome and establishments of Imperial Airways.

"GERMAN JEWS POURING INTO THIS COUNTRY"

By Daily Mail Reporter

"The way stateless Jews from Germany are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage. I intend to enforce the law to the fullest."

In these words, Mr. Herbert Metcalfe, the Old-street magistrate yesterday referred to the number of aliens entering this country through the "back door"—a problem to which *The Daily Mail* has repeatedly pointed.

Soon Caught

The number of aliens entering this country can be seen by the number of prosecutions in recent months. It is very difficult for the alien to escape the increasing vigilance of the police and port authorities.

Even if aliens manage to break through the defences it is not long before they are caught and deported.

The greatest of their difficulties is employment. Every employer must

address as the other three, was discharged under the Summary Jurisdiction Act. She had been charged with knowingly harbouring Bockner.

Mr. Metcalfe said it was clear that she relied on Bockner, for she had consented to marry him. He had no reason to doubt her story.

It was stated that Bockner was born at Minsk, Russia. Fierman was born in Warsaw, and had stated that he had been married to Weiss according to Jewish rites.

Mr. Clifford Watts, who appeared for all three, said he was instructed that they were making their way to friends in Africa when arrested.

Fierman and Weiss, who was expecting to become a mother in some months, could leave this country if the magistrate would give them an opportunity.

Fierman, he added, had had to run away from Berlin. He was a Jew, and he met Weiss, who was born there. Her brother was arrested and shot.

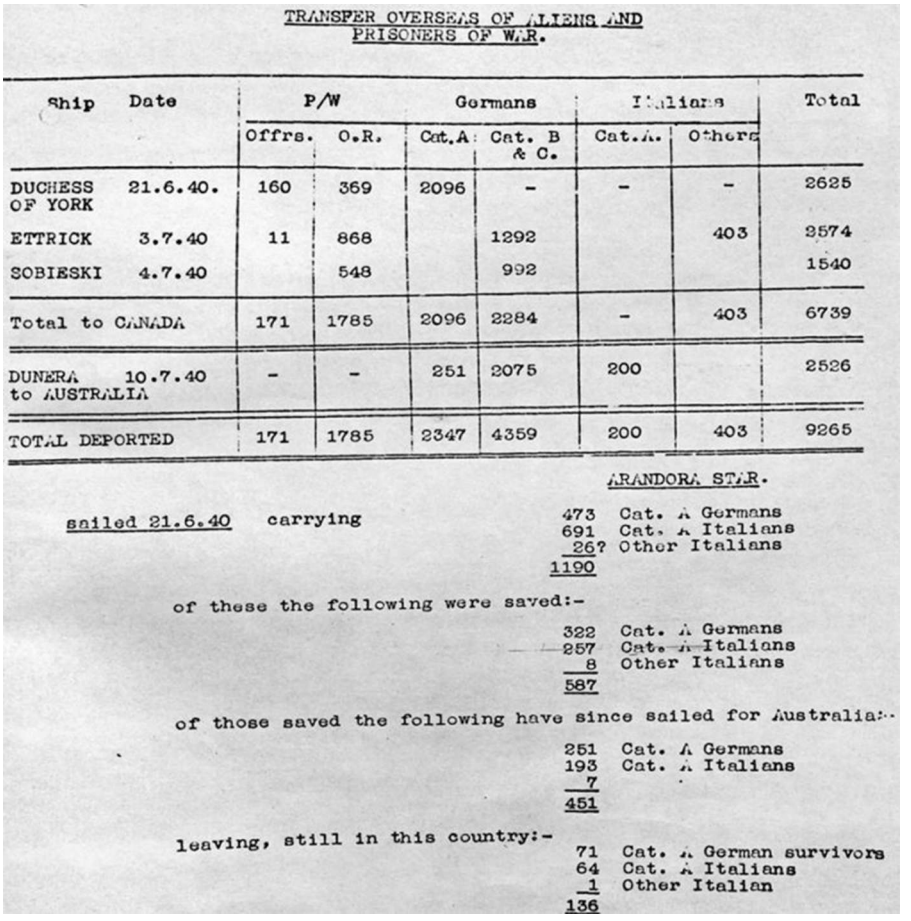
Figure 2. News clipping from The Daily Mail, 20 August 1938. This image often circulates on social media. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

From refugee to 'enemy alien': the story that keeps disappearing

Seventy thousand German and Austrian nationals[7] living in Britain, the majority of them refugees, were classified as enemy aliens by the British Government in 1939 and sent before tribunals to determine whether or not they posed a security risk as the Second World War began. But, notes Pistol (2020) 'The tribunal decisions were notoriously inconsistent depending on the magistrate in charge with some overusing the B category while others classified almost all enemy aliens as C.' Men and boys, in particular, were considered to be high risk (Kershaw, 2015). By July 1940, 27,000 people classified as enemy aliens in Britain had been arrested (Gillman & Gillman, 1980) and thousands had been deported (Figure 3).

