

**Book Review – *Refugees in Twentieth-Century Britain: A History*, by Becky Taylor.**

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*Refugees in Twentieth-Century Britain: A History* by Becky Taylor is a book about the country refugees found refuge in or were excluded from. The years spanned by the book lead us from Britain as a global sovereign power to Britain as a post-colonial country lying in the European Union. This book examines in detail four groups of exiles: refugees from Nazism in the 1930s, the Hungarians escaping from the Soviet invasion in 1956, the Ugandan Asians dismissed by Idi Amin in 1972 and refugees from Vietnam who came to Britain after 1979.

In the last century issues of migration and refugees have been a dominant part of social and political discourse in Europe. This is especially true in Britain which has already faced diverse migration pushes. The writer and critic John Berger regarded the twentieth century as “the century of departure, of migration, of exodus, of disappearance: the century of people helplessly seeing others, who were close to them, disappear over the horizon” (Dyer, 1995, p. 128). Global conflicts, revolutions and civil wars have played a major part in these processes of movement and loss, exposing combatants and non-combatants to personal risk. The book by Becky Taylor under review dramatically focuses on four cohorts of refugees – Jewish and other refugees from Nazism; Hungarians in 1956; Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin; and Vietnamese ‘boat people’ who arrived in the wake of the fall of Saigon. The historian Becky Taylor demonstrates how refugees’ experiences, rather than being marginal, were emblematic of some of the principal developments in British society.

The first chapter, titled “Protectionism vs Internationalism: Refugees from Nazism” focuses on two of the inclinations of refugees originated by the Nazi regime: the struggles of Jews before “the outbreak of war in September 1939; and “the arrival of thousands of Dutch and Belgian refugees in Britain in May 1940 as they fled the Nazi advance” (p. 31). It shows how 1940 was to identify a crucial division: no longer prevented from having access to public funds, refugees were now entitled to the exact same Unemployment Assistance Board (UAB) profits as the prevalent community.

The second chapter titled “Post-War Settlement: The Hungarians” brings an exploration of the reception and resettlement of Hungarian refugees moves us beyond theory to reveal the actual extent and limitations of the post-war cognitive and policy shift (p. 12). It explains in detail how Britain's decline as a world power in the second half of the twentieth century was brought about by its membership in the international Hungarian resettlement programme. Taylor also proposes to initiate a discussion to acknowledge the true significance of Britain's acceptance of Hungarian refugees, to consider the national picture. The chapter describes in detail the procedures of 1950s Britain, the regulations of the reception camps, and the regulations of the camps.

The third chapter, titled “Rivers of Blood: The Ugandan Asians” explores the arrival of the Ugandan Asians who were expelled by Idi Amin in 1972. The time when the Ugandan Asians arrived in Britain is described as a time when Britain was increasingly turning its back on the Commonwealth. This was both as a financial stock and as a container of cultural 'Britishness'. This chapter examines how Ugandan Asians were varying, and sometimes concurrently, classified as "refugees," "immigrants," and "expelled" (p. 9). It also provides an excellent illustration of the extent of change in the nature of British civil society: the committee coordinating the work of the sixty-three major voluntary organisations involved in the Ugandan Asian programme ranged from “the Jewish Board of Deputies and the National Council for Social Service to the Institute for Race Relations, the Supreme Council of Sikhs in the UK, the Indian Workers’ Association and the pacifist International Voluntary Service (IVS)” (p. 21).

The fourth chapter, titled “Marketisation and Multiculturalism: Refugees from Vietnam” tracks the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in Britain between 1979 and 1983, and the process of resettling them, which emphasized the ongoing effect of the Cold War on the displacement of new refugees and in establishing “a wider geopolitical context in which their settlement in the West was seen as both desirable and possible” (p. 9). In chapters two and four, the impact of the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, which ratified the Refugee Convention and its guiding bodies in 1951, is discussed considering the Hungarian and Vietnamese resettlement plans that Britain participated in as one of the organisation's first signatories. Moreover, chapter four attempts to answer questions such as: Why it was that Britain, in global quarters, applicable to the range of the matter, received so few? (19,355 Vietnamese, or around 2.5 per cent of the total). On the other hand, why, in light of the declared aim of all governments after the 1971 “Immigration Act to decrease settlement to the lowest possible level, did it take so many? How was it that Thatcher, in her first weeks in office, departed from the electoral

program encouraging further curbs to immigration to accepting over 19,000 Vietnamese refugees?” (p. 213).

Overall, by examining the differing responses of Britain to these four influxes of refugees – who all appeared within a definite timeline and at such a scale that their occupation needed to be acknowledged by both voluntary societies and governments – this book uncovers some of the significant changes experienced by the British government, foundations, and community during the middle decades of the twentieth century. During the course of this book, the reader will discover the value of advancing analysis further and considering the implications of the arrival of refugees. This will enable him/her to consider a broader range of historical issues. Similarly, the book shows that each group of refugees studied was confined to meeting “expectations around acceptable behaviour and performances of gratitude, with those failing to fulfil expectations often quickly identified as a ‘problem’ requiring punitive action” (pp. 16–17). Hence, this book can appeal to a vast audience ranging from scholars, researchers, and policymakers to a more general reader.

**Dr Nevin Gürbüz-Blaich** holds a Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from İstanbul Yeni Yüzyıl University, Turkey. Nevin’s research covers a spatial analysis of Tom Stoppard’s plays. Her further academic interests are space, place, the geography of literature, and literary representations in contemporary British drama, as well as postmodern novel and film studies. Nevin is currently a visiting scholar at Heidelberg University, Germany, where she carries out her post-doctoral research on space, place, environment and contemporary British drama.

#### **Works cited**

Dyer, G. (1995) *The Missing of the Somme*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.