

REFUGEES **IN** EUROPE

A history of

MIGRATION, DISPLACEMENT + INTEGRATION

— BY DR. ANNE HAMMERSTAD —

A large-scale migration and refugee crisis is unfolding in Europe. During the course of 2015, more than 1 million people arrived aboard overflowing and often unseaworthy vessels crossing the Mediterranean Sea to European Union member countries Italy and Greece. Almost 3,800 people died in the attempt. Most of the new arrivals have headed farther north into the EU, with Germany expecting to receive 1 million asylum applications in 2015.

Global displacement stands at over 60 million people, counting refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and others in refugee-like situations. This is the highest number since World War II. Many have drawn on this statistic to suggest that the population movement into the EU is unprecedented in scope and manageability.

The numbers are indeed high and the EU's response — poorly coordinated and piecemeal, driven in part by fear and hostility, in part by sympathy and generosity — has made it less manageable than it needs be. The chaotic nature of the influx has led many to feel that Europe is overwhelmed. The challenges are indeed great, but it is worth noting that the continent has dealt with larger flows, even in recent history: Twenty years ago, 3 million people were displaced at the end of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the vast majority of them having fled within Europe.

Europe's long history of migration and displacement shows that mass population movements are catalysts for change — sometimes for the worse, leading to conflict and violence, and sometimes for the better, with the newcomers contributing to the prosperity and strength of host communities. If Europe's migration and displacement history offers a lesson for today, it would be that sympathetic and pragmatic approaches to admitting and integrating refugees usually pay off in the longer term, while xenophobic and fear-driven attempts at "stopping the flow" through harsh security measures increase the risk of conflict and instability. This article is not meant to provide a historical blueprint for how to respond to today's crisis — that would be impossible. But by taking a historical view, we can add nuance and perspective to today's challenges, encouraging a less panicked and more measured response.

FROM MIGRATION TO REFUGEE CRISIS

Although hundreds of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers had been using the migration route across the Mediterranean to Italy for several years, it was only in the summer of 2015 that Europeans really started to pay attention. There are several reasons for this. From June onward, the flow of people shifted as landings dropped in Italy and soared in Greece. Furthermore, the new arrivals did not stay in Greece, but headed north on the "migrant trail" through the Balkans, most hoping to reach Germany.

A demographic shift accompanied the geographical one. The vast majority of those traveling from North Africa to Italy were young men. Now, growing numbers of families with children were arriving on the Greek islands. There was also a marked shift in nationalities and their motivation for making the journey to Europe: The arrivals in Italy had hailed from a range of different countries, some steeped in conflict, others merely poor, allowing European governments to label them as irregular economic migrants. That label simply did not fit those arriving in Greece. Of the more than 800,000 people who made their way from Turkey to the Greek islands in 2015, 57 percent were Syrians. Another 33 percent came from Afghanistan and Iraq. It dawned on European governments that their migrant crisis was to a large extent a refugee crisis.

Since then, European political discourse has been dominated by two broad questions: What does the influx of refugees mean for European economies and security, and how should Europe respond to the influx? How the latter question has been answered is closely related to how the first question is perceived. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel has concluded that the refugees, particularly Syrians, present Germany with

both a humanitarian duty to provide asylum and an economic opportunity to draw much-needed young recruits to Germany's aging labor pool. In Sweden, a sense of solidarity and obligation toward refugees has led to a generous asylum policy.

Hungary, on the other side of the spectrum, has sealed its borders against illegal migrants whom the Hungarian government perceives as a threat to national sovereignty, border security and Hungarian culture and identity. Most of the other countries on the migrant trail from Greece to Germany have moved the refugees on from one border to the next as fast as they can, with little coordination and much recrimination among neighboring states. The British government's response has been disappointingly self-centered and detached. Most of the rest of Europe has juggled anti-migrant concerns with an acknowledgment that European states have a legal and moral duty to provide protection and assistance to refugees arriving on their territory.

East German refugees penned behind barriers outside the West German Embassy in Prague in October 1989 wait to take a special train to West Germany after East Germany lifted restrictions on emigration.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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that walls, panic and
recrimination are likely to
increase political and security
problems arising from mass
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The terror attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, which killed 130 diners, concertgoers and football fans, brought a new fear to the forefront — that of the terrorist masquerading as refugee. The police found a tattered Syrian passport next to the body of one of the suicide bombers at the Stade de France. The passport, deemed to be fake, had followed its owner into the EU from the Greek island of Leros, after which it was registered again in Serbia. Its owner has not yet been identified, but may have been an Iraqi. Most of the other Paris attackers were French and Belgian nationals who had traveled to IS-held territory in Syria. The discovery of the passport led to calls in the United States for an immediate halt to immigration and resettlement programs for Syrian, as well as other Muslim, refugees.

