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@Rob Pinney

# Refugees: Forced to Flee



Challenging perceptions  
of forced displacement  
through social science, arts  
and humanities research



German civilians, fleeing the Soviet advance, pick their way across the River Elbe on a partially destroyed railway bridge at Tangermünde, May 1945. © IWM (KY 12151F)



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# Foreword

*Refugees: Forced to Flee* is rooted in cutting-edge research, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), that explores the decisions and consequences faced by those whose worlds have been turned upside down by war over the past 100 years

From the First World War to the present day, countless lives have been affected by conflict, resulting in ordinary people having to make extraordinary decisions – should they stay or go? This is the focus of *Refugees: Forced to Flee*, a major new exhibition at IWM London.

Featuring research supported by the AHRC and ESRC, it tells the stories of refugees in different times and places – from those fleeing Belgium in the First World War to those escaping conflict in modern-day Syria.

Through historical archives, oral history, personal testimonies and studies of design, new light is shed on the experiences of both refugees and the communities that receive them.

With a greater understanding of the obstacles faced by those who are forcibly displaced – whether a perilous journey across the sea or bureaucratic barrier – we gain new insight to the lived experience of refugees on the move, searching for safety, and trying to make new lives.



## Professor Christopher Smith, AHRC Executive Chair

Reflecting on her experience of exile, Hannah Arendt wrote “We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures...” The tragedies of forced displacement and exile have been with us for centuries, but every experience is different, every challenge is faced individually as well as collectively. This exhibition seeks to understand and characterise that loss.

The impressive research which underpins *Refugees: Forced to Flee* is engaged and compassionate, but it is also rigorous and methodologically innovative. It draws on history, and looks at those who flee and those who receive them, at journeys, languages, and environments. It recognises that the experience of displacement can never be forgotten, it is life-changing, and affects the future as well as the present. Such research is the necessary foundation on which good public policy can draw, policy which addresses causes, consequences and mitigations at local, national and global levels.

## Professor Jennifer Rubin, ESRC Executive Chair

Social science research provides new and challenging thinking around refugee crises, both past and present. Working with a national museum, such as the IWM, allows the public to engage with this important research.

From enhancing public understanding of obstacles faced by young asylum seekers to exploring how local communities play a role for those seeking refuge, the breadth of the projects featured highlights how complex this challenge is for vulnerable people, the places they live, the places to which they travel, and how we respond collectively.



A family and their overloaded car at a refugee centre on the Iraq-Kuwait border, during the First Gulf War, 1991. © John Keane (IWM GLF 174)

# About the research

*Refugees: Forced to Flee* features research projects supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council, which are both part of UK Research and Innovation





UK Research  
and Innovation

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) works in partnership with universities, research organisations, businesses, charities, and government to create the best possible environment for research and innovation to flourish. Operating across the whole of the UK with a combined budget of more than £7 billion, UKRI brings together the seven research councils, Innovate UK and Research England.

[ukri.org](http://ukri.org)



Arts and  
Humanities  
Research Council

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funds world-class, independent researchers in a wide range of subjects: history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and more. Research supported by the AHRC provides social and cultural benefits and contributes to the economic success of the UK, as well as to the culture and welfare of societies around the globe.

[ahrc.ukri.org](http://ahrc.ukri.org)



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest funder of research on the social and economic questions facing us today. It supports the development and training of the UK's future social scientists and funds major studies that provide the infrastructure for research. ESRC-funded research informs policymakers and practitioners and helps make businesses, voluntary bodies and other organisations more effective.

[esrc.ukri.org](http://esrc.ukri.org)

# Tracing the Belgian Refugees

## A public history project aims to broaden understanding of Belgian refugees during the First World War by telling their unheard stories

After the invasion of their homeland during the First World War, approximately 250,000 Belgian men, women and children came to Britain. Despite the large number of people, their histories are still not well known.

“We have official records of their arrival and registration, but what’s missing is the longer-term experiences of these refugees and their British hosts,” says Alison Fell, Professor of French Cultural History at the University of Leeds and Principal Investigator on *Tracing the Belgian Refugees*.

The project brings together academic research by Alison and her team in the UK and Belgium with the findings of smaller public-history projects in a free-to-use online database. “During the centenary of the First World War, lots of projects took place in towns and villages around the UK, so we wanted to create a repository for all these stories that might otherwise be lost,” explains Alison.

There are around 3,000 entries to the database – which vary from a few details about an ancestor to more

A Belgian refugee grave.



