**Migration and Immigrants in Europe: A Historical and Demographic Perspective**

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**Are we really facing an unprecedented migrant crisis?**

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**<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/migration-series-part-3-_are-we-really-facing-an-unprecedented-migrant-crisis/42431210>**

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**Immigration to Europe** has a long history, but increased substantially in the [later 20th century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-1945_history).

[Western European](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Europe) countries, especially, saw a high growth in immigration after [World War II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II) and many European nations today (particularly those of the [EU-15](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EU-15)) have sizeable immigrant populations, both of European and non-European origin. In contemporary globalization, migrations to Europe have accelerated in speed and scale. Over the last decades, there has been an increase in negative attitudes towards immigration, and many studies have emphasized marked differences in the strength of anti-immigrant attitudes among European countries.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_Europe#cite_note-1)

Beginning [in 2004](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Movement_of_Citizens_Directive), the [European Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Union) has granted [EU citizens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizenship_of_the_European_Union) a [freedom of movement and residence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internal_market) within the EU, and the term "immigrant" has since been used to refer to non EU citizens, meaning that EU citizens are not to be defined as immigrants within the EU territory. The European commission defines "immigration" as the action by which a person from a non-EU country establishes his or her usual residence in the territory of an EU country for a period that is, or is expected to be, at least twelve months. Between 2010 and 2013, around 1.4 million non-EU nationals, excluding asylum seekers and refugees, immigrated into the EU each year using regular means, with a slight decrease since 2010.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_Europe#cite_note-2)

In 2015 the number of asylum seekers arriving from outside Europe increased substantially during the [European migrant crisis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis) (see [timeline](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_European_migrant_crisis)).

The **European migrant crisis**,[[n 2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-7) or the **European**[**refugee crisis**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee_crisis),[[n 3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-12) is a term given to a period beginning in 2015[[10]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-13) when rising numbers of people arrived in the [European Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Union) (EU), travelling across the [Mediterranean Sea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediterranean_Sea) or overland through [Southeast Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southeast_Europe). These people included [asylum seekers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asylum_seekers), but also others, such as [economic migrants](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_migrant)[[11]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-14) and some hostile agents, including [Islamic State](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant) [militants](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Militants) disguised as refugees or migrants.[[12]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-15)[[13]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-16)

Most of the migrants came from [Muslim-majority countries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_world) of regions south and east of Europe, including [Western Asia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Asia), [South Asia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Asia) and [Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa).[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-origins-17)[[15]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-18)[[16]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-19) By religious affiliation, the majority of entrants were [Muslim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim) (usually [Sunni Muslim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni_Muslim)), with a small component of non-Muslim minorities (including [Yazidis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yazidi), [Assyrians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assyrian_people), [Mandeans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandean" \o "Mandean), etc.). According to the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_High_Commissioner_for_Refugees), the top three nationalities of entrants of the over one million Mediterranean Sea arrivals between January 2015 and March 2016 were [Syrian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syria) (46.7%), [Afghan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghanistan) (20.9%) and [Iraqi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq) (9.4%).[[17]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-20)

Of the migrants arriving in Europe by sea in 2015, 58% were adult males over 18 years of age, 17% were adult females over 18 years of age and 25% were minors under 18 years of age.[[18]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-bsUNHCR2015-21) The number of deaths at sea rose to record levels in April 2015, when five boats carrying almost 2,000 migrants to Europe [sank in the Mediterranean Sea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_migrant_vessel_incidents_on_the_Mediterranean_Sea), with a combined death toll estimated at more than 1,200 people.[[19]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-22) The shipwrecks took place in a context of ongoing conflicts and refugee crises in several Asian and African countries, which increased the total number of forcibly [displaced people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Displaced_people) worldwide at the end of 2014 to almost 60 million, the highest level since [World War II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II).[[20]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-UNHCRtrends-23)[[21]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-24)

Amid an upsurge in the number of sea arrivals in Italy from Libya in 2014, several European Union governments refused to fund the Italian-run rescue option [Operation Mare Nostrum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Mare_Nostrum), which was replaced by [Frontex](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frontex" \o "Frontex)'s [Operation Triton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Triton) in November 2014. In the first six months of 2015, Greece overtook Italy as the first EU country of arrival, becoming, in the summer 2015, the starting point of a flow of refugees and migrants moving through [Balkan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balkan) countries to [Northern European](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Europe) countries, mainly Germany and Sweden.

Since April 2015 the European Union has struggled to cope with the crisis, increasing funding for border patrol operations in the Mediterranean, devising plans to fight [migrant smuggling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migrant_smuggling), launching [Operation Sophia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Sophia) and proposing a new quota system both to relocate asylum seekers among EU states for processing of refugee claims to alleviate the burden on countries on the outer borders of the Union, and to resettle asylum-seekers who have been determined to be genuine [refugees](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee). Individual countries have at times reintroduced border controls within the [Schengen Area](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schengen_Area), and rifts have emerged between countries willing to allow entry of asylum-seekers for processing of refugee claims and others countries trying to discourage their entry for processing.

