‘Our Most Foreign Refugees’: Refugees from Vietnam in Britain

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From the autumn of 1978 when British merchant vessels in the South China Seas began rescuing people in distress from overcrowded boats fleeing Vietnam to the end of Britain’s involvement in the UNHCR’s Orderly Departure Programme, 19,355 people came to Britain from Vietnam. And yet, although Britain’s commitment to participate in the UNHCR scheme was made at the highest level of government, the process of reception and resettlement proved to be a difficult, and sometimes unhappy, process:

The Vietnamese are one of the most disadvantaged groups ever to come to the United Kingdom. Many lack marketable skills or even skills which can easily be adapted to our society. Many lack education and literacy, even in their own language. Most, having come from North Vietnam, have had little contact with Western civilisation. For many Britain was a last resort as a settlement country following refusals from the USA and other countries.

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Unlike other refugee and immigrant groups they had no established community in this country to receive them.¹

This government report into the reception and resettlement of refugees from Vietnam, published in 1982, was bleak, focussing as it did on how their previous lives had fitted them ill for their new lives in Britain. The challenges facing the initial quota of 10,000 refugees who came to Britain from Vietnam—a number which was eventually nearly doubled once family reunions under the UNHCR's Orderly Departure Programme took place—were undoubtedly huge. But setting their experiences alongside those who were resettled in other European countries pushes us to question its assumptions, particularly as the report's authors implied that the difficulties experienced by the refugees coming to Britain could be reduced to their individual or group characteristics.

Yet at the heart of Britain's reception and resettlement programme was a tension: despite Britain's engagement in the UNHCR scheme, central government refused to fully fund the costs involved in their reception and resettlement, devolving them instead to local authorities and the refugee organisations. What was presented as an economic necessity in Britain—the need to limit state support for refugees as part of a wider programme of economic restructuring and government retrenchment in order to respond to the global recession of the early 1980s—looks rather different when placed alongside the response of other European nations. The recession was experienced globally, but elsewhere, as the other chapters in this book show, the level of support made available to arrivals from Vietnam was very different. Seen in this light, Britain's position becomes exposed as the political choice it was, one driven by the ideologies of the New Right with its emphasis on the shrinking of the state, marketisation and individualism. One of the central concerns of this chapter then, after setting out the wider geo-political and national context behind Britain's involvement with the 'boat people' is to explore the effect of that political choice on the grassroots and everyday experiences of those refugees who came to Britain.

Important though state policies were, there were other factors at play in mediating the experience of refugees from Vietnam. The ever-growing diversity of Britain's population, encompassing not only first-generation

¹ National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh (hereafter NAS): HH61/1431, *Report of the Joint Committee for Refugees from Vietnam* (London: Home Office, 1982), 12.

migrants and their offspring but also an expanding mixed heritage British-born population, had ensured that by the 1980s easy assumptions over the 'assimilation' of foreigners into the 'host' population was no longer a viable social model. The embedding of multiculturalism in local government policy and grassroots practice was accompanied by a growing acceptance that British institutions needed to change in order to fully reach and serve its diverse population and the emergence of a significant minority-ethnic economic sector. As we will see, together these developments opened a space in which refugees from Vietnam could find work, build their own businesses and community organisations and find a sympathetic hearing from local authority workers and others working who embraced the idea of a more diverse society.

Before we look in depth at Britain's reception and resettlement programme, it is worth briefly putting its response to the UNHCR's Vietnamese programme within Britain's longer history of refugee entry. While Britain understood itself as having a strong tradition of welcoming refugees, in fact its island position ensured that it had significantly more control over its borders than the countries of mainland Europe.² It had thus been insulated from the mass population movements which had been such a significant feature for many European countries during the first half of the twentieth century. Legislative boundaries though, proved to be as important as physical ones. British immigration law up until the 1960s ensured that while there was freedom of movement to Britain for its imperial subjects and citizens, all others—defined as aliens—after 1905 found their entry tightly controlled by a series of Aliens Acts.³ These were designed to ensure that aliens entering the country would not become a charge on the public purse, were free of certain medical conditions and would not take employment from British workers. Although initially those seeking refuge from persecution were exempt from these requirements, by 1919 this provision had been removed, meaning that Jews and others fleeing Nazi rule in the 1930s were subject to the general restrictions placed

² Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees. Then and Now* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

³ Most notably the 1905 Aliens Act and the Aliens Act of 1919. The terms of the 1919 Act were carried out under the 1920 Aliens Order, and its provisions and other relevant legislation were all consolidated within the 1953 Aliens Order. The Immigration Act 1971 rendered the distinction between aliens and British subjects/citizens obsolete.

on all aliens.⁴ After 1945, 200,000 Poles who had fought on the British side were offered asylum and government support under the Polish Resettlement Act 1947, but in general Displaced Persons were selected on the basis on their ability to work and fit into British life rather than their experiences of persecution or need to claim asylum.⁵

The UK was an original signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention but it took decades to work it into domestic law: the requirement to consider asylum applications in line with the Convention's articles was included in a footnote to the Immigration Act 1971; it took until 1987 for the Convention to become integrated into British case law following a House of Lords judgement; and it was only through the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 that the Convention was finally granted primacy when assessing asylum applications.⁶ But the small number of individual asylum applications being made each year meant that civil servants and refugee agencies alike largely saw the discretionary nature of Britain's asylum framework as unproblematic well into the 1980s. In the late 1970s, no more than three hundred individual applications were typically made annually, and if successful, generally resulted in the refugee being granted indefinite leave to remain.⁷ Once in the UK they normally received advice and specialist support from the voluntary British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR), but held no special status and were entitled to the same welfare benefits as others resident in Britain which they accessed in the usual way.

Aside from these individual claimants, those seeking refuge in Britain broadly fell into two categories. The first were cohorts generated by the Cold War, and included the nearly 20,000 Hungarians who came to Britain following the Soviet invasion in 1956, 3000 Czechs following the Prague Spring and some hundreds of Chilean and Latin American refugees in the 1970s. The second category were those whose lives had been disturbed by decolonisation or post-colonial events, and where historic imperial ties, often reinforced by UK passport status, meant that Britain

⁴ Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵ Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Post-war era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁶ Dallal Stevens, *UK Asylum Law and Policy: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 2004), 78 & 165.

⁷ The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA): HO376/210, minute from Clayton to Mr Howard-Drake, May 23 1977.

was the obvious choice for those seeking to rebuild their lives. Kenyan and Ugandan Asians—first hit by Africanisation policies of their newly independent nations and then, in the case of Uganda, Idi Amin's direct expulsion order of August 1972—came to Britain as UK passport holders. Two years later Cypriots coming to London after the Turkish invasion joined the city's established Cypriot population, whose links to Britain dated back to when the island was a Crown Colony.

And yet, despite the seriousness of the conflicts and persecution they faced, these post-colonial refugees were rarely regarded as such by the British public. In crude terms, prior to the arrival of the Vietnamese, Cold War refugees had been understood in Britain to be European and Christian while post-colonial arrivals were commonly elided with New Commonwealth 'immigrants', viewed as racially and culturally distinct and, with their numbers increasing, seen as needing to be controlled through immigration legislation. Those coming to Britain from Vietnam—as Cold War refugees, but also the product of years of (post)colonial conflict—thus complicated the picture, simultaneously eliciting sympathy from Britons as refugees from a communist regime while becoming a focus for street-level racism and legislative attempts to restrict immigration.

This background is useful because it offers a way into contextualising Britain's role in the Indochinese refugee crisis. Despite its self-perception as a place of refuge, compared to Germany or France, Britain's involvement in refugee matters in the twentieth century was most often numerically marginal. Yet Britain's participation in the UNHCR programme was striking. Not only has every UK government after 1971 been committed even nominally to reducing immigration to the lowest feasible level, but Thatcher's incoming government in 1979 had a very explicit commitment to restrict non-European migration. The latter sections of this chapter explore how reception and resettlement policies affected the Vietnamese once they had arrived in Britain, but we begin by exploring how was it that Thatcher moved in a matter of weeks from her anti-immigration electoral platform to a position of granting entry to 19,000 Vietnamese to the UK.

