

Truly, Madly, Deeply: Britain's Love Affair With Refugees - Past but not Present?

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Abstract

Britain's response to the recent refugee crisis is marked by its paucity. This article explores how constructions of the past have been instrumentalised by both those defending government policies and those demanding that more should be let in. The focus is on child refugees and the comparisons drawn (and rejected) to the Kindertransport. Through discussion in parliament, the media, cultural productions and amongst ordinary people, it shows the importance of 'history' and how references to the Second World War and the Holocaust have tended to help justify rather than query the exclusion of today's refugees and thereby providing a very different example to Germany.

Keywords

Refugees; Kindertransport; Holocaust; Britain; Germany; Second World War; Syria; parliament; media; Mass-Observation; history.

In Anthony Minghella's Truly, Madly, Deeply (1991), a film that passionately fights back against the selfishness and bigotry that typified the excesses of Thatcherism and instead posits a 'liberal humanism',¹ Juliet Stevenson's character cannot bring herself to love again until she has - with his permission - let go of the ghost of her soulmate and husband (Alan Rickman) who has died prematurely and suddenly. The film works not only because of the romantic chemistry between Stevenson and Rickman, but through the commitment of Minghella (son of an Isle of Wight Italian origin ice cream maker),² and the two lead actors (much of the detail was improvised) to a different Britain - one that welcomes diversity and rediscovers compassion.³ It is exemplified by its portrayal of refugees whose talents and skills are ignored by the host society but maintain their dignity and decency. They do this by utilising their professional expertise in the private sphere amongst themselves whilst also working menially in the 'unofficial' economy, exploited because of their 'illegality': 'In Chile I make film [documentaries]. In London, I'm a cleaner.'⁴ As Minghella later noted, the myth of Thatcher was that Britain had become a: 'a classless society, but we'd created an

invisible class of migrant, dispossessed workers. I was in contact with a great number of these people.¹⁵ Furthermore, Truly, Madly, Deeply also marked a cinematic landmark with regard to those with learning disabilities who again are shown exercising agency and are not represented as helpless victims.

Commented [WM1]: I don't think the film manages this actually.

Five years later and towards the end point of a long period of Conservative government which had demonised those seeking refuge in the UK (formally so with the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Act), Auschwitz survivor Hugo Gryn warned that he was

desperately concerned over the fact that the issues of asylum seeking and the authorities' mean spirited response to it are part of the process which is the hardening of the caring arteries. There is such a process going on. I see towards the end of the twentieth century here in civilised Europe that it is an abomination, but it is happening.

Like Truly, Madly, Deeply, Gryn emphasised that a more inclusive outlook was still possible but needed fighting for. Refusing to separate 'history' and the present, Gryn believed that meeting the challenge of how 'you are with the one to whom you owe nothing... is a grave test and not only as an index of our tragic past!'.⁶

Gryn, reflecting on his lifetime, in what turned out to be his last speech, believed that 'future historians will call the twentieth century not only the century of the great wars, but also the century of the refugee'.⁷ But if that is to be the case, much has to change in the historical profession. Peter Gatrell has become the most important scholar in writing global refugee history.⁸ Reflecting on his distinguished and pioneering career he concludes that 'It is striking how little attention is given to refugees in general histories of the modern world'.⁹ There is thus a certain irony that in the early twenty first refugee crisis, the largest since the Second World War, 'history' is often evoked. It is done so, however, in many (often competing) ways.

First, and following Hugo Gryn, it is to pose how our responses today to this human-made disaster

will be viewed by those to come. Juliet Stevenson herself, a long standing and committed refugee campaigner, articulates this perspective with her usual passion and intelligence. In October 2015 it was fast becoming apparent that Britain was not going to follow Germany's lead in helping those hundreds of thousands of migrants (a million by the end of that year) who had reached Europe following the most horrific journeys from North Africa and Turkey. In a somewhat tokenistic gesture, the British government pledged to take in 20,000 Syrian refugees from camps in the Middle Eastern region over a five year period. It refused, however, to take any part in sharing responsibility and offering refuge for those who had managed to get to Europe. Stevenson argued that Britain was 'facing a once in a generation challenge in the way it deals with the refugee crisis, and the response of its politicians and the public will be judged by history'.¹⁰

