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‘Europe and Refugees: 1938 and 2015/16’

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Abstract: This article attempts to provide some historical contextualization for the refugee crisis that has dominated much of European public and political debate since 2015. It draws comparisons between the crisis-ridden present and the decade of the previous century that was particularly laden with anticipation of disaster and doom: the 1930s. More specifically, the article explores parallels in public discussions of refugees by European political leaders and media commentators in 1938 on the one hand and 2015-2016 on the other. The coverage of 1938 pivots around the Evian Conference, organized to discuss the problem of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, while the analysis of 2015-2016 extends from the rapid acceleration of the refugee influx into Europe in the late summer of 2015 to the Brexit referendum of June 2016. The article contends that despite obvious and significant structural and contextual differences between the late 1930s and the mid-2010s, recent public discussions of the refugee crisis in Europe have closely resembled those conducted around the time of the Evian Conference. Fear and a sense of threat have been the dominant sentiments in the mid-2010s, as they were in the late 1930s, with many similarities in the language and analytical categories with which those sentiments have been publicly expressed. The article also provides observations about the potential benefits and pitfalls of diachronic historical comparisons, suggesting that an analysis of the failings of refugee policy during the 1930s can provide comparative lessons for better practice today. Aggressive, racist language about refugees of the kind that was common in the 1930s should have no place in today’s public discourses in Europe. Awareness of the continuities that exist in this area can provide important historical perspective, highlighting the persistence of prejudice and the urgency of rejecting and battling it.

In the autumn of 2015, at a point when public and political debate in Europe was dominated by the large-scale arrival of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa, an influx that had promptly been labelled a ‘refugee crisis’, United Nations human rights commissioner Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein of Jordan gave a notable interview to *The Guardian* newspaper. In the interview, Al Hussein criticized European politicians and media commentators for using dehumanizing language about refugees and instrumentalizing the ongoing crisis. He warned

about the dangers of ‘amnesia’, arguing that contemporary public rhetoric about refugees in many ways echoed that deployed by Western leaders in the late 1930s vis-à-vis Jews trying to escape from escalating persecution in Nazi Germany. Interestingly, he also made a more specific comparative observation, arguing that things being said about refugees in contemporary Europe were ‘very similar’ to the language used at the time of the Evian Conference, an ultimately unsuccessful inter-governmental meeting held in July 1938, with the stated objective of trying to facilitate the settlement of political refugees, particularly persecuted Jews, from Germany to other countries.¹

Al Hussein’s comparative point is important and intriguing, particularly because the contemporary European refugee crisis has not received sufficient historical contextualization. The ongoing mass movement of people from Asia, Africa and the Middle East towards Europe has often been portrayed in public discussions as a *sui generis* event, an ‘unprecedented refugee crisis,’ to quote an OECD spokesman, during which the world-wide forced displacement of people has reached ‘its highest level since records began’.² When commentators have sought to include historical perspectives in their analyses, these have tended to be vague and sweeping. Descriptions such as ‘Europe’s worst refugee crisis in decades’ or ‘the biggest movement of refugees on the continent since the Second World War’ have constituted the norm.³ Vague references to the 1930s have also featured in the public debates, but usually on a level of generality that has made their relevance and validity very difficult to assess. This has been the case when UN officials talk about getting ‘that 30s

¹ ‘Refugee rhetoric echoes 1938 summit before Holocaust, UN official warns’, 14 October 2015, available at *The Guardian* website at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/oct/14/refugee-rhetoric-echoes-1938-summit-before-holocaust-un-official-warns> (accessed 17 October 2017).

² Rosemary Bennett, ‘Britain sees 24% increase in migrant numbers’, *The Times*, 23 September 2015; ‘The world’s refugees and internally displaced’, *The Economist* (online), 26 June 2016.