BRITAIN'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

When in the winter of 1978 and into the spring and early summer of 1979 television screens and newspapers across Britain were filled of pictures of desperate Vietnamese 'boat people'—those fleeing the toxic combination of ethnic repression, Communist restructuring and reprisals—their plight

did not immediately seem a British concern. Yet Britain's past and continuing imperial connections with the region ensured that it rapidly became implicated in the subsequent refugee crisis. Although Britain had not been active in Vietnam, either as a colonial power or a combatant force, it had consistently supported America's fight against the Vietcong and had its own track record of fighting communist insurgency in Malaysia. Added to this, and crucially, was the position—geographically and politically—of Hong Kong as a British Crown colony.⁸ Hong Kong sustained a substantial British military presence and an ex-patriot population largely involved in a range of financial, commercial and investment activities. Its importance as a loci of British influence in south-east Asia had been strengthened following Singapore's independence from Britain in 1959, while Hong Kong's role as a major port in the region meant it acted as a key hub of British shipping interests, ensuring that 'Britain's responsibilities for Hong Kong ... in one sense made her a Pacific power'.⁹ The large numbers of British vessels regularly crossing the South China Sea made it almost inevitable some would cross paths with the overloaded boats of refugees which by late 1978 were regularly leaving Vietnam. By this point, when the number of people fleeing Vietnam was reaching the hundreds of thousands, neighbouring nations had begun insisting that a boat carrying refugees would only be allowed dock if they were guaranteed settlement in a third country—normally the nationality under which a vessel was registered.

So it was that in October 1978 the Labour government had to face the question of how to respond to the 'boat people' crisis. The Scottish-owned *MV Wellpark* had been on its way to Taiwan when it saw distress flares from a sinking refugee boat during a typhoon and rescued its 346 Vietnamese passengers. The incident proved a popular news story, where the story of heroic British sailors dramatically coming to the aid of desperate Vietnamese escapees played well across both tabloid and broadsheet press.¹⁰ Given the heightened tensions in the region over the high numbers of arrivals from Vietnam, Taiwan refused to allow the *Wellpark* to

⁸ Its status shifted to that of British Dependent Territory under the British Nationality Act 1981.

⁹ TNA: PREM19/129, record of call by the Soviet Ambassador, Mr Lunkov, on the Lord Privy Seal, 5.30 pm, May 29, 1979. These words were spoken by the Lord Privy Seal, Sir Ian Gilmour.

¹⁰ See for example John Dickie, 'Lifeline for the Refugees,' *Daily Mail*, October 10, 1978, p. 1; *Guardian*, 'Captain Says: I'm No Hero,' October 18, 1978, p. 3.

dock unless Britain guaranteed that it would give asylum to all the rescues. The Labour government responded positively, declaring itself willing to accept responsibility for anyone picked up by British boats and the *Wellpark* refugees were quickly transferred to Britain. Here they were placed in the care of the BCAR, the NGO which had specialised in receiving and resettling refugees in Britain since the late 1940s. It sent the new arrivals to its London hostel, Kensington Barracks, where they were warmly received. As one rescuee, Huy Nguyen, remembered: 'when we got to the barracks people were waiting for us, to give us soup. They put flowers on our beds. Roses or carnations. I got a carnation. White. I was really happy'. Donations poured in, a 'circus visited, complete with an elephant for rides. Woolworths laid on a Christmas party for the children', and even the normally refugee-averse *Daily Mail*, mindful that the 'boat people' were refugees from Communism, extended the hand of friendship:

Because we have closed the door to mass immigration—and rightly so—it does not mean we need be deaf to the knocking of some of those whose claim to help requires no passport or birth certificate to establish its piteous authenticity.¹¹

But, if they were deserving of assistance, this came at a price, and that was of being depicted as abject and helpless victims. News accounts and pictures of the 'boat people', as they had instantly become labelled, were dominated by images of grateful survivors climbing aboard British ships from dangerously overloaded boats, or quietly squatting on decks, behind wire fences or in refugee camps while waiting to be granted entry. Representing the refugees in this way certainly had the effect of generating public sympathy for the rescuees, but it meant that if, once they had arrived in Britain, they failed to match up to this stereotype, sympathy could soon evaporate.

If the *Wellpark* rescuees had been feted on arrival and the Labour government had agreed to take responsibility for rescuees on British boats, Margaret Thatcher's new Conservative government, which came into office in May 1979, was determined to take a very different approach. Coinciding with Thatcher's first weeks in government, the British

¹¹Quoted in Chris McGreal, "Vietnamese Boat People: Living to Tell the Tale," *The Observer*, March 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2016/mar/20/vietnamese-boat-people-survivors-families> (accessed June 26, 2017).

merchant vessels *Sibonga* and *Roachbank* picked up nearly 1200 refugees between them. The situation became tense after Thatcher adamantly refused to take responsibility for the rescuees and Taiwan, the nearest port of call, retaliated by refusing to let them land. Hong Kong similarly closed its port to the vessels, not wanting the rescuees to join its already overcrowded refugee camps, which were already receiving a thousand new refugees each day. Intensifying the strain on Hong Kong's physical and social infrastructure was the clandestine arrival of approximately 3000 migrants leaving communist China each week.¹² Throughout, the stand-off conditions on the ship deteriorated, a situation which was closely followed in the British press. Despite significant expressions of public sympathy for their plight, Thatcher continued to maintain her anti-immigrant position, consistently eliding refugees with immigrants in general, asserting that 'there would be riots on the streets if the Government had to put refugees into council housing'.¹³

And so, when her government was finally forced to guarantee the *Sibonga* rescuees' entry to Britain 'on humanitarian grounds', ensuring they could disembark in Hong Kong, this was not accompanied by 'any general commitment [to take] similar action in future'.¹⁴ Rather, the prime minister insisted that the government should continue to resist taking other rescuees. To bolster her position, in a confidential memo she ordered civil servants to explore 'the elements of a political and legal basis for *refusing to accept* Vietnamese refugees', including 'plans for the possible withdrawal from the UK's existing international obligations concerning refugees' and shipping conventions.¹⁵ With two further British vessels having picked up more rescuees, Thatcher was anxious to develop 'a cast iron position in legal and political terms which would enable the UK to hold out against admitting [them]'.¹⁶

She met with resistance. The Attorney-General and the FCO drew out the implications of her suggested approach, implications which ranged from the increased danger to people at risk at sea—'not only for

¹² Sir Paul Bryan, House of Commons Debates, vol. 967 col. 1228, May 24, 1979.

¹³ TNA: PREM19/129, note for the record, June 14, 1979.

¹⁴ TNA: PREM19/129, press notice, May 28, 1979.

¹⁵ TNA: HO376/200, letter from PM Private Secretary to JS Wall, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), confidential, May 29, 1979. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ TNA: PREM19/129, Note of a meeting at 10 Downing Street to discuss the problem of Vietnamese Refugees, May 29, 1979. The *Herring Bank* and *Whalebone* were the two merchant vessels which had picked up refugees in mid-May.

refugees'—to the difficulties of a 'major maritime nation' no longer abiding by international shipping's rules and the resulting consequences for the UK's shipping industry.¹⁷ This guidance, and increasing international pressure for Britain to follow the example of other nations in accepting all rescuees picked up by their flagged vessels, caused Thatcher to change tack. Instead of simply stonewalling, she started considering how Britain might maintain international standing while conceding entry to as few refugees as possible. Her solution was twofold. Firstly, in what Hong Kie Yuen has called 'proxy humanitarianism', she now claimed Hong Kong's refugee effort as her own. This meant arguing that as a Crown Colony the territory's refugee camps—by now accommodating around 80,000 people—should be counted as Britain's contribution to the crisis.¹⁸ Secondly, and extending from this, Thatcher argued that other countries needed to help to shoulder this burden being 'carried' by the UK. Her proposed mechanism for ensuring this was a UNHCR-sponsored conference. This was to have the twin aims of agreeing a formula for resettling the existing refugees located across south-east Asia and ending the massive exodus from Vietnam in order stem the crisis at source.¹⁹ Her call was strengthened by a deteriorating picture on the ground which, as we have seen, saw Vietnam's neighbours further hardening their position.²⁰

With this heightened political background and with the full and significant backing of the US and the UN's Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim, the UNHCR's High Commissioner, Poul Hartling, agreed to convene an international conference in Geneva in July.²¹ One of the conditions he set was that governments must come willing to make significant pledges of both resettlement and of money.²² This meant that the UN conference was something of a pyrrhic victory for Britain: Thatcher was pleased to have her strategy vindicated, but it was with some consternation that she discovered Hartling proposed that Britain take an 'indicative' 10,000

¹⁷TNA: PREM19/129, FCO letter to Downing Street, May 30, 1979.

¹⁸Hong Kiu Yuen, 'Proxy Humanitarianism: Hong Kong's Vietnamese Refugee Crisis, 1975–79,' unpublished MPhil dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 2014.

¹⁹TNA: PREM19/129, comments of Kurt Waldheim, UNHCR contained in telegram from UK UN desk, New York to FCO, May 31, 1979.

²⁰UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees*, 83. These nation were Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.

²¹TNA: PREM19/129, telegram from UK UN Mission to FCO, June 14, 1979.

²²TNA: PREM19/129, FCO telegram report of meeting with Poul Hartling, June 6, 1979.

refugees as its contribution to the resettlement total, as well as expecting it to sign up to the Orderly Departure Programme.²³ Such an undertaking would, in effect, entail Britain accepting an unspecified number of people from Vietnam in the future, who chose to exercise their right to join family members already in the UK.