Here is a description from the Australian National Maritime Museum of the conditions on the prison ship Dunera, which embarked from Liverpool on 10 July 1940 with 2,542 internees aboard (Tao, 2020):

> Although most of the passengers were German or Austrian Jewish refugees, they were treated as prisoners. Also on board were nearly 500 German and Italian prisoners of war or



TRANSFER OVERSEAS OF ALIENS AND PRISONERS OF WAR.

Ship	Date	P/W		Germans		Italians		Total
		Offrs.	O.R.	Cat.A	Cat. B & C.	Cat.A.	Others	
DUCHESS OF YORK	21.6.40.	160	369	2096	-	-	-	2625
ETTRICK	3.7.40	11	868		1292		403	2574
SOBIESKI	4.7.40		548		992			1540
Total to CANADA		171	1785	2096	2284	-	403	6739
DUNERA to AUSTRALIA	10.7.40	-	-	251	2075	200		2526
TOTAL DEPORTED		171	1785	2347	4359	200	403	9265

ARANDORA STAR.

sailed 21.6.40 carrying

473 Cat. A Germans
691 Cat. A Italians
26? Other Italians
1190

of these the following were saved:-

322 Cat. A Germans
257 Cat. A Italians
8 Other Italians
587

of those saved the following have since sailed for Australia:-

251 Cat. A Germans
193 Cat. A Italians
7
451

leaving, still in this country:-

71 Cat. A German survivors
64 Cat. A Italians
1 Other Italian
136

Figure 3. Document showing 'enemy aliens' and prisoners of war shipped to British internment camps overseas. Source: The National Archives: 'Arandora Star' and Huyton Camp inquiries. Catalogue ref: PREM 3/49.

Nazi sympathisers, some of whom were survivors from the transport ship *Arandora Star*, which was torpedoed by a German U-boat on 2 July, just hours after departing Liverpool.

[The] HMT *Dunera* became known as the 'hell ship'. Before the ship had even left port, the internees were subjected to brutal treatment and humiliation by their poorly trained British military guards. Henry recalled being pushed around by the guards, who stole the internees' precious possessions and dumped their luggage overboard. Two days into the nightmare voyage, [the] *Dunera* sustained minor damage after it was struck by a German torpedo in the Irish Sea.

[The] *Dunera* was dangerously overcrowded and the internees were kept in quarters below deck, with limited access to fresh air or daylight. Conditions were unhygienic, with the putrid stench of vomit, urine and unwashed bodies. The internees suffered from poor rations, inadequate medical care and regular beatings from the British guards. Henry remembered that they were restricted to about 10 min of exercise per day, supervised by armed guards carrying bayonets. On one occasion, the guards forced the internees to run over broken glass in bare feet.

[Italics in original text.]

On 21 August 1940, six weeks into the journey from Liverpool to Sydney, one of the internees, Jacob Weiss, killed himself by jumping overboard. 'Weiss had a mother and brother already in Buenos Aires, but the visa for Argentina that had come through for him just before he was interned had been confiscated at the beginning of the voyage. It had expired on the day of his suicide,' writes Margaret Bevege (1993, p. 89).

My father was one of the refugee prisoners on that ship. He was seventeen years old at the time, and had been adapting to his new life in England after he managed to gain release from Buchenwald concentration camp and obtain a space on the Kindertransport. He was interned in Liverpool first (on an unfinished housing estate in Huyton), then on the Isle of Man (where the largest internment camp was), and finally in the outback of Australia. Every time I tell people in Britain about that part of my father's story, they initially express disbelief. Sometimes I am asked, 'Are you sure that happened here?' Many people's reactions are similar to this comment on a National Archives blogpost about the internment of enemy aliens in Britain in 1940 (Rudge, 2020).