³ ‘Interview with Dimitris Avramopoulos’, *The Economist* (online), 23 September 2015; ‘Reverse thrust’, *The Times*, 2 March 2016.

feeling, all the way’ amidst the socio-economic problems of contemporary Greece, or when Prince Charles finds ‘deeply disturbing echoes’ of the 1930s in religious persecution around the world today.⁴

To be sure, in particular settings, more specific historical comparisons have also appeared, but the points of reference have typically seemed problematic. A case in point would be the German discussions that have sought to draw parallels between the present-day influx of largely extra-European refugees and the mass arrival of ethnically German expellees from Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II. Although often well-intentioned as attempts to generate sympathy for the plight of today’s uprooted people, these historical comparisons have seemed artificial, given the very different ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the two refugee populations and the vastly divergent capabilities of Germany as a receiving area for them in 1945 and 2015.⁵ Similarly, in British discussions, the predominant specific reference point has been the *Kindertransport*, the rescue of roughly 10,000 mostly Jewish children from Nazi-controlled Central Europe to the UK between late 1938 and 1939. Discussions of the *Kindertransport* have typically highlighted Britain’s supposedly long and proud tradition of admitting refugees, while conveniently omitting most of the wider context of the late 1930s, which would make the picture much less flattering for the UK. The neglected factors include London’s refusal to accept significant numbers of adult refugees, the fact that the *Kindertransport* programme was organized and funded by private philanthropic and religious organizations rather than by the state, and the contemporary proviso that the incoming children were to stay in Britain only temporarily, with restricted

⁴ ‘That 30s Feeling’, *The Economist* (online), 2 August 2011; ‘Prince Charles warns against religious persecution’, 22 December 2016, available at the BBC News website at <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-38401857> (accessed 14 October 2017).

⁵ See, for instance, Angela Merkel’s press conference, 31 August 2015, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2015/08/2015-08-31-pk-merkel.html> (accessed 14 October 2017); ‘Gauck fordert Deutsche auf, Flüchtlinge zu integrieren’, *Die Zeit* (online), 20 June 2015.

rights and privileges, pending emigration to further, permanent destinations.⁶ In both Germany and Britain, as indeed in the rest of Europe, the present-day refugee crisis has thus remained poorly rooted in history.

The lack of a proper historical contextualization of the current crisis is, in turn, connected to a wider problem: a dearth of historical perspectives in contemporary refugee studies more generally. As several scholars have indicated, historical analyses have been slow to be integrated into refugee studies, a relatively new field of scholarship dominated by social scientist with largely presentist preoccupations.⁷ In part, this lack of synergy can be blamed on a tradition of low attention to refugees within the historical profession itself. However, even after a growing body of sophisticated historical scholarship on refugees has begun to appear, penned by well-established pioneers such as Tony Kushner and Peter Gatrell and by a number of highly productive younger scholars, the findings of such work have not featured prominently in analyses of the position of refugees in contemporary societies.⁸ This is regrettable because a historical perspective is essential for understanding issues related to refugees in the present. To quote one prominent scholar of contemporary refugee policies: ‘We need to know how today’s movements are related to those of the past; how institutional

⁶ See, for example, ‘Influx of migrant children creates care crisis for councils’, *The Times*, 26 January 2016; ‘Migrant Crisis: A Reminder of Britain’s Long History of Welcoming Refugees’, *International Business Times*, 29 August 2015. On the *Kindertransport*, see Rebekka Göpfert, *Der jüdische Kindertransport von Deutschland nach England 1938/39: Geschichte und Erinnerung* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1999).

⁷ See, for instance, Philip Marfleet, ‘Refugees and History: Why We Must Address the Past’, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2007, 136-148; Peter Gatrell, ‘Refugees – What’s Wrong with History’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2017, 170-189.

⁸ See, for example Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Tony Kushner and Katherine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jessica Reinisch and Matthew Frank, eds., *Refugees in Europe 1919-1959: The Forty Years’ Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

actors responded to people displaced in earlier migration crises, how discourses of the refugee have emerged and how they shaped policies for refugee and asylum.’⁹

This article attempts to contribute to a historically grounded understanding of refugees in the contemporary world by making comparisons between the present refugee crisis and that of the late 1930s, particularly on the level of public discourses. Taking Al Hussein’s comments as my point of departure, I explore public discussions of refugees by European political leaders and media commentators in 1938 on the one hand and in 2015-2016 on the other, with the aim of tracing differences and similarities in the treatment and public portrayal of refugees in these two periods. My coverage of 1938 pivots around the Evian Conference which took place in July, while the analysis of 2015-2016 extends from the rapid acceleration of the refugee crisis in the summer and early autumn of 2015 to the Brexit referendum of June 2016. The geographical focus of the study aligns with the parameters of the UN Human Rights Commissioner’s 2015 interview. Although Al Hussein spoke mostly on the level of Europe and Europeans, his remarks were, in good part, aimed specifically at Britain: the interview was given to a major British newspaper during a visit to the UK, and it dwelled on recent controversial statements by leading British politicians. Adopting a similar focus, I draw primarily on British-based printed media, such as *The Times* and other quality newspapers, although additional sources also feature, including continental media materials and the published official record of the Evian Conference itself. Together, these sources provide a broad sample of mainstream political and media discourses about refugees in Europe in 1938 and 2015-2016, from which comparative observations about patterns and practices in these two periods can be drawn.

