

531707

War Refugee Committee  
(Birmingham branch)

Miscellaneous leaflets. 1914-16

**REFUGEE MOVEMENTS:  
FROM THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TO TODAY**

# **Refugee Movements: From the Eighteenth Century to Today**

## ***Contents***

**Refugee Movements: From the Eighteenth Century to Today**

**Jewish Refugees**

**Refugees in the Early Twentieth Century**

**Post-War Refugees**

**Summary of some of the refugee groups who have settled in Birmingham**

**Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections**

**General Sources**

*Written by Dr Kevin Searle, 2008.*

[www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp)

## Terminology

There is much confusion, and even hostility over the terms used to describe asylum seekers and refugees. The following definitions, taken from the Refugee Council Online, aim to provide some clarity:

## Asylum Seeker

A person who has left their country of origin and formally applied for asylum in another country but whose application has not yet been decided.

## Refugee

Someone whose asylum application has been successful and who is allowed to stay in another country having proved they would face persecution back home.

## 'Failed' Asylum Seeker

A person whose asylum application has failed and who has no other protection claim awaiting a decision. Some refused asylum seekers voluntarily return home, others are forcibly returned and for some it is not safe or practical to return until conditions in their country change.

## 'Illegal' Immigrant

Someone whose entry into or presence in a country contravenes immigration laws.

## Economic Migrant

Someone who has moved to another country to work.

REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA.  
ALL THE FAULT OF THE JEWS.

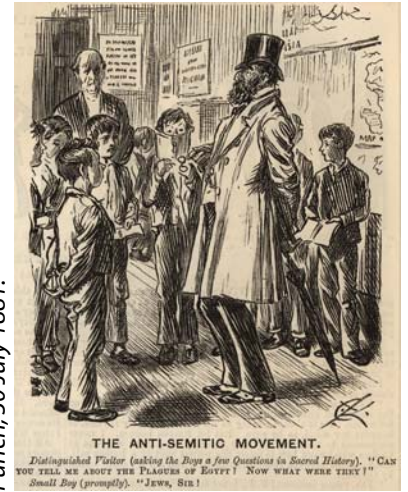
*Birmingham Daily Mail, 27 July 1905.*

ALIENS BILL DEBATE.  
MR. BALFOUR AND THE RIGHT OF  
ASYLUM.  
INTERESTING DISCUSSION.

*Birmingham Daily Mail, 11 July 1905.*

The Bill was only intended to keep out the destitute; and if the Jews in this country were willing to welcome their co-religionists fleeing from persecution they would be admitted. If, however, the wide words proposed by Sir Charles Dilke were put in, practically anybody could come into the country by merely stating that he was fleeing from persecution, and in that case it really would be useless to pass the Bill at all.

*Birmingham Daily Mail, 11 July 1905.*



*Punch, 30 July 1881.*

# Refugee Movements: From the Eighteenth Century to Today

The immigration of asylum seekers and refugees is a volatile political issue. In the press, they are often the targets of xenophobic racism and habitually depicted as a threat to the 'British way of life,' and as 'leeches,' people who sponge off of the economy, and want 'something for nothing.'

In contrast, an analysis of the role of the West overseas, which is often important in creating the conditions which lead to emigration, is usually marginal, or all together absent. Any mention of the contributions that asylum seekers and refugees make to the economy while in Britain is also rare.

Asylum seekers and refugees have been settling in Birmingham since the eighteenth century. The city has become home to people fleeing persecution from many places. This learning guide aims to provide an introduction to the presence of asylum seekers and refugees in Birmingham, and to highlight a number of resources in Birmingham Central Library that can be used to discover more.



*Sunday Mercury, 28 July 2002.*

## Midlands to be asylum haven

*Birmingham Mail, 26 May 2000.*

## Somali refugees 'cost Brum £3m'

*Birmingham Mail, 4 June 2001.*

**Key Debate:**  
what does the concept of 'xenophobic racism' tell us about attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees?