Form 02

Application Form for Belgian War Refugees for inclusion in Parties for Free Transport to Belgium.  
 Demande de Repatriement pour Refuges Belges inclus les Groupes pour Transport libre.  
 Aanvraag bewijs voor den Kostelozen terug-Keer der Belgische Vluchtelingen.

Date: 17 DEC 1918

Nom.	Patron.	Nom du Mariage M. ou Mlle.	Age.	No du Carnet d'identité.	Date de l'arrivée en Angleterre.	Adresse actuelle.	Adresse en Belgique.	Adresse d'origine.	Adresse de l'employeur.	Spouse to be Referred for Office Use (Belges married & living in Britain).
Naam.	Voornaam.	Mijdenaam of Mevrouw.	Ouderdom.	№ 2276 (1917)	Inkomst van aankomst in Engeland.	Tegenwoordig Adres.	Adres in België.	Geboorteplaats of woonplaats van vader of moeder.	Adres van Patronen.	Belgische voorkeuren bij getrouwd van het huwelijk.
Elen	Leendrik	mijdena 38.	19	Januari 1915	Whitfield Road	Dalme Str. 28	Stadend P. List.			
Elen	Marie	Madam 30	"	"	Wibby Road (E.P.)	Antwerpen				
Elen	Anna	mijdena 7	"	"	"	"	"			
Elen	Eduard	mijdena 3	"	"	"	"	"			

MINISTRY OF  
 1918

“Through personal narratives and family stories, we learn more about the impact of exile”

extensive information from local history groups – but it’s the personal narratives that provide a bigger picture of refugee experience, says Alison.

“Very often the history of displacement concentrates on the horrors of what people are fleeing from and their initial experiences in a new country. Through personal narratives and family stories, we learn more about the impact of that exile – what it means to someone’s identity, and the legacy for generations that follow.”

Interviewing descendants allowed the team to trace forward a number of these stories, helping to improve knowledge of this important moment in history. “Belgium has a complicated history, and sometimes it can take a couple of generations before these stories can be narrated,” explains Alison. “You can’t find this information in records; it only comes from this type of public history project.”

Tracing the Belgian Refugees University of Leeds, University of Leuven and University College London. Funded by the AHRC.

belgianrefugees.leeds.ac.uk



Professor Alison Fell

# Becoming Adult

Each year around 2,500 children escape violence and war to arrive in the UK on their own. An innovative project explored how these young people envision their futures – often amid great uncertainty – as they make the transition into adulthood

*Dear Habib* is a short animation telling the story of a young migrant who arrived in Britain from Afghanistan at the age of 16. It shows the painful losses he experienced and how he lives in constant fear of being returned.

“Habib’s story is reflective of so many of the young people in our study who arrived alone as children and face uncertainty as they become ‘adult,’” says Dr Elaine Chase, Associate Professor at the Institute of Education, University College London, and principal investigator of *Becoming Adult*, a project investigating the experiences and wellbeing outcomes of unaccompanied child migrants growing up in the UK.

“It captures the length of time it takes to go through formal processes to remain, which is often years. And it also shows how these young people want to learn, form friendships and contribute – it reflects their dreams and aspirations.”

When unaccompanied children arrive in the UK they must apply for asylum. However, it is often difficult to prove the well-founded fear of persecution required for refugee status. The result for most is time-limited protection for the duration of their childhood.

“There’s very little policy focus on what happens when these children turn 18 and their situation becomes more precarious. They can lose eligibility to housing support, social care,

and, if appeals fail, they can be deported,” explains Elaine. “Our research traces the outcomes for some of these young people.”

The project also examined the impact of current immigration policies on young people’s lives. “Many have experienced trauma, but this project shows the poor wellbeing outcomes are often a result of the systems and structures they’re forced to navigate,” says Elaine. “There’s a disconnect between policy intentions for these young people and their lived realities. We need to look at alternative ways to regulate status – and question the idea that they are ‘returnable’ to a country they may have left years ago.”



Dr Elaine Chase

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*Becoming Adult: conceptions of futures and wellbeing among migrant young people in the UK* University College London, University of Birmingham and University of Oxford. Funded by the ESRC.  
becomingadult.net

**“There’s little policy focus on what happens when these children turn 18 and their situation becomes more precarious”**

From Dear Habib, a short animation sharing the true story of a young, unaccompanied child migrant called Habib. © PositiveNegatives

# Refugee Hosts

More than five million people from the Syria Conflict have sought refuge in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. An innovative project considers the experiences of both refugees and the communities that host them

The extract below from *Writing the Camp* encapsulates the themes of *Refugee Hosts*, a project examining local responses in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey to the arrival of refugees from Syria.