Second, 'history' is called upon to aid understanding of the current refugee crisis in relation to both the reasons behind it and 'our' (that is 'Western') responses to it. With regards to the latter, Stevenson has her own version of the British past:

people are realising that what is going on at the moment is a movement in history, it is not just a news item. It is not going to stop and we need to remember that we do live in a country that has a very proud tradition of opening doors to people in extreme cases of humanitarian need... It is time now to identify ourselves again as a nation that does respond as compassionate human beings.¹¹

Third, is how future historians will not only judge but also explain and contextualise what is happening in the first decades of the twenty first century. Peter Gatrell has begun this process, calling for 'the current calamities [to be located] in a broader history of encounters and enterprise in the Mediterranean'. He follows the lead of cultural theorist Iain Chambers who 'notes the historical connections and multiple cross-currents that made the Mediterranean "always part of an extensive elsewhere", not just a "Latin lake"'.¹² Gatrell is too much of a realist to assume this will necessarily happen, noting 'Of course, it is conceivable that historians will pay little or no attention to this Mediterranean moment, deeming the migration of asylum seekers and refugees to be merely

episodic or surface noise rather than a fundamental component of conflict in the modern world.¹³ Indeed, the general failure of historians to confront the 'refugeedom' of the twentieth century, matched by the inability of those in refugee studies to take 'history' seriously, is not especially reassuring in expecting that the current crisis will provoke a different scholarly response.

But the focus in my contribution to this special issue does not continue the important intervention of Gatrell and his plea for historians and those in refugee studies to think beyond the nation state and thus to 'normalise' forced migration as part and parcel of the modern world - however necessary (if troubling and demanding) this will be.¹⁴ Instead, it is to explore how particular refugee crises of the past have been utilised, instrumentalised and, significantly, contested, in coming to terms with and responding to Gatrell's 'Mediterranean moment'. It is especially the Nazi era that is the most readily evoked comparison (and not only by those who would liberalise current refugee policy). A neat example was provided in March 2016 by Hilary Clinton during the American Presidential campaign. Vainly, it turned out, attempting to highlight the dangers posed by Donald Trump and his rhetoric against immigrants, refugees, Muslims, the disabled, and women amongst others, Clinton warned:

Now, we've had dark chapters in our history before. We remember the nearly 1,000 Jews aboard the St Louis who were denied entry in 1939 and sent back to Europe. But America should be better than this. And I believe it's our responsibility as citizens to say so... If you see bigotry, oppose it. If you see violence, condemn it. If you see a bully, stand up to him.¹⁵

Such references to the St Louis have a long pedigree. Hugo Gryn in his 1996 speech narrated the ship's journey and what happened (or what he assumed happened) to those returned to the continent, using his moral stature to insist: 'It is a very painful and I have to say this, it is an unacceptable fact, that half a century later, we, and by we I include our political leaders as well, we act as nothing happened. It's unacceptable.'¹⁶ More openly, an article and later a lesson plan in the New York Times in late 2016 and early 2017 comparing responses to German Jewish refugees in

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the 1930s to Syrian refugees today was illustrated with a photograph of the St Louis passengers being denied entrance to Cuba in Havana harbour. The caption added "The ship was later denied entrance to the United States and returned to Hamburg, Germany."¹⁷

Collective 'Western' responses to the refugee crisis during the 1930s have also been referenced. Early in September 2015, photographs of Syrian three year old refugee Alan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach, led to an emotional outpouring at a global level. It did not, however, lead to a meaningful international response, including and particularly within the European Union - Germany excepted. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, admonished: 'One wonders what has happened to Europe. Why is there so much amnesia? Why don't they properly distil from their experience that they've been down this road before and it's a very unhappy road if you continue to follow it.'¹⁸ With the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, firmly in mind, who in July 2015 on national television had referred to migrants in the Calais camp - those closest to the United Kingdom - as 'swarms of people',¹⁹ Al Hussein added

Closer examination of history and of what happened in Europe in the early part of the 20th century should make people think very carefully about what it is that they're saying. These are human beings: even in the use of the word migrants, somehow it's as if they don't have rights.²⁰

Such language was, Al Hussein suggested, reminiscent of the Evian conference in July 1938 when America, Australia, Britain and other western countries refused to take substantial numbers of Jewish refugees for fear it would 'destabilise their societies and strain their economies'.²¹

At the same point as Al Hussein's intervention, a debate took place in Britain about the migrant crisis and whether the country should take in more refugees beyond the 20,000 already committed to by 2020. Again 'history' was brought into play, but the comparator was not the Evian conference, which - country by country - was focused on refugees (essentially Jewish though this was never fully acknowledged) of all ages.²² Instead, it was the Kindertransport, through which close to 10,000 mainly Jewish children came to Britain before the outbreak of war, that was referenced again and

again by those arguing both for and against letting in more refugees.