**“In the Synagogue, situated in the Froggery, they still preserve the faint resemblance of their ancient worship. Their whole appurtenances being no more than the drooping ensigns of poverty. The place is small, but tolerably filled where there appears less decorum than in the Christian churches.”**

*William Hutton, 1780. [Levine, p. 2]*

## Jewish Refugees

### The Eighteenth Century

Archival sources date the Jewish presence in Birmingham back to the early 18th century. Jewish people comprised the first refugee community in Birmingham. They came fleeing religious persecution in Europe. The main cause of prejudice against Jews was 'deicide'.

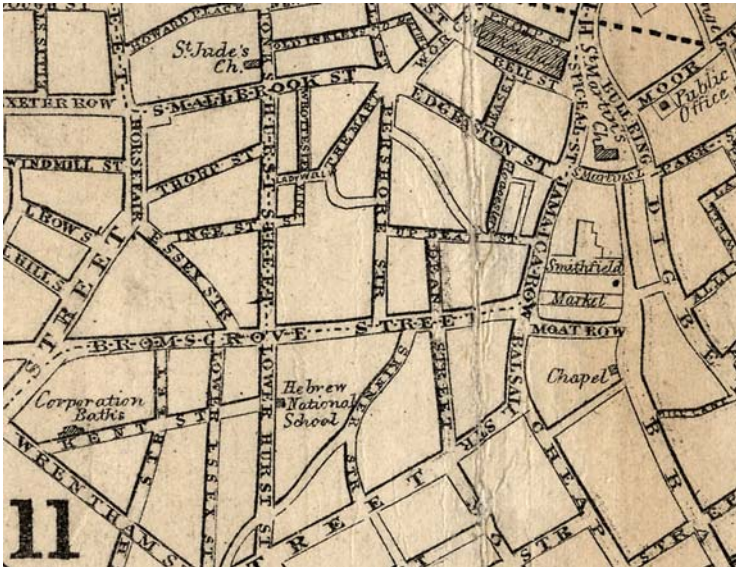
There are several Jewish names in rate books dating from 1730. In 1780, the Birmingham historian William Hutton briefly described a synagogue (left).

### The Nineteenth Century

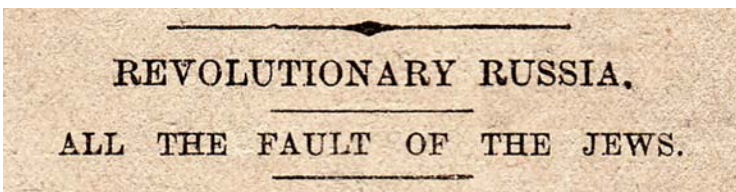
The numbers of Jewish people in Birmingham grew in the 19th century when anti-Jewish pogroms swept through the South-West of Tsarist Russia in the 1880s. The pogroms affected around 166 towns in the region, and left thousands of families without homes and destitute. Around two million Jews fled the Russian Empire between 1880 and 1914, with many going to Britain and America. In Birmingham the Jewish community comprised around 700 people in 1851. Yet the population had swelled to 3,200 by 1900.

### The Second World War

At least six million Jewish people were killed during the Nazi holocaust. Some refugees were able to escape the holocaust, but many others had experienced the concentration camps. Birmingham received approximately 700 Jewish refugees between 1939 and 1945. Initially, individual volunteers helped to provide emergency lodging for local refugees. As Hitler's persecution of Jews intensified, and the numbers of refugees arriving increased, new organisations were developed to cope with the situation. There was however, some opposition to the presence of Jews in Birmingham and Britain more broadly. Oswald Mosley and his Blackshirts were particularly hostile.



*National Hebrew School, c. 1860 [Map Draw 128]*



*Birmingham Daily Mail, 27 July 1905.*



**LOBBYING AGAINST THE ALIENS BILL.**  
OUR ARTIST TRUSTS THAT THE RUMOUR THAT THE "UNDESIRABLES" INTEND TO DO A BIT OF LOBBYING THEMSELVES IS INCORRECT.