Hartling's demand that the UK offer a specific and significant commitment caught the new Conservative government in a dilemma: on the one hand it retained its determination to continue to be seen as anti-immigrant, on the other was its strong desire for Britain to be seen as having a pivotal role in the international effort to solve this Cold War refugee crisis. The way out of this bind was offered by William Whitelaw, the new Home Secretary, who argued that the corollary of participating in the UNHCR programme was restricting the entry of other immigrants.²⁴ Accordingly, the 1981 British Nationality Act was designed to cut down 'the level of immigration into the UK, and in particular on the admission of dependants', in part to 'compensate for a higher intake of Vietnamese refugees'.²⁵

Here then we see not a humanitarian democratic state spontaneously stepping up to its international responsibilities. Rather, this was a government which did its best to evade international maritime responsibilities, only grudgingly accepting the minimum of refugees after all other avenues were closed. And it was a government which attempted to avoid any further commitments under cover of proposing an international meeting and stressing its contribution to the crisis by proxy by drawing on its colonial relationship with Hong Kong. And, when manoeuvred into accepting a significant number of refugees, the UK government not only counted its existing commitment to boat rescuees as part of its UNHCR quota but also saw it as necessitating the introduction of further general immigration restrictions. Scholars have normally located the explicit coming together of immigration law and refugee policy in the later 1980s, but here we see their unequivocal alliance in Thatcher's first weeks in office.²⁶

Who then were these ten thousand 'boat people' which Britain had committed to take? Although they were most often called 'Vietnamese boat people' in the British press, this label hid more than it revealed. The

²³ TNA: PREM19/129, FCO to Downing Street, June 20, 1979.

²⁴ TNA: PREM19/130, confidential note to Prime Minister from William Whitelaw, July 9, 1979.

²⁵ TNA: PREM19/130, note for the record, July 9, 1979.

²⁶ See for example Stevens, *UK Asylum Law and Policy*.

majority were in fact ethnic Chinese who had fled the country due to a targeted programme of anti-Chinese state discrimination, and to their numbers were added ethnic Vietnamese simply seeking to escape the repressive regime. But the invasion by China of northern Vietnam and the legacy of the war ensured entrenched tensions between ethnic Chinese and ethnic Vietnamese refugees. And intersecting these divisions were other differences: rural and urban; Christian and Buddhist; and between Cantonese and Vietnamese speakers.²⁷ French colonial rule of Indo-China had ensured that French was the language of the Vietnamese elite and educated, who commonly chose France as their first destination. By contrast, in Britain, under three per cent of the incoming refugees had a university education, and among the ethnic Chinese refugees there was a first-language illiteracy rate of nearly forty per cent.²⁸ Of those surviving escape by boat from north Vietnam, many ended up in Hong Kong simply as a result of its relative proximity. Once in Hong Kong, Britain's 'humanely drawn' selection criteria meant that it accepted people who had been rejected by other countries.²⁹ Whereas France, the US, Canada and Australia, which all had large and established Vietnamese populations, were often destinations of choice for refugees seeking to move to the West, Britain found itself selecting individuals for its quota people with little knowledge of the country and whose options for going elsewhere were limited.

COMING TO BRITAIN

It was not a good time to be coming to Britain. The country was entering what would prove to be the deepest recession in fifty years: inflation, which had been rising steadily and alarmingly since September 1978, hit nearly twenty-two per cent in May 1980; unemployment, which exceeded five per cent in the summer of 1979 continued to increase every month, creating nearly a million new jobless in the first year of the Conservative government, affecting fourteen per cent of the workforce by September

²⁷ NAS: HH61/1431, Report of the JCRV, 17.

²⁸ London Metropolitan Archives, London (hereafter LMA): LMA/4243/A/06/090, Ockenden Venture Planning Report on Boat Refugee Education in the UK, Annex 2, July, 1980.

²⁹ Hale, 'Vietnamese Refugees in Britain', 278.

1982.³⁰ Intensifying this picture were the new government's tough retrenchment policies. Although these were articulated as measures necessary to deal with the recession, they were inspired by New Right thinking which aimed to shrink the size of the state in order to make way for market-driven solutions, enterprise and individualism.³¹ For refugees coming to Britain, this was to mean two things: that the level of support offered to them by the state would be severely constrained, and the possibilities for establishing themselves economically were sparse.

Making matters worse, popular expressions of anti-immigration feeling, which had moved ever closer to the centre of mainstream political discourse since the late 1960s, made little distinction between economic migrants and refugees. On hearing of the government's commitment to take refugees from Vietnam, Britain's far-right party, the National Front, threw itself into action. It threatened demonstrations at Heathrow airport to coincide with the arrival of the first groups of Vietnamese refugees; handed out leaflets across the town's closest to reception centres; sent alarmist hoax letters to elderly residents; and made its presence felt at public meetings called by residents concerned about the arrival of large numbers of refugees in their locality.³² One leaflet argued:

IN GRANTING ASYLUM TO A GROWING NUMBER OF CHINESE, UNWANTED BECAUSE THERE ARE ALREADY 100,00–2,000,000 OF THEM [migrants] HERE. What now of Mrs Thatcher's no more 'swamping' and Edward Heath's (at the time of the Ugandan Asian expulsions) 'no more substantial settlements'?³³

But this was not the whole story, there was another side to Britain too. One which challenged the anti-immigration preoccupations of the new government and racist elements of society. One which understood

³⁰ Office of National Statistics, 'Unemployment since 1881,' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/lms/labour-market.../unemployment-since-1881.pdf> (accessed July 11, 2017).

³¹ For the IEA's outline of the key debates surrounding the economic choices of Thatcher's first term see Philip Booth et al., 'Were 364 Economists All Wrong?' Institute of Economic Affairs Monographs, Readings 60, 2006, Cass Business School Research Paper, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=892579> (accessed July 17, 2017).

³² For an example of a hoax letter see TNA: BS18/54, attached to minute from Alan Marshall JCRV to Guy Crawley, II, Home Office, September 3, 1980.

³³ TNA: HO376/301, Anonymous flyer, 'A protest – the Vietnamese/Chinese boat people', June, 1979. Emphases in original. The expulsion of Uganda's Asian population in 1972 had seen 28,000 of them who were UK passport holders coming to Britain.

Britishness as a capacious and diverse category and accepted that new migrants and Britons with second- or third-generation migrant backgrounds alike had the right to fully access all aspects of British life. Such understanding reconceptualised the job that needed to be done, moving away from an expectation that it was the work of the migrant to assimilate towards a realisation that much needed to change in British institutions, daily life and practice to ensure that they worked for all of its population. A borough such as Haringey in London, home to people from eighty-five different countries and where eighty-seven identifiably distinct languages were spoken in its schools, could not afford to ignore diversity or insist on assimilation.³⁴

The emergence of multiculturalism across urban, often inner city, Britain, from the 1970s was a response to this diversity, as those living and working on the frontline began to develop new ways of working and thinking to take in account the differences they encountered in the course of their everyday lives. Anti-racist critiques, which had been the preserve of a small number of activists in the late 1960s, were by the 1970s becoming embedded in the everyday practices of a constellation of community activists, radical professional local authority workers and younger Labour councillors.³⁵ There was a broader agenda here too: this New Urban Left viewed multiculturalism, as well as anti-sexist and anti-homophobic politics, as vehicles of resistance to Thatcherite policies, and saw them as part of a wider programme of reforming local service provision and democratising local politics.³⁶

But the state was only one part, and often only one small part, of the wider reception and resettlement programme. For, even from the moment when refugees in the camps in Hong Kong were selected to come to

³⁴ Stewart Ranson and Kieron Walsh, *Community Education For Equal Rights and Opportunities in Haringey* (London: Haringey Council, 1986), 6.

³⁵ Camilla Schofield and Ben Jones, "'Whatever Community Is, This Is Not It': Notting Hill and the Reconstruction of "Race" in Britain after 1958,' *Journal of British Studies* 58, no. 1 (2019): 142–73.

³⁶ Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 461; Daisy Payling, 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire: Grassroots Activism and Left-Wing Solidarity in 1980s Sheffield,' *Twentieth Century British History* 25, no. 4 (2014): 602–627. For contemporary analyses see Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988); Gerry Stoker, *The Politics of Local Government* (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1988), 192–214; Martin Boddy and Colin Fudge, eds, *Local Socialism? Labour Councils and New Left Alternatives* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Joy Holland, ed., *Feminist Action* (London: Battleaxe Books, 1984).