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There is a certain irony in the instrumentalisation of this particular refugee movement - the Kindertransport had been largely forgotten in Britain and elsewhere until the last years of the twentieth century and its fiftieth anniversary in 1988. Whilst his (ab)use of history has frequently got him into trouble, Ken Livingstone is a useful measuring rod of general knowledge/ignorance of the Kindertransport in British culture. In 2002 the then Mayor of London was present at a Holocaust memorial event at Liverpool Street station, one of the main places of arrival of the Kindertransportees in 1938/1939 once they had disembarked from the port of Harwich and then continued their journey by train to the capital. Livingstone, long involved in anti-racist rhetoric, admitted that 'Until today, I did not know that Jewish children had escaped to London before the Second World War.'²³ Just a decade and a half later from that commemoration, there are two (rival) memorials to the Kinder at this station and it has become the most remembered refugee movement in Britain.

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The Kindertransport is, for example, featured prominently in the triumphalist narrative being promoted by the Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission (2014 onwards) backed by a pledge of £50 million government money (remarkable at a time of massive cut backs and austerity):

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Ensuring that the memory and the lessons of the Holocaust are never forgotten lies at the heart of Britain's values as a nation. In commemorating the Holocaust, Britain remembers the way it proudly stood up to Hitler and provided a home to tens of thousands of survivors and refugees, including almost 10,000 children who came on the Kindertransports.²⁴

Two decades on from its rediscovery, the Kindertransport has a still limited, superficial and largely celebratory historiography.²⁵ This sits alongside increasing media interest which situates it as a rare act of collective rescue, a ray of light, amidst the dark abyss of the Holocaust. The Kindertransport was thus ripe for exploitation as a 'usable past' in the autumn of 2015 when forced migration was so prominent in the news.

Similar to the parliamentary debate in November 1938 in which the scheme that was later to be known as the Kindertransport was announced,²⁶ the focal point in 2015 was the rescue of child refugees, even though these were/are a small proportion of forced migrants in Europe and beyond. On 7 September 2015 in the House of Commons, shortly after the Kurdi family tragedy, Prime Minister Cameron defended the government's policy on Syrian refugees and rejected any possibility of extending it further to unaccompanied children who had reached Europe.²⁷ The then acting leader of the Labour party, Harriet Harman, responded, first arguing, like Minghella, for an all-embracing form of Britishness that could welcome in the stranger and take care of the vulnerable. Her response, which echoed that of Hugo Gryn two decades earlier and predicted that of Stevenson a few weeks later, deserves quoting at length:

When a country decides how to respond to the plight of others from outside, it is a moment when a nation becomes clear about who it is and what it stands for. This is one such defining moment. Is our national priority to keep people out at all costs or to give sanctuary to those fleeing from their homes? Is being British to be narrow, inward looking and fearful of the outside world or is about being strong, confident and proud to reach to those seeking refuge on our shores?

It must, she insisted, 'be the latter'.²⁸

Harman then brought to play a utilitarian 'lesson' of 'history' to further strengthen her case and critique the rhetoric of Cameron:

We should not be talking about refugees as being a 'burden' on us. Among the Syrian children we [should] take in now will be the future consultants at our hospital bedsides, the entrepreneurs who will build our economy, the professors in our universities and those who will be among the strongest upholders of British values, because that has been the story of refugees to this country - whether it be the Jewish children of the Kindertransport, the Asian families driven out of east Africa 20 years later or the Sierra Leoneans fleeing a brutal civil war.