*Punch, 12 July 1905.*

#### Key Debate:

what does the above Punch cartoon tell us about attitudes towards immigrants and refugees at the turn of the century?

## Refugees in the Early Twentieth Century



*Ecole Belge, Birmingham, in front of Bull Street Meeting House, 1918. [War Refugee Committee: LF21.86]*

### World War 1

Birmingham was host to a number of refugees from World War 1. The largest community of refugees from the war were from Belgium. Germany invaded Belgium in 1914. The imperial power committed a series of massacres in Belgian towns including Andenne (211 dead), Tamines (384 dead), Danant (612 dead), and set fire to the city of Leuven, where 209 were killed and 42,000 forced to evacuate.

The migration of refugees from Belgium totalled over a quarter of a million, and was the largest refugee movement in the history of Britain. Of this number, 5,000 came to Birmingham, and many went to other parts of the West Midlands such as Wolverhampton. In Birmingham, 'The Belgium Refugee Committee' was established, to raise money and provide food and housing for the displaced persons.

### The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War devastated Spain from July 1936 to April 1939. Tens of thousands of people were killed in atrocities, including at least 50,000 executions. As the war proceeded in the Northern front, the Republican authorities arranged the evacuation of children. Around 4,000 Spanish War children, mainly from the Bilbao region, were shipped to Britain. Belgium, the Soviet Union, and Mexico also became major places of asylum.

In Birmingham, the Lord Mayor, the Quaker Community, and the Women's Co-operative Guild, were all active in providing relief for the refugees of the Civil War. They raised money to acquire three homes for the Basque refugee children, at Avoncroft, Elford and Aldridge, in the West Midlands. However, Basque children were targeted by the right-wing press, which lent covert support to Francisco Franco, the Nationalist leader, and his Fascist allies. Oswald Mosley, the Blackshirts and other local fascist groups also made demands that the children be sent back to Spain. After the war ended the majority of the children returned to their homelands.



*Birmingham Mail, 1 July 1937.*

**Key Debate:**  
in what ways did ordinary people from Birmingham provide support for the refugees?

# Post-War Refugees

Birmingham has been host to a number of different refugee groups in the post-war period. Owing, in part, to their relatively recent arrival, collections about post-war asylum seekers and refugees are still growing. This page aims to introduce four of the different communities.

**Asylum Myths:**

**"Britain is a soft Touch."**

**"They get large hand-outs from the state."**

**"They come for free NHS treatment."**

## East African Asians

Two of the first refugee groups to arrive in Birmingham in the post-war period came from Kenya and Uganda. They came following the expulsion of East African Asians from Kenya in 1968, and Idi Amin's expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1972. They arrived amidst a great deal of hostility, when the issues of 'race' and immigration were particularly high on the political agenda, both locally and nationally. This was around the time of Peter Griffiths' electoral campaign in Smethwick, and Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech. To their advantage, however, most had received an English education and were fluent in the language.



*Minority Rights Group, Report No. 16. [MS 2220]*

## Vietnamese and Ethnic Chinese

A number of refugees from Vietnam migrated in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, in the mid-late 1970s. Their numbers increased during the 1980s, with the persecution of ethnic Chinese communities and attacks on business. Many of the refugees were resettled in Handsworth upon their arrival into Birmingham. They arrived during a recession in the economy, those who were able to find work did so as warehouse store-men, kitchen porters, and waiters. The Handsworth area in the North-West of the city, remains the epicentre of the community in Birmingham today, which numbers around 3,000.