Britain, voluntary action was central. In this the Vietnamese programme drew on a long and rich tradition of Britain's active and diverse civil society generally, and the expertise of three well-established NGOs—BCAR, Ockenden Venture and Save the Children Fund (SCF)—specifically.³⁷ Voluntary organisations had always sat at the heart of the work of receiving and resettling refugees, even during the arrival of Hungarian refugees in 1956–7 and the Ugandan Asian resettlement programme of 1972–3, both of which had seen significant government involvement and leadership. Now, however, NGOs were expected to lead the way.³⁸ They were tasked with receiving refugees when they first came to Britain, housing them in reception centres where they received orientation and language training, finding housing, and sometimes work, for them in the part of Britain in which they were 'resettled' and providing continuing social, welfare and emotional support over the following months.

The centrality of NGOs to the Vietnamese programme was the logical outcome of central government's 'front-end loading' policy which set out the financial parameters for reception and resettlement. This, based on the American model, confined additional state funding to a highly circumscribed twelve-week period of reception. Even at this stage, the day-to-day costs of board and lodging were covered by the standard state supplementary benefit payments, to which all UK residents with an income below a certain threshold were eligible. Additional central government funding was confined to a direct grant to the NGOs to cover extra staffing and running costs associated with the programme. During this 'reception period':

the refugees would be taught basic 'survival' English, receive medical screening, learn about life and opportunities in Britain and be found a suitable home. Thereafter, with the help from members of support groups and any

³⁷ Ockenden Venture had been set up by Joyce Pearce in 1951 following her work with children living in Displaced Persons camps. SCF had been established in 1919 to provide support to women and children affected by the Allies blockade of Germany after the First World War. From this date onwards it routinely sent teams of workers to major international humanitarian crises.

³⁸ Becky Taylor, 'Good Citizens? Ugandan Asians, Volunteers and Race Relations in 1970s Britain,' *History Workshop Journal* 85, Spring (2018): 120–141. Although the Hungarian programme of 1956–7 was led by BCAR, it benefited from seconded Home Office civil servants and crucially the Home Secretary retained ultimate oversight and responsibility for the programme's success as he was ultimately answerable to Parliament.

special facilities the responsible agencies might provide, the Vietnamese would have access to the same services as other members of the community.³⁹

If there were any shortfalls, the Home Office expected that these would be covered by fundraising and donations managed by the voluntary agencies. Once an individual left a reception centre to be 'resettled', no additional government support would be available as they were expected to access the full range of health, education and welfare services provided to all British residents. So while the three national NGOs running the Vietnamese programme were maintained by a core of paid staff, much of the reception and resettlement work was only possible due to significant input from volunteers.

In the period when the only refugees from Vietnam coming to Britain were the 1500 rescuee 'boat people' from the *Wellpark* and other vessels, the initial plan for their reception and resettlement followed a pattern familiar from previous refugee programmes. BCAR had responsibility for receiving the refugees on arrival, providing accommodation and basic orientation and language training at Kensington Barracks reception centre in London. Councils that had been moved by the desperate scenes of distressed boat people stepped forward with offers of housing to which refugees were matched dependent on family size. After resettlement, local authorities were expected to provide continuing additional support, particularly in terms of language tuition, but local voluntary organisations were expected to carry the 'burden' of social work.

Initial readings of the resettlement programme were positive, as numbers of homes roughly equalled the number of projected refugees. Also the clustering of resettled refugees in London and a few other areas meant that ongoing specialist language provision appeared realistic and that there would be enough Vietnamese in each area to form what were considered to be viable communities. Civil servants were confident that they would not need to call on councils to provide many additional services, partly due to their belief that the Vietnamese were poised to become 'good, industrious, conscientious citizens ... keen to gain their independence and unlikely to seek recourse to local authority services for any longer than is absolutely necessary'.⁴⁰

³⁹ Home Office memo cited in Dalglish, *Refugees from Vietnam*, 64.

⁴⁰ TNA: HO376/198, draft letter to Local Authority Associations from Home Office, January 15, 1979.

But there were problems. Even before Britain agreed to accept ten thousand refugees from Vietnam, it had become apparent that despite its ambitions, BCAR did not have the capacity to support the refugees properly.⁴¹ The already inadequate arrangements that BCAR had been able to make at its Kensington hostel were ‘thrown out of gear’, first by the arrival of rescuees of the *Sibonga* and the *Roachbank*, and then the 10,000 refugees who made up Britain’s UNHCR pledge.⁴² But the Home Office rejected the possibility of either stepping in and leading the resettlement effort, as it had done during the arrival of the Ugandan Asians, or even seconding a number of civil servants to BCAR as it had during the Hungarian programme. Instead it emphasised the importance of ‘strengthening the voluntary organisations themselves’.⁴³ To this end it invited Ockenden Venture and SCF to form, with BCAR, a Joint Committee for Refugees from Vietnam (JCRV) to manage the new phase of arrivals.⁴⁴ This development did not change the central principles of the refugee programme. As well as maintaining the centrality of NGOs, the Home Office also continued to hold to its ‘front-end loading’ policy with its twelve-week target stay in a reception centre.

This restructuring of the reception programme was accompanied by a decision to open two large camps, both ex-military establishments, one at Sopley in Hampshire, and the other at Thorney Island near Chichester in West Sussex. Both had the capacity to hold several hundred refugees at a time, but they suffered from being institutionalised, impersonal, isolated from their surrounding communities, with shortages of interpreters and internal power struggles between the different agency staff operating in them.⁴⁵ None of these difficulties came across in the camp newsletter,

⁴¹ TNA: HO376/201, Shearer, ‘Helping the Boat People’.

⁴² TNA: MH48/1364, letter from GI de Deney, Home Office, to Miss JM Forsyth, Treasury, August 15, 1979.

⁴³ TNA: MH48/1364, letter from GI de Deney, Home Office, to Miss JM Forsyth, Treasury, August 15, 1979; NAS: HH61/1431, minute Philip to Reid, Scottish Health and Housing Department, August 22, 1979.

⁴⁴ TNA: HO376/, note of a meeting to discuss reception arrangements for refugees from the *Sibonga*, June 5, 1979.

⁴⁵ See Samantha Hale, ‘Vietnamese Refugees in Britain,’ in *The International Refugee Crisis: British and Canadian Responses*, ed. Vaughan Robinson (Houndsmill: Macmillan, 1993), 273–92, 278, 284–5; Peter Jones, *Vietnamese Refugees: A Study of their Reception and Resettlement in the United Kingdom*, Research Report No. 13 (London: Home Office, 1982), 36–39.

however, which was written by residents and seems to have been fashioned in part to be an indirect comparison between Britain and Vietnam:

Upon arrival at the Centre, each of our families was put in a separate room with adequate facilities ... Every day ... we go to classes to learn English taught by experienced English teachers using sophisticated teaching aids ... [One] afternoon is dedicated to cultural and sportive hobbies ... Sick people are properly cared for by doctors, with plenty of medical supplies ... we are taken out by our teachers for visits to neighbouring towns where opportunities are created for us to get acquainted with the customs and habits of the English people ... It is anticipated that we will leave the Centre after three to four months to resettle in the New Homeland. It can be said that we do not have to worry at all about our future.⁴⁶

The Home Office's insistence on voluntary organisations leading the reception and resettlement programme was not without its progressive elements. To bring in NGOs that had developed specific expertise of refugee issues, and which carried with them the potential for flexible working and had a tradition of taking a more personal approach to their charges, was a welcome step. The policy was also not unrealistic: there was considerable public sympathy for the refugees and a willingness to translate this sympathy into grassroots action. As with past cohorts of refugees, there were significant numbers of people willing to give their time, expertise and resources to welcome refugees to their areas.

We can see some of the benefits of mobilising volunteers if we look at Stowmarket in Suffolk. Here the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS)—which had a track record stretching back to the second world war of working with refugees and the displaced in Britain—set about furnishing the three houses which had been allocated by Mid-Suffolk District Council to 'the Boat People' coming from BCAR centres. Its volunteers collected items to equip the houses and put a great deal of effort into easing the process of orientation for the families:

We had meetings with the Adult Education Department to plan English lessons, arranged for a local Playgroup to welcome the three year old, visited the local shops and explained about their new customers, and found a

⁴⁶ Dalglish, *Refugees from Vietnam*, Appendix D.

go-between who persuaded two Cantonese speaking Chinese to act as interpreters.⁴⁷

On top of these efforts, the men from the three families had been found work in the local iron foundry, and the WRVS volunteers undertook to continue visiting the families until it was apparent that they had fully settled in. Where there were fully functioning WRVS groups, evidence suggests that their volunteers were often highly effective at preparing and furnishing houses and ensuring that refugees were put in contact with all relevant agencies and services.

