

# Opinion: World's many refugees need help; the U.S. must do more

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Volunteers paint flags of the world for immigrant and refugee families learning English and preparing for the citizenship exams during a day of service in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 15, 2018. Photo by: Keith Bedford/The Boston Globe via Getty Images

President Donald Trump's administration has cited national security concerns in proposing a limit to the annual number of refugees resettled in the United States. The limit would be 45,000.

Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen is part of Trump's government and is in charge of the country's security. She introduced new screening procedures for refugees on Monday, January 29. At the same time, she issued a statement. It said that the United States "must continue to fulfill its obligation to the global community to assist those facing persecution."

## Rules Written After The Holocaust

Modern American refugee plans were written in the wake of the Holocaust. Nazi Germany and its collaborators had murdered millions, including hundreds of thousands of Jews who had applied to immigrate to the U.S. They were unable to navigate strict U.S. laws. Yet it is almost certain that even before that, the United States in 1939 admitted more refugees fleeing persecution than we did in 2017 or will in 2018. This is significant because in 1939, the U.S. was facing high unemployment, national security fears and a coming world war.

By 1938, Americans had suffered under the Great Depression for nearly a decade. After a partial economic recovery in the mid-1930s, a new setback pushed workforce unemployment back up to 19 percent. As the world marked the 20th anniversary of the end of World War I in November of that year, Nazi German leadership unleashed its attacks on Jews. Its followers destroyed shops and synagogues. They arrested 30,000 Jewish men and boys, who were sent to concentration camps.

## Choosing Immigrants By "National Origin"

Another war seemed unavoidable. Americans did not want to be dragged into another war, and many people worried that the Nazis, Japan or Communists in the Soviet Union, might have placed spies among them in the United States.

America's immigration laws had then been in place since the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. It named the number of immigration slots open to people born in specific countries. That way, the authors of the act argued, it wouldn't matter where an immigrant was living. What mattered was where they were born, their "national origin."

The act was a way to restrict applicants born in southern and eastern Europe, Africa and the areas of Asia where immigration wasn't already banned. It would promote applicants from countries that were whiter. The law's writers thought they would be more easily assimilated, or absorbed into society.

## Jews Trying To Flee Nazi Germany

Trump reportedly recently wished for more immigrants from Norway. The European country originally had an annual share of 6,543 immigrants to the United States. In contrast, only 1,200 immigrants could come from the entire continent of Africa.

In 1939, the United States admitted at least 43,450 Jews, almost all from Europe. But we know the number only because immigrants arriving here had to list their own "race," and until 1943, the government considered "Hebrew" a race.

Many people being persecuted by the Nazis as Jews didn't identify themselves as Jewish. They would have listed themselves as "German," for example. So the number of refugees fleeing Nazism that year was clearly higher than 43,450. The United States did not have a substantive refugee plan because people fleeing persecution had to follow the same steps as other immigrants. Still, Jewish refugees alone constituted more than half of all immigration to the United States.

### **An 11-Year Wait Was Too Long**

More than 300,000 applicants remained on the German waiting list. U.S. officials had granted to Germany the second-largest share of any country. However, the authors of the racist and anti-Semitic immigration law probably would not have done so had they known that most of the applicants in the 1930s would be Jewish.

Germany's 27,370 total slots meant an 11-year wait for new applicants. Though neither they nor the U.S. government knew it at the time, most of the people on the list in 1939 would not make it to America; they would, instead, be killed in the Holocaust.

The Holocaust began in 1941 after American government offices were forced to close in Nazi territory. The Washington Post introduced Americans to the word "genocide" in December 1944. Most people here would not see photographic evidence of the Holocaust until the concentration camps in western Europe were liberated in 1945. Then came images of the mass killings of Jewish people, with deaths numbering in the millions.

### **Today's Refugees Need Help Now**

Today, we know the Myanmar military is murdering the minority Rohingya population. Myanmar is a country in Asia, bordering China. We also know tens of thousands of Syrians are "disappearing" at the hands of Syria's government, also in Asia. We have film, photographs, evidence, testimony, witnesses.

In the 80 years since the refugee crisis of the late 1930s, the U.S. population has nearly tripled. Instead of the 19 percent unemployment of 1938, the unemployment rate is 4.1 percent. Though the president engages in terrifying talk on Twitter, world war does not seem on the near horizon. Our tools for weeding out potential spies are far more sophisticated.

The United Nations High Commission on Human Rights declared in 2016 that the ongoing refugee crisis is the worst since World War II. We regret America's failure to admit more European Jewish refugees before the Holocaust. Our descendants will be much harsher when they look at America's inaction today.