*Birmingham Post, 21 October 1986.*

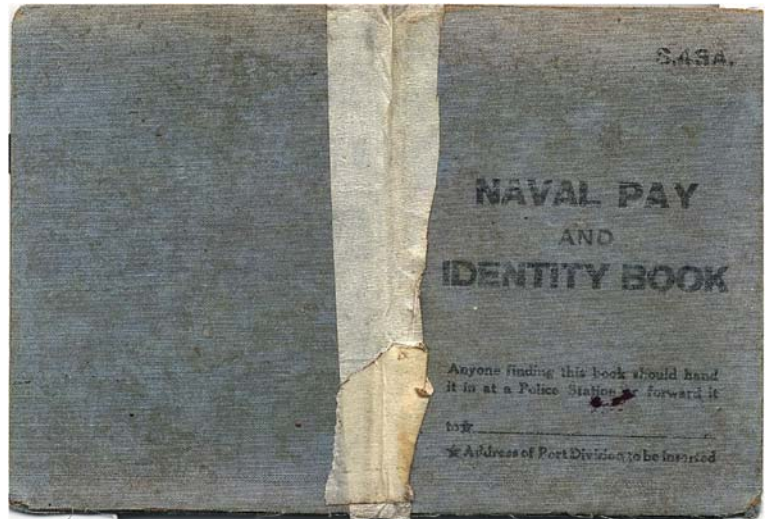
*Vietnamese refugees try to reach the shore in Malaysia, 1979.*

**Key Debate:**  
to what extent are widely held views about asylum seekers and refugees, truthful?

# Post-War Refugees

## Somalis

The legacies of colonialism have helped to create and intensify a number of problems in the Republic of Somalia. The recent history of the country has been marred with civil war and factional fighting. The conditions were particularly severe after opposing clans overthrew the president in 1991, and then failed to agree on a replacement. War and massive population upheaval have produced famine, left two million Somalis internally displaced and 800,000 as refugees.



Naval Pay and Identity Book of a Somali former-member of the British Merchant Navy. [Courtesy of Izzy Mohammed]

There is no accurate data regarding the numbers of Somalis in Birmingham, with community estimates varying from between 10,000 and 60,000, with most settling around 40,000. The bulk of the community are concentrated in the city's most deprived areas. Many did not come directly to Birmingham, but came via other European countries.

**Asylum Truths:**

**The UK hosts less than 2% of all asylum seekers.**

**Asylum seekers live on 30% less than unemployed UK citizens.**

**Asylum seekers are more likely to become ill once in the UK, owing to poverty.**

## Bosnians and Ethnic Albanians

The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, beginning in 1992, killed around 200,000 people and made two million homeless. All Bosnians suffered in the conflict. However, the former Yugoslavian president, Slobadan Milosevic and others initiated a programme of ethnic cleansing on the Muslim population of the country. The Bosnian community in Birmingham numbers around 1,000.



Albanian Refugees queuing for food, Birmingham Post, 24 May 1999.

The decade also saw the war in the Serbian province of Kosovo. This resulted in the forced migration of around 3,000 Ethnic Albanians to Birmingham. There was a flow of migration throughout the 1990s, as the community faced an increase in discriminatory treatment in their homeland. Today, the West Midlands' ethnic-Albanian community numbers around 2,000.

**Key Debate:**  
to what extent has the growth in the political and media interest in the issues of 'race' and immigration, affected asylum seekers and refugees in the post-war period?

## 18th Century

**Push Factor:**  
Religious Persecution

**Refugee Group:**  
Jews

## 1880-1914

**Push Factor:**  
Russian Pogroms

**Refugee Group:**  
Jews

## 1914

**Push Factor:**  
World War I -  
Invasion of Belgium

**Refugee Group:**  
Belgians

## 1936-1939

**Push Factor:**  
Spanish Civil War

**Refugee Group:**  
Basque Children

## 1939-1945

**Push Factor:**  
World War II -  
Holocaust  
Invasion of Poland  
Occupation of Austria

**Refugee Group:**  
Austrians, Germans,  
Jews, Poles

## 1968-1972

**Push Factor:**  
Expulsion

**Refugee Group:**  
Kenyan Asians  
& Ugandan Asians

## 1975-1980s

**Push Factor:**  
Vietnam War &  
Ethnic Persecution

**Refugee Group:**  
Vietnamese  
& Ethnic Chinese



*Birmingham Mail, 6 April 1992.*

## Summary:

of some of the refugee groups  
who have settled in Birmingham  
since the 18th century.

