
EMPIRE WINDRUSH
LONDON

# A Moving History

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## MIGRATION HAS PROPELLED HUMAN PROGRESS FOR HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS

The history of migration is the story of humanity and its progress. It's a story of peaceful cooperation and exchange, but also of violence. Terrible things have been done to compel people to migrate against their will. Yet despite the suffering, migration remains the key to the success of our species.

People on the move carried with them vestiges of old lands and past lives. As they ventured farther from their homes, they encountered previous settlers who had accumulated different habits, technologies, and economic activities. They traded goods and shared ideas, like pollinators of human progress.

In the United States today, immigrants account for a disproportionately large share of intellectual leadership, from Nobel laureates and Oscar-winning directors to founders of unicorn start-ups valued at more than $1 billion. Immigrants to the United Kingdom make up a third of authors awarded the Booker Prize.

The effects on the countries migrants leave behind are equally important. Migrants send home over $1 trillion a year in remittances, exceeding aid and investment flows combined for many developing economies, and they often return with new skills and investment. Entrepreneurs who spent time abroad have created some of the most successful emerging market start-ups, from the Caribbean's Blue Mahoe Capital asset managers to Indonesia's tech giant GoTo.

But the story begins at least 300,000 years ago, when our African ancestors developed the skills needed to migrate over ever-longer distances. About 65,000–70,000 years ago they ventured into the Middle East and then farther, into Asia and Europe. Before the end of the last ice age, over 25,000 years ago, they crossed from Siberia into the Americas.

About 6,000 years ago, in Eurasia, horses were domesticated. The wheel and cart that followed made it possible to journey to new places much farther away, often with plants and animals. As more people migrated, the chances of meeting others increased, creating opportunities to exchange knowledge and learn novel ways to grow food, stay healthy, and organize communities.

The more our early ancestors explored and experimented, the more differences emerged between them. Encounters between these distinctive groups were more productive as a result, but could be a source of conflict. One group was usually



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Passengers crowd the decks of the *Empire Windrush* as it docks at the port of Tilbury, England, on its arrival from Jamaica, 1948.

more powerful or more technologically advanced than the other. Trade and early peaceful exchanges could become hostile as one party dominated the other commercially and even violently, through invasion and subjugation.

## Unequal encounters

Unequal encounters between populations, whether trading or warring, over time profoundly affected the balance of power across the globe. Yet trade links between empires also enabled a vibrant global exchange of people and ideas.

Marketplaces and ports developed along busy trading routes. Trading cities became centers of gravity where information, produce, and resources were pooled and exchanged. Diverse ideas generated in these dynamic hubs spread, challenging old ways of doing things. As trade networks expanded, the wealth and dynamism of their anchor communities grew. A virtuous spiral emerged of growing wealth; increased trade; and further migration, exchange, and innovation.

Long before Europeans arrived, the inhabitants of the Americas migrated across long distances. Mesoamerican cultures and societies shared know-how about matters ranging from crop development to astronomy and religion. When Europeans arrived, they carried guns, but also deadly pathogens against which the immune systems of Indigenous peoples offered little resistance. The resulting spread of diseases led to a catastrophic loss of life.

In 1519, ships with little more than 600 Spaniards landed on the coast of Mexico. Within a century the 20 million inhabitants of the Aztec empire were reduced to just over a million, many through violence, but the majority from disease. The resources and riches the newcomers extracted were sent back to Europe, luring more and more Europeans to the Americas.

## Columbian exchange

The "Columbian Exchange," which began in the decades following 1492, involved irreversible cross-pollination of crops, animals, commodities, diseases, technologies, and ideas carried by migrants between the Americas and other continents.

Besides tobacco and cacao, the many plants from the Americas introduced to other continents included maize, potatoes, rubber, tomatoes, and vanilla. The traffic went in both directions. Crops previously unknown in the Americas would become central to their economies and cultures—sugar, rice, wheat, coffee, onions, mangoes, bananas, apples, and citrus—many of which had initially been brought from Asia or Africa to Europe. Domesticated animals introduced by the Spaniards offered new sources of food and transportation, including horseback riding.

Today, beef and pork are integral parts of the diet in the Americas. Similarly, the white "Irish" potato from the Andes Mountains in Peru became a staple in many parts of Europe, where Belgian moules frites, Swiss rösti, and English fish and chips became cherished national dishes. Much of modern Italian cuisine would be unimaginable without the tomato.

Some of the earliest human records testify to the movement of migrants against their will. Over the centuries, vast numbers of people have been transported as slaves, serfs, or workers bound by different forms of unfree servitude. Historically, a combination of power, coercion, and the ability to subjugate peoples or territory allowed for slavery, as did demand for arduous labor. The European voyages of expansion set the stage for centuries of brutal exploitation of Indigenous African and other populations, during which the violent subjugation inherent in slavery reached industrial levels.

