

An Introduction to Refugees



Introduction

'Refugee' is an inherently loaded word. It asks us to sympathize with someone's else's suffering and is more emotionally charged than terms like 'migrant,' 'émigré,' 'fugitive' or 'asylum seeker.' Like the related word 'exile,' 'refugee' implies a sense of loss, perhaps even a tragic loss as a person must abandon their home due to fears of persecution or even death. Part of the reason for the emotionalism of the word is its use to describe people of faith forced out of their homes because of their beliefs. Many of the world's religions have stories of the plights of their coreligionists in the past. The word thus carries with it both an implication that the refugee is to be pitied - because they have had to give up social ties, property, and safety for the unknown - and to be celebrated - because they have the courage or strength of belief to make that sacrifice. That is, when we use the word 'refugee' to describe a migrant, we are usually making certain claims about where our sympathies lie, and urging others to support charitable policies with regard to those migrants. Meanwhile, many people whom an outsider might confidently call a refugee do not identify as such, and some even find the term of insulting and derogatory because it downplays their own sense of authority and self-dignity. Others get angry when outsiders refuse to recognize them as refugees as a pretext for refusing them access to emergency relief or asylum. But just because the word carries such sentiments does not mean that we cannot use it in a scholarly context. Being scholarly means being critical, systematic, well-informed, accurate, and thorough in our thinking about a topic. At the same time, it does not mean that we lack a value system.

INTRODUCTION TO REFUGEES

INTRODUCTION

DEFINITIONS

WHY DO PEOPLE LEAVE?: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS

CONCLUSION

Definitions

To approach the history of refugees from a scholarly perspective, it's useful to start with definitions. First, migration - the movement of a person or group of people from one area to another - has been going on since humans have been on Earth. And those migrations have brought with them changes, by spreading new ideas, belief systems, and values; altering languages and forms of communication; and spreading genes, diseases and species of plants and animals from one human community to another. While sometimes anti-immigrant advocates express fears about social change that comes with migration, historically speaking such changes 1) are a normal part of human existence, 2) often bring benefits as well as risks, even as 3) humans have rarely been good at differentiating the real threats and rewards associated with migrations that they experience or witness. From a scholarly perspective, migration is a perfectly normal part of the human experience and every human being is the ancestor of migrants.

Still, not all migrations are the same. One common distinction is between voluntary and involuntary migration. In cases of involuntary migration, one group of people uses physical force or the threat of violence to compel others to move. The transatlantic slave trade is one example. Ethnic cleansing is another example, as for instance during the Holocaust in Germany in the 1940s, or the deportation of indigenous peoples of North America by the United States government in the 19th century, or in the suppression of ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union. Other migrations are voluntary. Settlers and colonists are types of migrants who mostly welcome travel as an opportunity that they see as a positive option. Such was the case with widespread emigration from Europe to North America during the 19th century or the more recent practice of Americans retiring in lands where they can live with a higher standard of living than they could if they stayed put. That said, migration is rarely completely voluntary.

After all, why move if one is fully satisfied where one is?

Key Terms:

Migration

Involuntary Migration

Refugee

Push Factors

Pull Factors

A ship of Vietnamese refugees, 1984





Sahrawi refugee settlement in the Algerian desert, 2012

Refugees fall somewhere in between involuntary and voluntary migrants. We can define refugees as people who flee out of fear of some perceived threat. They thus have a choice to flee, but they make that choice reluctantly out of panic, dread, alarm, or distress that staying would be the worse option.

There are four more points that are important to recognize when we consider these definitions. First, usually multiple considerations shape a migrant's decision to leave. Thus, clearly distinguishing between categories of migrants can obscure as much as it clarifies. Second, migrants sometimes have good reasons to emphasize one reason for their travel and to deemphasize another. Third, sometimes hosts have their own incentives to emphasize the reasons that the migrants traveled. And finally, not all members of a migrant community might have travelled for the same reasons, when people who fled for different reasons formed a coherent group.

Why Do People Leave? Push and Pull Factors

As historians endeavor to be systematic about studying refugees and other migrants, they often distinguish between push factors and pull factors. Push factors are those that explain why a person or group of people would want to leave. The most common of these include poverty, persecution, environmental catastrophe, social collapse, and war. Pull factors are those factors that help explain why a migrant might travel to a specific location. Common examples of pull factors are the promise of a good income, the ability to communicate in a language they speak, the existence of friends or relatives in that place, the reputation of a place for peace and stability, or active recruitment efforts. As you learn about specific refugees in this lesson, try to consider all the push and pull factors you can in assessing their migration.



Dust Bowl drought refugee's car on U.S. Highway 99, 1936

Refugees tend to be those for whom push factors dominate or for whom push factors are especially sudden or severe. However, pull factors are also present for refugees. Often anti-immigrant activists among host populations spend considerable energy emphasizing that those claiming to be refugees are actually moving more for pull factors than for push factors. But those arguments are usually rooted in a moral panic driven by fear, anxiety, or xenophobia. We should be cautious in such cases about accepting their claims at face value. Having a clear analytical framework for distinguishing types of migration is a useful tool from keeping heated rhetoric from clouding our judgement.



