

Global Refugees Reaches New Peak: What the World Has Forgotten

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Featured image: European refugee camps, Syria 1945 (Source: TruePublica)

Wars, violence and conflict were the main drivers that uprooted record numbers of men, women and children worldwide last year, making a new global refugees crisis more critical than ever, according to a UNHCR report published yesterday. But have we forgotten what Middle-Eastern countries did for European refugees after WW2?

The UN Refugee Agency's annual [Global Trends study](#) found 68.5 million people had been driven from their homes across the world at the end of 2017, more people than the population of Gt Britain or France.

Refugees who fled their countries to escape conflict and persecution accounted for 25.4 million. This is 2.9 million more than in 2016, also the biggest increase UNHCR has ever seen in a single year.

New displacement is also growing, with 16.2 million people displaced during 2017 itself. That is an average of one person displaced every two seconds.

Overwhelmingly, it is developing countries that are most affected.

Contrary to what many believe, four out of five refugees globally remain in countries next door to their own and 85% of the population of the wealthy global north do not contribute or support them in any way.

Breaking some of the numbers down reveals some other statistics.

Of the 25.4 million refugees on the run from conflict, just over 5 million are Palestinians under the care of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees or UNRWA.

Two-thirds of all refugees come from just five countries with Turkey being the world's leading refugee hosting country in terms of absolute numbers, with a population of 3.5 million refugees, mainly Syrians. In all, 63 per cent of all refugees under UNHCR's responsibility were in just 10 countries.

To put this in context. The greatest calamity in human history was World WarII. That event created 40 million refugees. Today, there are 70 per cent more refugees than in 1945. In 1950 there were still over 11 million refugees displaced. Around the same time, 750,000 Palestinians became refugees with the establishment of the state of Israel.

From there, wars and conflict continued over the decades to create millions more refugees.

The partition of India and Pakistan created 14 million refugees, the Bangladeshi war of Independence in 1971 created 11 million refugees. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 created 6.3 million and a further 5.7 million were displaced in the 1992 Mozambique civil war. The conflict following the breakup of Yugoslavia and Bosnia in 1995 caused 2.5 million to become refugees. Rwanda created 3.5 million more in 1994.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 saw millions of ethnic Russians flow into Russia from the newly independent states and there were many more such as East Timor, 540,000, Kosovo 350,000, Vietnam 800,000, civil wars in Central America over a decade saw 2 million. Georgia, Croatia, Armenia – the list goes on. We have become desensitised to all this despair and hardship.

What We Have Forgotten

In World War II there were many desperate people from Europe trying to escape the bloodiest conflict ever. At the height of that conflict, the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration (MERRA) operated camps in Syria, Egypt and Palestine where people from across Europe sought refuge.



The archival record provides limited information on the demographics of World War II refugee camps in the Middle East. The information that is available, however, shows that camp officials expected the camps to shelter more refugees over time. Geographic information on location of camps come from records of the International Social Service, American Branch records, in the Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota.

MERRA was part of a growing network of refugee camps around the world that were operated in a collaborative effort by national governments, military officials and domestic and international aid organizations. Social welfare groups including the International Migration Service, the Red Cross, the Near East Foundation and the Save the Children Fund all pitched in to help MERRA and, later, the United Nations to run the camps.

Once registered, recent arrivals would their way through a thorough medical inspection. Refugees headed toward what were often makeshift hospital facilities — usually tents. They were inspected and washed until officials believed they were sufficiently healthy enough to join the main population without bringing disease.

After medical officials were satisfied refugees were split up into living quarters for families, unaccompanied children, single men and single women.

Naturally, food was an essential part of refugees' daily lives. Refugees in MERRA camps during World War II typically received a half portion of Army rations each day. Officials acknowledged that when possible, rations should be supplemented with foods that reflected refugees' national customs and religious practices.



Greek refugees who lived in a refugee camp in Moses Wells, Egypt from 1945 to 1948 reunite with family members on their island home of Samos

Camps that weren't pressed for space were able to provide room for refugees to prepare meals. In Aleppo, for example, a room was reserved in the camp for women to gather and make macaroni with flour that they received from camp officials.

Camp officials did try to create opportunities for refugees to use their skills in carpentry, painting, shoemaking and wool spinning so that they could stay occupied and earn a little income from other refugees who could afford their services.

Some camps even had opportunities for refugees to receive vocational training. At El Shatt and Moses Wells, hospital staff was in such short supply that the refugee camps doubled as nursing training programs for Yugoslavian and Greek refugees and locals alike.

The head nurses of the training program hoped they could eventually garner formal accreditation so that anyone who finished the program would be licensed to practice nursing after leaving the camps — at the time, nursing students in refugee camps were only able to treat patients because they were “emergency nurses” operating by necessity in wartime.



Rows of tents in a World War II refugee camp in Nuseirat, Palestine

MERRA officials agreed that it was best for children in refugee camps to have regular routines. Education was a crucial part of that routine. For the most part, classrooms in Middle Eastern refugee camps had too few teachers and too many students, inadequate supplies and suffered from overcrowding. But there was a global war raging at the time.

And Yet

Today, it should not be forgotten that it was the global north that caused this latest massive migration of human misery by attacking Afghanistan then Iraq, Libya and Syria and not intervening in other conflicts for good and proper humanitarian reasons such as Yemen and Somalia.

The Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi warned repeatedly in 2010-11 that the country acted as a cork to the African migration bottle and must not be attacked – but Britain, France and America through NATO decided that oil was more important. How wrong they were. On September 15th, 2011, [David Cameron](#) and French leader Sarkozy arrogantly declared victory in Tripoli, which triggered a refugee crisis and aided the rise of Isis that then led to a wave of terrorist attacks across Europe.

The migration of people from these countries has since completely destabilised the European Union, helped Brexit become a reality and divided Western populations as seen through the appointment of hard-right political leaders in places like Italy, Austria, Poland and Hungary.

And yet, through all this, we, in the global north have completely forgotten what Middle Eastern countries such as Syria and Palestine did for Europeans who were on the run from fascists and Nazis not so long ago. We have forgotten how Europeans were treated given the appalling lack of post-war resources, certainly better than the other way round. The vast majority of Europeans were, of course, repatriated to their homelands in the end, but as mentioned earlier, in 1950, there were still over 11 million refugees displaced from their homes and families. Europeans were treated like human beings by Muslim host nations and

irrespective of your personal feelings about the current refugee crisis, we should not forget that it was our tax dollars/pounds/euros that caused much of the misery we have in the world today – and we should bear some of that responsibility. That doesn't mean Europe should be accepting millions of refugees where they can barely look after their own citizens, but it does mean that safe harbour and dignified treatment should be the very minimum provided in some meaningful way.

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