

Review: Becky Taylor, *Refugees in Twentieth Century Britain. A History*

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Anna Maguire¹

Becky Taylor's *Refugees in Twentieth Century Britain* is a brilliant history of refugee arrivals, reception and resettlement across the twentieth century. Following four cohorts of refugees, the book offers a comprehensive analysis of the shifting terrain of 'welcoming' refugees to Britain, from the Second World War to the 1980s and 1990s. More than that, the book uses the treatment and experience of refugees by and with the British state, non-governmental and voluntary organisations, and broader publics as a compelling tool for investigating what modern Britain was and how it was developing, from imperial power to post-colonial, and European, nation. 'Underwriting this shift was a perpetual tension between assumptions of British dominance on the world stage and fears of decline and of shrinking prestige and influence.' (p. 5.) Rather than a book about refugees, Taylor tells us, 'this is a book about the country refugees found refuge in or were barred from.' (p. 5.) What follows therefore is a richly woven and deeply researched account of who got to be a refugee in Britain and how their experience was shaped and structured by the changing provisions of the welfare state from housing to healthcare, the development of hostile bordering regimes and practices, conceptions of Britishness and belonging, and policies of assimilation, integration and multiculturalism. Rather than seeing refugees at the margins of this context, they are at the centre of understanding how Britain's political, social and moral economy developed.

From the outset, Taylor describes refugees as 'awkward' (p. 1). This conception offers an effective underpinning to the book. It helps to challenge moral signifiers as to who refugees and migrants are expected to be in Britain: 'good' and 'grateful' or 'bad' and 'bogus'. It is a useful category through which to interrogate the responses of both statutory and non-governmental provision: how do governments and charities provide for newly arrived populations with such varying demographics and needs? It offers a position from which to understand when and how refugees have coalesced or diverged from the broader history of immigration and its control. And it explains how the history of refugees in, and as a history of, modern Britain has been underwritten or marginalised.

The book is structured in chronological order, following the arrivals of refugees through mass settlement schemes and in particular moments of historical crisis which tell us about Britain's understanding of its responsibilities to refugees and its role in the world. At the heart of Taylor's argument is the demonstration of motivations to accept refugees to Britain that had less to do with humanitarianism and more to do with the country's international preoccupations and sense of identity. This is deftly argued through the four case studies. Chapter One, 'Protectionism vs Internationalism: Refugees from Nazism' considers two movements of refugees, before the outbreak of war in September 1939 and in May 1940. Taylor uses both state papers and the records of groups like Worthing Refugee Committee to demonstrate that 'Britain's reaction to

¹ Anna Maguire, Queen Mary, University of London, a.maguire@qmul.ac.uk

the European refugee crisis was partial and driven by voluntary not state initiatives, most often in the face of policy intransigence.’ (p. 31) Chapter Two, ‘Post-War Settlement: The Hungarians’, tracks the arrival, reception, dispersal and employment of Hungarian refugees after the uprising, against a background of 1950s Britain grappling with the superiority of having been a world power and the discomfort of its changing status as a decolonising imperial power. The concern with ‘economically active potential citizens’ amidst the growing immigrant population was somewhat offset by Britain’s full employment and welfare state. (p. 99) Yet ‘for many Hungarians in 1956 the path to life in Britain was a jagged one.’ (p. 147)

Anxiety over immigration and race in relation to refugees is illuminated in Chapter Three, ‘Rivers of Blood: The Ugandan Asians’. ‘This was the first time in Britain that the metropole saw its “empire striking back” through a mass “refugee” movement.’ (p. 150). Taylor paints a vivid and complex picture of how the experience of Ugandan Asians tells us about the operation of race relations and racism across British society but also about the depths of the housing crisis and the bureaucratic nightmare for all trying to claim support from the reduced welfare state, coalescing sharply in the policy of dispersal and the distinction of ‘red’ and ‘green’ areas. The welfare and campaigning work of voluntary organisations and pressure groups, especially under the umbrella of the Co-ordinating Committee Welfare of Evacuees from Uganda, in turn offers insight into the ‘fertility of early 1970s political activism’. (p. 162). Chapter Four, ‘Marketisation and Multiculturalism: Refugees from Vietnam’ resumes the investigation of the impact of international relations, both post-colonial and Cold War, voluntary action, housing, poverty, racism and the continued emergence of a ‘multicultural’ society on refugee resettlement. (p. 209) Taylor explores the Conservative government’s decision to sign up to the UNHCR Vietnamese resettlement programme to avoid losing international status, but that this was accompanied by tougher domestic rules on immigration. The ‘rolling back’ of the state under Thatcher saw the return to the voluntary management of refugee arrivals: ‘the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees across Britain after 1979 was made possible due to the work of hundreds of individuals motivated by little more than goodwill’, with local groups especially important in the context of dispersal. (p. 212) We begin to see the impact of multiculturalist policy and practices on work with refugees, including the British Council for Aid to Refugees and Save the Children/Refugee Action’s efforts to establish a Vietnamese trainee social worker programme. (p. 261). The book concludes with Chapter Five, ‘A New World Order’, where the transition from mass resettlement programmes to rising individual arrivals saw lines blur between refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, leading many to question what Britain’s responsibility to refugees was and provoking the reworking of domestic policy hostile to refugee entry.

Coming out in 2021, coinciding with the 70th anniversary of the Refugee Council, one of the many strengths of Taylor’s book is the necessary attention it pays to the role of charities and refugee agencies and their relationships to the state. Even if humanitarianism was not always at the heart of the state’s response, then the providers of aid, voluntary actors and upholders of ‘civil society’ were called upon time and again, within and beyond and in opposition to the state’s plans for refugees: the British Council for Aid to Refugees, Shelter, the Child Poverty

Action Group, to name just a few of those who made up this patchwork landscape. The question of the kind of 'home' available to refugees resonates throughout the book: 'it is clear that if any case for a British tradition of tolerance and welcome exists then this needs to be acutely historicised.' (p. 27). In our contemporary hostile environment, where asylum-seekers risk their lives to come to a country where they are kept in barracks, subject to evictions and Home Office immigration raids, against a backdrop of Brexit, the Windrush Scandal and Grenfell, many of the issues which Taylor investigates remain vital and urgent: inadequate housing, bureaucratic violence, the construction of borders, both internal and external.² This book is an essential read for anyone wanting to understand how we got to our present Britain.

You can read more from Becky about her book here:

<http://www.cambridgeblog.org/2021/05/refugees-in-twentieth-century-britain/>

² I am grateful to Amy Grant for the term 'bureaucratic violence'.