⁹ Marfleet, ‘Refugees and History’, 137.

To be sure, the kind of diachronic comparative approach adopted here poses various challenges. In a critical commentary on British public debates about the evolving refugee crisis in the autumn of 2015, Jessica Reinisch highlighted the most important of these, warning against a selective ‘misreading of the evidence’ in isolation from its wider historical ‘context’ and pleading for ‘caution’ in how historical precedents are ‘applied to current events’, particularly as policy-making tools.¹⁰ While these points are valid and significant, a focused and properly contextualized diachronic comparison can nevertheless make very useful contributions. It can provide long-term perspectives to challenge an array of ahistorical contemporary claims, ranging from the alleged singularity of the present-day crisis to the supposed generosity of particular national traditions and past policies, such as the vaunted *Kindertransport* programme. Most importantly for this article, this approach can also, to borrow Peter Gattrell’s words, cast light on the ‘discursive registers in which responses to crises are articulated’, accentuating similarities and differences in rhetorical practices, which, in turn, can have far-reaching political and societal repercussions within wider processes of categorizing, labelling and stereotyping refugees and other migrants.¹¹

The article begins with brief background information about the Evian Conference and its historical setting. It then compares and contrasts the wider political and social contexts in which refugees found themselves in the Europe of 1938 and 2015/16 before moving on to an analysis of the public portrayal of refugees in these two periods. My contribution makes no

¹⁰ Jessica Reinisch, ‘History matters ... but which one? Every refugee crisis has a context’, *History and Policy*, 29 September 2015, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/history-matters-but-which-one-every-refugee-crisis-has-a-context> (accessed 15 October 2017). On comparative history more generally, see especially Heinz-Gerhardt Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Comparative and Transnational History: Central European Approaches and New Perspectives* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2009); Hartmut Kaelble, *Der historische Vergleich* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 1999).

¹¹ Gattrell, ‘Refugees’, 184.

claim to comprehensiveness; it simply aims to address select points that I believe to be significant for a historically informed understanding of the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe.

The Evian Conference

The inter-governmental conference that convened in the plush surroundings of the French spa town of Evian between 6 and 15 July 1938 is largely forgotten today, except among historical experts, particularly those of the Holocaust. At the time, however, it attracted extensive international attention. The conference arose from an initiative of US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. In late March 1938, Roosevelt invited select democratic states to meet and explore ways of facilitating the emigration of refugees from Nazi Germany, including Austria, whose incorporation into the Reich earlier that month had significantly exacerbated the German refugee problem. Hundreds of thousands of people, the majority of them Jewish, were at least potentially looking to emigrate from the Third Reich, but with very few practical options. Amidst the escalating persecution of Jews and other perceived enemies in Nazi Germany, and against a wider transnational backdrop of economic uncertainty, extensive unemployment, and growing international instability, no country was eager to accept large numbers of immigrants, particularly as fears of a much larger exodus of Jewish refugees from other parts of Central and Eastern Europe loomed in the background. Accordingly, stringent immigration quotas and other related restrictions were in place around the world, making escape from the Third Reich increasingly difficult by the late 1930s. At the same time, however, the outbursts of sadistic violence that accompanied the German *Anschluss* of Austria in March 1938 caused consternation across the world and generated pressure for some kind of a humanitarian response.