This is a short summary of the main issues raised by mass migration movements to host countries, not just today but throughout history. What is the economic impact of population influxes? Can new arrivals be absorbed into host communities? Will they affect communal cohesion, identity and culture? Can they cause instability and even violent conflict?



REFUGEES AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

If one thing is constant about European history, it is the ebb and flow of populations into, across and out of the continent. Ancient Rome was founded by a group of refugee-warriors led by Aeneas, fleeing from the ruins of Troy to establish a new empire, or so Roman legend would have it. Centuries later, other refugees contributed to the empire's fall. The 18th-century historian Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* describes how the Western Roman Empire buckled and dissolved under the pressure of large population movements, Visigoths and Vandals among them, pushing in from the east, some as refugees, others as conquerors.

The sacking of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 is still held up as a warning to Western civilization not to admit barbarians at the gate. "This is exactly how civilizations fall," historian Niall Ferguson exclaimed in a *Boston Globe* column on the Paris terror

attacks. He went on to argue that Europe has let its defenses decline and crumble and grown decadent while opening "its gates to outsiders who have coveted its wealth without renouncing their ancestral faith." In other words, by allowing in refugees and migrants from conflict-ridden, Muslim-majority countries — the barbarians at the gate — stable and prosperous Europe is undermining its own security.

The Visigoths were in fact Arian Christians by the time they sacked Rome. By then, many Germanic tribes had been living within, or in close contact with, the Roman Empire for centuries. While some "barbarian" groups attacked the Roman Empire, others defended it. Roman armies relied on Germanic recruits for their many wars, whether internal strife between Roman factions or in defense of the empire's borders.

Lex Paulson recently argued that the Visigoths' sacking of Rome could best be described as the result of a mismanaged refugee crisis. Roman leaders first welcomed the Visigoths, who were fleeing the onslaught of the Huns, but then turned against them a few decades later. The Visigoths reciprocated the hostility and grew to become a powerful enemy as the Western Roman Empire weakened, riddled by corruption, intrigue, coups and civil strife.

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND MASS EMIGRATION

Fast forward to the 19th century, when the Industrial Revolution set off Europe's next

Kosovar refugees flood into Albania in June 1998, fleeing ethnic violence amid clashes between Serb security forces and Kosovar guerrillas. REUTERS





If Europe's migration and displacement history offers a lesson for today, it would be that sympathetic and pragmatic approaches to admitting and integrating refugees usually pay off in the longer term.

migration period, this time in the form of mass emigration. Between 1820 and 1920, about 60 million Europeans left the continent, some fleeing political or religious persecution, many more escaping poverty and social injustice, and almost all traveling to North America.

At the turn of the 20th century, more than a million Europeans were leaving the continent every year. As a proportion of population, the figures were even more staggering: from 1900 to 1909, 107 of every thousand Italians emigrated, as did 83 of every thousand Norwegians.

Many American citizens worried that the new arrivals from countries such as Germany, Sweden and Italy were overwhelming the country, and that their foreign traditions, religion (in the case of Catholics) and languages made them incapable of assimilating into the American way of life. As the U.S. turned isolationist after World War I, immigration became severely proscribed, bringing the era of European mass emigration to a close.

AN AGE OF MASS DISPLACEMENT

As militarism and nationalism led Europe into World War I, the continent's migration patterns changed from voluntary emigration to forced displacement. The demise of the Ottoman Empire led to chains of displacement, and forced population exchanges took place between the newly created nation state of Turkey and its neighbor Greece, with many lives lost in the process. The Russian Revolution caused displacement on such a scale that the League of Nations appointed Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian explorer and humanitarian pioneer, as the world's first high commissioner for refugees. "Nansen passports," internationally recognized travel documents, enabled 450,000 Russian — and later Armenian, Assyrian, Greek and Turkish

— refugees to find safety. Among the Nansen passport holders were Igor Stravinsky, Anna Pavlova, Marc Chagall and Sergei Rachmaninoff.

As authoritarian and totalitarian regimes took hold of parts of Europe in the inter-war years, refugee numbers also grew. Jewish refugees fled pogroms in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and Nazi persecution in Germany. A few lucky ones were allowed into Western Europe and North America. Those with international standing in the arts and sciences were welcomed: Albert Einstein was among the many Jewish scientists who moved to the U.S. in the years before World War II, as were several nuclear scientists who teamed up to create the first atomic bomb.

For ordinary Jewish refugees, there were few places to flee. There was no Nansen Passport available for them, and anti-Semitism abounded. Not unlike the fear of radicalized Muslims hiding among today's Syrian refugees, many believed that Jewish refugees were Bolsheviks, radicals and subversives, and even Nazi agents. In the period from 1933 to 1945, the United States' already small official immigration quotas for Germans went unfilled almost every year, as suspicious immigration officers rejected most applications from German Jews.