Robert Rudge, Thu 11 Jun 2020 at 8:57 pm:

> I am surprised to find that German Jewish refugees who were presumably fleeing persecution and risk of death were interred in the UK, as well as being deported to the colonies with nazi [*sic*] sympathisers then being torpedoed. One can imagine the atmosphere aboard the ships. Is anything more known about the detainees Italian or otherwise …

'Until the last few decades, little was known about the internment of enemy aliens by the British during the war,' historian Rachel Pistol wrote in 2019 (p. 37). Pistol notes that works like David Cesarani's BBC Radio 4 programme *Behind the Wire*, about the internment of Second World War refugees, which aired in October 2000, might have raised awareness at the start of the twenty-first Century. However, more than 20 years after *Behind the Wire* aired, another story about the internment of enemy aliens aired on BBC Radio 4 – an episode of *History on the Edge* presented by Anita Anand – was billed as a show that 'uncovers an extraordinary personal story from the margins of British history which challenges our perspective of the past we thought we knew' (BBC, 2021). The show, notes the History on the Edge website, tells 'the incredible story of a 19-year-old refugee from Hitler's Germany who, safe at last in Britain in 1940, was deported in horrific conditions to the other side of the world' (BBC, 2021). These shows followed earlier television documentaries about refugees who were interned in Britain: *Jailed by the British* (1983) and *His Majesty's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens* (1991). Simon Parkin's non-fiction account of the lives of internees, *The Island of Extraordinary Captives* (2022), is billed by its publisher as 'an untold history of British World War II internment camps' that reveals 'the hidden truth of Britain's grave wartime mistake' (Simon & Schuster, 2022). Every time a story airs or is published about Britain's internment of Second World War refugees, it is as if these events have never been heard about before.

A similar kind of amnesia applies to the story of Asian Ugandans who, when they were seeking refuge in 1972, were discouraged from settling in Britain despite the fact that they were British passport holders.

Ugandan Asians expelled from Uganda: refugees with British passports

Approximately 80,000 South Asians were given 90 days to leave Uganda in 1972, with Amin stating that 'British Asians were Britain's responsibility,' states Saima Nasar (2022). 'But the British government's initial response to the expulsion was to delay any migration for as long as possible. It hesitated when it came to accepting any obligation to its passport holders.' Britain, experiencing what the finance minister privately warned was 'the gravest economic crisis since World War Two' around this time (Bruce, 2022), was a place where power cuts limited electricity use to nine hours a day and labour disputes were frequent (BBC, 1972). Housing was also in short supply (Nasar, 2022). Politicians, media, and in some cases organised labour made it clear that Ugandan Asians were not welcome. 'Weeks after the expulsion order, on Aug. 25, 1972, the Smithfield meat porters marched in London to the Home Office, where they presented a petition calling for the end to all immigration into Britain. They carried signs stating, 'Britain for the British.' MP Enoch Powell, known for the racist and xenophobic 'Rivers of Blood' speech he delivered as Shadow Secretary of State in 1968, commented that 'people were rightly shocked at the prospect of 50,000 Asians from Uganda being added to our population.' The British government responded by asking Uganda, India, Pakistan, and the Falkland Islands to instead provide refugee to Ugandan Asians holding British passports (Nasar, 2022).

Ugandan Asians held British passports because when Uganda gained its independence from Britain in 1962, they were offered a choice of either a British or Ugandan passport. The Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968 restricted citizens of Commonwealth countries from entering the UK unless they could prove an ancestral link to the UK. National newspapers began to express sympathy for the Ugandan Asians trying to flee, notes Nasar (2022) – some referred to them as 'The Jews of East Africa'. Ultimately 28,500 Asian Ugandans, of the estimated 55,000 who fled Uganda, settled in Britain. The Ugandan Resettlement Board (URB), set up by the British government in August 1972, received the refugees at airports and assigned them to temporary accommodation – some on former military bases and in student residence halls. The URB decided where in the UK the refugees could settle, designating areas red or green. Refugees were discouraged from going to red areas, and were told that there was too much of a demand on housing, schools, social services, and employment in these areas. However, these were also places where many Commonwealth immigrants were already living. Leicester City Council for example took out an ad in a Ugandan newspaper that warned refugees: 'In the interest of yourself and your family, you should accept the advice of the Uganda Resettlement board and not come to Leicester' (Figure 4). Moving to green areas – where the URB encouraged Ugandan Asians to go though – could isolate the refugees socially (Hawkins, 2022). Over the long term, notes Nasar (2022), most of the refugees were able to move to the places they wanted to live, where they had social connections.