President Roosevelt's initiative reflected these conflicting pressures – and was itself deeply contradictory. The 32 states that attended the Evian Conference were invited 'to

consider what steps can be taken to facilitate the settlement in other countries of political refugees from Germany (including Austria)' while being assured that such steps would remain 'within the existing immigration laws and regulations of the receiving countries'.¹² In other words, the participants were under no real pressure to change their restrictive immigration procedures. Unsurprisingly, then, the conference achieved little, except perhaps a temporary public relations boost for the participants. After a week of deliberations and proclamations, it concluded with no tangible results, beyond the establishment of an Inter-Governmental Committee, based in London, which was to continue the work of trying to seek solutions to the German refugee crisis. Nothing concrete came out of this Committee's operations either, and as the persecution of Jews by the Nazi authorities escalated in the so-called *Kristallnacht* of November 1938 and its aftermath, the vast majority of Jews in Germany had no escape routes available. The significance of Evian can therefore be aptly summarized in the words used by Israel's Yad Vashem memorial: 'At the conference, the world's democracies made it clear that they were willing to do next to nothing for the Jew of Europe. ... The world's doors, closed at Evian, remained shut throughout World War II.'¹³

The Political and Societal Context: 1938 vs. 2015/16

In many ways, the Evian conference belonged to a historical epoch drastically different from the contemporary period, certainly in Europe. The surrounding setting was deeply ominous, in a way that the world of 2015-16 does not approximate, despite all its conflicts and tensions

¹² *Proceedings of the Intergovernmental Committee, Evian, July 6th to the 15th, 1938, Verbatim Record of the Plenary Meetings of the Committee, Resolutions and Reports* (Evian: Inter-Governmental Committee, 1938), 8.

¹³ 'Evian Conference', available at Yad Vashem's 'This Month in Holocaust History' website at www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/this_month/resources/evian_conference.asp (accessed 15 October 2017). See also S. Adler-Rudel, 'The Evian Conference on the Refugee Question', *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, vol. 13, 1968, 235-73; Tommie Sjöberg, *The Powers and the Persecuted: The Refugee Problem and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991).

– and certain loose parallels with the 1930s. The severe economic crisis that had devastated Western economies in the early 1930s continued to cast deep shadows at the end of the decade, feeding zero-sum mind-sets, protectionism, and general uncertainty. The fragile post-WWI international order constructed around institutions such as the League of Nations had reached an advanced state of disintegration. Democratic polities seemed shaky at best, and many had collapsed altogether in the previous years. Fascism, authoritarianism, and Stalinist Communism struck many as auguring the way of the future, and the ascendancy of dictatorial forces in the ongoing fratricidal conflict in Spain seemed the latest manifestation of that general trend. Openly racist demagogues basked in the limelight, with perceived ethnic and racial minorities, above all Jews, targeted with venom and violence, most prominently in Nazi Germany, of course, but also in other parts of Europe, especially its eastern half. Although some features similar to the above exist in today's Europe too, in a milder form, the overall crisis of the 1930s was of a different magnitude.

Similarly, the position of refugees in the Europe of the late 1930s was considerably more precarious than today. Despite some attempts by the League of Nations to create a measure of overarching protection for them, at the time refugees enjoyed no official recognition under international law of the kind that the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951 and other post-World War II provisions by the UN, the EU, and additional authorities would subsequently establish. Refugees existed very much at the mercy of individual governments, which were not obligated to grant them any particular courtesies. The vast majority of potential refugees were not admitted into the countries in which they had hoped to find shelter, and even on the rare occasions when admission was granted, the standard assumption was that the newcomers would not be staying long. As repeatedly asserted at Evian, European states viewed themselves as 'transit countries' that might provide 'temporary asylum' to small numbers of refugees from Germany whose ultimate areas of

settlement would lie outside of Europe, in the colonies, dominions and independent states of the Americas, Asia, Australasia and Africa. None of these ‘distant countries’ showed any enthusiasm for this task, however, which stalled the process further.¹⁴

Furthermore, unlike today, European governments did not assume financial responsibility for the refugees admitted into their territories. On the contrary, the general assumption, upheld at Evian, was that ‘the admitting countries [did] not make themselves responsible for the cost of migration’ but that the migrants themselves or ‘private organizations’ would have to carry the burden, which indeed they did, within their limited resources.¹⁵ Various charities and other private organizations, particularly Jewish groups, distinguished themselves with their humanitarian commitment and diligent fund-raising during the late 1930s. Overall, a refugee in the Europe of the late 1930s, with few rights, in an extremely tense and unstable national and international setting, faced general conditions that differ significantly from those of the present, when the existence of the legal category of a refugee is internationally recognized, as are certain obligations of receiving states towards such people. To be sure, European countries still frequently strive to skirt their responsibilities, and the position of many refugees continues to be weak, and frequently even dehumanizing and dangerous, but the underlying structures and policy principles governing the reception and treatment of refugees are fundamentally different from what they were eighty years ago.