Public opinion supported the restrictive stance. In an opinion poll from 1938, 82 percent of Americans opposed taking in large numbers of Jewish exiles from Europe. Another poll that same year asked if the U.S. should take in more Germans, Austrians and other political refugees. "With conditions as they are, we should try to keep them out," 67.4 percent answered.

AN INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE-PROTECTION REGIME

World War II created the largest population upheaval in modern European history. In May 1945, at least 40 million people were displaced in Europe. They included survivors of the Holocaust, prisoners of war and millions of Poles, Ukrainians and citizens of the Soviet Union fleeing the totalitarianism of Stalin's

regime. But the largest single group of refugees were the 13 million ethnic Germans, most of whom had fled or been expelled from eastern European countries and the Soviet Union in the closing months of the war.

The plight of these millions of displaced people and revelation of the horrors of the Holocaust spurred the U.S. administration to spearhead creation of an international regime for refugee protection. After various interim measures and organizations, the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted in 1951, accompanied by a new agency, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

A decade after the war ended, a new refugee crisis erupted in Europe. When the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in late 1956 to crush a popular uprising, 180,000 Hungarian refugees fled to Austria and another 20,000 went to Yugoslavia. Most of the refugees arrived in the space of a few weeks. Again, refugee resettlement was used as a tool to avoid refugees overwhelming host countries or becoming a source of domestic (Austrian) or international (NATO-Soviet Union) tension. While the UNHCR organized emergency aid for the refugees, a large-scale resettlement operation was quickly executed. By mid-1958, 140,000 Hungarian refugees had been resettled in 35 countries, led by the U.S. (38,000) and Canada (35,000).

The early postwar years provide valuable lessons on how to handle today's Syrian refugee crisis in Europe. First, the collective punishment of Syrian refugees for the actions of Islamic State terrorists would not only be unjust and unfounded, but politically counterproductive. It would give official sanction to xenophobic impulses and prepare the ground for radicalization of disaffected European youth of immigrant backgrounds. This would play straight into the hand of the Islamic State, whose stated aim is to create us-versus-them animosity between non-Muslim Westerners and Muslims.

Second, refugee resettlement, done promptly and supported by a broad coalition of states, is an effective tool for stabilizing countries of first asylum. This was the case for Germany after the war and Austria in 1956. It is the case again now, not just for Europe's own struggling frontier states, but for Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Syria's

neighbors are showing the strain of hosting 4 million Syrian refugees over several years. To relieve their burden through a mix of economic assistance and refugee resettlement is in the interest of international security and of avoiding even larger refugee movements in the future.

POST-COLD WAR DISPLACEMENT: YUGOSLAVIA

In the 1980s, a trickle of dissidents arriving in Western Europe from the Communist bloc developed into streams of asylum seekers from all corners of the world. Asylum figures increased rapidly until, in 1989, 283,000 applications were lodged in the EU. This presaged even steeper rises in asylum figures in the early post-Cold War period, coupled with a sharp increase in other types of displacement. By 1995, there were 7.7 million refugees, internally displaced people and asylum seekers in Europe as a whole. Almost 3 million of them were within the 28 countries constituting today's EU.

It has been commonplace to discuss today's Syrian refugee influx as the largest in the EU's history. Between April 2011 and October 2015, over 680,000 Syrians have sought asylum in Europe (not just the EU), most arriving in the past two years. These large and growing numbers, combined with the swift and chaotic manner of their



Migrants wait outside the central registration office for asylum seekers at the State Office for Health and Social Services in Berlin in October 2015. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The refugee convention confirmed the right of refugees to seek asylum and the obligation of states not to return them to danger. It remains the cornerstone of refugee-protection law and asylum-determination procedures today. Because it is illegal to return a refugee to danger — a practice known as *refoulement* — all asylum applications must be investigated, and only if their claims are deemed unfounded can the asylum seeker be expelled. The unacceptable alternative of the 1930s was that states could return refugees to their persecutors at will, in the name of political expediency, economic cost or public opinion.

New legal protections for refugees were accompanied by practical efforts to reduce Europe's massive population of displaced persons. The U.S. initiated large-scale resettlement and immigration programs to take pressure off war-devastated and unstable European states. Tens of thousands of Germans benefited from resettlement in the first couple of years after the war, despite frequently voiced concerns that there could be Nazi sympathizers among them who could pose a threat to national security. Cooler heads prevailed, and displaced Germans avoided collective punishment for the crimes of the Nazi regime. Between 1950 and 1959, 575,000 Germans emigrated to the U.S.

arrival, have led to a humanitarian emergency in Greece and other places along the migrant trail.

