



Learning from Our Past

The Refugee Experience in the United States

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Introduction

Today there is much public discussion, both in the United States and abroad, about the worldwide refugee crisis. In recent years, the United States has welcomed 70,000 refugees per year. The President has indicated he intends to admit 85,000 refugees in Fiscal Year 2016, including 10,000 from Syria, an increase which has been criticized by some lawmakers and politicians. In considering the appropriate U.S. response to the refugee crisis, it is important to remember the central role of refugees in the American experience. This *Perspective* provides background on the refugee experience in the United States, including welcoming and exclusionary responses, the impacts of these disparate reactions, and lessons to consider in determining our response to the current refugee crisis.¹

A Land of Refuge

Many acknowledge that much of the initial migration to the North American English colonies was primarily refugees fleeing oppression and persecution. The Pilgrims' search for a place to freely practice their religion lies at the very root of American identity. Other seekers of religious freedom also found a home in the colonies that were sometimes labeled “plantations of religion”—whether they were Protestants fleeing persecution by Catholics, Catholics fleeing persecution by Protestants, or simply those whose religious practice put them outside the mainstream in their countries of origin.

Yet persecution and flight also lay at the core of the experience of many new American arrivals who are often characterized simply as immigrants. Consider two examples from the middle of the nineteenth century. The “famine Irish” provide one example. The potato blight that appeared in 1846 put the Irish at, and beyond, the brink of starvation. Disease soon followed; death by fever joined death by famine. So the Irish fled.

In one sense, their flight might seem “economic”: the catastrophic failure of a way of agricultural production. A consideration of historical conditions, however, shows how that doomed system of livelihood was itself created by a long-term English colonialism that stripped the lands from the Irish Catholics in favor of large English Protestant landholdings. The Irish were consigned to the periphery of their own country, with small plots of land that were little more than gardens and a crop that had little resistance to disease. Surely this was a form of governmental “persecution” like that invoked in recent legal definitions of refugee status. Furthermore, while the Irish were starving, the English were still shipping food from Ireland back to England. That too is a form of governmental persecution. But the suffering did not end with their flight from Ireland. As for many other refugees, the journey to America was a further trial. For with the famine had come disease. As they moved “out of Ireland, across the ocean . . . fever went with them, and the path to a new life became a path of horror.”²

The second example involves the German “Forty-Eighters.” 1848 was a year of tumult across Europe. In France, uprisings brought down the monarch Louis Philippe, and established the Second Republic. In Germany, agitation against autocracy and regionalism led to a liberal constitution in 1848 and an elected parliament. However, backlash soon gutted the parliament, and the liberals who had formed it were forced to flee from the renewed power of right wing monarchists. Initially—like many other refugees—they remained close to German borders hoping for a reversal of the situation. As time passed and hope for success abated, they turned toward countries farther away, including an America that had long been a destination for German emigrants. As new arrivals in America, their allegiances shifted over time to their new country. Coming from a place that had already banned slavery, they became active in the U.S. anti-slavery movement. Thus, these refugees possessed both skills that would make them successful in economic pursuits and the political experiences that would transform their own experiences of exile into a sharper appreciation of the inconsistency between American republican ideals and the continued existence of slavery.

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In both the Irish and German cases, the United States’ acceptance of people in need turned out to be immensely valuable to the country’s economic and political growth. To the Irish, for example, we owe much of the rough and tumble of populist urban politics; to the German Forty-Eighters, we owe a renewed sense of what a republic should stand for. In both cases, it seems fair to characterize these arrivals as “refugees” even though we often think of them only as “immigrants” adapting to a new land.³ For these cases—and for many others—we might not be far off the mark to say that America is as much a land of refugees as a land of immigrants, as much a place of refuge as a place of opportunity.

A Land of Refusal

America has not, however, always been willing to offer refuge, and those denials reverberate through our history. Even before the founding of the United States, the colonists often turned against those who were seeking what the colonists themselves had sought: a refuge and an opportunity to build anew. U.S. colonial history is rife with cases of persecution of religious minorities. One especially jarring example involves the French-speaking, Catholic Acadians who were forcibly exiled from their native lands in what is now Atlantic Canada.

The Acadians were industrious farmers. The taming of the tidal lands around places like Grand Pré on the Bay of Fundy (on the Atlantic coast, just north of Maine), for example, produced a sylvan landscape of lush green that endures today. An early eighteenth century agreement had established a compromise between the British desire for control over the Acadians and

the Acadian desire to avoid an oath of allegiance to Britain, which might force them to fight against their brethren in the still-French controlled areas of North America. But that compromise collapsed. In 1755 Captain John Winslow landed in Grand Pré with British troops. Their purpose only became clear some days later when he summoned all the men of the area to the local church, sealed the doors, and read a proclamation from the king that all their lands were to be seized and the Acadians themselves to be removed from “this his Province.” The men remained imprisoned in the church until they and their families were forcibly transported into exile.