## 1979-

**Push Factor:**  
Political & Religious  
Persecution

**Refugee Group:**  
Iranians

## 1979-

**Push Factor:**  
Invasion & Civil War

**Refugee Group:**  
Afghans

## 1989

**Push Factor:**  
Ethnic, Political &  
Religious, Persecution

**Refugee Group:**  
Sudanese

## 1990s

**Push Factor:**  
Civil War

**Refugee Group:**  
Somalis

## 1991

**Push Factor:**  
Ethnic Persecution

**Refugee Group:**  
Kurds

## 1992

**Push Factor:**  
Civil War & Ethnic Cleansing

**Refugee Group:**  
Bosnians & Ethnic Albanians

## 1993

**Push Factor:**  
Burundian Civil War

**Refugee Group:**  
Hutus & Tutsis

## 1994

**Push Factor:**  
Post-Unification Civil War

**Refugee Group:**  
Yemenis

## 1998-2000

**Push Factor:**  
Eritrea-Ethiopia Border War

**Refugee Group:**  
Eritreans & Ethiopians

## 2002-2007

**Push Factor:**  
Civil War

**Refugee Group:**  
Ivorians



# Refugee Movements: From the Eighteenth Century to Today

## *Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections*

### **Archives:**

Spanish Refugees Children's Relief Fund. (Material unsorted, see box list) [MS 740]  
Vietnamese, 1980. Papers relating to settlement in Birmingham [EP 113/16/6/1]  
War Refugees Fund: Belgian Refugee Register, c. 1915 [302724/ZZ 34]  
War Refugees Fund (Birmingham and District) [MS 652]  
War Refugees Fund: Allocation Committee Minutes, Sept 1914 - Apr 1919 [302728-31/ZZ 32]  
War Refugees Fund: General Committee Minute Book, Sept 1914 - Dec 1919 [202721/ZZ 34]  
War Refugees Fund: Newspaper Cuttings, Sept 1914 - July 1918 [302733/IIR 29]  
The Birmingham Hebrew Congregation Archive [JA]  
Ugandan Asians, 1972. Correspondence and printed material relating to evacuees from Uganda. [MS 396/37]

### **Primary Printed Sources:**

Belgian War Refugee Committee (Birmingham Branch) Miscellaneous Leaflets etc. 1914-16 [LF21.86]  
Birmingham Anglo-Polish Society: Constitution programmes, leaflets etc. 1944 [LF21.81]  
Birmingham City Council, *The Chinese in Birmingham: A Community Profile* (1997) [LF21.85]  
Birmingham City Council, *The Vietnamese in Birmingham: A Community Profile* (1997) [LF21.85]  
Birmingham Council for Refugees: A Five Year Survey 1939-44, and reports 1944-45 and 1949-52 [LF21.86]  
Birmingham Newspaper Cuttings: Ethnic Communities [WALL SEQ]  
Birmingham Newspaper Cuttings: Refugees and Asylum Seekers [WALL SEQ]  
Birmingham Mail and Post Collections  
The Birmingham Jewish Recorder Newspaper Collection, 1935 onwards [L19.8]  
Bosnia and Herzegovina Refugee UK Network - Birmingham, *Haber: Bosnia and Herzegovina Refugee UK Network - Birmingham*. Magazine (Nov/Dec 2002 - Nov 2005) [LF21.86]  
Zoe Josephs, *Singer's Hill Synagogue: Voices From The Past* [BCOL: 19.8]  
Zoe Josephs, *Birmingham Jewry 1749-1914* [BCOL: 19.8]  
Zoe Josephs, *Survivors* [BCOL: 19.8]  
Harry Levine, *Jewish Community in Birmingham*. Newspaper cuttings compiled 1937-1948 [LF19.8]  
Harry Levine, *Singer's Hill Centenary History 1856-1956* [LF19.8]  
*Sanctuary: Magazine of the West Midlands Consortium for Asylum and Refugee Support*, 2001-2002 [LF21.8]  
Julie Wooldridge (ed.) *Jewish Life In Birmingham* [BCOL: 19.8]

