

# Migration stories, the British civil rights movement and the impact of the Cold War on identity:

## How migration and migrant stories can provide new insights into teaching Britain's twentieth-century history

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In the twentieth century Britain was facing a period of change and flux: a dissolving empire, a struggle to establish its position in and relation to Europe, its status as other big powers emerged. At one level we are familiar with these developments, from textbooks. But these developments were also played out in the lives of those who migrated to and from these islands. Their stories can help students understand the century's deep changes in our sense of what 'Britishness' may mean.

### 1905 to 1919: a small window with a big view

Looking in depth at a short period can help students to a longer overview. The years either side of the First World War can enable understanding of the complexity of our migration story and its significance to the century's big themes.

The 1905 Aliens Act came from an atmosphere of rising xenophobia directed particularly at three immigrant groups: Lascar merchant seamen accused of undercutting wages; émigré political activists seen as a terrorism threat; and eastern European Jewish refugees portrayed as failing to assimilate and creating '... an alien world ... In the heart of London ... like a foreign town, with its own liberties of trade, own segregated peoples, religions, customs and industries'.<sup>1</sup> In 1911 a bitter dockers' strike became racialised when Chinese seamen prevented from joining the union continued to work and 30 Chinese laundries were attacked in Cardiff. In the same year Latvian political exiles opposed to the Russian monarchy were surprised by police while raiding an east London jeweller's. Three policemen were shot dead and their pursuit led to the Sidney Street Siege and a growing climate of fear. In 1916 German and Austrian businesses were attacked and 'enemy aliens' interned. At the end of the war in 1919, there was serious violence leading to fatalities between returning, war-weary servicemen and African, Arab and Asian seamen who had in many cases served in the Atlantic convoys that kept the country fed.

On the other hand, people made human connections across ethnic difference and found common cause. In 1912 east London dockers – mostly of Irish heritage – were on strike. Jewish families offered to give strikers' families fewer mouths to feed by looking after their children. They remembered how the dockers' union had given their striking garment workers a large donation a generation earlier in 1889. Years later in 1936 many of those former children would refuse to join Mosleyite fascists on a march through the East End, instead standing alongside their Jewish neighbours on the Cable Street barricades. Solidarity could grow from shared conditions of poverty. During the war a quarter of a million Belgian refugees found safety in Britain. And in 1911 a young Yemeni called Mohammed Muckble left his village and, one of many, joined the crew of a British tramp steamer as a fireman. When he later settled in South Shields he married a local woman, a Scottish Catholic girl from Newcastle called Rosetta. They had two weddings – one in the mosque and one in the church – and their children were brought up as Catholics.

These contradictory trends became interwoven throughout a century of ever tighter immigration laws as well as structural and overt racism, but also of growing understanding – often through shared hardship – between recent arrivals and 'settled' people, themselves often from families who had previously migrated from Ireland, southern Europe and within the UK. Our 'national dish' of Jewish battered fried fish and the potato chips that fed Irish navvies encapsulates this. Between the wars the Muckbles and many like them – Irish, Bengali, Gujarati, Glaswegian, Somali, Cockney, Jamaican, Chinese, Maltese, Greek, Scouse, Geordie and Arab – laid the foundations, in their choices of who to love, of our working-class multi-ethnic communities.

A close look at those years either side of the war can open students to a deeper interrogation of the currents of the time and their significance for today's world.



Mangrove Nine evidence photo. Photographs such as this were used by the police to suggest that key allies of the Black Power movement were implicated in planning and inciting riot.

The National Archives UK

(right) Barbara Beese during the demonstration of 9 August 1970. Barbara Beese was a member of the Black Panthers and one of the original Mangrove Nine. After the march Beese was arrested and charged on a number of accounts. She was found not guilty on all.

The National Archives UK



## Britain's civil rights movement

Recent attention to the 'Windrush generation' is leading to an increased focus on migration from the Commonwealth after the Second World War – from south Asia, Cyprus and Africa as well as the Caribbean. Seldom told in schools, though, is how their children's generation challenged the endemic racism their parents had suffered. Facing colour bars in employment and housing, dog-whistle speeches by some politicians, aggressive policing, the rise of anti-immigration movements such as the National Front and sometimes extreme and deadly violence, people – many of them young – fought back in many ways. The 'second generation', born here but made to feel excluded, were at the forefront.