According to [Eurostat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurostat), [EU member states](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Member_state_of_the_European_Union) received over 1.2 million first-time asylum applications in 2015, more than double that of the previous year. Four states (Germany, Hungary, Sweden and Austria) received around two-thirds of the EU's asylum applications in 2015, with Hungary, Sweden and Austria being the top recipients of asylum applications per capita.[[22]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-asylum2015-25) More than 1 million migrants crossed the [Mediterranean Sea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediterranean_Sea) in 2015, sharply dropping to 364,000 in 2016.[[23]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#cite_note-26)

Historical migration[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Immigration_to_Europe&action=edit&section=1)]

*Further information:*[*historical migration*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_migration)*and*[*genetic history of Europe*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genetic_history_of_Europe)

booty historical migration into or within Europe has mostly taken the form of [military invasion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_invasion), but there have been exceptions; this concerns notably population movements within the [Roman Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire) under the [*Pax Romana*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Romana); the [Jewish diaspora](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_diaspora) in Europe was the result of the [First Jewish–Roman War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish%E2%80%93Roman_War) of AD 66–73.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire, migration was again mostly coupled with warlike invasion, not least during the so-called [Migration period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migration_period) (Germanic), the [Slavic migrations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavic_migrations), the [Hungarian conquest of the Carpathian Basin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hungarian_conquest_of_the_Carpathian_Basin), the [Islamic conquests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_conquests) and the [Turkic expansion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkic_expansion) into Eastern Europe ([Kipchaks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kipchaks), [Tatars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatars), [Cumans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cumans)). The [Ottomans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman_Empire) once again established a multi-ethnic imperial structure across Western Asia and Southeastern Europe, but [Turkification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkification) in Southeastern Europe was due more to cultural assimilation than to mass immigration. In the late medieval period, the [Romani people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani_people) piginto Europe both via Anatolia and the Maghreb.

There were substantial population movements within Europe throughout the [Early Modern period](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Modern_period), mostly in the context of the [Reformation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformation) and the [European wars of religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_wars_of_religion), and again [as a result of World War II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_evacuation_and_expulsion).

Until the late 1960s and 1970s, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Norway,[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_Europe#cite_note-3) Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom[[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_Europe#cite_note-4) were primarily sources of [emigration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emigration), sending large numbers of emigrants to the Americas and Australia. A number also went to other European countries (notably France, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium). As living standards in these countries have risen, the trend has reversed and they were a magnet for immigration (most notably from Morocco, Somalia, Egypt to Italy and Greece; from Morocco, Algeria and Latin America to Spain and Portugal; and from Ireland, India, Pakistan, Germany, the United States, Bangladesh, and Jamaica to the United Kingdom).

Migration within Europe after the 1985 Schengen Agreement[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Immigration_to_Europe&action=edit&section=2)]

As a result of the 1985 [Schengen Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schengen_Agreement), there is free travel within Europe. Citizens of [European Union member states](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Member_State_of_the_European_Union) and their families have the right to live and work anywhere within the EU because of [EU citizenship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizenship_of_the_european_union) but citizens of non-EU or non-EEA states do not have those rights unless they possess the EU Long Term Residence Permit or are family members of EU citizens. Nevertheless, all holders of valid residence permits of a Schengen State have the unrestricted right to travel within the [Schengen Area](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schengen_Area) for tourist purposes only, and for up to three months.

A large proportion of immigrants in western European states have come from former eastern bloc states in the 1990s, especially in Spain, Greece, Germany, Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom. There are frequently specific migration patterns, with geography, language and culture playing a role. For example, there are large numbers of [Poles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poles) who have moved to the [United Kingdom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom) and [Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ireland) and [Iceland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iceland), while [Romanians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanians) and also [Bulgarians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulgarians) have chosen [Spain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spain) and [Italy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italy).[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_Europe#cite_note-5) In fact, with the earlier of the two recent enlargements of the EU, although most countries restricted free movement by nationals of the acceding countries, the United Kingdom did not restrict for the [2004 enlargement of the European Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_enlargement_of_the_European_Union) and received Polish, Latvian and other citizens of the new EU states. Spain was not restricted for the [2007 enlargement of the European Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2007_enlargement_of_the_European_Union) and received many Romanians and Bulgarians as well other citizens of the new EU states.[[*citation needed*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Citation_needed)]

Many of these Polish immigrants to UK have since returned to Poland, after the serious economic crisis in the UK. Nevertheless, free movement of EU nationals is now an important aspect of migration within the EU, since there are now 28 member states, and has resulted in serious political tensions between Italy and Romania, since Italy has expressed the intention of restricting free movement of EU nationals (contrary to Treaty obligations and the clear jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice).

Another migration trend has been that of [Northern Europeans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Europe) moving toward [Southern Europe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Europe). Citizens from the European Union make up a growing proportion of immigrants in Spain, coming chiefly from the United Kingdom and Germany, but also from Italy, France, Portugal, The Netherlands, Belgium, etc. British authorities estimate that the population of UK citizens living in Spain is much larger than Spanish official figures suggest, establishing them at about 1,000,000, with 800,000 being permanent residents. According to the *Financial Times*, Spain is the most favoured destination for Western Europeans considering to move from their own country and seek jobs elsewhere in the EU

**Italy**[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Immigration_to_Europe&action=edit&section=8)]

*Main article:*[*Immigration to Italy*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immigration_to_Italy)

The total immigrant population of the country is now of 5 million and 73 thousand, about 8.3 percent of the population (2014). However, over 6 million people residing in Italy have an immigration background. Since the expansion of the European Union, the most recent wave of migration has been from surrounding European nations, particularly Eastern Europe, and increasingly Asia, replacing North Africa as the major immigration area. Some 1,200,000 Romanians are officially registered as living in Italy, replacing Albanians (500,000) and Moroccans (520,000) as the largest ethnic minority group, but independent estimates put the actual number of Romanians at double that figure or perhaps even more. Others immigrants from Central-Eastern Europe are Ukrainians (230,000), Polish (110,000), Moldovans (150,000), Macedonians (100,000), Serbs (110,000), Bulgarians (54,000) Germany (41,000), Bosnians (40,000), Russians (39,600), Croatians (25,000), Slovakians (9,000), Hungarians (8,600). Other major countries of origin are China (300,000), Philippines (180,000), India (150,000), Bangladesh (120,000), Egypt (110,000), Perù (105,000), Tunisia (105,000), Sri Lanka (100.000), Pakistan (100,000), Ecuador (90,000) and Nigeria (80,000). In addition, around 1 million people live in Italy illegally. (As of 2014, the distribution of foreign born population is largely uneven in Italy: 84.9% of immigrants live in the northern and central parts of the country (the most economically developed areas), while only 15.1% live in the southern half of the peninsula.)