The Public Portrayal of Refugees: 1938 vs. 2015/16

Despite these structural and contextual contrasts between the late 1930s and the mid-2010s, however, the portrayals of refugees in the European public discussions of these two periods show striking similarities. Two prevailing sentiments, expressed in multiple ways, come

¹⁴ ‘Results at Evian’, *The Times*, 16 July 1938.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; ‘Homes for Refugees’, *The Times*, 22 November 1938.

through again and again: fear and a sense of threat. At their most basic – and visceral – level, media reports of both periods cultivated a sense of threat by describing the large-scale movement of refugees as an uncontrollable force that had the potential to push aside all controls and to overwhelm societies. In both periods, analysts typically made these points by employing a vague language of millions. Referring to the more than a million refugees that had arrived in the European Union in the course of 2015, for instance, *The Times* asserted that although this number did not yet ‘represent an existential threat’, ‘a million’ was ‘just the start’ of what appeared to be ‘an enormous and unprecedented movement of peoples from the developing to the developed world that threatens to engulf Europe’.¹⁶ Very similarly, the Oxford social scientist and Member of British Parliament Arthur Salter, writing in late 1938, prognosticated that the number of refugees trying to exit the Third Reich was likely to reach ‘nearly a million’ in the ‘near future’ alone. The ‘prospect’ for the years beyond the immediate horizon seemed much more threatening still, with the likelihood that ‘between 3,000,000 and 5,000,000’ Jewish refugees would be ‘forced out’ from ‘Hungary, Rumania, Czecho-Slovakia and Lithuania’.¹⁷ Therefore, concluded another British commentator during the Evian Conference, ‘[g]overnments [were] concerned with taking precautions’ against what they perceived to be ‘a new migration, comparable with the great migrations of history’, which was likely to become ‘a menace to them’.¹⁸ These opinions very much echo those frequently expressed about the contemporary influx of refugees into the European Union, for instance by Boris Johnson, who in September 2015 warned in grim tones about an ‘eternity of refugees’ looming at Europe’s gates.¹⁹

¹⁶ ‘Exodus’, *The Times*, 2 January 2016; ‘Accepting these numbers is a huge mistake’, *The Times*, 10 September 2015.

¹⁷ Sir Arthur Salter, ‘The Case of the Refugees’, *The Times*, 27 December 1938.

¹⁸ ‘Evian refugee conference’, *The Times*, 9 July 1938.

¹⁹ ‘Boris: Act on Syria to Halt Refugee Crisis’, *The Times*, 1 September 2015.

In both periods, the underlying sense of a general threat was linked to more specific interpretative paradigms and recipes for action which were themselves steeped in sentiments of menace and dread. Commentators of the late 1930s and the mid-2010s alike frequently juxtaposed two contradictory ideas: abstract sympathy for the suffering of uprooted humanity on the one hand and hard-headed, non-sentimental political calculations vis-à-vis actual refugees on the other, typically insisting that the latter must trump the former. A British government minister, speaking in Parliament in late 1938, gave an axiomatic example of such a juxtaposition, expressing his ‘sympathy ... for the persecuted Jews’ and his ‘horror’ at their plight, while vowing that these personal feelings would not ‘warp’ the ‘cool and just judgement’ which he and the rest of the government had to exercise.²⁰ Similar expressions of uncompromising *Realpolitik* were in abundant evidence in the refugee crisis of 2015-2016 as well, and in early 2016 a British journalist crystallized them pithily: ‘Compassion is the right response [to the crisis], but an unconditional welcome is the wrong way to express it.’²¹

The typical justifications for the necessity of a tough stance towards refugees were very similar in both periods. Fears about the socio-economic impact of the large-scale arrival of presumably destitute foreigners on a given country stood high on the list. In late 1938, for instance, one British parliamentary deputy enquired whether the government ‘intend[ed] to put a period or limit to the enormous influx of aliens into this country’ in view of ‘the great number of unfortunate British unemployed’.²² The same kinds of anxieties about the potential diversion of social policy resources from the pockets of average citizens into the hands of refugees were commonplace in 2015-16 as well. Alarmist media accounts repeatedly drummed up concern in this area. *The Times*, for instance, reported in early 2016 that ‘British

²⁰ Malcolm MacDonald, Secretary of State for the Dominions and Colonies, cited in ‘House of Commons’, *The Times*, 25 November 1938.

