

Think Critically About Refugees – Additional Background Information

The plight of refugees is a controversial issue. People and politicians hold strong and frequently conflicting views. This document provides additional background reading to be used as the context for all of the other resources offered on the issue of refugees including the critical thinking activity, workshop and quiz.

TAGS

Refugees

The plight of refugees is a controversial issue. People and politicians hold strong and frequently conflicting views. For some people migration is an opportunity while for others it's a threat. Therefore it's difficult not to be biased about this topic, one way or another. The purpose of this section is not to provide answers but to share some ideas you may have come across already in school subjects, particularly History, and ask you to think critically. Please do try to read as much as possible about the issue, discuss it with as many people as you can and take what you decide are the right actions.



*Irish citizens show their welcome to refugees, Sandymount Strand, September 2015.
Photo: Steve Kingston/Oxfam Ireland*

21st century freedoms – but no freedom to move between countries

We live in the era of globalisation. Supporters of globalisation claim that its greater openness and connectivity between countries encourages economic growth and is good for everyone.

People talking about globalisation often talk about four main freedoms and how these freedoms make countries more interconnected.

Freedom for Capital to move between countries (capital is the money invested in businesses): people are free to buy stocks and shares or invest their money in virtually any country in the world. Money moves freely and quickly between countries.

Freedom for Goods and Services to move between countries (goods and services are the things we buy and sell): we are free buy and sell products around the world. Taxes on imports and exports have been dramatically reduced or altogether abolished. For example visiting almost any shop in any country will confirm that the items we buy and use come from virtually everywhere.

Freedom for Knowledge and ideas to move between countries (knowledge and ideas are all the things we know): Knowledge and information is instantly transferred around the world by the internet. For example scientists in one country can access research by scientists in another country almost instantly.

Freedom of Labour to move between countries (labour is people and the work they do): People are not free to travel everywhere in the world to live and work. People usually work in the country they are a citizen of or in a country where they have specific permission to live. There are controls at borders to control the movement of people.

- Why do you think capital, goods, services and knowledge can move almost freely around the world while people cannot?

A brief history of countries and their borders; from Westphalia to Versailles

In 1648 the Treaty of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years War. The Treaty introduced the principle that each individual country has sole the right to rule its own territory and that other countries shouldn't interfere in their neighbours' affairs. The idea of the modern country, or 'nation state' – independent and in charge of its own affairs – was born.

In the 18th and 19th centuries many countries were also empires. Examples include the British Empire, the French Empire, the Portuguese Empire, the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire. These were huge and diverse multi-national states. For example a person could travel from Baghdad to Belgrade without leaving the Ottoman Empire.

During the 19th century the principle of nationalism developed. This said that a country's borders should contain people united by a single language and culture. This was bad for empires, as they were multi-national, but good for nation states. For example Poland emerged as the country of the Polish people rather than a province of the Russian Empire.

The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 formally ended World War 1. One of its principles was nationalism. The treaty created new countries to reflect this principle; for example Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were created out of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. The Treaty of Versailles marked the beginning of the end of multi-national empires and broke up the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires into smaller nation states.

Many people believe the right of different peoples to have their own countries, free and independent from other countries, is good. However is nationalism always good?

Good: People who share the same language and culture can decide their own government for themselves. A nation state is cohesive as its people share similar backgrounds. People are not ruled and dominated by people from different backgrounds in a faraway capital city.

Bad: The nation state *includes* people who share the same language and culture. But at the same time it *excludes* people who don't. Excluded people may be minorities living within a nation state's borders or people living in other nation-states. Some people gain the rights and responsibilities of national citizenship while other people are denied them. This process has often been messy and inconsistent. For example the borders of many nation states have been hastily drawn, and many 'nations' have been denied their own state. For example 35 million Kurds live in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Armenia. They do not have their own nation state.

Thinking point: Is this brief history of countries important in explaining the modern crises of people being forced to flee their homes from conflict and disaster? Why?

A world without passports

Every time we travel to another country we have to bring our passport or identity document. Being citizens of a nation state means we have the automatic right to live in our own country but we don't have the automatic right to enter other countries. Therefore our travel documents are checked at the border of countries we wish to visit.

Passports for everybody are a relatively new innovation.¹



A Map of Europe in 1648 following the Treaty of Westphalia. Credit: See Footnote

There is a long history of kings issuing passports and promising safe conduct through their kingdoms to small numbers of people. These were often personally signed by the king and were issued to people like ambassadors and church leaders. The word passport literally means to pass safely through the port.

However there were no laws saying an ordinary person always had to have a passport to travel. Throughout much of history travel was difficult and dangerous, but passports were not required. However during the 19th century rail and sea travel grew rapidly and travelling to other countries became more frequent. People usually travelled without passports and moved between countries without being checked or registered at the border. When European aristocrats visited the tourist sights of Italy on the 'Grand Tour' they travelled without passports.

Immigration control in the UK was first introduced in 1905, primarily to prevent the unrestricted arrival of Jewish refugees from Russia. Up until this date anyone could enter the UK without their identity being checked. Identity documents and passports first became compulsory in the UK at the beginning of World War 1 and were introduced to protect national security. The standardised 'book style' passport was adopted by the League of Nations and by most countries in 1920.