The action at Grand Pré was one of the many British efforts to expel the Acadians from all of Atlantic Canada. Some of the Acadians managed to escape into the wilderness or across the waters to areas of French control. As with many refugees, however, there was no lasting refuge. Those who escaped from initial British attacks were often caught in later ones. Some, for example, escaped to the French-controlled islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon off the coast of Newfoundland, only to be forced to flee again when the British attacked those islands. For those transported away on British ships, fates were mixed. Those transported to the colonies that would become the United States faced hardship. In the two biggest colonies, they were barely tolerated. In Massachusetts, they were dispersed out to localities under strict surveillance. There were difficulties in obtaining work and housing, and the Acadians were under the perpetual shadow of having to indenture their children if they began to sink into debt. It was a resettlement system of a kind, but not a very welcoming one.

In Virginia, their fate was worse. They were initially allowed to land, and there was some support for them given their plight. But the general response was negative. The Governor himself noted how the Acadians had created “discontent among the people as we had no Roman Catholics here before, and they are very great Bigots.” Ultimately Virginia turned them away and that contingent of Acadians was transported to England, imprisoned there—where many died—then returned to France when war concluded, and sometimes from there journeyed back to the New World. This commitment to exclude often resurfaced in the post-independence United States. Those Irish and Germans arriving at the middle of the nineteenth century were met with frequent hostility. The famine Irish were allowed in, but the “no Irish need apply” signs were common and the caricatures of the day show a ready dehumanization of the Irish and a debasement of their Catholic religion. While they helped build our modern infrastructure—from canals to railroads to new urban landscape—they were incessantly rejected on both national origin and religious grounds.

The Germans arriving at mid-century initially had a more positive reception since their fight for a republic in Germany recalled America’s own rebellion against monarchy for a similar republican ideal. But the response became hostile, especially in places where these “free Germans” became active on behalf of the enslaved. One newspaper editorial of the day in Cincinnati, for example, excoriated the Forty-Eighters as the “worst kind of crazy visionaries ever thrown by circumstances upon our shores” and “by far the most dangerous element in our population.” The Germans’ great crime was that they should choose to “unite with the negroes” in pursuit of emancipation.⁴ Such

negative reactions against immigrants consolidated in nativist political parties. The Know-Nothing Party swept to power in Massachusetts in 1854, and made serious inroads in local elections elsewhere. Newly renamed the American Party, it fielded former president Millard Fillmore as its candidate for president in 1856.

The Civil War temporarily reduced immigration to the United States but, as immigration surged again after the war and continued through the early twentieth century, negative responses transformed into formal legal restrictions. Arrival limits were first employed against Asians in the

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late nineteenth century and then in the early twentieth century against all countries except those, like England, most closely linked to the United States. That shutting of the door, largely completed by the end of the 1920s, had implications for immigrants in general and for refugees in particular. The unwillingness to aid Jewish refugees in the 1930s, even when their fate under the Nazis was well-recognized, remains an especially shocking episode in a nation built on the notion of providing refuge for religious liberty. The *St. Louis* sailing off the east coast of North America in 1939, with its largely Jewish passengers denied the opportunity to land, remains a searing image of America's refusal of refugees—a denial based on a tightening knot of religious, ethnic, and racial intolerance.

Out of the Ashes

Such refusals and denials have taken their toll on core American values at home, and on the image and effectiveness of the United States overseas. However, the refusal of Jews before and during the Second World War, coupled with the new challenges of American world leadership after the war, sparked a greater attention to refugees. This, in turn, helped pry open the gates of U.S. immigration once again.

The first crucial issue involved what were labeled “displaced persons.” At war’s end, millions of people in Europe were outside their countries of origin either because they had moved across borders or because borders had shifted around them. On the international scene this would lead to broader world acceptance of the right to move across borders (as seen in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and a more specific attention to the rights of refugees (as seen in the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees).

To all of these efforts, the United States contributed. Within the country itself, the Truman Directive of 1945 was the opening salvo in renewed attention to refugees. In that directive the President used existing U.S. immigration quotas so that some of the European displaced persons could enter the United States. “Common decency and the fundamental comradeship of all human beings” require it, he wrote. It was a beginning.

The situation of displaced persons, however, proved intractable and there was increasing concern that if they did not find a proper refuge, they would be forcibly repatriated back to countries that were now behind, in Winston Churchill's coinage of 1946, an "iron curtain." Both Harry Truman and Franklin Roosevelt's widow Eleanor, with whom he maintained contact for many years on this issue, were appalled by the possibility. Congress too now supported action, and in 1948 passed the Displaced Persons Act, permitting some 200,000 to enter the United States. In 1950, Congress roughly doubled that number. As a result of these presidential and congressional actions, overall immigrant admissions in 1946 exceeded 100,000 for the first time since 1930, and reached nearly 250,000 in 1950.

Subsequent world events created further changes in U.S. immigration law. In 1953, Congress passed legislation specifying that refugees from communist countries could enter the United States under special admissions channels. The 1956 Hungarian revolution sparked another presidential directive—this from Dwight Eisenhower—that allowed some 38,000 refugees into the country. That Hungarian effort also showed a sharpening recognition that many refugees have significant education and skills that make them ideal new arrivals. A classified CIA cable on the Hungarian refugees in Europe, for example, noted the "happy" fact that the refugees were well-educated city dwellers who would likely fit well in the United States. Soon, a more formal program for refugees was launched to assist Hungarian refugees upon arrival. It was a model for the public-private cooperation in refugee resettlement that continues to this day.