[**Refugees or Immigrants? The Migration Crisis in Europe in Historical Perspective**](http://origins.osu.edu/article/refugees-or-immigrants-migration-crisis-europe-historical-perspective)

**by**

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[The flight of Greeks from Asia Minor in 1922.](http://criticallegalthinking.com/2015/10/14/izmir-international-law-and-the-past-and-present-of-forced-migration/)

**Editor's Note**:

If one photograph has captured the magnitude and sadness of the 2015 refugee crisis, it is the boy on the beach: three-year-old Alan Kurdi, found drowned and washed up near the Turkish town of Bodrum after the overcrowded boat carrying him and his mother and brother across the Mediterranean was overcome by waves. They were just three of more than a million migrants who fled war-torn and destabilized parts of the Middle East and Africa in 2015, trying desperately to find refuge in Europe. Many commentators now call this “one of the greatest humanitarian crises the globe has ever known.” This month, historian Theodora Dragostinova explores the causes and pathways of today’s refugee crisis and reminds us that displacement and migration have long defined European history.

Over the past months, politicians, journalists, and ordinary people across Europe have passionately debated what is variably called [the refugee or migrant crisis in Europe](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/road-europe-2015-migration-crisis). Some have used expressions such as “flood,” “invasion,” or “swarms of people” to describe the hundreds of thousands who are determined to reach Europe in search of security and stability.

With close to one million people arriving in 2015, many Europeans worry about the integration of these new populations.

They raise concerns that the migrants would require extensive state support in a time of continued economic insecurity in Europe. Some Europeans also fear that they would threaten the cultural makeup of Europe due to the alleged incompatibility of the Islamic faith of the majority of new arrivals.

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/IMG_2057_0.JPG |
| Anti-refugee graffiti. Ljubljana, Slovenia, September 2015. Photo by M.A. Johnson |

The migration crisis has spread images of suffering, courage, and intolerance. It has strained the unity of [the European Union](http://origins.osu.edu/article/european-disunion-rise-and-fall-post-war-dream), sparked debate about the difference between Western and Eastern Europe, and posed difficult questions about global inequality.

While these developments have often been portrayed as an unprecedented crisis, this is certainly not the first time that Europe has faced such challenges.

During the 20th century, Europe saw some of the largest waves of refugees and most violent forced migrations in human history, especially as a result of the First and Second World Wars. Some of these forced migrations can be more accurately described as ethnic cleansing and, in the case of the removal and ultimate extermination of Jews from Europe, [genocide](http://origins.osu.edu/milestones/may-2015-liberation-concentration-camps).

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| [http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Bundesarchiv_R_49_Bild-0131%2C_Aussiedlung_von_Polen_im_Wartheland_0.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_evacuation_and_expulsion#/media/File:Bundesarchiv_R_49_Bild-0131,_Aussiedlung_von_Polen_im_Wartheland.jpg) |
| [German expulsion of Poles from Reichsgau Wartheland, 1939.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_evacuation_and_expulsion#/media/File:Bundesarchiv_R_49_Bild-0131,_Aussiedlung_von_Polen_im_Wartheland.jpg) |

And Europe has long been a popular destination in global migration flows. Traditionally, the Mediterranean has functioned as the main route for migrants from Africa or the Middle East into Europe. This is perhaps one of the oldest routes of contact in human history, going back to the Iron Age and the great empires of antiquity.

During the age of European imperialism, networks grew from the colonial relationship between Africa and Europe. Especially since postwar decolonization, migrants have been drawn to the former metropoles because they know the language or rely on diasporic networks.

In the 21st century, as conflicts in Africa mounted (in Eritrea, Libya, and [Sudan](http://origins.osu.edu/article/worlds-worst-humanitarian-crisis-understanding-darfur-conflict), to name a few), the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean soared. Traffickers ruthlessly exploited the vulnerability of these desperate individuals fleeing both persecution and poverty.

Distinguishing between political migrants (those trying to escape persecution) and economic immigrants (those moving from poverty) is difficult but important because international law treats these two categories of people differently.

The 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, ratified by all European states, defined a refugee as someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

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| [http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/P31_L.%C3%89._Eithne_Operations_28_June_2015.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#/media/File:P31_L.%C3%89._Eithne_Operations_28_June_2015.jpg) | http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Refugee_march_Hungary_2015-09-04_02.jpg |

[Rescued migrants arriving in Italy, June 2015 (left).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#/media/File:P31_L.%C3%89._Eithne_Operations_28_June_2015.jpg)[Migrants walking through Hungary on their way to Austria, September 2015 (right).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#/media/File:Refugee_march_Hungary_2015-09-04_02.jpg)

International law guarantees to each person fleeing persecution the right to request asylum in a safe country. The authorities reviewing people’s asylum applications determine whether one is a refugee or an immigrant on a case-by-case basis.

Asylum laws differ in each European state because the [EU](http://origins.osu.edu/article/european-disunion-rise-and-fall-post-war-dream) considers immigration law a matter of national sovereignty. Generally, those who are found not to qualify for asylum as refugees are deported to their country of origin. The uncertainty of the process explains why many people do not even file for asylum, but continue to live in the shadows as undocumented migrants.

Those who succeed in staying in Europe generally take unskilled jobs that the local population does not desire. In this way, they tend to fill crucial labor needs for the host society.

As we look to the future of today’s migration wave to Europe, we need to recognize that the issue of [global human migrations](http://origins.osu.edu/article/hacer-am-rica-and-american-dream-global-migration-and-americas) may very well define the 21st century.

As globalization has become the rule, and as the West has generally benefitted disproportionately from the economic integration entailed in this global process, it cannot simply ignore the fact that people will continue to cross borders in search of better life, a basic human right.