²¹ ‘Reality check’, *The Times*, 21 January 2016.

²² W.G. Howard Gritten, cited in ‘House of Commons’, *The Times*, 9 December 1938.

children' in Kent were being sent to care homes outside their home county because 'social services [were] overwhelmed with unaccompanied child asylum seekers', expressing 'fears that the numbers will increase in the spring'.²³

In both the late 1930s and the mid-2010s, such specific concerns quickly gelled into much wider, nationalistic arguments about why a particular state was unable to accept (additional) refugees. At Evian, the representatives of one country after another stressed their past credentials of generosity towards migrants before moving on to assert that, in the present circumstances, their capabilities were exhausted. Henry Berénger, the chief French delegate, famously stated that his country had 'reached, if not already passed, an extreme point of saturation as regards the admission of refugees', while the representatives of several other European states, including Britain, Denmark and Sweden, declared that theirs was not 'a country of immigration'.²⁴ Similar arguments about the inability of particular states to transcend strictly defined limits in responding to the refugee influx were also widespread in 2015-16. The most notorious statement was probably UKIP leader Nigel Farage's 'Breaking Point' poster action of June 2016, unleashed shortly before Britain's EU referendum, in which the words 'Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all' were superimposed on the background image of a huge queue of vaguely threatening-looking, overwhelmingly young and male refugees.²⁵ However, numerous other EU countries, particularly those of the former Eastern bloc, also insisted that they could not admit more than a minimal number of people, and the British government under David Cameron stuck to its special opt-out privileges, jealously restricting refugee admissions into the UK.

²³ 'Influx of migrant children creates care crisis for councils', *The Times*, 26 January 2016.

²⁴ *Proceedings, Evian*, 16, 14, 34, 30. See also Joshua B. Stein, 'Great Britain and the Evian Conference of 1938', *The Wiener Library Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 37/38, esp. 49-50.

²⁵ 'Immoral and dishonest: MPs from every side attack Farage's poster', *The Times*, 17 June 2016.

Unsurprisingly, these kinds of narrow, nationalistic stances towards refugees adopted by particular governments translated into competitive games of evasion among them in both periods. Around the time of the Evian Conference, the tendency of the potential receiving countries of German refugees to shunt responsibility among themselves was painfully evident. The United States stressed the need for ‘intergovernmental action’ rather than for major adjustments in its own, highly restrictive immigration quotas; the British similarly demanded ‘international action on the widest scale possible’ while emphasizing that their own ‘possibilities’ remained ‘strictly limited’; the French indicated their willingness to act if ‘Great Britain and the United States together could produce a noteworthy scheme’; and smaller states, such as Belgium, typically suggested that they would consider shouldering a burden ‘in proportion to that which the other states ... agree[d] to accept.’²⁶ The predictable outcome was very limited progress on all fronts.

By the second decade of the 21st century, the international setting in Europe had, of course, grown considerably less anarchic. With the European Union, attempts to co-ordinate European-wide responses and policies in the refugee field had become much more prominent and viable – but competition, tension, and attempts to shift blame and burdens among the affected states had by no means disappeared. The biggest contrast with the 1930s was the readiness of a small number of European countries to admit high numbers of refugees in 2015-16. Although Sweden stood out as the most generous country in terms of refugees accepted in proportion to its own population, Germany was the unchallenged leader in absolute numbers, taking in somewhat over one million refugees in 2015 alone. As Chancellor Angela Merkel opened her country’s borders, presenting her actions as a defence of European humanitarian values, the contrast with the Evian context of the Third Reich as a

²⁶ *Proceedings, Evian*, 13, 19; ‘Settlement of Refugees’, *The Times*, 21 November 1938; ‘Parliament: Future of the Refugees’, *The Times*, 22 November 1938; ‘Settling the Refugees’, *The Times*, 3 December 1938.