One of the other NGOs involved in the Vietnamese programme—SCF—had five decades of experience working with refugees across the world. It prided itself on its decentralised mode of working and refugee empowerment, and also worked closely with local voluntary groups. In Ilkley three hundred volunteers were used to ‘renovate, repair, decorate and furnish’ a derelict building before it was opened as a reception centre.⁴⁸ At Bishops Stortford, where it acquired the old hospital at a peppercorn rent, it put local enthusiasm to good purpose, furnishing and equipping the centre with donations, and as at Ilkley the work of preparing it for opening had largely been done by volunteers.⁴⁹ The third NGO drawn into the reception and resettlement programme, Ockenden Venture, saw the ‘volunteer spirit’ as essential to its ethos and the running of its twenty-seven hostels. At these, while its ability to run full language training programmes was patchy and dependent on a range of highly localised circumstances, Ockenden’s volunteers enthusiastically ran a wide range of extra-curricular activities, including ‘teaching adults to drive, painting and decorating the house, or tending a vegetable garden’. These supplemented more basic enabling activities that included supporting residents to do their own shopping and cooking and going on social outings.⁵⁰

The level of support given by, and engagement of, volunteers was to be crucial. As the refugees from Vietnam began to embark on the process of being taught English and introduced to British culture and expectations,

⁴⁷ Royal Voluntary Service Archives, Devizes (hereafter RVS): 728-1-Mar-1980, WRVS Mid-Suffolk District Office, Report on Vietnamese Refugees, March, 1980.

⁴⁸ Levin, *What Welcome?*, 93.

⁴⁹ TNA: MH160/1270, *Herts and Essex Observer*, ‘Vietnamese Come to Stortford,’ January 17, 1980.

⁵⁰ Levin, *What Welcome?*, 87.

it was obvious that there was a significant gulf between their previous lives and any future life in Britain. Indeed, one of the striking features of the accounts of the arrival and reception process was the very 'foreignness' of the refugees. Few spoke English, even at a basic level, and many had previously been:

fisher-people, peasant farmers and labourers, all occupations which with few obvious transferable skills which might ease their passage into British life. While not all those coming from Vietnam fitted this profile, evidence suggests that the three months basic language tuition provided during their stay in reception centres was utterly inadequate in preparing most Vietnamese for life in Britain.⁵¹

DISPERSAL

Front-end loading provided the financial underpinning of the British resettlement programme, and was based on a presumption that incoming Vietnamese would need no further support after being given accommodation. In essence the policy assumed that from the point of leaving a reception centre, the Vietnamese were the same as the rest of the population. This may have been the financial rationale for the policy, but the *social* thinking driving resettlement—the principle of dispersal—was based on an opposite premise. This was that refugees from Vietnam would impose both financial and social burdens on the localities to which they were sent. Dispersal then, would simultaneously reduce costs for, and demand on, statutory services and voluntary support in any one area, while diluting the presence of the refugees to the point of near-invisibility. This second attitude stemmed from an explicit desire to prevent the development of 'ghettos' and to reduce 'resentment' from the local population.⁵² It was, of course, predicated on the belief that the perceived needs and comfort of Britain's majority population and institutions should take precedence over newcomers.

There was some official acknowledgement that in the short term dispersal meant 'the initial resettlement period is unhappy for some', but the

⁵¹ LMA: LMA/4243/A/06/089, minute, Vietnamese refugees: Post 3-month settlement period, February, 1980. See also Dorothea Hall, 'Adult Education amongst Vietnamese Refugees,' *Education*, 54, no. 2 (1981): 146–51.

⁵² LMA: LMA/4243/A/06/089, Advisory Council for the Reception and Resettlement of Refugees from Vietnam, meeting minutes, March 27, 1980.

Home Office saw this as a reasonable price to pay for ‘better chances of good integration into the community’.⁵³ Yet past experience—most recently the arrival of Ugandan Asians—comprehensively demonstrated the failure of official attempts at dispersal of the expellees. Indeed, the majority of Ugandan Asians had opted to live in overcrowded conditions in areas close to co-nationals, where it was easy to access familiar foods and clothing and cultural activities, rather than remain in relatively comfortable accommodation where they were isolated from their wider community and support networks. And beyond the practical failures of dispersal was the fact that as a philosophical position it was fundamentally at odds with a conception of Britain as a pluralistic country where people had a right to live where they wished and newcomers could participate in political, social and cultural activities while still maintaining their own ethnic and cultural identities. Dispersal instead suggested a more rigid world view in which newcomers were understood as a problem and where assimilation of individuals into majority culture was best promoted by diluting their presence.

In theory, the combination of front-end loading and dispersal should have insulated the Vietnamese resettlement programme from the effects of government’s flagship policies: financial retrenchment and the shrinking of the state. On paper, if refugees were fully prepared for British life during their three months in reception and then dispersed across the country, their presence would have minimal financial impact on local authorities having to manage an intensifying climate of cuts. This was not only the result of the ever-deepening recession—although it was often portrayed in these terms—but also of the Conservative government’s deliberate policy of limiting state spending, with local government and Labour-led councils taking the brunt. This was to become a particular issue when it came to soliciting offers of council housing for the refugees. Even when only housing was taken into account, as the Association of Metropolitan Authorities pointed out, councils faced a dilemma:

in areas of severe housing stress every refugee family housed means one extra indigenous family in hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation. The average cost of keeping a family in bed and breakfast accommodation is £3000 per annum.⁵⁴

⁵³ Jones, *Vietnamese Refugees*, 40.

⁵⁴ LMA: GLC/DG/TD/1/25 (2), Chief Executive, Association of Metropolitan Authorities, to all members, April 18, 1980.

Right across the country, councils grappled with the question of who was more deserving of their resources: their existing population, many of whom had spent years waiting for a council house, or homeless exiles from an iniquitous communist regime? In Haverhill in Suffolk, sympathetic councillors moved to allocate three houses to refugees, but they were challenged by colleagues expressing concerns over the refugees' English proficiency and whether or not they would fit into the community and who felt that ultimately 'our heads must rule our hearts'.⁵⁵ These were not easy decisions to make. Every year after 1979 saw the Conservative government insisting on more cuts in public spending, while the recession bit harder and unemployment continued to grow month by month. At the height of appeals from the JCRV for housing, the Labour-controlled Derwentside District Council, in County Durham had pledged two of its new three-bedroom houses to the resettlement programme. But:

Little did the Council know that by the time the houses were due to be ready for occupation, the District would become one of the worst unemployment blackspots in the whole of the Country. It was not expected that the Consett Steel Works would completely shut down in 1980 or that Ransome, Hoffman & Pollard would close their ball-bearing factor in 1981, nor that the Ever Ready battery-making factory would make more than 200 of their work force redundant in 1981.⁵⁶

Again and again, even sympathetic councils asked how, when they were being forced to cut services for their existing population, could they justify spending scarce resources on Vietnamese refugees? Housing was of course, only the tip of the resettlement iceberg. Government funding might have been grounded in the principle of front-end loading, but those involved in community and equal opportunities work at the grassroots level were very clear about the need to offer post-reception support. Based on the growing body of evidence from everyday experience with 'Commonwealth immigrants', it was easy to predict that the refugees would 'make special demands on local authority and health authority services'. At the very least, local authorities argued, if they were to 'integrate properly into their new communities', specific support would have to include 'special

⁵⁵ LMA: GLC/DG/TD/1/25 (1), *Haverhill Echo*, 'Haverhill Homes for boat people?' June 28, 1979 and 'Boat people must be integrated says MP,' August 9, 1979.

⁵⁶ Refugee Council Archive, University of East London (hereafter RCA): Box 14, Ockenden Venture, Support Report, Winter/Spring 1981, 7.

teachers to take language classes in schools, adult education classes, [and] information leaflets in appropriate languages on public services':⁵⁷

All of these cost money. The demand is coming at a time when Government has announced that it is looking for cuts in the volume of planned local government spending ... of £800m this year with further cuts to be achieved in 1980–81 ... Against this background, despite their sympathy for the plight of the Vietnamese, local authorities may be slow to offer permanent homes for the refugees if that can foresee the additional demands for services with no obvious way of paying for them.⁵⁸

So right from the outset, in August 1979, as the scale of the new refugee programme became known, local authorities were anxious for central government funding as a 'way of reducing the impact upon their own budgets of providing for refugees settled temporarily or permanently in their areas'. As with housing, although councils were often keen to help, they were wary of stepping forward to shoulder an 'additional burden in a time of cuts'.⁵⁹

We can see how the combined policies of cuts and dispersal fed through into experiences for refugees on the ground. As early as spring 1980, JCRV advisors began flagging up the 'dangers of isolation', and how the government's 'policy of avoiding ghettos' had made it almost impossible to provide effective language tuition for refugees. With only two or three families in an area, it was neither financially nor practically viable to deliver dedicated ESL classes to such few students. A survey by Ockenden of 1530 refugees living in its resettlement zones found nearly half living three or more miles from their nearest ESL tuition, with nine people living over fifty miles away.⁶⁰ So although the year following the beginning of the

⁵⁷ LMA: LMA/4243/A/06/089, letter to ME Head, Community Programmes and Equal Opportunities Department, Home Office, August 24, 1979. More generally see file TNA: BS18/34.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ For example, Hampshire, Staffordshire, North Yorkshire, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire all contacted their local government association to clarify what funding might be available if they took refugees. See LMA/4243/A/06/089, note for file: Vietnamese Refugees, August 24, 1979; minute from PJ Coles, Association of County Councils (ACC), September 6 1979; letter from North Yorkshire County Council to ACC, September 25 1979; letter from Hertfordshire County Council to ACC, October 22, 1979.