“The poem refers to refugees talking to other refugees, asking who is host and who is guest,” says principal investigator Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Professor

of Migration and Refugee Studies at University College London. “There’s an assumption that citizens are hosts while refugees are dependent recipients of aid. But, particularly in areas where there has been protracted conflict, those host communities can be formed of previously displaced people who are themselves refugees.”

**“Refugees ask other refugees, who are we to come to you and who are you to come to us? Nobody answers. Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds share the camp, the same - different camp, the camp of a camp. They have all come to re-originate the beginning with their own hands and feet.”**

by Yousif M Qasmiyeh, writer in residence, *Refugee Hosts*



A Palestinian widow explores the details of a piece of jewellery with a group in a workshop. © Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

The project explores the relationships between these communities and displaced people through interviews and participatory workshops, which are documented in an online 'Community of Conversation'.

As well as contributing to the research output, some of the workshops provided a space for communities to come together. "In one of our workshops in Jordan, a man from Syria spoke of how his pregnant wife had been unable to leave with him. She subsequently died in childbirth. He said his wedding ring reminded him both of the past – his marriage – and his present distance from a child he may never meet," says Elena.

"The group was formed of Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian refugees and Jordanian citizens. It was a powerful moment when they came together to try to help him manage this enormous loss."

Hostility towards refugees is not always inevitable, says Elena, and the project aims to highlight the importance of community response in terms of policies on intervention. "We see people in situations of extreme precarity come together to help each other. Sometimes an international response by a large organisation can destabilise these networks of care," says Elena. "We need to think about ways to support these local responses, not undermine them."

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*Refugee Hosts* University College London, Durham University, University of Birmingham and Queen Margaret University. Funded by the AHRC and ESRC.

[refugeehosts.org](http://refugeehosts.org)



Professor Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

# Reckoning with Refugeedom

## Examination of historical petitions and letters to those in authority throws light on how refugees understood and negotiated their situation



There is a widespread public perception of refugees as mere ‘flotsam and jetsam’, says Peter Gatrell, Professor of Modern History at University of Manchester and Principal Investigator on *Reckoning with Refugeedom*.

The project aims to give voice to refugees of the last century and show that, far from being passive objects of humanitarian assistance, many understood and negotiated the personal and political consequences of their displacement.

“By examining petitions and letters written to those in positions of authority, as well as personal correspondence, we can see that refugees are not just people with needs, but people with something to say – and who found ways to speak out,” explains Peter.

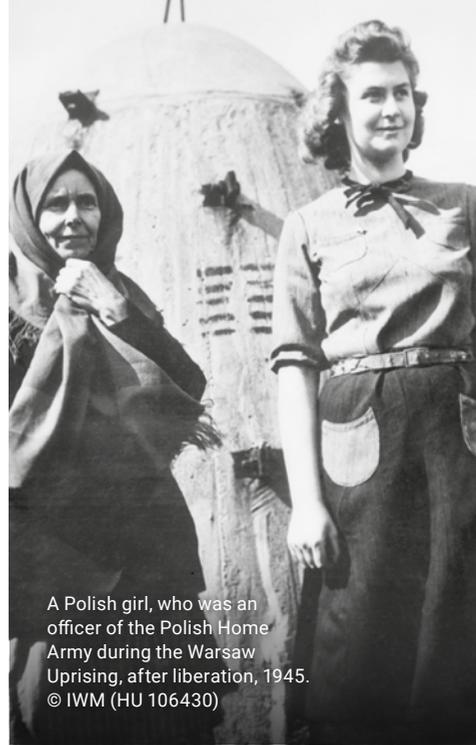
Through archives, the project looks at four moments in time: refugees reaching France between the two world wars; the aftermath of the Second World War; the refugee regime of the 1950s and 60s; and India in the aftermath of Partition.

“The case studies may be very different, but what comes out of the letters and testimonies is a sense of many refugees being keen and adept at putting themselves forward as people who demand rights to be protected, assisted, and resettled,” says Peter.

Consideration of these refugee voices is just as important as consideration of the international laws and institutions that govern them, says Peter. “This idea of ‘refugeedom’ puts the systems of power alongside how refugees convey their own experiences. You can’t talk about one without the other.”