savage persecutor of its own citizens could not have been greater. Ironically, however, generosity in admitting refugees proved nearly as divisive as steadfastness in turning them away had done eight decades earlier. Merkel soon came under attack from many quarters at home and abroad for a large number of alleged sins, including that of having provoked the refugee crisis in the first place with her unrealistic policies. Some of the strongest criticism emerged from Eastern Europe, where the Chancellor's policies, including her attempts to deal with the crisis by distributing refugees around the EU member states through a quota system, encountered little sympathy. Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo, for example, made her disapproval clear in late 2015: 'Attempts to export a problem that certain countries have themselves created without the input of other members cannot be called solidarity'.²⁷

Such recriminations about proposed EU refugee quotas between Eastern and Western European states, with their very different recent historical experiences of immigration and ethnic diversity, were perhaps predictable, but smouldering conflicts between such intimate neighbours as Denmark and Sweden seemed particularly jarring. The countries locked horns over the introduction of border checks at their mutual boundary at the peak of the refugee surge in autumn 2015, and after Denmark passed controversial new legislation in early 2016 that allowed its authorities to seize assets in excess of approximately £1,000 from incoming refugees, a Social Democratic member of the Danish parliament defended the measure thus: 'What is your alternative? The alternative is that we continue to be one of the most attractive countries in Europe to come to, and then we end up like Sweden'.²⁸

In both the late 1930s and the mid-2010s, the prevalent sentiments of fear and threat repeatedly found racist, or even downright racist, expression in public discussions. Around the time of Evian, anti-Semitism often lurked just below the surface of various statements and

²⁷ 'Blame game erupts over migrant crisis', *The Times*, 19 November 2015.

²⁸ Dan Jorgensen, cited in 'Danish MPs vote to seize refugee cash and valuables worth over £1,015', *The Times*, 27 January 2016.

declarations. Notoriously, Australia's official representative at the Evian Conference justified his country's reluctance to accept Jewish refugees with the following pronouncement: 'as we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one by encouraging any scheme of large-scale foreign migration'.²⁹ In British debates, related notions of ethnic prejudice were typically expressed in a more guarded fashion, as when the Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, explained to Parliament in late 1938 that 'mass immigration of Jews' had to be avoided in order to prevent the strengthening of 'any anti-Semitic movement' in the country.³⁰ More open expressions of anti-Semitism were commonplace in many other parts of Europe, of course, and occasionally they surfaced in prominent places in the UK too. In the middle of a reasonably balanced examination of the contemporary refugee problem, a 1938 editorial in *The Times*, for example, proclaimed: 'That there have been undesirable Jews in Germany need not be disputed, nor the fact that many of them acquired positions in the years which followed the war which gave them too strong a hold on the social life of the country.'³¹

By 2015-16, the level of ethnic prejudice that could be expressed within the bounds of acceptable mainstream public discourse in Europe had diminished considerably, of course, certainly in terms of anti-Semitism, but racist pronouncements about Muslim immigrants, and indeed Muslims in general, were disturbingly common on the political fringes, certainly on the populist right and the far right. Islamist terror attacks or incidents such as the mass sexual assaults by young Muslim men in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015 fuelled the rhetorical flames. In certain countries, including Hungary and Slovakia, national governments led by demagogic right-wing politicians made callous use of racially tinged anti-Muslim arguments. In opposing the arrival of mostly Muslim refugees, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban

²⁹ *Proceedings, Evian*, 20.

³⁰ 'Help for the Refugees', *The Times*, 22 November 1938.

³¹ 'The Refugees', *The Times*, 12 December 1938. See also Shlomo Z. Katz, 'Public Opinion in Western Europe and the Evian Conference of July 1938', *Yad Vashem Studies on the European Jewish Catastrophe and Resistance*, vol. 9, 1973, 108-9.

maintained that he was simply exercising ‘Hungary’s prerogative to preserve its Christian roots’, while a media commentator closely linked to his ruling Fidesz Party described those involved in the Cologne sex attacks as ‘north African and Arab animals’. Using a similar zoological metaphor, Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico, in turn, denounced Muslim refugees as a seemingly ‘protected species’ in Europe, blaming Germany.³² Although statements like these remained outliers from the right, general expressions of concern about the ability of Muslim refugees to integrate into European societies were very common in 2015-16, and the sentiments bore a close resemblance to the fears of exacerbating ethnic divisions that had featured prominently in discussions of the potential effects of large-scale Jewish immigration in the late 1930s. Indeed, contemporary concerns in this area were arguably even more pronounced than their counterparts from eight decades earlier, as commentators worried about ‘the long-term impact’ of the arrival of mostly young Middle-Eastern males ‘on the vaunted social stability’ of key European democracies.³³