And, if we return to the claims that today’s [migrant crisis](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/road-europe-2015-migration-crisis) is an “invasion,” we see that instead of “flooding” and “besieging” Europe, these migrants and refugees tend to flee for a reason (armed conflicts or economic distress), follow pre-established political and social networks (of empire and diasporic communities), and occupy employment niches that are undesired by the locals (rather than “take our jobs”).

Migration is a highly structured process built upon patterns, historical contexts, and rational individual decisions. And integration is a long-term, complex process that takes generations and requires accommodation between the new arrivals and the host society.

**What triggered the refugee crisis in summer 2015?**

The immediate cause of the current crisis is [the ongoing civil war in Syria](http://origins.osu.edu/article/alawites-and-fate-syria) over the past four years, which has left 22 million [Syrians](http://origins.osu.edu/article/syrias-islamic-movement-and-2011-12-uprising) incredibly vulnerable. This situation is compounded by the breakdown of authority in [Iraq](http://origins.osu.edu/article/secular-roots-religious-divide-contemporary-iraq), [Afghanistan](http://origins.osu.edu/article/long-long-struggle-women-s-rights-afghanistan), Libya, and Eritrea. As a result, desperate people started fleeing in even larger numbers during the past two years.

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Syrian_refugee_camp_on_theTurkish_border.jpg |
| [Syrian refugee camp near Aleppo, Syria. August 3, 2012.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugees_of_the_Syrian_Civil_War#/media/File:Syrian_refugee_camp_on_theTurkish_border.jpg) |

For a few years now, the Syrian refugees have been mainly going to neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, and [Turkey](http://origins.osu.edu/article/erdo-s-presidential-dreams-turkey-s-constitutional-politics), hoping that with the end of [the civil war in Syria](http://origins.osu.edu/article/alawites-and-fate-syria), they will be able to go back home. Many live in refugee camps funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or, once registered as refugees with the UN, subsist on meager stipends in the larger cities of those three countries.

The UNHCR has registered more than 4.1 million Syrian refugees; more than 1 million reside in Lebanon, a country with a population of 4.5 million, and more than 2 million reside in Turkey.

But as the [Syrian conflict intensified](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/syrian-civil-war-alawites-womens-rights-and-arab-spring) in 2014 and 2015, and as the refugees were generally unable to find lawful employment and decent housing or establish permanent legal residence in Lebanon, Jordan, or Turkey, they started evaluating other options. Because the Gulf Arab states did not accept these refugees, Europe emerged as the only other possible destination.

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| [http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Top_recipients_of_asylum_applications_in_the_EU-28_%282015%29.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Top_recipients_of_asylum_applications_in_the_EU-28_(2015).png) |
| [Top ten European countries that received asylum applications between January-September 2015.](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Top_recipients_of_asylum_applications_in_the_EU-28_(2015).png) |

From Turkey, [Bulgaria](http://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/1142014-empty-fountains-communist-era-monuments-revisited) is the closest European entry point – a two-hour trip by car or bus from Istanbul. There, arrivals can apply for asylum in this EU member state or continue to another country.

Syrian refugees generally do not want to stay in Bulgaria, a country of 7.5 million, although some 15,000 have registered as refugees there. While asylum applications in Bulgaria have a striking success rate of 94 percent, very few actually desire to settle in this poorest EU member state, where they face decrepit, underequipped transit centers and refugee camps.

An even more powerful deterrent preventing human movement from Turkey to Bulgaria is the fact that, two years ago, the Bulgarian government started [building a barbed wire fence](http://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/top-ten-origins-walls), with the alleged goal of stopping human traffickers from Turkey. This fence was built with striking efficiency, despite the lack of funds in the country for more urgent infrastructural projects.

It is because of the risk of this impenetrable Bulgarian fence that refugees risk drowning in the Mediterranean on rickety boats from Izmir, Turkey, to the nearby Greek islands of Lesvos, Kos, and Rhodos.

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/20151030_Syrians_and_Iraq_refugees_arrive_at_Skala_Sykamias_Lesvos_Greece_2.jpg |
| [Syrian and Iraqi refugees departed from Turkey and arrive on the Greek island of Lesvos. October, 2015.](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:20151030_Syrians_and_Iraq_refugees_arrive_at_Skala_Sykamias_Lesvos_Greece_2.jpg) |

Yet most refugees attempt to leave Greece soon after arrival because of the 25% unemployment rate (50% for young people) and scarce economic resources as well as restrictive citizenship and residence laws.

**The Balkans and East-Central Europe in the spotlight**

Most of the new refugees arriving in Greece want to go to Germany, Austria, Sweden, or Norway, western European states with liberal migration policies and generous social benefits.

But to arrive there, they must cross a series of impoverished, conflict-ridden states in the “Western Balkans”—as Albania together with the non-EU-members of [the former Yugoslavia](http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Volume1-Issue1-Article2.pdf)(Macedonia, [Kosovo](http://origins.osu.edu/article/kosovos-year-zero-between-balkan-past-and-european-future), Bosnia, and [Serbia](http://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/932014-postcard-djerdap-serbia)) tend to be called.

Over the summer, there were chaotic scenes of refugees waiting at train stations in Macedonia or sleeping in tents in downtown Belgrade, Serbia. There was a standoff between Croatia and Serbia on the issue of refugees, reminding us that the wounds of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s are still present. When crossing into Croatia, the refugees face the terrifying possibility of running into undetonated mines from the wars.

This dramatic situation has highlighted [the ultimate failure of the European project at the margins of Europe](http://origins.osu.edu/article/european-disunion-rise-and-fall-post-war-dream), in the Balkans. While Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania are now EU members, EU accession talks with Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo are in limbo.

The Western Balkans has now become a European ghetto, a series of marginalized states whose citizens have little hope for the future besides emigration to the West.

