

Opinion: Refugees around the world need homes; U.S. must help more of them

By Rebecca Erbelding, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.08.18

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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 government wants to limit the number of refugees coming to the United States. The limit would be 45,000 each year.

Refugees are people who leave their homelands because they are no longer safe. However, Trump's government is afraid that the refugees might not be safe to bring into the United States. New processes for screening refugees coming to the United States were announced on Monday, January 29. At the same time, a statement said that the United States must continue to help those facing trouble.

A Lesson From History: Nazi Germany

We know that in some countries today, governments are mistreating and even killing their people. It is similar to what Germany was doing to Jewish people in the 1930s and 1940s. This time is often called the Holocaust.

The American refugee plans we have today were written after the Holocaust. Nazi Germany and its partners had murdered millions of people, including hundreds of thousands of Jews who had applied to move to the U.S. At the time, they were kept out by U.S. laws.

Yet it is almost certain that even before that, the United States in 1939 admitted more refugees fleeing trouble than we did in 2017 or will in 2018. This is in spite of problems in 1939. The U.S. did not have enough jobs and faced safety fears and a coming world war.

Looking For "White" Immigrants

America's 1924 Johnson-Reed Act addressed immigration. It named the number of spaces open to people born in specific countries. That way, the writers of the act said, it wouldn't matter where an immigrant was living. What mattered was where they were born.

The act was a way to lower the number of immigrants coming in who were born in southern and eastern Europe, Africa and parts of Asia. It would support applicants from countries that were considered better and more "white". The law's writers thought they would be more easily accepted into society.

A few weeks ago, President Trump said that the U.S. needed more immigrants from "countries like Norway." This Northern European country originally had a yearly share of 6,543 immigrants to the United States. In contrast, only 1,200 could come from the entire continent of Africa.

Jewish Refugees In 1939

In 1939, the United States admitted at least 43,450 Jews, probably more than that. Almost all were from Europe.

Back then, United States did not have a meaningful refugee plan. Those fleeing trouble had to follow the same steps as other immigrants. Still, Jewish refugees made up more than half of all immigration to the United States.

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

Killed While They Were On A Waiting List

People applying from Germany faced an 11-year wait to get into the country. Although neither they nor the U.S. government knew it, most of the people on the list in 1939 would not make it to America. They would be killed in the Holocaust.

The Holocaust began in 1941. Most people in the United States would not see photographs of the Holocaust until the concentration camps in western Europe were opened in 1945.

Today, We Can Do More. Will We?

Things are different today. Today, we know that the military in Myanmar, a country in Asia next to China, is murdering many people in a group called the Rohingya. We also know tens of thousands of Syrians in the Middle Eastern country of Syria are "disappearing" at the hands of the government. We have film, photos and other proof.

Now, the U.S. is better off than in the 1930s. We have plenty of jobs. Our tools for finding possible spies are much better. Still, we are not letting refugees in.

We regret America's failure to admit more Jewish refugees before the Holocaust. However, our children and grandchildren will be much harsher when they look at America's lack of action today.