In view of this evidence, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein does have a point, then. Recent public discussions about the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe have borne a close resemblance to those conducted around the time of the Evian Conference of 1938, despite the many structural and other differences between the two periods. Fear and a sense of threat have been the dominant sentiments in the mid-2010s, as they were in the late 1930s, with many similarities in the language and analytical categories in which those sentiments have been expressed. Although countervailing voices stressing the positive potential of mass migrations have also been raised in the past few years, including OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría’s argument that ‘migration is not a liability but an asset’, they have constituted a

³² ‘Europe is finally confronting the migrant crisis’, *The Economist* (online), 4 September 2015; ‘Terror and migrant crisis testing Europe to limits, warn EU chief’, *The Times*, 14 January 2016.

³³ ‘Demographic Timebomb’, *The Times*, 7 January 2016.

distinct minority.³⁴ The predominant tone has been one of anxiety and apprehension, concisely summarized by a fearful journalist at the start of 2016: ‘Dealing with migrants is the greatest challenge of Europe’s future’.³⁵

Conclusion: Comparative Lessons

Diachronic historical comparisons are always complicated, and comparisons that draw on the late 1930s in general and aspects of the Third Reich in particular pose special problems. In analyses of Germany’s role in that era, the crimes of the Nazis, including the Holocaust, are never far from the surface, and because those crimes have become the symbolic embodiment of evil in today’s world, special care is needed in evoking them. All too easily, comparisons with the Nazi period can be used to inflate the severity or significance of the issues that are being weighed against it. With sufficient imagination, little Hitlers can be found lurking in many corners. However, the opposite hazard also applies. Given the magnitude of the horrors that the Third Reich unleashed, comparisons with it can trivialize potential dangers as well. No contemporary crisis, no matter how serious it seems, is likely to culminate in total war and genocide, which can be used to play down the urgency of responding to important challenges. General, sweeping comparisons involving the Nazi years are therefore profoundly problematic.

However, As Tony Kushner argued in an insightful article in this journal some years ago, there are also ‘legitimate comparisons that can be made between the Nazi era and the present day’, comparisons that are more limited and focused.³⁶ Kushner’s contribution highlighted ‘the limitations of refugee policy during the 1930s’ as an area from which

³⁴ ‘Britain sees 24% increase in migrant numbers’, *The Times*, 23 September 2015.

³⁵ ‘Exodus’, *The Times*, 2 January 2016.

³⁶ Tony Kushner, ‘Kosovo and the Refugee Crisis, 1999: The Search for Patterns amidst the Prejudice’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1999, 85.

comparative lessons could be drawn for better practice today.³⁷ I would like to endorse that point, emphasizing the aspect of refugee policy that has been the focus of this article: parallels and continuities in public rhetoric between the late 1930s and the contemporary period. Although Europe and its societies have been transformed between 1938 and 2015/16 and the position of refugees is now less precarious than it was eight decades ago, certainly in legal terms, continuities in public discussions concerning refugees are nevertheless striking. In both periods, refugees were portrayed overwhelmingly as a threat, an unpredictable alien force with the potential to overwhelm pre-established national communities, all too often in racially charged language.

On this point, another important argument advanced by Tony Kushner deserves reiteration. Kushner has demanded that historians interested in refugees “reconnect their profession ... with ethical issues’ by using historical insights to engage with relevant societal questions in the contemporary world.³⁸ His observation is highly relevant to the subject matter of this article. Words can – and do – have concrete consequences, and we need to take them seriously, certainly in view of the awful precedents set in the 1930s and the 1940s. Aggressive, racist language about refugees should have no place in today’s public discourses in Europe, and an awareness of the continuities that exist in this area can provide important historical perspective, highlighting the persistence of prejudice and the urgency of rejecting and battling it. Dimitris Avramopoulos, The EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs, and Citizenship made this point succinctly and persuasively in early 2016: ‘We must not let Europe go back to its past. We must do our best in order to stop the expansion of xenophobic and populist rhetoric.’³⁹ His important words of warning deserve

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁸ Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*, 232-33.

³⁹ ‘Interview with Dimitris Avramopoulos’, *The Economist* (online), 4 February 2016.

the widest possible attention amidst the crises and widespread uncertainties of the early 21st century.