Muhajirs fleeing Europe, 1912 (above) and Syrian and Iraqi refugees, 2015 (below)



Push and pull factors usually focus on features of the places from which the migrants depart or to which they travel. But we should also consider what happens in-between. Many factors about the opportunities for travel shape refugee movements well. Certainly, geographical barriers – like mountains and oceans – put great limits on travel routes. Preexisting transportation infrastructure – roads, regular water (or more recently air) routes, or other established travel corridors – can funnel refugees toward certain locations. We might think of those as kinds of pull factors, except that they do not describe anything about the destination itself. Preexisting structures along the way that shape migration might be human as well. Networks of sympathetic supporters encountered during the journey might direct migrants toward certain locations. Encountering dangers en route might similarly shape one’s travel plans. In addition, the language or languages spoken in places through which a migrant travels shape their travel too. The opportunities for nourishing food and clean water might as well. So, while you should be attentive to identify both push factor and push factors, considering the structural conditions that shape the travel itself can also prove critical in understanding refugees’ movements.



Another factor that is a kind of pull factor that you might not be thinking about is whether the migrant even knows the existence of their final destination and, if they do, what ideas they have about it. Sometimes refugees head out to reach some place that they have heard is welcoming, stable, or safe. At times, they might even have weeks or months to plan out their travels and make inquiries about what life is like there. Other times, refugees have no idea where they might end up. In cases, they often wander aimlessly, just trying to find any safe location.

Kurdish refugees travel by truck, Turkey, 1991

Some of the refugees we will study in this module travelled only a short distance from the place they fled. Others traveled an ocean away. But those who travelled further away did not necessarily have a more difficult time; often, they travelled so far because they had the resources and knowledge to do so. Meanwhile, those who fled to nearby locations were often among the most vulnerable. In many cases they had such limited means that they were compelled to risk staying close to their potential persecutors so that they retain access to resources.

Finally, in many cases refugees are not a representative sampling of the population under threat. In some cases, for instance, more vulnerable populations like children, women, and the elderly flee while adult men remain home. In other cases, young adult men with fewer landed possessions, family complications, or health limitations are over-represented among refugee populations. Often, people with greater education, more wealth, and more extensive social networks in foreign lands are more highly represented among refugee populations. In other cases, social elites are less likely to be refugees because they can use their resources and status to protect them from dangers at home.

Conclusion

All of these factors are worthy of consideration as you think about whether we can justifiably describe someone as a refugee, considering the emotional, spiritual, and even moral resonances that the word can carry.

In what follows, we will ask what forces shaped the push and pull factors of various coerced migrants in the Atlantic World in the 1670s and 80s. We will also whether some of these forces affected multiple groups of migrants in Europe, Africa, and the Americas - perhaps in similar and perhaps in different ways. And then we will consider how later memory of those migrants re-remembered them in ways that continues to shape the world today.

***Syrian refugees strike on a train platform
in Budapest, Hungary, 2015***



Image Citations:

Page 1:

Forced removal under Apartheid, Mogopa, Western Transvaal, February 1984, CC BY-SA 3.0, Paul Weinberg,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Travelling_Light_76_F.jpg

Page 2:

35 Vietnamese refugees wait to be aboard the USS Blue Ridge, 350 miles northeast of Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, May 15, 1984, Public Domain,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:35_Vietnamese_boat_people_2.JPG

Page 3:

Sahrawi refugees - a forgotten crisis in the Algerian desert, February 22, 2012, CC BY-SA 2.0, European Commission DG ECO,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Sahrawi_refugees_%E2%80%93_a_forgotten_crisis_in_the_Algerian_desert_%287%29.jpg

Dorothea Lange, "Drought Refugee's Car on U.S. Highway 99 Between Bakersfield and Famoso," California, 1936, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., Public Domain,
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/fsa.8b29930/>

Page 4:

Muhajirs from the Balkans in Turkey during the First Balkan War, 1912, Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Muhajir.jpg>

Syrian and Iraqi refugees arrive at Skala Sykamas Lesvos Greece, October 30, 2015, CC BY-SA 4.0, Ggia,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:20151030_Syrians_and_Iraq_refugees_arrive_at_Skala_Sykamas_Lesvos_Greece_2.jpg

Kurdish refugees travel by truck between mountain campsites and tent cities established by U.S. military personnel as part of Operation Provide Comfort, April 1, 1991, Public Domain,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kurdish_refugees_travel_by_truck,_Turkey,_1991.jpeg

Page 5:

Syrian refugees protest at Budapest Keleti Railway Station, Hungary, September 4, 2015, CC BY-SA 4.0, Mstyslav Chernov,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syrian_refugees_strike_at_the_platform_of_Budapest_Keleti_railway_station._Refugee_crisis._Budapest,_Hungary,_Central_Europe,_4_September_2015._%283%29.jpg