It is clear that migrants from Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia, most notably, have joined the recent refugees from [Syria](http://origins.osu.edu/article/syrias-islamic-movement-and-2011-12-uprising) and [Iraq](http://origins.osu.edu/article/century-us-relations-iraq) in their march to Austria and Germany. This development has prompted Germany to declare the Western Balkans a “safe area” and announce that it would automatically deport all asylum seekers from those countries.

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| [http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Map_of_the_Schengen_Area.svg_.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Schengen_Area.svg)   |  | | --- | |  | |
| [Map of the 1995 Schengen Area (blue); Countries with open borders (turquoise); Countries legally obliged to join (orange).](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Schengen_Area.svg) |

But the Syrian and other recent refugees are not faring better in [the rest of the Eastern European states](http://origins.osu.edu/article/1989-twenty-years-end-communism-and-fate-eastern-europe) that are now EU members: Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, Hungary, [Slovakia](http://origins.osu.edu/article/becoming-european-diverging-paths-czech-and-slovak-republics), [the Czech Republic](http://origins.osu.edu/article/becoming-european-diverging-paths-czech-and-slovak-republics), and [Poland](http://origins.osu.edu/review/poland-takes-charge-its-own-revolution).

The situation is most dramatic in Hungary, where Prime Minister Victor Orban, a leader of the far-right nationalist party Fidesz, has adopted an uncompromising anti-refugee position. Hungary emerged as a desired destination for the refugees because it is a member of the so-called Schengen zone that does not require passport controls and border posts between member countries.

As a result, the human flow has been redirected to Slovenia, a small country of barely 2 million, whose government has had to deal with as many as 15,000 refugees crossing into the country daily. Its government threated to close off its border should Austria and Germany not speed up the transfer of refugees along the way.

To stop the human flow, however, over the summer of 2015 [the Orban government completed a 15-foot barbed wire fence](http://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/top-ten-origins-walls) on its border with Serbia; even more controversially, the government finished building a fence on the border between Hungary and Croatia, another EU member state.

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Syrian_refugees_strike_in_front_of_Budapest_Keleti_railway_station._Refugee_crisis._Budapest%2C_Hungary%2C_Central_Europe%2C_3_September_2015.jpg | http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Hungarian-Serbian_border_barrier_1.jpg |

[Striking refugees at a railway station in Budapest, Hungary, September 2015 (left).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#/media/File:Syrian_refugees_strike_in_front_of_Budapest_Keleti_railway_station._Refugee_crisis._Budapest,_Hungary,_Central_Europe,_3_September_2015.jpg)[Border fence between Hungary and Serbia, 2015 (right).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#/media/File:Hungarian-Serbian_border_barrier_1.jpg)

Ironically, leaders of other [East-Central European states](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/1989-year-changed-it-all) – which have not been affected by the crisis as profoundly as the Balkans – have made regrettable choices on the refugee topic.

[Slovak](http://origins.osu.edu/article/becoming-european-diverging-paths-czech-and-slovak-republics) leaders have indicated that Muslims would not be welcome in their country and have only reluctantly agreed to accept a limited number of Christians. In [the Czech Republic](http://origins.osu.edu/article/becoming-european-diverging-paths-czech-and-slovak-republics), photographs of police writing numbers on refugees’ arms with permanent markers have prompted comparisons to [the Holocaust](http://origins.osu.edu/milestones/may-2015-liberation-concentration-camps).

In this context, an old question has been raised again: Is Eastern Europe somehow more xenophobic that the rest of Europe? Are [the former Soviet bloc countries](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/1989-year-changed-it-all) unable or less willing to cope with ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences?

No conclusive studies compare Eastern and Western European attitudes toward foreigners. But there has been a resurgence of far-right parties, supporting anti-immigrants agendas, in many Western European states as well, including [France](http://origins.osu.edu/article/socialism-takes-over-france-again) and the Netherlands.

The standoff between [France](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/socialist-legacy-france) and Britain over 2,000 immigrants on the French side of the Channel Tunnel – who are living in miserable conditions in a makeshift camp described as “the jungle” – indicates a similar unwillingness of Western European politicians to engage the issue of migration constructively.

A more relevant question might be: Do East-Central and Southeastern Europe need to receive more help from the rest of Europe? Given the much lower standards of living in many of those countries compared to the rest of the EU, how much responsibility should they be asked to take in the current crisis? Should this instead be a European (i.e. EU) responsibility?

**Europe’s Long Experience with War, Persecution, and Refugees**

The current refugee crisis is but one moment in the much longer history of refugees, immigrants, and displaced persons in Europe.

The traumatic experiences of forced migration mark the beginning of the 20th century in European history. As a result of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and [World War I (1914-1918)](http://origins.osu.edu/milestones/june-2014-assassin-s-shadow-beginning-world-war-i-and-legacy-gavrilo-princip), the entire region of Eastern Europe saw a flood of millions of refugees.

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/800px-Armenian_woman_and_her_children_from_Geghi%2C_1899.jpg |
| [Armenian refugees fleeing Turkey, 1915-1923.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee#/media/File:Armenian_woman_and_her_children_from_Geghi,_1899.jpg) |

In the Balkans, especially on the Bulgarian-Turkish-Greek-Serbian borders, fighting in some areas lasted as long as six years, from 1912 to 1918. As the borders and military and civilian administrations changed multiple times, people fled their villages as control of their land switched hands. Each border change was accompanied by the movement of people.

Bulgaria, for example, had to accommodate some 280,000 wartime refugees in the 1920s, and their integration into Bulgarian society was not always smooth.

In the case of what is now often referred to as East-Central Europe, in the borderlands between Russia, Germany, and Austria where much of the fighting on the eastern front took place during World War I, the size of the refugee movements (6 million people) motivated one historian to describe the situation there as “a whole empire walking.”

Continuing conflict between Turkey and Greece about Asia Minor led to the massacres of both Christians and Muslims at the hands of the rival army during the Greco-Turkish war of 1920-1922.