It was, however, with the ethical imperative to act positively with these historical examples in mind, that she forcefully concluded:

The Prime Minister said... that it will not help to take more refugees because it will not solve the problem in Syria, but that was a false choice. Helping those Jewish children was not part of our

efforts to end the Second World War; helping the east African families did not bring down the brutal dictatorships in east Africa, but it was the right thing to do.²⁹

Cameron was clearly nervous of these references to the past, especially the Kindertransport, more so after veteran Labour MP, Gerald Kaufman, referred to the help his own family in Leeds gave, providing a home to a young Jewish girl in 1939. Chiding the Prime Minister, Kaufman pointed out that rather than 20,000 over five years, the Germans had let in 10,000 in one day. With the verdict of 'history' clearly in mind, Kaufman added that 'if we do not do it now, we will live to regret it for the rest of our lives'.³⁰ Tamely, Cameron responded that many of those 20,000 Britain would take from the Syrian refugee camps would be children and these 'are the modern equivalent of the Kindertransport and this country should be proud of that'.³¹

The government, spurred on by the Home Office, continued to resist moves to bring in additional unaccompanied children in Europe, especially from the Calais refugee camp - the so-called 'Jungle'. Campaigners, however, both inside and outside of parliament refused to let go of this issue. In a debate to mark Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January 2016, for example, Keir Starmer, Labour Shadow Home Office Minister, highlighted how there were '26,000 [unaccompanied children] across Europe; 3,000 have been specifically identified by Save the Children and others [as being particularly at risk]'. Starmer chastised Cameron who earlier that day had described those in Calais and other camps as just a 'bunch of migrants'. Instead, Starmer stated 'This is Holocaust Memorial Day - a very important day when we consider children on their own in Europe. I ask the Government to look very seriously at the now very powerful case for taking some among that number of unaccompanied children.'³²

Initially, the Kindertransport scheme had no upper limit on numbers but was later restricted to a maximum of 10,000 because the refugee organisations could not afford to take any more. Over three quarters of a century later, and with the somewhat arbitrary 3,000 deemed to be at particular

risk, this was the figure of unaccompanied children from the continent that was demanded entry to Britain. Leading this campaign was veteran Labour politician, Alf Dubs, himself a former Czech Kinder and a member of the House of Lords.

Through the first half of 2016, Dubs urged an amendment to the ongoing Immigration Bill to allow such children, mainly from Syria, to come to Britain. Initially rejected in April 2016 by the House of Commons in a close vote split largely on party lines, Dubs stubbornly continued, imploring:

My message to Conservative MPs is in 1938-39, Britain took 10,000 child refugees from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. We were in the lead then and we could take an important step now. The least we can do is say this is a small number and they should be welcome here.³³

Through persistence, and because the focus point was children, the campaign became harder to ignore. When the Daily Mail, consistently at the forefront of anti-migrant discourse since it was founded in 1896, suggested in early May 2016 that Cameron should show 'compassion', the backing of 'middle England' led the Prime Minister to apparently change his mind, if only minimally so. As the Daily Mail commented: 'No one has been more vigorous than this paper in voicing public concern over the effects of uncontrolled immigration on Britain's social fabric. But we are also proud of giving safe haven to those fleeing war and oppression. So we argued that it was our moral duty to help these children.'³⁴

The reality since that decision in spring 2016 was made has been that the bureaucratic restrictions enforced by the Home Office have made it almost impossible to allow any of these children legal entry to Britain. In this respect it repeats those put in place during 1945 and 1946 when attempts were made to fly in child survivors of the Holocaust, forcing many to change their age and identity so as to qualify and others to remain on the continent.³⁵ The destruction of the Calais camp in November 2016 led to the dispersion of many of the children campaigners had hoped to bring to Britain and further chaos in these youngster's vulnerable lives. Furthermore, post-Brexit, racism and xenophobia has become less restrained in terms of physical violence and everyday discourse. One

way this was made manifest was a moral panic over the age of prospective child migrants and allegations that they were cheating their way in. 'Migrant "Children" Look 40', argued The Sun in October 2016, fighting for 'a greater Britain'.³⁶

In January 2017, Samir, a seventeen year old who had 'followed a well-trodden escape route from Sudan via Libya and Italy before arriving in Calais', died in France. He had spent eight months in the Calais camp and was one of 1,900 children registered by the Home Office seeking asylum in Britain. Although he was unaccompanied and had a brother who had reached Britain, his claim was rejected - as were all but four of the claims of his fellow child refugees who had been located to a centre for unaccompanied minors in Taize. Samir had given up hope of reaching his 'promised land'. He had poor health and died of a heart attack.³⁷