⁶⁰ LMA/4243/A/06/089, The Ockenden Venture Resettlement Survey, Annex 2. The survey, carried out by its forty resettlement officers and support group volunteers, August-

mass reception programme saw the development, production and distribution of a wealth of learning materials—including a one hundred-page dossier compiled from those teaching at Kensington Barracks and a BBC 'Speak for Yourself' combined radio and television ESL programme—many places lacked the teaching capacity to be able to deliver them.⁶¹ Things were to worsen. And as local government cuts began to be felt in the withdrawal of frontline services, local language provision shrank. The effects of this were revealed in a survey in 1983—four years after the first arrivals—which found that forty per cent of Vietnamese refugees still had no more than 'survival' proficiency in English.⁶²

With the economy in deep recession, the pressures on local authorities to restrain their finances did not disappear, if anything following the Conservative's landslide election victory of 1983—in part won on the promise of reforming 'overspending' councils—they intensified. One by-product of this was the government's continued insistence on the centrality of voluntary agencies in resettling refugees, so it could argue that it was not placing 'additional burdens' on councils at a time when they were being asked to 'exercise stringent restraint' on expenditure.⁶³ In turn the three refugee agencies themselves relied ever more heavily on voluntary effort and local support groups to carry out the main tasks involved in resettlement. These local groups tended to be most successful when they were made up of members with a 'range of expertise and ages', and when they lived in the same area as the refugees. However, even given a motivated support group with a wide skill set, the breadth of duties they were meant to cover was formidable:

Establishing contact with particular families at reception centres, liaising with housing and education authorities, arranging furnishing, checking that services are connected, welcoming the family, arranging visits to the DHSS, doctor, dentist. They should also deal with any difficulties arising after the

September 1980, covered over 312 families, and 1530 individuals across twenty counties and metropolitan districts in England and Wales.

⁶¹ LMA: LMA/4243/A/06/089, Advisory Council for the reception and resettlement of refugees from Vietnam, Education Sub-Committee, minutes of first meeting May 8, 1980.

⁶² NAS: HH61/1431, Report to the Home Secretary by the Joint Committee for Refugees from Vietnam, October, 1983.

⁶³ NAS: HH61/1431, letter from Robin Young, DoE, to JF Nicholson, Home Office, November 17, 1983.

initial settling-in period, and consolidate support and friendship with the refugees.⁶⁴

Facing such a list of demands was daunting, even with professional back up. No surprise then that the three NGOs' fieldworkers could struggle to form groups in the first place, and then found it difficult to sustain their commitment after an initial burst of enthusiasm. This was all the more the case given that many local groups were made up of:

Four, or more usually three, overworked ladies from working class families, and each with her own problems; and none of the ladies has very much experience or expertise in this sort of work, nor the knowledge of how to obtain the services of experts. The ladies tend to work very hard for the Vietnamese for a few days, then fall back exhausted and defeated⁶⁵

It was in this context that the Home Office's own researcher, Peter Jones, noted that a high number of support groups reported feeling 'used': 'I did a lot of work (unpaid) which I feel should have been done by skilled workers'.⁶⁶ Jones went on to conclude that the 'general view' was that resettlement had been 'under-manned and under-financed'. Although Jones noted that local groups felt over-burdened, he didn't extend his gaze to look at the underpinning reasons for this: the lack of central state funding and lack of active involvement by local authority workers. Many of these latter, particularly working within education, health and social services, had built up expertise in delivering services for a multicultural clientele, but were prevented by financial constraints from extending their work to Britain's new Vietnamese population.

BUILDING A NEW LIFE IN BRITAIN

the implications of uprooting, of isolation and of being a stranger on a foreign soil ... [is] very real. A new life-style to cope with seemingly insurmountable language and communication difficulties, unfamiliar practices and official procedures, and a host of mundane and seemingly trivial matters which he finds himself grossly inadequate to handle—social security claims, free school meals for his children, family income supplement, making enqui-

⁶⁴ Levin, *What Welcome?*, 91.

⁶⁵ Levin, *What Welcome?*, 85

⁶⁶ Jones, *Vietnamese Refugees*, 47.

ries and appointments, job search, water heater problem, rent rebates ... [the] lowering of one's socio-economic status and down-grading to what seems to be a menial position and a 'dirty job'. Then, for families which had previously been independent, affluent and self-sufficient, there is also the feeling of humiliation and even of shame to be wholly dependent upon others and on 'charity' for even the bare necessities of life.⁶⁷

All the foregoing suggests that once the refugees left reception centres, unless they had an exceptionally active local support group and were in easy reach of other Vietnamese households, life in Britain was likely to be challenging. And as the psychologist Jay Yao Ye-Chin quoted above pointed out, even then, the gulf between everyday life in Vietnam and that in Britain often meant that even the smallest tasks and interactions could feel insurmountable. In this final section we explore refugees' experiences of looking for work and claiming welfare benefits, and how over time, and in ways not expected, or even approved of, by the official resettlement programme, refugees from Vietnam began to rebuild their lives in Britain.

As the JCRV's final report put it, with over three million people on the dole, 'in terms of employment the Vietnamese could not have been received at a worse time'.⁶⁸ By mid-1983 when national unemployment stood at over thirteen per cent, for ethnic minority groups it reached an average of twenty-four per cent but among the Vietnamese it was over eighty per cent.⁶⁹ Those involved in the resettlement programme most often attributed their disproportionately high unemployment rate to the refugees' limited English-language skills, but this was not the whole story. Grassroots resettlement workers reported how in a climate of joblessness, it was seen to be 'bad, whether politically or in terms of industrial relations, to show any favour to a newly arrived group when long-standing residents [were] losing their jobs'.⁷⁰

He goes to the Job Centre and meets with such remarks from the reception desk as—'Even our OWN people can't get jobs ...'. He wishes he does not have to be part of the 'dole queue' each week, and recognises that in a sense

⁶⁷ LMA: LMA/4243/A/06/090, Jay Yao Ye-Chin, 'The Inner World of the Vietnamese Refugee: Stress and the Vietnamese Refugee in South England', November 1980.

⁶⁸ NAS: HH61/1431, Report by the JCRV, 14.

⁶⁹ NAS: HH61/1431, Report by the JCRV.

⁷⁰ TNA: BS18/6, JCRV, Draft Progress Report, February 1981.

he has no 'right' to be there ... that he is no help to the present economic climate in his host country.⁷¹

High unemployment meant many Vietnamese families were forced to rely on the residual parts of the general welfare system as they had not built up the necessary work record to qualify for the higher-level national insurance-related payments. Limited functional literacy in English and confidence in handling bureaucracy ensured that claiming was often a difficult process, with many 'baffled by the forms they received concerning tenancy agreements, gas, electricity and DHSS payments'.⁷² Families could find themselves with 'nothing to sleep or sit on, nor have items to eat or to cook with', sometimes for months, until grants and extra-payments was disbursed.⁷³ All too often it needed the active intervention of well-informed and motivated support group members to ensure they gained access to the benefits to which they were entitled. However, the better-functioning support groups tended to be those best-placed to equip households from donations in the first place. And it was often in London and the bigger cities where voluntary support was thin on the ground, where there was the least capacity to either furnish and equip houses before refugees arrived, or to provide ongoing support to refugees attempting to navigate the labyrinthine benefits system.

Practical difficulties could feed into, and reinforce, more existential feelings of alienation and dislocation. Heads of household with little command of English could struggle with the 'complexities of their communication difficulties ... loss of status ... and their frustration at an unnatural growing dependence on their children, for whom the acquisition of language skills [was] a simpler matter'. These could be exacerbated by rural isolation, but, as Ockenden's head acknowledged, could also be a feature of urban life, where such feelings could 'develop to the point where individuals [were] frightened to leave their homes'.⁷⁴ The fractured nature of

⁷¹ LMA: LMA/4243/A/06/090, Jay Yao Ye-Chin, 'The inner world of the Vietnamese refugee'.

⁷² Jones, *Vietnamese Refugees*, 41. DHSS was the Department of Health and Social Security and was the government department charged with delivering in- and out-of-work welfare payments.