With the destruction of the thriving port of Smyrna/Izmir—ironically the point of departure today for many desperate Syrian refugees—Greece and Turkey enacted the first compulsory population exchange in history, agreed upon with the mediation of the League of Nations in 1923. Some 2 million people, Christians and Muslims alike, were affected by this treaty, which uprooted people from their homes without giving them any other choice.

The dynamics of that humanitarian tragedy bear a striking resemblance to what is happening in the area today. Despite the intervention of the League of Nations, the integration of 2 million refugees put severe pressures on Greek and Turkish societies and economies. It was only with the third generation that these “newcomers” finally felt at home.

***European Refugees in the 1930s and 1940s***

Further predicaments over the status of refugees in Europe emerged after 1933 when Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. In 1933 alone, close to 50,000 of the approximately 500,000 German Jews tried to leave Germany, but European governments carefully controlled the entry of “foreigners” into their states.

In their desperation, Jews who were unable to secure papers for emigration to other parts of Europe, the first choice, or [Palestine](http://origins.osu.edu/article/new-view-israeli-palestinian-conflict-needs-and-narratives-negotiation) (then a British mandate), the increasingly preferred option, considered various resettlement schemes in the United States, Central and South America, Africa, and China.

During this time, western European states carefully refined their increasingly restrictive systems of passport and border control. Participants at the 1938 Evian Conference refused to deal decisively with the crisis, rationalizing that accepting more Jewish refugees would only encourage the Nazi regime. To alleviate guilt, the British accepted 10,000 Jewish children who arrived through the privately funded Kindertransport program.

By 1941, about 160,000 Jews remained in Germany. Unable to flee, the vast majority were killed during the Holocaust.

During World War II, even larger-scale population movements led to the ultimate ethnic homogenization of the European continent. The combined number of wartime and postwar forced migration in Europe is close to 64 million people. Many of these people fled military conflict as the war spread. Most of them later sought to return to the areas they had fled.

This number includes the 6 million Jews exterminated by the Nazi regime, a powerful reminder that when the world does not act, enormous human tragedies can occur.

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Czech_refugees_from_the_Sudetenland_1.gif |
| [Arrival of Czech refugees in Prague, October 1938.](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f4/Czech_refugees_from_the_Sudetenland_1.gif) |

At the end of the war, the postwar winners enacted another massive forced migration, the removal of all German populations from neighboring countries, some 13 to 14 million people who “went home” to Germany from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and elsewhere. Poles and Ukrainians were two other large groups that were subjected to forceful population swaps in the name of national homogeneity.

As a result of these forced migrations, the European continent had been re-made into largely ethnically homogeneous states that had efficiently purged their territories of undesired ethnic or religious minorities.

This homogeneity, which some in Europe fear will be lost with the current influx of new people, was the outcome of a series of violent and relatively recent historical episodes.

**Across the Iron Curtain: A Cold War Divergence between East and West**

During the Cold War, the two parts of Europe took diverging paths regarding population movement and migration.

Western Europe became more religiously and ethnically diverse with the influx of a large number of guest laborers from [Africa](http://origins.osu.edu/article/yen-marre-were-fed-senegal-season-discontent), [Asia](http://origins.osu.edu/article/population-bomb-debate-over-indian-population), and [the Middle East](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/understanding-middle-east), some of them from former colonies. While invited to help rebuild Europe as temporary migrants, many stayed, contributing to the transformation of western European countries into multiethnic societies.

Some of the most visible immigrant communities include the Turks in Germany, the [Algerians](http://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/1302015-dangers-being-humorist-charlie-hedbo-not-alone) in France, and the [Indians](http://origins.osu.edu/article/population-bomb-debate-over-indian-population) and [Pakistanis](http://origins.osu.edu/article/fresh-start-pakistan) in Great Britain. Since 2013, the majority of London’s population is people of color.

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Fl%C3%BCchtinge_9999-Michelides.jpg | http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/1024px-Curry_Mile_in_Rusholme.jpg |

[Migrants waiting to enter Germany, October 2015 (left).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#/media/File:Fl%C3%BCchtinge_9999-Michelides.jpg)[Pakistani shops and restaurants on Wilmslow Road in Manchester, England, nicknamed "The Curry Mile" (right).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Pakistanis#/media/File:Curry_Mile_in_Rusholme.jpg)

By contrast, Eastern Europe, especially East-Central Europe, remained ethnically homogeneous in the postwar period. Today, many politicians continue to talk about their countries as homogeneous national spaces with no prior experiences of religious or ethnic diversity. This is simply wrong and ignores the history of the region merely 70 years ago.

There were exceptions, such as Bulgaria and Romania, which continued to have large minorities in their territories. These minorities were periodically subjected to nationalist pressure; some 350,000 Turks fled Bulgaria in the 1980s in what was at the time described as “the largest refugee wave after World War II.”

Nonetheless, the Soviet bloc countries maintained regimes of closed borders and limited travel opportunities for their citizens. Built in 1961, the [Berlin Wall](http://origins.osu.edu/milestones/november-2014-remember-remember-9th-november-fall-berlin-wall-25-years) became the symbol of this separation between East and West, a potent metaphor of captivity.

It is not coincidental that the end of the Cold War began with the mass exodus of East Germans to the West in the summer of [1989](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/1989-year-changed-it-all) following the removal by Hungarians of barbed wire fences between Austria and Hungary. In effect, [in 1989 Eastern Europeans](http://origins.osu.edu/article/1989-twenty-years-end-communism-and-fate-eastern-europe) rebelled, among other things, against the regime of closed borders and travel controls.

It is therefore beyond ironic that the current government of Hungary, the country that started removing fences in 1989, is building [a new barbed wire fence](http://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history/top-ten-origins-walls) in unified Europe today.