Samir was simply not the 'right type' of refugee envisaged entry by 'Middle England'. It seemed that being at least under ten and in possession of a teddy bear or doll (toys that are becoming iconic in representations of the Kindertransport) was the new cultural proof of innocent 'refugeedom'.³⁸ In the words of a Sun editorial, 'Visions of kiddies wandering helpless and along among predators in the Calais Jungle melted even the hardest of hearts. Britain had to save them.' In contrast, it claimed without any evidence, that the first arriving in Britain were 'strapping, hairy-chested blokes in their late teens or 20s... There's not a young child, or a female of any age, among them'.³⁹

'History' insists on Britain 'doing the right thing'.⁴⁰ What is remarkable is that the difference between the restrictionist 'right' and the more open 'left liberal' world has become so narrow. For the former, Britain's 'proud tradition' necessitates allowing in those who are indisputably innocent and vulnerable. They must, therefore be children or female but also endure a test of legitimacy that is legally and culturally almost impossible to pass. Indeed, the only way forced migrants can totally prove their refugeedom is either to be safely located in the past (for example, the Kindertransportees) or if in the 'now', no longer 'in this world' - like Alan Kurdi.⁴¹

For the latter, some substance has to be given to Britain's 'proud tradition'- hence the desire to bring in 3,000 unaccompanied children. In the 2015/2016 campaign it was thus not up to 3,000 children, but a genuine commitment to that number, but no more. In the context of the scale of the refugee crisis the poverty of this 'progressive' response is thus exposed. The reason why it was limited both to a fixed number of children was not simply because of political reality and what was possible in an increasingly xenophobic atmosphere. It also reflected how the Holocaust, constructed without any sense of its complex evolution, has become off limits to any form of comparison, including those that escaped from it. In this context, ultimately there was a belief that these unaccompanied refugee children were not like the Kindertransportees.

To the right wing Jewish commentator, Melanie Phillips, attacking 'blinkered emoting' over the death of Alan Kurdi and the 'tidal wave of human misery', the 'comparison with the Kindertransport... seemed particularly inappropriate':

The Kindertransport rescued children from almost certain murder by a regime aiming to kill them simply because they were Jews. Today's migration crisis is different... [and] even if they are not economic migrants, most are not fleeing for their lives.⁴²

In late April 2016, Cameron was still resisting pressure to let in additional unaccompanied minors. In Prime Minister's questions, Yvette Cooper for the Labour Party pointed out that more than one thousand such children were sleeping rough in Greece alone and that ten thousand had gone missing across Europe: 'How are they safe? The agencies say that children are committing survival sex and that they are being abused and subject to prostitution and rape.' Cameron was unmoved and re-stated that 'We have a proud record and nothing to be ashamed of.'⁴³ A week later Cameron gave some ground but was again at pains, like Phillips, to 'reject the comparison with the Kindertransport'.⁴⁴ Later that day, Channel 4 News had a major item where the comparison between child refugees past and present was revealingly the focal point.

Alf Dubs was not the only former Kinder who had demanded action and in so doing had used the moral authority of his own experiences. Sir Erich Reich had written to the Prime Minister stating that

The echoes of the past haunt many of my fellow Kinder and I whose fate similarly rested with members of the British parliament. I feel it is incumbent on us to once again demonstrate our compassion and human-kindness to provide sanctuary to those in need.⁴⁵

In the Channel 4 feature in May 2016 another former Kinder, Hella Pick, who had come to Britain from Austria in 1939 and subsequently became an international news correspondent, replicated Reich's perspective. She insisted, however, that there was 'no direct comparison' between the experiences of the current child refugees and those of her own experiences. In this alone she shared the views of her opponent that night - Sir Edward Leigh, a right wing Conservative MP for Gainsborough. Leigh insisted too there was 'no parallel' and that those today were 'not subject to genocidal hatred'. Where they did differ was whether any significant numbers of children were at risk on the continent. Predicting the moral panic four months later, Leigh referred three times to 'these "quote" children', arguing that many were of military age and thus not only denying their need but also hinting that they were a threat to the security of the nation. No doubt realising that Cameron's alleged 'U-turn' was almost meaningless in practice, as subsequently proved to be the case, Leigh argued that it was a 'gentle, safe compromise'.⁴⁶