But the number of Syrians in Europe is still smaller than the number of displaced people resulting from the breakup of Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995. By the end of the Balkan wars — the largest conflict in Europe since World War II — almost 3 million people had been displaced, the vast majority within the borders of Europe.

In 1995, the 28 countries that today form the EU hosted 1.35 million displaced persons from the former Yugoslavia. Not all were asylum seekers or had refugee status; many had “humanitarian leave to remain” — a category of temporary protection introduced to cope with the large refugee populations. Others were hosted as *prima facie* refugees by countries neighboring the Balkan war zones.

Many Balkans refugees have since returned to their homelands; some were forced to return after the Dayton Agreement. Those who stayed have integrated relatively well into their host countries, although in some countries they still lag in terms of employment, income and education.

9/11: THE ANTI-ASYLUM FALLOUT

In the first half of the 1990s, 2.4 million people applied for asylum in the EU, leading to a race among member states to make themselves unattractive to potential asylum seekers. The efforts had an effect. The next 15 years saw considerably lower asylum application levels: 1.6 million in 1995-1999, another 1.6 million in 2000-2004, and 1.2 million between 2005 and 2009. Despite the drop, concern over “unmanageable” numbers did not go away. By the turn of the millennium, “asylum seeker” had become a dirty word, synonymous in many European minds with economic immigrants abusing the asylum system.

This hostility toward asylum seekers came to the fore after the terror attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Within days of the attacks, government after government in the Western world announced draconian measures to “close the asylum loophole” in their immigration and border control regimes. Speaking to the House of Commons in November 2001, then-British Home Secretary David Blunkett said: “We have a right to say that if people seek to abuse rights of asylum to be able to hide in this country and organize terrorist acts, we must take steps to deal with them.”

In fact, none of the 19 al-Qaida hijackers had been asylum seekers. All had entered the U.S. legally, although some had overstayed their visas. The post-9/11 clampdown on asylum was the culmination of hostility toward asylum seekers that had built up during the 1990s. Draconian measures that had been deemed unacceptable by democratic societies before 9/11 became justified in the name of national security.

Evidence of refugees or asylum seekers committing terrorist acts in the industrialized world remains scant. A small minority of asylum seekers, or more often the children of asylum seekers, has become radicalized after arriving in their host countries. One of the assailants in 2013 at the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, had arrived in Norway as a 9-year old refugee from Somalia. The Tsarnaev brothers, the Boston Marathon bombers, arrived as children in the U.S.,

where their parents sought asylum. But such cases are few and far between, and there is even less evidence of resettled refugees committing terrorist acts, most likely because resettlement programs include strong screening mechanisms.

In the case of the Paris terror attacks, the link between the refugee influx to Europe and international terrorism remains unclear. It is unlikely to provide a strong argument against letting in refugees, but shows the importance of coming to grips with the chaotic conditions of the migrant trail from the Greek islands through the Balkans and into northern Europe. The fake Syrian passport found at Stade de France shows that it is possible for terrorists to make use of the migrant trail to get into the EU, but it does not explain why they would do so. Most of the perpetrators of the Paris attack were French nationals, with strong links to Belgium. They traveled back and forth to Syria seemingly without needing to use the dangerous and time-consuming migrant trail. Indeed, it would make little sense to do so, considering how many border posts and passport controls migrants have to go through on their way through the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

While the identity of the fake passport’s owner remained unknown at the time of writing, it is reasonable to assume that one reason for choosing the refugee route via Greece is that it was an act of provocation from the Islamic State. The decision to take this arduous route was made with the knowledge that it would cause a backlash against Syrian and other Muslim refugees.

WARM HEARTS, COOL HEADS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

If we are to learn from both history and the Paris attacks, we should focus our efforts on streamlining and increasing quotas for the orderly resettlement of Syrian refugees, combined with increasing political and financial support to frontier states such as Greece, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Syria’s neighbors are reeling under the weight of massive refugee burdens. The refugees themselves are running out of resources and opportunities in their host states. Unable to find education for their children or employment for themselves, they are desperate to move on. At the moment, the only route to restarting their lives is the chaotic and dangerous migrant trail across the Aegean Sea and through Europe.

This state of affairs benefits nobody, apart from organized criminals, corrupt police officers and possibly terrorists. In the 1950s, Europe’s states signed onto the U.N. Refugee Convention partly out of remorse over the horrific failures of refugee protection in the preceding decades, but also in the name of international security, recognizing that refugee crises left to fester would cause instability and conflict.

This lesson should not be forgotten today. We are humanely and legally obliged to help refugees. To do so competently is also in Europe’s security interests. History shows that walls, panic and recrimination are likely to increase political and security problems arising from mass population movement. On the other hand, international collaboration and solutions that give refugees room to rebuild their lives and become productive members of society are likely to benefit refugees and host societies alike, particularly in the long term. □