Therefore people have travelled relatively freely and without passports throughout most of history. The modern passport required by everybody has existed for just over 100 years.

Thinking point: Are there links between the rise of nation states and the introduction of passports? Are there links between improving methods of travel (eg: trains and ships) and the introduction of passports?

¹ Photo credit: "Europe 1648 westphal 1884" by Robert H. Labberton - University of Texas Library From "An Historical Atlas Containing a Chronological Series of One Hundred and Four Maps, at Successive Periods, from the Dawn of History to the Present Day." by Robert H. Labberton. Sixth Edition. 1884.

Migration in history

Migration has occurred throughout human history. People have always moved within countries and across borders to seek new opportunities, wage war and escape persecution.

This is a brief history of significant human migrations. You could find out more about each example or research others.

Is there anything these migrations have in common? Is there a common cause or events that link human migrations or is each one historically unique?



A New Zealand passport from 1915.
 Credit: By Topshirilgan (Own work) [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

The Atlantic Slave Trade	16 th century to the 19 th century Between 11 million – 15 million Africans were captured and violently forced to migrate from West Africa to South America, the Caribbean and North America as slaves. The Atlantic Slave Trade has significantly shaped the economies and cultures of all the African and American countries it affected and its impact persists up to this day.
European migration to the USA	1820s – 1920s Over 30 million Europeans migrated to the USA primarily to escape poverty. The US Government built facilities on Ellis Island, New York, in 1892 to register new arrivals. Today one third of US citizens (or 100m people) can trace their ancestry back to immigrants who first arrived at Ellis Island. Immigration has proven very important to the US economy and has helped to make the USA a global superpower.
World War 2	1939 – 1945 The redrawing of European borders and the intensification of the Cold War after 1945 led to migration on a vast scale within Europe. For example 16.5 million German speakers alone were forced to move westwards from Eastern Europe. Marshall Aid, financial support from the USA, helped European countries to rebuild their economies and absorb new arrivals.
India and Pakistan	1947 India and Pakistan became independent countries in 1947, and communal violence erupted in both countries. 17 million people were forced to migrate, Muslims fled from India to Pakistan while Hindus fled from Pakistan to India.
Indochina Refugee Crisis	1975 – 2000 3 million inhabitants of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos fled the imposition of communist governments in 1975, many as ‘Boat People’. 2.5 million ‘Boat People’ were resettled, primarily in Europe and North America.

Modern migration

Here are the world’s largest migrations between 1990 and 2010. These are primarily economic migrants searching for better opportunities and work, although refugees are included in these migrations too.

Before you look at the chart decide what you think the largest migrations have been. Then look at the chart. Are there any surprises?



*Ellis Island, New York, in 1905. This was the first sight of the USA many migrants from Europe saw.
Credit: By A. Coeffler [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons*

Chinese workers moving from the Chinese countryside to Chinese cities	250 million
Latin America to North America	15 million
South Asia to the Arabian Peninsula (Dubai, Bahrain, Qatar etc)	6.8 million
Africans to Europe	6.6 million
Central Asian republics to Russia	4.3 million
Syria to neighbouring countries	4.1 million
Afghans returning to Afghanistan from Pakistan	3.4 million
Bangladesh to India	2.3 million
India to the USA	1.9 million
China to the USA	1.9 million
Iran to Afghanistan	1.6 million
Philippines to the USA	1.6 million
Indonesia to Malaysia	1.5 million
Eastern Europe to the UK	1 million

Source: Sunday Times 20.09.15 page 44

Refugees in European countries; the lesson from history

There is a fear that large numbers of refugees place challenging stresses on their host countries. However most countries have a history of successfully welcoming and absorbing new arrivals into their societies. Many refugees bring valuable skills, energy and knowledge which are of high value in their new homes.

Here are some of the largest groups of refugees who have arrived in the United Kingdom throughout recent history. All have been absorbed into their host communities, and they and their descendants are today indistinguishable from their fellow British citizens. Other countries have similar histories of refugee immigration.

Date	Numbers	Refugee Group	Reason for migration
16 th and 17 th century	50,000	Huguenots	Protestants fleeing Catholic persecution in France.
Late 19 th century	120,000	European Jews	Jews fleeing persecution in tsarist Russia.
1930s	70,000	European Jews	Jews fleeing Nazi persecution in Germany and Europe.
1940s	250,000	Europeans, primarily Poles	People forced to flee during or just after World War 2.
1968-1974	70,000	Kenyan and Ugandan Asians	People of Asian descent forced to leave Kenya and Uganda.
Late 1970s	11,000	Vietnamese	The 'Boat People' who fled Vietnam following the Communist victory in the Vietnam War.
1995	8,000	Montserratians	Inhabitants of the Caribbean island and British Overseas Territory of Montserrat. Much of the island was destroyed by a volcanic eruption.

Source: Robert Winder. *Guardian*. 18.9.2015 page 40

Sources of information

- UNHCR – The UN Refugee Agency - <http://www.unhcr.org>.
- The International Organisation for Migration - <http://www.iom.int/>.
- *The IOM produces regular Situation Reports providing up to date information from crisis affected locations. The 'Where We're From' interactive map illustrates the contribution of migrants to countries around the world – <https://www.iom.int/world-migration>.*
- Frontex – The European Union border agency - <http://frontex.europa.eu/>.