In the British case, cocooned in its mythology of tolerance, decency and fair play, reinforced by its selective memory of the Second World War and 'Britain alone', the past was a safe place and emphasis on the Kindertransport allowed self-congratulation about refugee policy then. The enormity of the Holocaust (and the increasing preciousness of its memory), alongside chronological distortion (melding the ten months before September 1939 with the conflict itself when the child transports were in operation) meant that direct comparisons between the plight of Jews and contemporary forced migrants could be rejected as not only inappropriate but also offensive.

So far, this discussion has focused on political, cultural and media debate. It will close by reflecting on how this has been refracted through the 'everyday' discourse of ordinary people in Britain. In Autumn 2015, Mass-Observation asked its respondents to reflect on 'The Refugee Crisis'. The several hundred people who contribute their literacy practice to this social anthropological organisation, founded in the 1930s and revived in the 1980s, provided material that is rich, multi-layered and generally hard to categorise. In this case, with the images of Alan Kurdi firmly in mind, the directives were a little more unified than normal and there was general criticism of the British government's refusal to commit to any new refugee entry policy. The government's pledge to take in 20,000 over five years was 'just a drop in the ocean. We should take many more.'⁴⁷ In response, and feeling frustration, many had given generously to charitable appeals. There was recognition that 'Germany had led the way' and Britain's response in comparison was 'quite shameful'.⁴⁸ Many Observers' views were typified by a 35 year old charity fund raiser who was angry that her government was 'too concerned with the perceptions of Daily Mail reading middle England'.

If people just stopped to think - 'What would make me travel half way across the world, jump on a sinking ship, walk mile after mile, carrying my worldly possessions in a single bag, my children traipsing after me, headed for a country where I know I will be despised and mistrusted?'⁴⁹

Some openly acknowledged their ambivalence over the refugee images on the media, repeating a pattern that was common when news of the Holocaust was presented to the British public during the war: 'I alternate between finding it shocking and terrible, letting it wash over me, and being bored of it.' The last two, this middle aged male Observer reflexively acknowledged, 'don't do me much credit, and I'm rather ashamed of my relative immunity to the suffering of so many people.' His donation to an online appeal for Syrian refugees may well have been, he concluded, 'the price of my disengagement'.⁵⁰ There were others, however, who interpreted the crisis very differently and without any feeling of angst.

Responding to the representation of what she called 'so-called Syrian refugees' on the news, a female

Mass-Observers believed they were cunning: 'The few children present in these crowds of men are shoved to the front or held aloft. They are proffered as a commodity. The men know soft European hearts would never be able to turn away from innocent children, and so it has proved'. It had allowed the entry of 'rapists, burglars and terrorists'. To her, a refugee is a 'vulnerable person, certainly not someone capable of joining the Army and fighting for their country'. Finally she turned to 'history' to justify her diatribe:

Every time there was a shot of an overcrowded train, we were told that this is just what the Nazis did to the Jews, which is an inept and sick comparison to make.

As if to further convince herself that her views were not simply prejudice, she added 'Since the Paris [terrorist] attacks [in November 2016], no one says that any more, thank God. It was embarrassing.'⁵¹

Commented [WM6]: What does this mean?

Such negative views following other terrorist outrages, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have become more prominent and socially acceptable. It is perhaps reassuring for the future that this is not the first time that Britain has turned in on itself and then recovered, retreating from insularity. Juliet Stevenson's character, Nina, in Truly, Madly, Deeply warns:

I hate what this country's doing to itself and to the people. You see it all the time, the way we treat other races and visitors... Wrong skin, wrong size, wrong shape, you're lost. Or wrong religion, wrong ideology, wrong class.⁵²

Over a quarter of a century on, this could be the description of a new Britain but not one that is doomed to be in this state forever.

Commented [WM7]: What does this mean? Which description?