# Refugee Movements: From the Eighteenth Century to Today

## General Sources

### Secondary Reading:

- Humayan Ansari, *The Infidel Within: The History of Muslims in Britain, 1800 to the Present*. London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd. (2004)
- Steve Cohen, *No one is Illegal: Asylum and immigration control past and present*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books (2003)
- Alice Bloch, *The migration and settlement of refugees in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (2002)
- Malcolm Dick, *Celebrating Sanctuary: Birmingham and the Refugee Experience 1750-2002*. Birmingham: Refugee Week Steering Committee (2002)
- Michael Dummett, *On Immigration and Refugees*. London: Routledge (2001)
- Nuruddin Farah, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*. London: Cassell (2000)
- Ian Grosvenor, and Kevin Myers, *Refugees, Racism and Educational Policy: from the past to the future*, in *Schooling and Equality: Fact, Concept and Policy*, D. Hill and M. Cole (eds.) London: Kogan Page 249-64 (2001)
- Daniele Joly, *Refugees: Asylum in Europe*. London: Minority Rights Publications (1992)
- Adrian Jones, *The Unexpected Community: The Needs and Aspirations of Birmingham's Somali Community*. Birmingham: Human City Institute (2007)
- Louise Pirouet, *Whatever Happened to Migration in Britain? A Tale of Two Walls*. Oxford: Berghahn Books (2001)
- Jill Rutter, *Supporting Refugee Children in 21st Century Britain: A Compendium of Essential Information*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books (2003)
- Nelson E. Swinerton, William G. Kuepper, and Lynne G. Lackey, *Ugandan Asians in Great Britain: Forced Migration and Social Absorption*. London: Croom Helm (1975)
- Carole Seymour-Jones, *Refugees: Past and Present*. London: Heinemann (1992)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000)
- Rachel Warner, *Refugees*. East Sussex: Wayland (1996)
- David J. Whittaker, *Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the Contemporary World*. London: Routledge (2006)

### Websites - Museums - Libraries - Institutions:

- <http://defend-asylum.org> - *Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers*
- [www.connectinghistories.org.uk](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk) - *Connecting Histories*
- [www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/collections](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/collections) - *The Jewish Museum (London)*
- [www.manchesterjewishmuseum.com](http://www.manchesterjewishmuseum.com) - *Manchester Jewish Museum*
- [www.movinghere.org.uk/galleries/histories/jewish](http://www.movinghere.org.uk/galleries/histories/jewish) - *Moving Here website (Jewish Migration Histories)*
- [www.NCACDC.org.uk](http://www.NCACDC.org.uk) - *The National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns*
- [www.refugee-action.org.uk](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk) - *Refugee Action*
- [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk) - *The Refugee Council*
- <http://refugeestories.org> - *Refugee Stories*
- [www.refugeeweek.org.uk](http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk) - *Refugee Week*
- [www.spanishrefugees-basquechildren.org](http://www.spanishrefugees-basquechildren.org) - *Spanish Refugees and Basque Children*
- [www.star-network.org.uk](http://www.star-network.org.uk) - *Student Action for Refugees*
- [www.wolverhamptonarchives.dial.pipex.com/local\\_migration\\_ww1.htm](http://www.wolverhamptonarchives.dial.pipex.com/local_migration_ww1.htm) - *Wolverhampton Archives & Local Studies*

***Contact us:***

**Birmingham Stories Project Office  
Central Library  
Chamberlain Square  
Birmingham  
B3 3HQ**

**(+44) 0121 4641608**

**Birmingham School of Education  
University of Birmingham  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham  
B15 2TT**

**(+44) 0121 4144866**

**Birmingham Archives and  
Heritage Service  
Floor 6, Central Library  
Chamberlain Square  
Birmingham B3 3HQ**

**(+44) 0121 3034217**