Nasar's essay, 'When Uganda Expelled Its Asian Population in 1972, Britain Tried to Exclude Them', is subtitled: 'Fifty years ago, they fled persecution to the UK; the legacy is that it marked a moment of generosity to refugees, but the real story is different'. The subtitle indeed describes most of the other articles commemorating the Ugandan Asians' arrival in Britain – articles published around the 50th anniversary as well as those appearing earlier. Paul Harris (2002), writing in the *Observer*, notes that 'Britain's

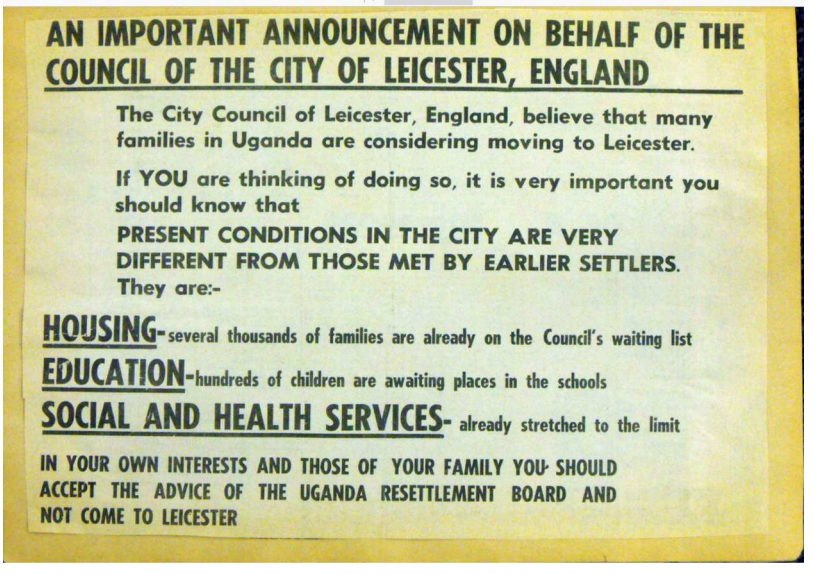


Figure 4. Leicester City Council Ad that appeared in the Uganda Argus, August 1972. Source: The Bennett Collection: Uganda Argus Newspaper, Archives and Special Collections MacOdrum Library, Carleton University.

first reaction to the Ugandan Asians was frosty' but that the refugees in Britain ultimately found 'Ugandan Asian success'. This he writes is because 'The answer seems to be hard work. Arriving with nothing, they quickly set about trying to rebuild the luxurious lives they had lived in East Africa' (Figure 5).

Empire and refugee policy

Before 1905, no immigration documents, refugee laws, or passports were needed to travel, but the 1905 Aliens Act changed that. As Eastern European Jews facing persecution in their countries of origin began to seek refuge in England, British law specified, for the first time, what made someone an 'undesirable immigrant', what criteria could be used exclude those immigrants, and what could exempt an immigrant exclusion. Asylum could be granted to 'those who were at risk of persecution or prosecution for political or religious reasons' (Bashford & McAdam, 2014, pp. 310–311). This framework would shape refugee discourse and law in the years to come, calling for a system that separated the deserving from the undeserving migrant, and calling on a redefinition of these terms in each era. When it appeared that circumstances might trigger a demand for asylum – on the eve of the First World War for example – the asylum clause could be removed and a focus on excluding 'enemy aliens' added (Bashford & McAdam, 2014, p. 338). The Aliens Order 1920, which introduced the 'work permit' to British immigration and linked immigration controls to the labour market, further narrowed the possibility of obtaining refuge in England. As Manoj Dias-Abey (2025, p. 122) notes, 'Even when the Home Office began to relax entry to refugees from Europe between 1937 and 1939 … work permits were seldom granted by the Ministry of Labour'.