To conclude: once the outcry following the images of Alan Kurdi has dissipated, it has left only activists (and, it must be emphasised, a very sizeable number who are silently angry but frustrated in their desire to make a difference), to keep liberal humanism alive in Britain. 'I want to believe in the potential of people for good' was the philosophy of Anthony Minghella.⁵³ Sadly, the British government has not allowed this to happen with regard to the 'Mediterranean moment' of the

refugee crisis and so much else. Whilst hostility and ambivalence have a long history in Britain's treatment of refugees, Prime Ministers and others in power, for all their protests to the contrary, are dishonouring the generous moments in offering asylum in the country's past. This history is rich if still largely unacknowledged. In this respect, the Kindertransport is just one example amongst many of complex refugee arrivals and complex responses to them that are a neglected part of Britain's 'island story'.

There were, of course, different readings of the past across Europe as it confronted the refugee crisis than that attempted across the English Channel. Germany provides the most striking counter example to it, the legacy of the Second World War and the Holocaust being interpreted in a manner that is the antithesis to that in Britain. The moral courage of Angela Merkel has allowed ordinary people in every locality of the country to support and encounter refugees in their everyday lives, thereby helping the ongoing process of coming to terms with a poisonous past. In contrast, the self-congratulatory tendency in the British case has allowed the debate to be circumscribed and to focus almost exclusively on the Kindertransport. Even then, for some of those who want this child refugee movement to be replicated, there are strict limits on what they demand. In terms of popular understanding of its history, there remain distortions of it as an act of rescue - confusing, for example, pre-war Nazi antisemitic policy with genocide. It also ignores the less palatable features of the Kindertransport - the exclusion of adults and the sexual, physical and economic abuse that were not isolated features of the children's experiences in Britain.

In Truly, Madly, Deeply Juliet Stevenson's Nina spends much time in the film weeping uncontrollably over the loss, absence and then ghostly presence of her partner, Jamie. Ultimately she comes to terms with what has happened and lets go of Jamie's apparition. Nina does not forget him and is able to live and love again, channelling her passion towards a better future for herself and society as a whole: 'I believe in protesting, in making this planet more decent.'¹⁵⁴ British responses to the refugee crisis in the twenty first century have also been marked by tears, many genuinely shed:

I feel so sad for these poor souls heading west for a better life and the privations they have endured during their journey; who would put themselves and their children at such risk if their situation [was] not so unbearable?... Britain is not full [and should take the refugees].⁵⁵

As yet, however, as exemplified by the likes of David Cameron, the tears are sentimental ones for the refugees we saved in the past or who they (the Germans) killed in the war despite our heroic efforts. They are not for those in need today. It is time for Britain, or those claiming to represent her in politics and the media, to follow the example of Nina and to move on.

Notes

1. Mario Falsetto (ed.), Anthony Minghella: Interviews (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), p.17. Thatcher resigned a year earlier as Prime Minister, but her legacy ran on.
2. See Ronald Bergan's obituary of Minghella: Guardian, 18 March 2008. Minghella said of himself: 'The fact of the matter is that I'm a Catholic, Italian immigrant with a very prescriptive view of the world.' In Falsetto (ed.), Anthony Minghella, p.17.
3. Rickman's final project was working with Oxford University students on a short film to raise money for the refugee crisis. See Heather Saul, 'Alan Rickman was helping students raise money for refugees just weeks before his death', Independent, 14 January 2016.
4. Maura, a Chilean refugee, in Truly, Madly, Deeply.
5. Falsetto (ed.), Anthony Minghella, p.17.
6. Hugo Gryn, An Index of Our Spiritual and Moral Civilisation (London: Refugee Council, 1996).
7. Ibid. See Hugo Gryn with Naomi Gryn, Chasing Shadows (London: Penguin Books, 2001).
8. See, for example, his outstanding The Making of the Modern

Refugee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) which is a worthy successor with wider chronological and geographical scope to Michael Marrus, The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

9. Peter Gatrell, 'Refugees - What's Wrong with History?', Journal of Refugee Studies, forthcoming.

10. Matthew Taylor, 'History will judge us on refugee crisis, says Stevenson', Guardian, 19 October 2015.

11. Ibid.

12. Gatrell, 'Refugees - What's Wrong with History', forthcoming, citing Iain Chambers, Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008), 39, 146.