A group of Polish displaced persons wave goodbye to Lubeck dock from the deck of the *Rotenfels*.  
© Norman Weaver (IWM HU 92280)



A Polish girl, who was an officer of the Polish Home Army during the Warsaw Uprising, after liberation, 1945.  
© IWM (HU 106430)

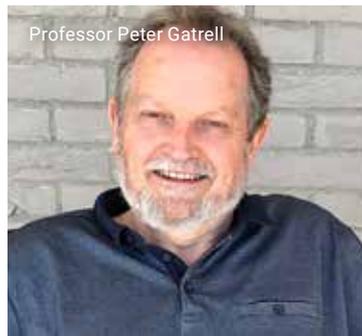
The new millennium sees growing numbers of those forcibly displaced. *Reckoning with Refugeedom* aims to reframe perspectives on refugees. “This project gives people a means to explore current developments – the history we’re living through today – with greater attention to what refugees are experiencing and how they represent those experiences,” says Peter. “They’re not flotsam; they’re human beings who demand respect and attention.”

**“Refugees are not just people with needs, but people with something to say”**

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*Reckoning with Refugeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History, 1919-75* University of Manchester. Funded by the AHRC.

[reckoningwithrefugeedom.wordpress.com](http://reckoningwithrefugeedom.wordpress.com)



Professor Peter Gatrell

# Translating Asylum

How can you make your needs known if you don't speak the language? Despite their importance, translation and interpreting services were historically in the hands of volunteers. A project seeks to uncover this labour hidden largely hidden from history – and reflect on today's approaches

When refugees and asylum seekers arrive in a new country, being able to communicate is critical – both to meeting their initial needs and for longer-term settlement. But while translation and interpreting services play such a vital role, they are often missing from historical accounts.

Through archive research and interviews with people who received these services, *Translating Asylum* aims to explore the role of translators and interpreters in the UK between the 1940s and 1980s.

“This was a significant period in British history both in terms of immigration and also the development of humanitarian action in relation to displaced persons, with the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol,” explains principal investigator Dr Rebecca Tipton, Centre for Translation and Intercultural Studies, University of Manchester.

“Professionalisation of public service interpreting only began in the mid 1980s, so charities at the frontline had to rely on volunteers. Our research investigates who these interpreters were, how were they recruited, and whether they were trained and remunerated.



Despite professionalisation, the responsibility of translation can still fall on volunteers.  
© Photo by G. Kraftschik under CC-BY

# “It’s a myth that anyone who can speak two languages can interpret”

It’s a huge volume of labour largely hidden from history.”

The project also maps developments in English language teaching – revealing lessons for today. “Archives show the challenges involved in organising English classes and attitudes that asylum seekers should ‘speak English’ which still exists in certain quarters today,” explains Rebecca. “My experience is that most people are desperate to learn the language, but it can be difficult. Classes can be hard to access, and the experience of trauma and conflict can significantly impair a person’s ability to concentrate and retain information.”

Despite professionalisation, today’s culture of ‘super-diversity’ means the responsibility of translation can still fall on volunteers. “It’s a myth that anyone who can speak two languages can interpret – it’s a highly skilled and complex role that requires training and support,” says Rebecca. “We need to stop thinking about translation as a temporary fix and understand its role in ensuring equality.”

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*Translating Asylum: Translation, interpreting and the British humanitarian response to asylum seeker and refugee arrivals since the 1940s*  
University of Manchester. Funded by the AHRC.

[translatingasylum.com](http://translatingasylum.com)



Dr Rebecca Tipton

# Architectures of Displacement

Finding a shelter is one of the most vital concerns for forced migrants – but can the design of emergency accommodation shape a refugee’s experience of displacement?

