

Canada's record in assisting refugee movements

by Constantine Passaris

Over the last few years Canadians have become much more aware and certainly more conscious of the human tragedy associated with that special kind of international migration that is referred to as refugee movements. The international events that have unfolded over the last few years, the horror stories that have appeared in the newspapers and the dramatic pictures that have been shown on television have made us recognize more than ever before the traumatic plight of this world's homeless and unwanted millions.

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes and floods and military operations such as a revolution here, a coup d'etat there, or a war in some distant corner of the world have sustained a continuous flow of refugees.

The refugee problem is truly a global concern for it encompasses crises areas in Europe, Africa, Asia and South America. Indeed, the situation has reached tragic and dramatic proportions for this day and age. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates a total of 8,716,109 people (May 1980 figures) are presently refugees or displaced persons. These include 1.8 million Palestinians; 1.6 million Ethiopians; 700,000 Afghans; 300,000 Vietnamese "boat people"; and 300,000 Cambodians (Kampuchians).

Canada's Role

Canada has a long and distinguished record of assisting refugee movements to resettle in this country. Canadian humanitarian sentiments have been generally exemplary in providing financial and resettlement assistance for specific refugee crisis situations. However, one cannot fail to note that there have also been readily identifiable economic considerations and an element of self-interest in terms of the numbers and the occupations of the refugees that were selected and granted asylum in this country.

From a Canadian historical perspective there appears to be a blurred distinction between those who were admitted into Canada as economically motivated migrants and those fleeing from persecution and oppression in their countries of origin. Indeed it would seem that Canada, until recently, has pursued a refugee policy that did not offer any clear distinction between refugees and economic migrants in terms of meeting its broad objectives of expanding the population base, enhancing the quantity and quality of the work force and using aggregate immigrant and refugee arrivals as a means of promoting and sustaining the process of economic growth and development.

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A systematic analysis of these observations, however, calls for an historical perspective in order to assess Canada's record on refugee movements.

The departure of the United Empire Loyalists from the embryonic United States for British North America in the late eighteenth century is a good starting point. This despite the fact that Canada as a nation was not born yet and there is some disagreement regarding whether the Loyalists could be considered as refugees in the commonly held definition of that term.

In the aftermath of the American revolution the United Empire Loyalists started arriving in what is now Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Ontario. The Loyalists were essentially British settlers who preferred life in British North America to life in the post-revolutionary United States. Since they left by choice rather than by compulsion, there is some debate about whether they can be properly labelled as refugees.

The British colonial powers saw this as a good opportunity to expand the population of British North America and offered free land in order to entice more to come. Saint John, New Brunswick is one city that grew rapidly as a consequence of the arrival of the Loyalists and to this day celebrates its early beginnings with events marking its association with the United Empire Loyalists including a re-enactment of the landing of the Loyalists at Market Slip.

The oldest provincial university in Canada owes its genesis to the arrival of the Loyalists. For it was the wife of William Paine, one of the early Loyalists, who acknowledged that she liked New Brunswick very much, but regretted that in the prevailing circumstances of frontier life, her children could not be properly educated. In an attempt to redress this matter an order in council dated December 13, 1785 ordered the attorney- and solicitor-general to prepare a charter for the establishment of a Provincial Academy of Arts and Sciences which was later to become the University of New Brunswick.

The Russian Mennonites were the first group of refugees to seek asylum in Canada after Confederation. In 1874, 2,000 German speaking Mennonites left Russia in search of religious freedom and a better opportunity for communal life, and settled in Southern Manitoba.

Canada's decision not only to permit but rather to encourage the entry of the Russian Mennonites by promising in addition to resettlement, certain military and civil exemptions, indicated a determined effort on the part of the Canadian government to attract a good strain of pioneers who would be instrumental in making a positive contribution to the agricultural economy of western Canada. The Mennonites turned out to be superb agricultural-