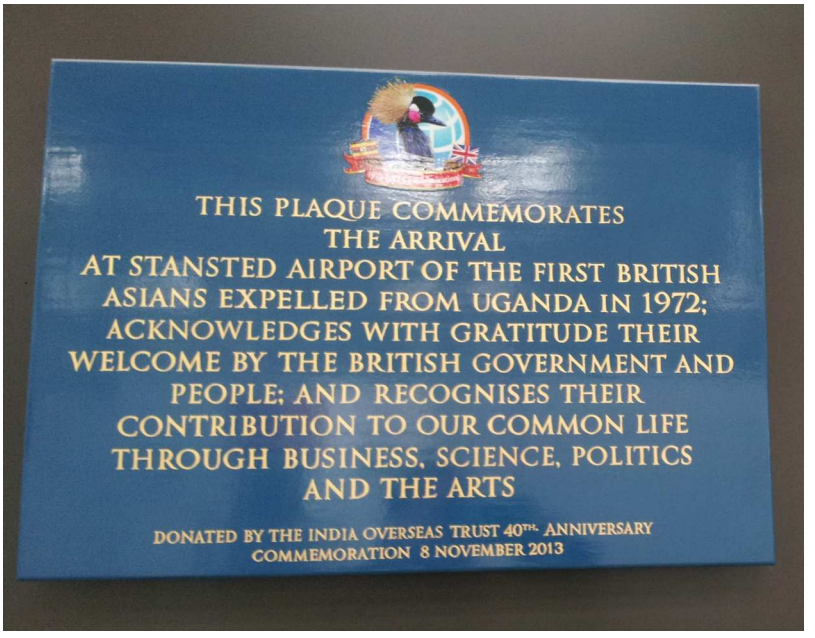


Figure 5. Plaque at Stansted Airport commemorating the arrival of the first British Asians expelled from Uganda. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Cropped from original.

Approximately 78,000 migrants fled Nazi-occupied Europe arrived in Britain before the Second World War began, with up to 50,000 of them arriving between March 1938 and September 1939 (Kushner, 2006, p. 114, p.117). While they were widely referred to as refugees by the press and the public, the overall response to them was mixed. Mass Observation material shows they were regarded with bigotry as well as sympathy. Politicians worried that their presence would cause a rise in anti-Semitism and xenophobia (Kushner, 2006, pp. 101–135). Sir John Hope Simpson, carrying out a survey of refugees in Britain in 1938, concluded that refugees did not have a 'right' to asylum, but that asylum was 'a privilege conferred by a state' instead (Bashford & McAdam, 2014, p. 342).

Britain is not unique in both mis-remembering and mis-characterising the history of its response to refugees. Considering Britain's response to refugees and migrants in the Twentieth Century though, it is also important to note how vast its empire was, and to understand how the political structure of that empire shaped its response to refugees during the war and after the war. In 1940, 25 per cent of the world's population were British subjects (Imperial War Museum, 2024). The defeat of Nazi-ism notes David Olusoga (2019), was only possible because of the mobilisation of

> 2.25 million Indian soldiers (the largest volunteer army on earth) and a third of a million African servicemen. Almost 7,000 men from the Caribbean [who] joined the RAF and thousands of seamen from across the empire [who] served in the merchant navy.

Additionally, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa entered the conflict and Canada entered the war at roughly the same time as Britain. And, Olusoga (2019) points out:

> The Eighth Army, the force shipped to north Africa to defend a key supply route – the Suez canal – from the Italians and the German Afrika Korps, was, in fact, one of the most diverse armies ever assembled. By 1941, the year of the siege of Tobruk, only a quarter of the troops of the British Eighth Army were British. As the historian Ashley Jackson has pointed out, the rest came from India, Sri Lanka, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Uganda, Tanganyika, the Gold Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Bechuanaland, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Palestine, Mauritius, the Seychelles and Cyprus.

Britain's mythology that it 'stood alone' during the Second World War exists alongside its mythology that it welcomed refugees during this time. Migrants from the countries that fought alongside British soldiers would often be among those who Britain tried to exclude in later years, as it did with Ugandan Asians in 1972.

Britain in 1940 also ruled over 20 per cent of the world's land mass (Imperial War Museum, 2024). Refugees fleeing continental Europe in the lead up to the War were therefore not only excluded from entering Britain, but also prevented from entering the countries that made up Britan's empire. The British government explored the possibility of allowing refugees from Germany to settle in its colonies and dominions from 1933 onward writes Joanna Newman (2019, p. 9), but:

> the Home Office, Foreign Office and Colonial Office all operated closed-door policies. One such note is emblematic of the British response: on 11 May 1938, Sir Cosmo Parkinson, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, was clearly irritated with yet another request from the Foreign Office to find opportunities for refugees in the colonial empire. In an internal message, he wrote: 'People will find it hard to believe that in all the wide expanse of the colonial empire there is really no corner where some of these wretched victims of persecution could find shelter. However, this has been gone into before, and the conclusion reached is always the same'. Parkinson came to this conclusion in May 1938, two months before the Evian Conference.