Action took many forms. Individuals such as railwayman Asquith Xavier and the organisers of the Bristol Bus Boycott challenged the colour bar. Street uprisings in Moss Side, Toxteth and Brixton forced policing and working-class youth unemployment of into the national consciousness. Defence campaigns and monitoring projects such as those in Newham, Bradford and Southall held authorities to account, gaining the legal and political experience that enabled the family campaign over the murder of Stephen Lawrence to change the law and bring perpetrators to justice. Industrial disputes – for example at Burnsall in the West Midlands and Grunwick in west London, led by Asian women – highlighted workplace abuse. Bengali families in east London squatted in empty properties

and set up their own housing association. Books, plays, films and TV documentaries examined and exposed racial discrimination and how exclusion and poverty were pushing many young people into crime or mental illness. Entrepreneurial spirit transformed our towns with corner shops, curry houses and takeaways: some children of immigrants established major businesses and played important roles in the national economy. Parents campaigned for better schooling for their children and against the classification of children as 'educationally subnormal'. In music, fashion, food, sport and the arts the influences of Africa, Asia and the Caribbean became embedded. Pressure to diversify eventually forced change from businesses, political parties and the media. Within minority communities, too, entrenched attitudes on gender, sexuality, marriage, patronage and power were challenged. In very different ways and not necessarily with co-ordination, these were all facets of the UK's anti-racist civil rights movement. There are direct links with the USA, too: the Bristol Bus Boycott was inspired by Montgomery, Women Unite Against Racism in Tower Hamlets took its cue from the voter registration drive and Welsh schoolchildren gave money





Rock Against Racism march from central London to Brockwell Park, Brixton, south London 1978.  
Homer Sykes / Alamy Stock Photo

to replace the stained glass window destroyed in the Alabama church bombing which killed four black girls.

The British Civil Rights Movement is a largely unknown phenomenon but it is important and it needs to be taught. It was disparate but interconnected. It is as important as the US story and closer to home, arguably more engaging and relevant for our students. However, many in our schools know more about the ‘children’s crusade’ in Birmingham, Alabama than the anti-deportation campaign by Glasgow schoolchildren; more about ‘Jim Crow’ than the UK colour bar. Malcolm X but not the British Black Power movement; the lunch counter protests in Greensboro but not the Mangrove Nine; ‘We Shall Overcome’ but not Rock Against Racism. These histories are not always easy but they are essential. This matters because presenting movements against racism as having happened elsewhere but not here prevents an understanding both of the scale of the continuing challenge and the extent of the change brought about by the agency of these ‘ordinary’ people, our students’ parents and grandparents, thereby diminishing young people’s sense that they too can make a difference. The omission is also bad history.

### Powerful forces reflected in Britain’s migration history

*no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.*

*you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as well.<sup>2</sup>*

Teaching the history of migration to Britain also provides an opportunity to introduce students to major, powerful forces in history and to see how these mighty forces could have significant impacts at the macro- and micro-level.

The arrival of the *Empire Windrush* is a relatively familiar and well-known event in popular history and a staple starting point for many lessons. But it is much more than that. *Empire Windrush* keys into much larger themes. First and foremost it keys into the theme of empire. This would include relationships between imperial Britain and the colonies but also the theme of imperial decline. Much of Britain’s migration history is inextricably connected to the history of decolonisation, the decline of empire, and the Commonwealth.

These are not the only forces which interplay with migration history. It might not seem an obvious link but migration and the Cold War are closely linked. As an interesting side-story to *Empire Windrush*, 66 Polish women and children on board had come from Mexico via imprisonment in Siberia by the Soviets and an epic journey through Central Asia, via India and across the Pacific Ocean. They came to join their loved ones, Polish exiles who had fought with the Allies and could not return due to deepening east-west tensions.

Developing this theme, the Cold War and empire (and by implication, migration) are also closely linked. The superpowers managed to inject Cold War tensions into the power vacuums or straightforward disarray which affected many post-imperial regions, such as east Africa, southern Africa or Malaya. This in turn led to mass migration as people fled conflict. The interplay of empire, decolonisation and the Cold War had massive implications for Britain’s migration story. There were migrants fleeing from Soviet-backed persecution in Hungary and Vietnam. Others were escaping US-backed regimes in South America and southern Africa. Refugees fled conflicts in Bangladesh, west Africa, Somalia, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Turkish Kurdistan through which the two blocs fought proxy wars. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union came refugees from Balkan wars. These are legacies of the





The Cable Street mural commemorating the Battle of Cable Street, London, England

Cold War and its aftermath as much as of the decline of empire, enabling students to see that those great power conflicts shaped who we have become. The impact of the Cold War was not only at the geopolitical and macroeconomic level: it affected the demographic of every part of this country and this needs to be understood.