13. Gatrell, 'Refugees - What's Wrong with History?', forthcoming.

14. See our respective contributions to Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch (eds), Refugees in Twentieth Century Europe: The Forty Years' Crisis (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

15. Dan Roberts, 'Clinton to Jewish Leaders: beware Trump', Guardian, 22 March 2016.

16. Gryn, Index of Our Spiritual and Moral Civilisation. Gryn assumed that all those returned to the continent, with the exception of those who went to Britain, were murdered. Detailed research of the passengers has shown that roughly half survived. See Sarah Ogilvie and Scott Miller, Refuge Denied: The St Louis Passengers and the Holocaust (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

17. Daniel Victor, 'Comparing Jewish Refugees of the 1930s with Syrians Today', New York Times, 19 November 2015; Laura Tavares, 'Text to Text: Comparing Jewish Refugees of the 1930s with Syrian Refugees Today', New York Times, 4 January 2017.

18. Sam Jones, 'Refugee crisis echoes rebuff of Jews in 1938 - UN official', Guardian, 15 October 2015.

19. Cameron to ITV News, 30 July 2015. For favourable comment, see Daily Mail, 31 July 2015.

20. Jones, 'Refugee crisis echoes rebuff of Jews'.
21. Ibid.
22. On the context and impact of Evian, see Tommie Sjoberg, The Powers and the Persecuted: The Refugee Problem and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991).
23. Quoted in Jewish Chronicle, 1 February 2002.
24. Cabinet Office, Britain's Promise to Remember: The Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission Report (London: Cabinet Office, 2015), p.9. On the evolution of Kindertransport memory, see Tony Kushner, Remembering Refugees: Then and Now (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), chapter 4 and the special edition of Prism vol.5 (Spring 2013).
25. The forthcoming study by Jennifer Craig-Norton to be published by Indiana University Press will provide a much needed corrective.
26. See Hansard (HC) vol.341, 21 November 1938.
27. Debate about 'Syria: Refugees and Counter-Terrorism', Hansard (HC) vol.599 cols 23-27, 7 September 2015.
28. Ibid, col.27.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid. col.33.
31. Ibid, col.34.
32. Hansard (HC) vol.605 cols.172-3, 27 January 2016.
33. Dubs, in an interview with the Guardian, 26 April 2016.
34. 'A humane response to child refugee crisis', Daily Mail, 5 May 2016.
35. Tony Kushner, Journeys from the Abyss: The Holocaust and Forced Migration From the 1880s to the Present (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, forthcoming), chapter 3.
36. The Sun, 19 October 2016.

37. Diane Taylor, 'Grief for a refugee boy robbed of his UK dream', Guardian, 20 January 2017.

38. It has forced those demanding more help for child refugees to incorporate this symbol of childhood. See the photograph of actress Carey Mulligan 'clutching a toy bear to represent the suffering of Syrian children' in Observer, 23 October 2016.

39. 'They're kidding', The Sun, 19 October 2016.

40. Daily Mail, 5 May 2016.

41. Here I have borrowed the title of Michael Winterbottom's 2002 docu-drama In This World which re-creates the horrendous journey of two young Afghan asylum seekers from the refugee camps of Pakistan across Europe. Only one makes it and gets to Britain 'illegally'.

42. Melanie Phillips, 'This is blinkered emoting', Jewish Chronicle, 11 September 2015.

43. Hansard (HC) vol.608, 27 April 2016.

44. Hansard (HC) vol.609, 4 May 2016.

45. Quoted in Hansard (HC) vol.609, 4 May 2016.

46. Channel 4 News, 4 May 2016, feature presented by its Home Affairs correspondent, Simon Israel.

47. The Keep, Mass-Observation Archive (M-O A:), DR C3515, Autumn 2015 Directive 'The Refugee Crisis'. She describes herself as a 56 year old housewife from Essex.

48. M-O A: DR C3210, Autumn 2015 Directive.

49. Ibid.

50. M-O A: DR B3227, Autumn 2015 Directive.

51. M-O: DR B5342, Autumn 2015 Directive, describing herself as a 29 year old 'blogger'.

52. Nina is introducing herself to what will become her new partner, starting with her politics and then moving on to her personal biography.

53. Falsetto (ed.), Anthony Minghella, p.17.

54. Nina trying to summarise the essence of herself to her new love.

55. M-O A: DR A4820, Autumn 2015 Directive.