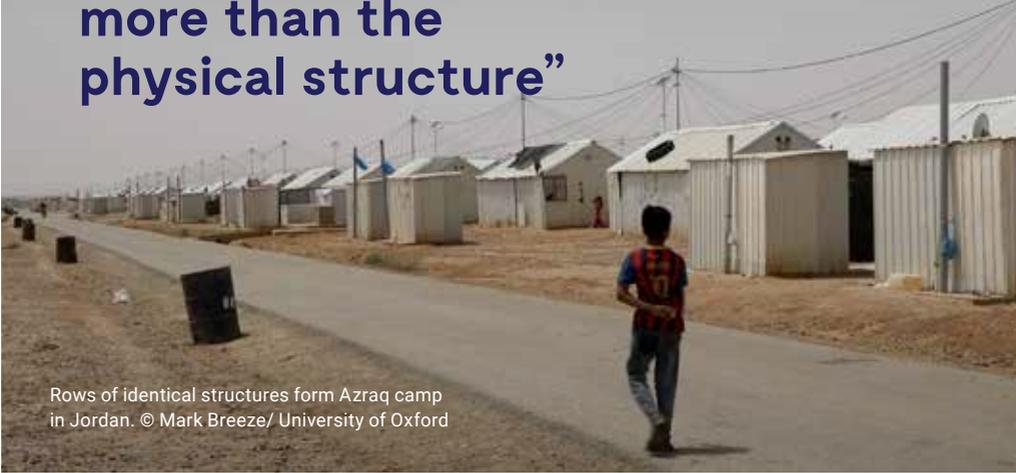
From self-built shacks to vast refugee camps and repurposed industrial buildings – migrant shelters come in many forms. *Architectures of Displacement* explores how the design of temporary accommodation for refugees can shape the experiences – both positively and negatively – of those living within their walls.

“There’s a tendency to think that we need a universal shelter; that if we get the right design, it can be dropped in wherever needed,” says principal investigator Tom Scott-Smith, Associate Professor at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. “But our research shows how shelter is much more than the physical structure; it involves much more than engineering.”

The project studied and documented emergency refugee shelters in six different countries in Europe and the Middle East, each taking a different approach to temporary accommodation.

“Huge, planned camps, like Azraq in Jordan, have rows of identical structures, which are well-built and connected to essential services, but there’s no scope for individuality or sense of community,” explains Tom. “By contrast, self-built structures in Calais’s ‘Jungle’ in France allowed a lot more freedom and gave opportunities for social life and artistic expression – but they were completely insufficient from a humanitarian point of view.”

# “ Shelter is so much more than the physical structure”



Rows of identical structures form Azraq camp in Jordan. © Mark Breeze/ University of Oxford

Much of the refugee experience is about waiting – for weeks, months and often years – so how people experience everyday life is crucial. Interviews with camp inhabitants at Berlin’s disused Tempelhof airport revealed how a lack of control over the mundane elements of life had the biggest impact on wellbeing.

“Fluorescent lights came on at 7am and went off at 11pm, there were no cooking facilities and constant noise,”

explains Tom. “Emergency shelter provision frequently takes away control from the inhabitants and puts it in the hands of organisers – but it is essential to give forced migrants more say over how they rest, eat and sleep.

“Shelter needs to be more than a roof to keep off the rain; it needs to be about control.”

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*Architectures of Displacement* is a partnership between the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, and the Pitt Rivers Museum. Funded by the ARHC and ESRC.

[www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/research/architectures-of-displacement](http://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/research/architectures-of-displacement)



Professor Tom Scott-Smith

# Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat

Thousands of people die trying to cross the sea to Europe. Listening to the testimonies of those making this perilous journey is key to improving policy

Despite the European Commission's announcement of A European Agenda on Migration in May 2015, people continue to make the dangerous – often fatal – journey across the Mediterranean.

Through in-depth interviews with people who had made the journey, or planned to do so, *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* sheds new light on the impact of migration policy.

“The EU has had some form of deterrent policy for many years now, but it's not working,” says principal investigator Vicki Squire, Professor of International Politics, University of Warwick. “We cannot address the issues surrounding migration without listening to the voices of people on the move.”

The research team spoke to migrants at arrival sites in Kos, Malta, Sicily, Athens, Berlin, Istanbul and Rome, with a selection of the 257 interviews incorporated into an online interactive story map. The map allows users to explore the lived experiences of people making the journey, and highlights the important claims that they make in so doing.

“The map shows the complexity of these journeys – people are rarely moving from A to B in straightforward terms,” explains Vicki. “There's a tendency for policy to be formulated around clear cut terms: economic migrants on one side, political refugees on the other. But we can see there are often multiple reasons people are forced to move.”

The research team asked those who were interviewed what they would like to say to European policymakers. “One answer that stands out is from a woman in Kos who had travelled from Syria. She said she wanted her voice to be heard and for people on the move to be treated as humans not animals,” says Vicki. “If the EU is to find an effective way forward from the so-called migration ‘crisis’, it must have an understanding of the experiences of those involved and an appreciation of their claims to migrate.”



Professor Vicki Squire

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*Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat: Mapping and Documenting Migratory Journeys and Experiences* University of Warwick, University of Malta and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). Funded by the ESRC.