Other powerful forces might also be added to this mix, such as globalisation and climate change. All empires are a form of globalisation, few more powerful in this respect than the British Empire. But we tend to see globalisation in the later twentieth century as more of an economic than a political phenomenon. With the expansion of the European Union, Britain now has many communities of workers from eastern Europe. Globalisation has given us new communities 'invisible

in plain sight', including Filipino care workers, Albanian baristas, Brazilian teaching assistants, Congolese students and Moroccan waiters, all here due to a globalising and more corporate world.

Migration in response to climate change is hardly a new phenomenon. From the earliest times to the twenty-first century, climate and environmental change have driven migration. Environmental change is a major factor driving movement from west and east Africa towards the Mediterranean, as well as being a contributory cause of conflicts such as the Syrian civil war and its resultant mass displacement of people moving into Europe. Perhaps there are interesting teaching possibilities in exploring the impact of this theme, not just in the twentieth century but on a longer timescale.



Three simple suggestions, therefore:

- Specific migration stories in the first half of the century can illuminate both that period and the ensuing years up to our own time.
- Our students need to know about the UK civil rights movement in the second half of the century.
- The less well-known ways in which migration interacts with key forces such as empire, decolonisation, the Cold War, environment and globalisation can be examined. Migration into every town and city across the UK is a legacy that connects those events directly with the young people in our classrooms.

There is another story to tell, too, for the twentieth century was one of mass *emigration* from the UK: for nearly all the century more people were leaving than arriving. Even as the 'Windrush generation' arrived, British families were being encouraged, with financial incentives, to emigrate to Australia. Forced migration of working-class British children continued, too, till the 1970s. Their stories, too, are small windows with a big view for children in a history classroom.

There is not one story of immigration, nor one story of how migrants have been received. Many factors underlie the difficult immigration debate of our own time: industrial decline and the weakening of organised labour, austerity politics, wealth and regional inequalities, the 'gig' economy, the rise of extremism from jihadists and the far right, 'identity' politics, international crises, the climate emergency. We owe it to our students to help them grapple with these complexities and to understand how history has shaped our own shifting sense of who we are.

*If you don't know your history and things like that ... the history of where you came from, what your ancestors went through and how your parents [and] ... your grandparents went through, people you are close to, it's kind of upsetting because you wouldn't have that bond with them.*

North London Year 9 student, interviewed in 2018

## Where to find more information – some starting points for hard pressed teachers

Begin with Robert Winder's *Bloody Foreigners* (2004) for a very readable overview of British migration history including an extensive look at the twentieth century.

The website of the Migration Museum has a range of resources, videos and teaching ideas: [www.migrationmuseum.org/education/](http://www.migrationmuseum.org/education/)

The Runnymede Trust's award-winning website: [www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk) – created in collaboration with academic historians – has pages on Jewish immigration and the 1905 Act, wartime attacks on Germans, Chinese and Somali seafarers, Polish immigration, Asquith Xavier, the Newham 8, Grunwick, Britain's Black Power movement, anti-deportation campaigns and the Bradford 12.

For the 1919 riots, the BBC's *Mixed Britannia* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTOSFKs\\_JpQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTOSFKs_JpQ)), David Olusoga's *Black and British* (2016) and Peter Fryer's *Staying Power* (1984).

*Patterns of Migration – Spitalfields* – downloadable from: [www.ocr.org.uk/Images/538133-spitalfields.pdf](http://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/538133-spitalfields.pdf) for the 1912 dock strike and Jewish tailors, the Bengali squatters' movement and Women Unite Against Racism.

On Lascar seamen, read Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain, 400 Years of History* (2002). Mohammed and Rosetta Muckble are at [www.theyemeniproject.org.uk/4/6/yemeni-and-british-integration.html](http://www.theyemeniproject.org.uk/4/6/yemeni-and-british-integration.html)

The story of the Mangrove Nine is at <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/rights-resistance-racism-story-mangrove-nine/> while there is extensive coverage of the Bristol Bus Boycott online.

The Office of National Statistics provides analyses from census returns of immigration patterns for every decade in the century.

## Also recommended:

Tony Kushner, *The Battle of Britishness* (2012). Spafford, Lyndon, Adi and Sherwood, *Migration* (2016) or Spafford and Lyndon, *Migrants to Britain* (2016) – OCR GCSE textbooks.

Mohamud and Whitburn, *Migration, Empires and the People* (2016) – AQA GCSE textbook.

Your local history library and archive.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Henry Walker, *East London: sketches of Christian work and workers* (1896).

<sup>2</sup> Warsan Shire, from 'Home'.

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