⁷³ TNA: BS18/41, Report on the procedures between the DHSS and the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees, August 14, 1980.

⁷⁴ TNA: BS18/10, Joyce Pearce, Draft, 'The "Stress"' of the Vietnamese Boat Refugees, June 8, 1982.

the refugee population—ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese, Buddhist and Christian, North and South, rural and urban—meant that even when refugees were resettled close together, it did not automatically bring with it a sense of community. Post-resettlement isolation then could mean isolation from the wider British population, but it could also mean living alongside co-nationals towards whom they felt no affinity, and perhaps even hostility. Liverpool's Race Relations Committee painted a stark view of life for many of the 140 families who had been settled in 'clusters' across the city, so they could 'support each other socially and culturally ... particularly when they are faced with racial harassment'. Yet, workers noted how this strategy had failed, with internal divisions meaning they had enough 'difficulty relating to one and other let alone the host community':

The alien culture and the language barrier often create a tremendous pressure on Vietnamese families. With no prospects on employment, the husbands of the Vietnamese women often turn to drinking and gambling. As a result, family violence erupts out of a drinking bout or a loss on the gambling table. This leads to wife battering and marital breakdowns.⁷⁵

And as with unemployment, which often became reduced to discussions around English proficiency, social isolation could not be solely equated with failures to acquire language skills. In both cases xenophobia and racism played their part. Refugees often preferred to explain their experiences of crime as being a product of the 'neighbourhoods in which they lived' than of their ethnic background.⁷⁶ But in some areas, most notoriously on the Pepys Estate in South London where some residents perpetrated a campaign of intimidation and violent attacks against its newly arrived Vietnamese residents, the racist intentions were unmistakable.⁷⁷ Even in the absence of targeted brutality, for refugees, there was the feeling of being, 'an unwelcome "intruder" upon the English

⁷⁵ Refugee Council Archive, London (hereafter RCA): Box 6, Report of the Director of Housing, Liverpool City Council, 'Funding for the support of the Vietnamese community', February, 1984.

⁷⁶ Dalglish, *Refugees from Vietnam*, 158.

⁷⁷ *Times*, 'Problem estate is "picking on" its boat people,' March 12, 1982, contained within Michael Swann. *Education for All: The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups* (London: HMSO, 1985), Annex B, 732.

socio-economic scene, “a burden on the state” and little more than a “tolerated presence” in the British society’.⁷⁸

While it is important to set out the considerable challenges facing refugees from Vietnam who arrived in Britain in this period, we should not make the mistake of thinking of the refugees as passive demoralised victims. Rather than through formal channels, those who were able to get work often did so through personal contacts. Sometimes these were via resettlement officers and local support group members, but often opportunities came through pre-existing social networks and personal contacts with British Chinese entrepreneurs, many based in the catering, food and wholesale industries. Research into the Vietnamese families living in Rochdale and London showed that only about a quarter of families had someone in work, and that those in employment were mainly either working for a community organisation or refugee agency or for British-Chinese employers.⁷⁹ This latter work had the advantage of not needing proficiency in English, but wages were often low, commonly not enough to sustain a family, and for those who were paid cash-in-hand, they lacked the formal evidence needed to claim low-income welfare benefits.⁸⁰

As the researcher for the Rochdale-London study noted, most of the work found by the Vietnamese was ‘marginal, either within the Chinese community, or job creation to assist the refugee community’: only one of the seventy-two adults of working age in Rochdale was working ‘in the mainstream economy’.⁸¹ While her analysis assumed that work for Chinese employers somehow could not be considered proper employment and demonstrated a lack of understanding over the growing role of such enterprises in urban economies, it nevertheless usefully quantified the marginalisation of the refugees from large sectors of the British economy. Other grassroots workers found evidence of ‘refugees claiming benefits while covertly engaged in employment’.⁸² Possibly helped by the British Chinese population, or possibly through their own experiences, Vietnamese refugees joined countless thousands of the British claimant population who knew that the only way to rise above the grindingly low standard of living

⁷⁸ LMA: LMA/4243/A/06/090, Jay Yao Ye-Chin, ‘The inner world of the Vietnamese refugee’. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ Dalglish, *Refugees from Vietnam*, 157 & 162.

⁸⁰ TNA: BS18/6, JCRV, Draft Progress Report, February 1981.

⁸¹ Dalglish, *Refugees from Vietnam*, 157 & 162.

⁸² TNA: BS18/5, JCRV, minutes of fourteenth meeting, 17 Jul 1980. See also LMA/4243/A/06/090, Advisory Council, minutes of fifth meeting, 22 Jan 1981.

offered by a life on benefits was to work 'on the black' while also claiming benefits.⁸³ Uncomfortable though this knowledge was, it was also, for those willing to accept it, evidence that Vietnamese workers were becoming familiarised with the realities of low-paid working life in Britain.

As with other minority ethnic groups who found themselves marginalised or exploited by established British businesses, many Vietnamese responded over time by opening their own business, often supported by extended family connections both in Britain and in south-east Asia. By the end of the century, seventeen per cent of Britain's economically active Vietnamese-born were registered as self-employed. Their businesses tended to be concentrated in restaurants, nail bars and 'minimarkets', but could also be found in areas providing specialist services, including hair dressing and car maintenance, to a mainly Vietnamese or south-east Asian clientele. Pushed to the edges of the mainstream British economy, many Vietnamese, along with other first-generation immigrants, turned to servicing their co-nationals, using it as a means of generating employment for themselves, wider family members and others who they saw as part of their community. Such 'ethnic entrepreneurialism' was long characterised as marginal to, and not part of, the 'real' British economy, but in fact it was to play an increasingly significant role. By 2000 BAME businesses in London were estimated as generating a turnover of £90 billion, or over ten per cent of the capital's total income.⁸⁴

For many who started their own business, or found work with Chinese entrepreneurs, this was possible because 'dispersed' refugees increasingly moved away from their place of resettlement to cities where they felt able to build a 'liveable life' for themselves. Some moved to be closer to other family members, or for work, or to be able to be part of a bigger Vietnamese population, others moved simply to escape racial harassment.⁸⁵ Anecdotal evidence from early in the resettlement programme, confirmed by later

⁸³ For a contemporary discussion of this phenomenon see Raymond Pahl, 'Does Jobless Mean Workless? Unemployment and Informal Work,' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 493, no. 1 (1987): 36–46.

⁸⁴ Susan Bagwell, 'UK Vietnamese Businesses: Cultural Influences and Intracultural Differences,' *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 24, no. 1 (2006): 51–69, 51. See also Susan Bagwell, 'Transnational Family Networks and Ethnic Minority Business Development: The Case of Vietnamese Nail-shops in the UK,' *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 14, no. 6 (2008): 377–394.

⁸⁵ Vaughan Robinson and Samantha Hale, *The Geography of Vietnamese Secondary Migration in the UK*, Warwick Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, 1989.

quantitative evidence, flagged up cases of refugees leaving Wales and Scotland for England, or leaving smaller towns such as Skipton and Halifax to move to Leeds, Manchester or Bradford. London, Merseyside and the West Midlands—notably Wolverhampton—also developed significant Vietnamese populations, thus reinforcing their status as desirable destinations.⁸⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, flight led to further flight: all the twenty-one families resettled in Northern Ireland had left by 1988; Glasgow's original forty-two families had shrunk to one by the same year; and Vietnamese families disappeared completely from peripheral rural areas such as Barnstaple or the Cumbrian coast. Some of the movements fitted into the more general national trend of movements away from the north-west and other areas of high unemployment to the south-east and London. But overall the increasing concentration of Vietnamese-born people in the inner cities of major conurbations ran counter to the general British picture of migration out of cities into suburban and small towns. If this was evidence of how the Vietnamese had 'actively redrawn their own pattern of settlement', it was also evidence of cleaving to areas of Britain which were being abandoned by more affluent and typically 'whiter' sections of the population.⁸⁷

The growing concentration of the Vietnamese population both reflected and reinforced a bigger change, as sections of mainstream British life began to embrace multiculturalist practices and ways of life. Britain's major cities became ever more diverse, and this became reflected as much in those who were delivering front-line services—including refugee agencies—as it was in those who used them. Most notable here were efforts by BCAR and SCF/Refugee Action to establish a Vietnamese trainee social worker programme, a scheme which, exceptionally, the Home Office agreed to fund for a limited period of time.⁸⁸ The initial scheme saw a cohort of ten Vietnamese and/or Cantonese-speaking refugees receiving 'basic social work, counselling, practical and linguistic skills' training, before being employed to support refugee families undergoing resettlement. It was illustrative of new social work practice which was emerging in

⁸⁶ House of Commons, *Third Report from the Home Affairs Committee Session 1984-5: Refugees and Asylum with Special Reference to the Vietnamese*, (1984-5), House of Commons Paper No. 72, xxviii. London's Vietnamese population rose from 3683 in 1982 to 5420 in 1984; in the West Midlands over the same period it rose from 1155 to 1604.