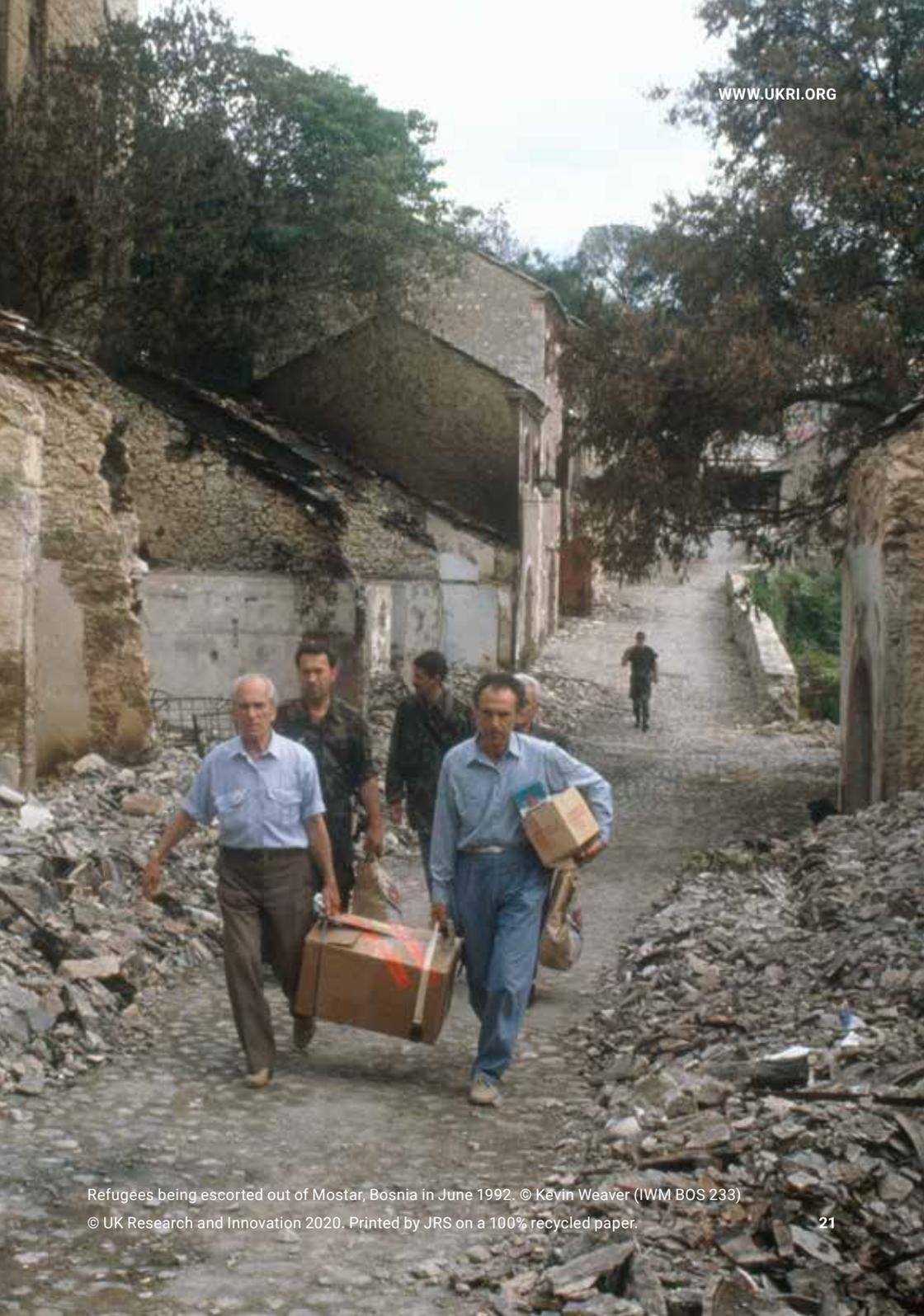
[warwick.ac.uk/crossingthemed](http://warwick.ac.uk/crossingthemed)

**“We cannot address policy and issues surrounding migration without listening to the voices of people on the move”**



Migrant journeys are often complex with people rarely moving from A to B in straightforward terms. © Vicki Squire

# Notes



Refugees being escorted out of Mostar, Bosnia in June 1992. © Kevin Weaver (IWM BOS 233)



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**ukri.org**

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)  
Polaris House  
North Star Avenue  
Swindon SN2 1ET

01793 444000  
communications@ukri.org  
@UKRI\_news