These experiences lay the basis for the acceptance of far greater numbers of refugees from Cuba after the final victory of Fidel Castro's forces at the beginning of 1959. Once again, refugees turned out to be very effective newcomers, demonstrating strong economic performance, steady family structures and morals, and firm commitment to American values. Miami, Florida was galvanized economically and the conservative American political opposition to Castro was further entrenched. Those conservative values are seen in the two children of Cuban immigrants who launched campaigns for the 2016 presidential election: Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio.

The refugees from Cuba were a vital part of American immigration through the 1960s and early 1970s. The number of Cuban refugees, in turn, was surpassed by the number of refugees from Southeast Asia who began arriving in 1975. Despite great difficulties, many have succeeded in the United States and helped cement a notion of refugees as new Americans, ones who can balance interests across the political spectrum, joining the humanitarian concerns of the left, a strong commitment to the core American political values of the right, and serving centrist interests by providing significant economic contributions to America after arrival.

In recent years such large, anti-communist groups of refugees have yielded to a broader range of refugees whose paths to the United States are more varied—from the contested border areas of Burma to the disputed ethnic terrain of the Himalayas, from the Christians fleeing Iran and Iraq to the Muslims fleeing Bosnia and Syria, from the young men and women escaping destruction in

the under-developed southern Sudan to the young activists fleeing political repression in a rapidly developing China. In recent years, the American connection with refugees has expanded from special relationships with a few particular countries to the broader landscapes and dangers of the modern world. As we remember refugees now, we thus remember not only the depth of American history but also the breadth of the contemporary world and its relationship to the United States.

Looking Forward

In this ebb and flow of acceptance and denial, we also see a range of outcomes for refugees who have settled in the United States. Perhaps the most important negative lesson involves the effects of low, decreasing, and erratic funding. Refugees have practical, social, and spiritual needs after arrival that are more extensive than is true for most other immigrants. Arriving refugees need

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assistance, particularly the older and less educated, whereas the young and educated refugees are more likely to fare well in the American economy. We also learn from history how injurious the politicization of refugee admissions can be, subjecting newcomers to unwarranted hostility and misunderstanding.

There are positive lessons from America's long experience with refugees as well. The acceptance and resettlement of refugees reiterate fundamental American values and, indeed, the fundamental value of America. There has been opposition to refugees, to their unexpected arrival in unpredictable numbers, their uncertain and chaotic

origins, and their diversity since they often come from places and situations that are truly foreign to Americans. But there has also been great support, people who support refugees in both word and deed and who take their resettlement as a re-invocation of the best of what America can be.

Furthermore, the United States has a flexible resettlement system that can place refugees throughout the country in the locations, and among the people, where their adjustment can be most effective. The program, though at times disjointed and underfunded, is an impressive amalgam of the public and the private, the secular and the religious, the institutional and the individual. It reaches along the highways, byways, and backways of our land. The system has needed reworking at times to match refugee screening security issues and frequent degradation in resettlement funding. But it is a well-used tool that can surely handle the rather modest increase in admissions that the administration proposes. It may be helpful to remember that the United States throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century routinely resettled an average of nearly 100,000 refugees per year. Current administration proposals are thus only returning U.S. refugee admissions numbers to "normal."

The likely refugees from Syria have some distinctive talents and skills that may well make their adjustment to the United States easier than that of many recent arrivals. The United States, to its great credit, has shown willingness in recent years to accept some very difficult refugee

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cases, including people who do not have the background language and job skills that make adjustment here relatively easy. Many of the Syrians, by contrast, have the kind of language, educational, and urban-living skills that will facilitate the development of new lives in America. In addition to those practicalities, these new refugees are likely to share with earlier refugees an especially keen appreciation of the liberties that the United States provides, as they come from places where such liberties do not exist—where rights are trampled, religious and ethnic minorities oppressed, and opportunities hollowed out.

Endnotes

1. Most of the issues in this essay are discussed in more detail in the author's *Safe Haven? A History of Refugees in America* (Kumarian Press, 2010) and, especially for the issue of rejection of refugees, "Refugees" in *Immigrant Struggles; Immigrant Gifts* (Diane Portnoy, Barry Portnoy, and Charlie Riggs, eds., GMU Press, 2012).
2. Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (Penguin, 1991 orig. 1962), p. 205.
3. For additional detail on the mid-nineteenth century Irish and Germans (the "famine Irish" and the German "Forty-Eighters"), see Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (Penguin, 1991 orig. 1962); Edward Laxton, *The Famine Ships* (Holt Paperbacks, 1998); Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles* (Oxford University Press, 1985); Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *The German-American Forty-Eighters* (Purdue University: Max Kade German-American Center, 1998); and Mischa Honeck, *We Are the Revolutionists* (University of Georgia Press, 2011).
4. Mischa Honeck, *We Are the Revolutionists* (University of Georgia Press, 2011), p. 71.