The increase in Nazi persecution of Germany's Jewish population, notes Newman (2019, p. 9), and the dramatic rise in the number of people trying to flee, did not change the British government's position. 'There was an abiding impasse between government departments due to the tension between their conflicting priorities', she writes, 'with the Colonial Office wishing to guard native populations against undesired large-scale migration, the Home Office resisting any relaxation in domestic regulations, and the Foreign Office increasingly concerned with preventing large-scale Jewish migration to Palestine'. The only exception to this was the creation of block visa agreements that made the Kindertransport possible, carried out 'Partly to appease public opinion in response to the incontrovertible news of persecution in Germany'.

How were the non-refugees in Britain to decide who deserved refuge then? Following the Second World War, international agreements began to define who would be considered a refugee and the rights of refugees.

Escaping the anti-refugee framework

The 1951 Refugee Convention, created during a diplomatic conference in Geneva, defines the term 'refugee' and outlines the rights of refugees and international standards of protection for refugees (UNHCR, 2023). Because the Convention was created as a response to the refugee crisis created by war in Europe, it

was essentially limited to protecting European refugees in the aftermath of the Second World War: The document contains the words 'events occurring before 1 January 1951' which are widely understood to mean 'events occurring in Europe' prior to that date. The 1967 Protocol, adopted 4 October 1967, removes these geographic and time-based limitations, expanding the Convention to apply universally and protect all persons fleeing conflict and persecution.

The cornerstone of it is that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom, which is known as the principle of non-refoulement.

Other rights contained in the 1951 Convention include: The right not to be expelled, except under certain, strictly defined conditions, the right not to be punished for irregular entry into the territory of a contracting State, the right to non-discrimination, the right to decent work, the right to housing, land and property, including intellectual property, the right to education, the right to freedom of religion, the right to access to justice, the right to freedom of movement within the territory, the right to be issued civil, identity and travel documents, and the right to social protection. It is these rights that Britain sometimes violates, despite being a signatory to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. The UN defines a refugee as someone fleeing conflict, persecution and human rights abuses who has crossed a border into another country. They define an asylum-seeker as an individual who has fled their country of origin and applied for asylum in another country, but their claim to refugee status has not yet been processed. Within Britain, among policy makers, charities, and NGOs, the term asylum-seeker is applied to people applying for refugee status, and the word refugee is used to describe people who have been granted that status and have 'leave to remain' (UK Government Digital Service, 2014). The rights of asylum seekers and refugees within Britain differ from one another. An asylum-seeker has the right to housing and legal representation, but does not have the right to work. A refugee does not have the right to housing – in fact, asylum seekers lose the right to housing once they have been granted leave to remain – but they have the right to work.

Britain has a number of charities that defend the rights of refugees in Britain, some of which began their work the year the Convention was created. The British Council for Aid to Refugees and the Standing Conference on Refugees, which later merged to become Refugee Council (2019a), is 'the leading charity working with refugee and asylum seekers in the UK, were founded in the same year. Refugee Action (2016), which provides advice and guidance to asylum seekers and helps people with refugee status to settle in Britain, and supports refugees and asylum seekers who are victims of hate crimes, was founded in 1981. Asylum Aid (2022), which provides legal advice and representation to people seeking asylum in the UK, lobbies and campaigns for a fairer UK asylum process in the UK, works for a better understanding of the position of UK asylum seekers and refugees was incorporated in 1990. All of these organisations, whose missions are mainly to support refugees and asylum seekers in Britain, also counter anti-refugee sentiment among non-refugees, the popular media, and governmental bodies in Britain. They address myths about who asylum seekers are, correct misconceptions about the legal rights of people fleeing war and persecution, and respond to erroneous beliefs about refugees and asylum seekers in Britain (noting, for example, that Britain, rather than a place that refugees flock to, only accommodates about one per cent of the 27.1 million people in the world who are currently displaced (Refugee Council, 2019b).

Refugee Week is an arts and culture festival 'celebrating the contributions, creativity and resilience of refugees and people seeking sanctuary (About Refugee Week, 2024)'. It takes place annually around World Refugee Day, 20 June, an international day designated to honour refugees around the globe, that was established in 2001, the 50th anniversary of the UN's Convention on Refugees. Under a paragraph of their website headlined 'Reclaiming 'Refugee',' they note that: 'We use the word 'refugee' because of its legal and historical significance, and because we believe it is important to reclaim it from negative uses'. Every year, refugee support organisations take part in an event called Refugee Week.