But the end of the Cold War did not bring peace and security to Europe. [The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s](http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Volume1-Issue1-Article2.pdf) saw what was then termed (again) “the largest forced migrations in Europe after World War II” with some 2.7 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees.

Many of these Yugoslav war refugees were offered “temporary humanitarian shelter” elsewhere in Europe under circumstances that resemble today’s plight of the Syrian refugees. Many returned to Bosnia and other formerly Yugoslav areas after the war, but still others permanently resettled to Western Europe and the United States.

In another parallel to today, Germany and Austria accepted the largest number of Yugoslav refugees in the 1990s.

**From Past and Present to Future**

Given these complex past experiences with migration, what lessons can history teach us about the refugee crisis in Europe today?

In the face of a prolonged and brutal conflict, people will seek to flee. If they don’t flee, conflict may escalate into ethnic cleansing and even genocide. This is particularly so in cases of civil war, such as [the Syrian conflict](http://origins.osu.edu/article/alawites-and-fate-syria).

After the devastating experience of the Holocaust, it is difficult to deny that we need to help people fleeing persecution and war. The sanctity of human life should come first.

But is the current refugee crisis of unprecedented proportion?

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Map_of_the_European_Migrant_Crisis_2015_-_Asylum_applicants%27_countries_of_origin.png |
| [Asylum applicants' countries of origin between January 1-June 30, 2015.](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_European_Migrant_Crisis_2015_-_Asylum_applicants%27_countries_of_origin.png) |

Historical research shows that migrants are always a small part of the overall population. Within the EU, whose population nears 750 million in 2015, the presence of even one million refugees remains a relatively insignificant number.

Furthermore, the UNHCR estimates there are close to [60 million displaced persons](http://origins.osu.edu/article/hacer-am-rica-and-american-dream-global-migration-and-americas) globally in 2014. The one million who reach Europe, one of the most prosperous places worldwide, therefore, is just a drop in the global bucket.

But how do we decide who is a refugee and who an immigrant? Some people are both; other people constantly transition between the two categories. This determination should be made in each individual case, but officials should err on the side of caution because the overlap between poverty and conflict in today’s world is rampant.

Would people return to their countries after the end of conflict? Historical evidence suggests that there are always a large number of people who want to return to their places of birth.

Migration waves are usually temporary. The current refugee crisis will most likely level off with the arrival of winter when fewer people will dare to cross the Mediterranean.

While it is difficult to predict what will happen in [the Middle East](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/understanding-middle-east), in the long term the pacification of [Syria](http://origins.osu.edu/article/alawites-and-fate-syria) could trigger a large migration back to it. Unfortunately, in this case, that scenario is not imminently likely.

Gender dynamics are an important factor in migration. Historically, young men seeking to avoid military conscription are the first to depart. Often, they send money home and attempt to reunite their families.

Yet during war, large numbers of women and children travel alone, and these are the most vulnerable migrants.

We need to pay attention to how men and women experience migration differently. Ideally, families should stay together. There should be active policies to prevent [sexual violence against women](http://origins.osu.edu/historytalk/violence-against-women), which is widespread in such fragile situations.

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| http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/800px-Spanish_War_Children001.jpg | http://origins.osu.edu/sites/origins.osu.edu/files/Refugee_children_from_Syria_at_a_clinic_in_Ramtha%2C_northern_Jordan_%289613477263%29.jpg |

[Children waiting to be evacuated from Spain during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939 (left).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee#/media/File:Spanish_War_Children001.jpg)[Syrian refugees in Ramtha, Jordan, August 2013 (right).](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugee#/media/File:Refugee_children_from_Syria_at_a_clinic_in_Ramtha,_northern_Jordan_(9613477263).jpg)

Many Syrian refugees go to Europe because they already have family members in European countries who have settled there and are able to assist them. In effect, these are “chain migrations” of mostly middle-class, educated, and motivated refugees, which could reinvigorate the labor force of Europe.We also need to remember the importance of social class in migration decisions. More affluent individuals are better able to finance their journeys and acquire the needed documents. This is the case with many of the Syrian refugees.

Yet, integration is a long-term process that depends on the willingness of both the newcomers and the host society to live together. The first generation is often grateful to be given the opportunity to start a new life, so the crucial question is how to make sure the second generation is not marginalized.

Based on past experiences, European societies should pursue integration along several lines: immediate language training and civics education, psychological counseling for those who need it, schools for children, employment for adults, housing that does not segregate, and wider debates in society over the meaning of integration.

In this process, Europeans will have to learn to live together with their new neighbors on pluralistic rather than assimilationist principles.

[**Jean-Pierre Lehmann**](https://www.forbes.com/sites/jplehmann/), CONTRIBUTOR*I write about Asia in the 21st-century world economy.*  Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.



*Children who had crossed into Hungary from Serbia stand at a collection point awaiting buses to take them to a refugee camp on Sept. 8 in Morahalom. The number of people leaving their homes in war torn countries such as Syria, marks the largest migration of people since World War II. (Photo by Dan Kitwood/Getty Images)*

Have you ever wondered why there are more McDonalds living in the U.S. than the entire population of Scotland? Ditto the Frasers, the Campbells and the MacLeods? The same can be said about the Kellys, the O’Neills and the Murphys in relation to the population of Ireland.

Staying in the Americas, but heading south, is it not astonishing that while the entire population of Argentina in 1864 stood at just over 1½ million, within thirty years, in 1894, it had reached 4 million. Then, by 1924, it more than doubled to over 10 million. By 1954, it was hovering at 20 million. What was driving this spectacular demographic growth? Immigrants and refugees! From where? [Europe](http://www.forbes.com/europe-news/), of course! In [the period 1857 to 1940,](http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1990/1/90.01.06.x.html) about 45% came from Italy, another 30% from Spain, at a time when both countries were undergoing traumatic economic and political transformations. There were also quite a few Germans, Poles, Frenchmen, British, as well as some Swiss, Belgians and Dutch. And apart from a handful of Japanese, there weren't any non-Europeans. After World War II, a fair number of Germans went into exile in Argentina. There was also, of course, widespread European migration to other parts of Latin America, including some 50,000 Spanish civil war refugees to Mexico.