⁸⁷ Robinson and Hale, *Geography of Vietnamese Secondary Migration*, 17 & 22.

⁸⁸ RCA: Box 17, Para Social workers pre 1982, letter from John Goddard, Home Office to R Hood, January 13, 1981.

certain cities in Britain, which aimed to adopt more open and less fixed and hierarchical working practices where workers were encouraged to 'look openly at new aspects of life and allow people to decide for themselves'. Crucially, this meant valuing the cultural expertise and insights the trainees brought with them in order to enable them to decide how to meet refugees' needs 'in a culturally acceptable way'.⁸⁹ The scheme was then, in a small way, a reflection of the gradual reworking of the local state, with practitioners both working within multiculturalist paradigms and themselves forming part of Britain's ever-diversifying population.

The increasing concentration of Vietnamese refugees in particular parts of the country could present opportunities for self-organisation, particularly in inner-city areas of Britain's biggest cities. Here they could find financial and other support from primarily Labour councils which were both keen to promote their own strand of municipal multiculturalism.⁹⁰ These organisations variously provided lunch clubs for the elderly, pre-school groups, play schemes and activities for teenagers, social events, shared news from Vietnam and within Britain and started creating their own community spaces.⁹¹ In tones very different from the gratitude of first arrivals, their publications could be assertive in expressing the needs of their users and explicit in their criticisms of the shortcomings of British society.⁹²

the majority of us are struggling with serious difficulties and our morale is becoming very low, with an increasing feeling of isolation and alienation. Such feelings seem to be difficult to share with people who have not been through our common experience and with whom we have a language barrier ... Elderly people or widows feel trapped in their flats, like birds in their cages, afraid to venture outside because of their limited English, the climate, the strangeness of their new environment and, in some places, racial prejudice and harassment. Middle aged people, as a result of their poor English too, have difficulty in finding employment and solving everyday problem ... [And] young people, in their frustration and despair, they will turn to gam-

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ 'Mandana Hendessi in Conversation', in Southall Black Sisters, *Against the Grain: A Celebration of Survival and Struggle* (London: Southall Black Sisters, 1990), 11..

⁹¹ Twenty-six different community organisations or Vietnamese-specific schemes run by local authorities were listed in the first edition of *Vietnamese Community News* 1, July (1986): 18–19.

⁹² Nam Thao, 'More Vietnamese refugees' relatives should be granted with entry visas,' *Vietnamese Community News* 1, July (1986): 3–4.

bling, drinking etc., in other words, an irresponsible way of life. This is already causing problems for the agencies and authorities.⁹³

Here the writer proposed that a Vietnamese community centre would solve these problems, providing as it would a place where people could drop-in and get advice, as well as being able to offer a range of cultural activities which could 'revive and transmit *our common heritage*—literature, art, traditional Vietnamese gymnastics—to the younger generation ... strengthening our cultural identity'.⁹⁴ Conceiving of and establishing social centres was one sign that Britain's Vietnamese population was beginning to put down roots in Britain, creating structures which might support and sustain it into the future.

But it is also worth noticing just how much this new community action was expressed via, and mediated through, the municipal multiculturalism of the mid-1980s. In many of the local-level initiatives we see expressions of ethnicity which fitted into the preconceptions of the period—the unproblematic idea of a 'community' with 'a' cultural identity and 'a' common heritage, an identity shorn of any political expression, internal rivalry, class or other divisions. Given the fragmented nature of Britain's Vietnamese refugee population, claims of a unified community and culture appear surprising. But for those seeking resources, mobilising unproblematic ideas of 'a Vietnamese community' was a way of accessing scarce funds—a tactic Gayatri Spivak has termed strategic essentialising.⁹⁵ Here their needs chimed with Labour councils' strategic agendas: funding such projects was both a way to actively resist the Conservative government's political agenda and to create social democracy on Labour's own terms. But, in the context of severe cuts, deep recession, high unemployment and endemic racism, community initiatives could never hope to be anything other than a sticking plaster over engrained social marginalisation.⁹⁶

⁹³RCA: Box 6, letter from Ta Thanh Thuong, Chair of the Vietnamese Refugee Community, Southwark, to Martin Barber, British Refugee Council, March 30 1983. See also Tuan Anh, 'HELP the Vietnamese refugees help themselves,' *Vietnamese Community News* 1, July (1986): 15–16.

⁹⁴RCA: Box 6, letter from Ta Thanh Thuong, Chair of the Vietnamese Refugee Community, Southwark, to Martin Barber, British Refugee Council, March 30, 1983. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵Gayatri Spivak, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹⁶For a critical analysis of community and public history see Kevin Myers, 'Historical practice in the age of pluralism: educating and celebrating identities,' in *Histories and Memories*.

CONCLUSION

Britain's engagement with the Vietnamese refugee crisis was stamped with the preoccupations of Thatcher and of Thatcherism. Although the outgoing Labour administration had pledged to accept into Britain all refugees rescued by British-registered vessels, this policy was quickly overturned by the new Conservative government of May 1979. Thatcher's administration first attempted to bypass international maritime conventions, and then, in a case of 'proxy humanitarianism', attempted to cast Hong Kong's significant role in the reception of Vietnamese refugees as Britain's own effort. To maintain Britain's international standing while seeking to minimise the number of refugees coming to Britain, Thatcher promoted the idea of a UN-sponsored meeting to resolve the crisis. It was unwillingness to lose face on the international stage which caused Thatcher to agree to the initial quota of 10,000 refugees pushed by Poul Hartling and to sign up to the UNHCR's Orderly Departure Programme. Her personal commitment to cut immigration and domestic government spending ensured that this pledge—which at best was only ever a grudging commitment—received the most parsimonious of support, and no oversight of the process by central government.

Yet the initial response of the British public to the arrival of the 'boat people' was warm and enthusiastic. The outpouring of voluntary effort which was a reflection of this can be set within a longer history of individuals who stepped out of their normal lives to help refugees in a moment of crisis. Although the Cold War might have framed the general context for the arrival of the Vietnamese refugees, we can read the presence of individual volunteers as a far more apolitical, visceral and immediate response to the images of human suffering they saw on their television screens. While problematic and often riven with shortcomings, the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees across Britain after 1979 was made possible due to the work of hundreds of individuals motivated by little more than goodwill, keen to prepare houses, sort clothes, arrange cultural activities, show refugees around their new towns and introduce them to life in Britain. This was necessary. Central government's refusal to provide funds post-reception limited local authorities' ability to respond to their arrival, and resulted in councils' reluctance to come forward with offers of housing

and generated very real fears over the increased costs their presence might impose after resettlement.

The climate of cuts interacted with the policy of dispersal which underpinned the JCRV's resettlement strategy. Despite having failed during the last major refugee resettlement programme, and despite being at odds with images of Britain as a pluralist nation, dispersal was encouraged to reduce the impact of refugees on any one locality. But those who were dispersed often experienced high levels of isolation, as they lived in areas with no wider south-east Asian population, and where there were insufficient refugees to justify providing special language classes and other support. Those who were not dispersed often ended up clustered in places where there was a large number of empty housing units, normally because depopulation, deindustrialisation and high levels of unemployment had made these areas unattractive to the wider population. These problems were exacerbated by the worst recession in fifty years, strict control of local government spending, endemic racism and the deep differences between the incoming Vietnamese refugees and wider British life, not just in terms of language and work histories, but also of culture.

There were more positive elements sitting alongside this picture, as across Britain's largest cities everyday encounters between Britain's increasingly diverse population and those working on the frontline of welfare delivery—who themselves were also becoming drawn from that diverse population—saw communities, grassroots activists and professionals challenging older ways of thinking and working. Simultaneously, sometimes via Britain's established Chinese population, sometimes separately, across certain inner city areas, refugees created businesses, social and cultural institutions to provide the work and social networks necessary to sustain their lives in Britain. We need to be wary of constructing an over-celebratory account of this process, as it was as much through negative experiences—unemployment, racism, mental health issues, lack of language provision—as positive affinities with co-nationals that many Vietnamese retreated into family or national community networks to provide livelihoods and find support. This suggests that rather than being able to chart a simple discourse of welcome or rejection, the Britain which incoming Vietnamese refugees encountered was composed of two competing strands. One which positioned immigration and immigrants as a problem threatening a 'white' British life and aimed to shrink the state to the bare essentials; and another, which embraced the idea of a

multicultural Britain and saw diverse local communities as places to generate a new agenda of equality as part of a rejuvenated democracy. Vietnamese refugees coming to Britain quickly found themselves caught up in both these strands.

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