In 2015, Refugee Week published a 14-page booklet titled *The Heritage and Contributions of Refugees to the UK – a Credit to the Nation*. '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', the booklet begins. The pamphlet goes on to name well known exiles who found refuge in the UK: Victor Hugo, Karl Marx, Oliver Tambo, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, and Marks & Spencer founder Michael Marks.[8] The booklet goes on to reference information provided by the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA) to point out that: 18 refugees have become Nobel Laureates,16 refugees have received knighthoods, 71 Fellows or Foreign Members of the Royal Society were refugees,

And 50 Fellows or Corresponding Fellows of the British Academy were refugees. 'Although it is important to guard against an impression that only successful refugees deserve our support', this section of the booklet concludes, 'there is no doubt that the skills and experience that many refugees have provided have enriched our culture.'

The American cognitive linguist George Lakoff has written about the importance of framing an issue you are arguing for or against, and the ways that 'progressives' in the US not only allow 'conservatives'[9] to frame an issue using particular terms and narratives but unintentionally strengthen the conservative framework by repeating those terms and narratives even as they refute them. 'If you negate a frame, you have to activate the frame, because you have to know what you're negating. If you use logic against something, you're strengthening it', Lakoff said in a 2017 interview.

Groups advocating for refugees in the UK are strengthening anti-refugee narratives through the way they respond to those narratives. In addition to listing refugees who are extraordinarily accomplished in order to refute xenophobic claims about refugees, Refugee Week responds to the anti-refugee framework by arguing that:

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

Refugee Week, and other initiatives advocating for refugees in the UK, are not only accepting but are unintentionally strengthening the anti-refugee framework. It is understandable that, within this framework, refugee advocates want to evoke a fairer and more moral historical era. The problem is that that historical era, for the most part, does not exist. And refugee advocacy groups in Britain, to their credit, make that clear when they summarise the history of refugee policy in Britain. '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?' proposes Refugee Week's booklet titled *The Heritage and Contributions of Refugees to the UK – a Credit to the Nation* (2015). By noting that Britain was slow to respond to the plight of Jewish refugees fleeing Europe, introduced a visa requirement to restrict the refugee influx, and interned 27,000 foreign nationals as enemy aliens, Refugee Week provides the answer to this question. Britain not only failed to welcome the refugees; it did not even recognise the urgency of their need for refuge. Yet, that answer keeps slipping away from British public memory – even when it is provided again and again, it seems to dissipate.

Though beliefs about the right to asylum, and laws governing those rights, changed around the world and in Britain after the war, the timeline of refugee history in *A Credit to the Nation* shows how seldom refugees were welcomed in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. More than 70,000 refugees arrived from the Soviet Union, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary between 1945 and 1960. And since that time, relatively small groups of refugees have been given permission to enter Britain with the purpose of resettling: 3,000 Chileans fleeing the Pinochet regime in the 1970s, 24,000 Vietnamese refugees between 1975 and 1992, 2,500 Bosnians between 1992 and 1996, and 4,000 Albanian Kosovans between 1995 and 1999. There are two exceptions to Britain's track record of resettling relatively small groups of refugees: the first is Polish Resettlement Act, passed in 1947, which provided support for 250,000 refugees fleeing Poland between 1939 and 1950. This is the largest group to have settled in Britain in the Twentieth century. The second exception came in 1972, when Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin tried to settle in the UK; what was exceptional was that people in this group were British passport holders, and Britain still tried to prevent them from settling in Britain (Refugee Week, 2015).[10]

Conclusion: facing the past

It is not that the UK never comes through for refugees. It is not that it always fails. But the cultural memory of its response to asylum seekers does not match the reality. And what we have seen recently – asylum seekers kept in prison-like conditions on the Bibby Stockholm barge moored in Dorset, the Conservative government's attempt to send people seeking refugee status in Britain thousands of miles away to Rwanda, and the 'Homes for Ukraine scheme' that left it to individuals to provide housing for people fleeing war – is not an aberration. Most of these policies fell in line with the policies that came before.

'Both supporters and opponents of refugee entry [have] evoked past British generosity to the oppressed' to make their case, points out Kushner (2018, p. 173). And this nostalgia was especially widespread from 2015 to 2017, when over 1.5 million asylum seekers sought refuge in Europe. Refugee advocates, noted Kushner, were trying to make the case that welcoming refugees is the norm in Britain, while opponents to admitting refugees were trying to make the case that Britain did admit refugees when they were the right refugees seeking refuge in the right circumstances, but (they argued), the asylum seekers who arrived from 2015 on were neither.