From the late 18th to the mid-20th centuries, Europe was a continent of emigration. There was a good deal of intra-European migration, but so far as the outside world was concerned, it was predominantly Europeans going out, not non-Europeans coming in. These movements reflected often tragic or extremely difficult conditions in the home countries. The first great wave of Irish emigration to the “new world” was caused by the great Irish potato famine (1845-1852). Many Scots were forced to migrate due to the Highlands Clearances, expulsions of small land holders for the benefit of hereditary aristocratic Scottish landowners establishing vast estates, thus paving the way for the agricultural revolution that ensued. Needless to say the Industrial Revolution in north-western Europe caused a great deal of population displacement and hence emigration.



The words on the Statue of Liberty, taken from a sonnet by Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus* (1883), perhaps provide a somewhat utopian vision of the welcome the migrants found – “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” – but, by and large, expectations were met and safe sanctuary was found. This was all the more the case since by then the indigenous Amerindian population had either been exterminated or forced into reservations.

That the immigrants to the U.S. were overwhelmingly Europeans reflected the turbulent conditions at the time, but also the fact that in 1882 [Washington](http://www.forbes.com/washington/) passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring Chinese immigration. (Even though China and the U.S. were allies in World War II, the act was not repealed until 1943, with repercussions preventing full implementation into the 1960s.) Canada and Australia adopted comparable policies – Canada passed the Chinese immigration act in 1885, while Australia had a "whites only" immigration policy that was not dismantled until 1973.

In a [brilliant must-read article](http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/eu-migration-crisis-by-joschka-fischer-2015-08?utm_source=MadMimi&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Nouriel+Roubini%3A+%22A+Financial+Early-Warning+System%22&utm_campaign=20150830_m127146087_Nouriel+Roubini%3A+%22A+Financial+Early-Warning+System%22&utm_term=Europe_27s+Migration+Paralysis), Joschka Fischer narrates how during the 19th century there were predominantly “economic migrants” from Europe, whereas during the 20th century, racial persecution, political oppression, and the ravages of revolutions, civil wars and two world wars “became the predominant causes of flight”; transforming migrants into refugees.

On the other hand it is true that the welcome mat was not conspicuous by its presence on American shores for Jews seeking to escape from Nazi Germany. As [narrated by the U.S. Holocaust Historical Museum](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007094): "While some American activists sincerely intended to assist refugees, serious obstacles to any relaxation of U.S. immigration quotas included public opposition to immigration during a time of economic depression, xenophobia, and antisemitic feelings in both the general public and among some key government officials."  Not a glorious chapter in U.S. history.



*Refugees from Nazi Germany who were forced to return to Europe after both Cuba and the U.S. denied them refuge. 1939*

During these two centuries, when Europe was a powder keg of social, economic, political and ideological explosions, emigration to foreign parts, not only North and South America, but also South Africa and Australia, provided a safety valve. Nor should one forget the opportunities provided by imperialism. As in the exhortation by Rudyard Kipling – “Take up the White Man's burden, Send forth the best ye breed/Go bind your sons to exile, to serve your captives' need” – imperialism was a means for frustrated young males to get some action and adventure. Life for many imperialists may have been short, but it certainly beat hanging around useless and unemployed in urban ghettos.

For two centuries, we (Europeans) were, to borrow the words from [Victor Kiernan’s great opus](http://www.amazon.com/The-Lords-Human-Kind-Attitudes/dp/1897959230), “the Lords of Human Kind.” While during both the 19th and 20th centuries there were major upheavals in Europe, it is difficult to imagine how much worse conditions would have been had there not been the hope and the means to find a better life and a sanctuary to raise children in safety through emigration.

The current economic hardships, social transformations, political oppression, ethnic hostilities, religious and racial persecutions, and traumas of wars that are occurring, at various degrees of intensity, in the Middle East, Africa, and parts of [Asia](http://www.forbes.com/asia/), in many fundamental ways reflect what occurred in the not too distant past in Europe – from which there is an occasional reminder, such as the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina – albeit for the time being at least in less violent form. We may be horrified by the atrocities committed by ISIS, and so we should be, but for now at least there is no Syrian Auschwitz or Iraqi Buchenwald. As we tend to get holier-than-thou, a look in the mirror of the past may humble us, as we should be humbled.

We might also remember that we have a degree of responsibility for what is happening in these parts of the non-European world. There might be war, ethnic cleansing and persecution in any case, but when ISIS says that one of its goals is to reverse the effects of the Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916), for those Europeans with historical amnesia, a bit of homework is recommended on the history of European imperialism in the Middle East.



It would have been very difficult to believe in, say, 1936, with the fascist regime in Italy, the rise of the Nazis in Germany, the civil war in Spain …. that within a few fairly short decades peace and prosperity would reign in western Europe. The roles of both migration and refuge were significant in achieving that end.

There is no reason that the turbulent parts of the non-European world will not achieve peace and prosperity in the future. There is a time-lag. What we Europeans should be doing is everything we possibly can to accelerate these developments and bring succor and support to those who may well play fundamental roles in bringing them about.

What the European policy in respect to the migrants and refugees from Asia and Africa should be is obviously a huge challenge, perhaps the greatest confronting us at the moment. But if we hope to find ones that will work for the benefit of as many as possible, we have to do something about our current attitude problem. (Though to give recognition where it is due, the behavior of the German government and many German individual citizens in respect to the migrants and refugees, has been exemplary, indeed inspiring.)

This is quite clearly an urgent priority demanding the collaborative efforts of business, civil society, government and the media. We should remember where we have come from when we were migrants and refugees. Europe must rise humanely and dynamically to the challenge.