There was no golden age when Britain used to welcome refugees of course. There have been exceptions to a damaged and damaging record of refugee policy overall, but British government policy towards refugees has almost always been guided by prejudice and

xenophobia rather than the ideals it professes. And the reality is such a source of shame to most people in Britain, that there is a constant editing and rewriting of its refugee history.

What would happen if an honest assessment of Britain's refugee history emerged alongside an honest assessment of its imperial history in popular memory? What shift in memory and self-perception would need to take place for a principled refugee policy to emerge in the present?

Notes

1. A search carried out on x/Twitter on 9 May 2023 showed approximately 15 UK accounts using some form of this phrase to argue for compassion towards refugees.
2. For example, Christopher N. Poulos's examples of auto-ethnographers in *Essentials of Auto-ethnography* (2021) are a Black woman in the American South, a queer writer documenting what it was like to come out, and an academic from a self-defined 'white trash' background. 'Autoethnographies focusing on the experiences of oppressed or marginalised cultural groups or individuals trying to make their way in the world have begun to emerge rapidly,' writes Poulos (p 6), which implies that those from the majority culture are called upon less to define their relationship to the themes they are exploring.
3. The layout of the inscription here follows the layout of the inscription on the plaque itself.
4. Winton has on occasion been referred to as 'the British Schindler,' a shorthand that, remarkably, obscures the fact that Oskar Schindler was a Nazi party member whose perspective transformed over time, while Winton was a young stockbroker who immediately began to support victims of Nazis in Europe when a British refugee advocate (and friend) asked him to do so. The child of German-Jewish immigrants to England who had converted to Christianity, Winton, like many rescuers, insisted that he had done nothing anyone else would not have done and when he was celebrated asked, 'Why are you making such a big deal out of it? I just helped a little; I was in the right place at the right time.' Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. (2024). Sir Nicholas Winton. Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. Available from https://www.hmd.org.uk/resource/sir-nicholas-winton/ [Accessed 19 February 2024].
5. These segments, spliced together in the YouTube video and posted in 2009 by a user identified as aggy007, are actually from two separate episodes of *That's Life!* filmed months apart. The original segments, shown more fully and in context, can be viewed on the BBC's archive website: BBC Archive (no date). Holocaust hero Nicholas Winton on That's Life. BBC Archive. Available from https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/nicholas_winton_on_thats_life/zbmxhbk [Accessed 19 January 2024].
6. 'Kindertransport Survey completed 'Making New Lives in Britain'' summarizes results of a 2007 survey with a sample of the almost 10,000, predominantly Jewish, children of the Kindertransport.
7. While people in this group would have been considered German and Austrian nationals by the British government, they would for the most part no longer have had German and Austrian citizenship, having been deprived of it beginning in 1933, when Germany's Nazi Government revoked the citizenship of Jews, political opponents, and people who 'emigrated' having been forced to flee. A similar structure was enacted upon Austrians once it was annexed by Germany in 1938 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, no date. Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database – - Revoked German Citizenship and Property Seizures 1933-1945. www.ushmm.org. Available from https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/source_view.php?SourceId=49495 [Accessed 16 February 2024].
8. The vast majority of the over forty exiles and refugees listed are male, which could in part be a reflection of bias against women in general during the time period covered, but can also be a reflection of the bias of the compilers of the list.
9. While Lakoff is writing about two opposing political groups in the US, it's also worth noting the differences between US and UK political affiliations. People called 'conservatives' in the

US are significantly more right wing than people called conservatives in the UK, and people called 'progressives' in the US are also more right wing than people considered center left or liberal in the UK.

10. These statistics and this timeline, compiled by Refugee Week, are presented in a slightly different format but with roughly the same results, by Refugee History (no date), an initiative of the University of East Anglia. https://refugeehistory.org/timeline-refugee [Accessed 18 February 2024].

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Notes on contributor

Linda Mannheim's PhD research explores what non-refugees expect of refugees through a work of creative non-fiction. She's the author of three books of fiction: *This Way to Departures, Above Sugar Hill,* and *Risk*. Much of her work (both fiction and non-fiction) explores memory, identity, and the concept of belonging to a particular place or community. Much of it is also about how people live their lives post-conflict – coping with forced migration, attempting to get on with work and relationships, and piecing together what's left after upheaval.

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