Slavery is the most extreme version of coerced labor that has forced people to migrate. The line between free and unfree employment is often blurred. Similarly, there are subtle differences between types of coercion, such as indentured or bonded labor.

## Age of mass migration

In terms of the sheer number of migrants and the distances they covered, the period from the mid-19th century to the start of World War I in 1914 was unlike any other. This age of mass migration followed unprecedented unrest, pogroms, and famines—as well as new opportunities in colonies and the advent of steam and rail, which allowed for cheaper, quicker travel.

Millions of European migrants crossed the Atlantic looking for a better life in the Americas. Comparable numbers were also moving across southern and central Asia, as well as the Pacific. The age of mass migration was remarkable not just for the number of people on the move, but also for its encouragement by host governments. The abolition of slavery in Britain and its colonies in 1836 and in the United States in 1865 led governments and employers to attract voluntary migrants as well as indentured laborers.

Until the 1890s, the scale of migration within Europe mirrored the numbers emigrating from Europe. People moved in search of safety, stability, and opportunity. The industrial revolution led to new industries in new locations, drawing job seekers from across Europe to mushrooming towns and cities. Others moved to rural areas to work in mines and on farms, supplying industrial raw materials and food for rapidly growing centers of activity. As urban economies grew, so too did

the need to dig canals, lay roads and railways, and build new steamships and ports.

## Nationalism and protectionism

In the decades before World War I, the view that open borders encouraged prosperity and were a means to escape hardship began to be eclipsed by rising nationalism and economic protectionism. A variety of new rules on movement sought to control entry and exit.

The war increased antipathy toward foreigners, bringing the age of mass migration to an abrupt end. Gone were the days when individuals, not states, could decide where to live and work. After the war governments became preoccupied with restricting entry.

The change in attitude reflected changes in the origins and destinations of migrants and their reasons for moving. As industry grew and birth rates gradually declined, northwestern European economies became migrant destinations rather than sources of labor. Migrants had previously traveled from wealthier countries in Europe to less prosperous regions of the world and more distant colonies, but the reverse was increasingly the case.

Identity cards and passports now allowed nation-states to choose who got to come and go. By regulating the free movement of people, governments could now regulate migrants' access to jobs and government support.

The immense upheaval of World War II left millions of refugees stranded on foreign shores. In addition to 40 million civilians killed, at least 11 million refugees found themselves outside their country of origin.

World War II hastened the disintegration of the remaining colonial empires. Major population movements followed the division of territories. In 1947 the partition of India and Pakistan led to the largest and fastest migration in history: About 18 million people were forced to move between the new territories. In that same year, the newly formed UN partitioned Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. In May 1948, when Israel declared independence, the Jewish population had grown to about 1.2 million, after hundreds of thousands migrated from Europe and elsewhere. The majority of the Palestinian-Arab residents in what became Israel were expelled or fled, creating a persistent and escalating refugee crisis.

Cold War politics and the turmoil of decolonization drove massive involuntary movement of people. The Soviet Union comprised 15 states and spanned a geographic expanse of the Eurasian landmass roughly two and a half times the size of the US. In 1991, when the USSR collapsed, the 15 former Soviet socialist republics reasserted their independence, including Ukraine, the Baltic states, and the Central Asian republics. Many ethnic Russians returned to Russia as the newly independent countries restored their languages and customs. Millions of others moved between the former republics in Central Asia, as people were compelled or chose to do so.

## Migration today

The number of migrants worldwide has been rising steadily in recent decades, nearly doubling from 153 million in 1990 to 281 million in 2020, the most recent year for which the UN has published its global tally. As a share of the total population, however, migrants today are not much more numerous than in the past. The world's population has increased by almost 3 billion in the past 30 years, meaning that the proportion of people migrating has remained relatively constant. In 2020, about 3.6 percent of recorded citizens were born in a different country; 30 years earlier, it was 2.9 percent.

While this percentage could fluctuate in the future, the number of people on the planet may be approaching its peak. The pace of global population growth is slowing after a period of rapid increase—from 2.5 billion people in 1950 to 5.3 billion in 1990, to today's 8 billion. The world's population is expected to approach 9.5 billion in the middle of this century, then fall to below current levels by the end of it.

There are more than 50 new countries since World War II, from newly independent ex–Soviet republics to those born of the fragmentation of other European, African, and Asian countries. People who previously moved within these countries are now regarded as international migrants.

Migration is often an enormous sacrifice made on behalf of others. In many poor communities the eldest sons or daughters are encouraged to migrate to support their families. Refugees and other forcibly displaced people tend to stay as close to home as possible so that they can return when it is safe to do so. Anywhere from a fifth to half of migrants return home or move to a third country within five years. This may be because they have saved money; gained a qualification; or are coming back to settle, raise a family, or retire.

Migrants are prepared to take risks and make sacrifices. These qualities prevented the extinction of our species during its early evolution, when threatened by droughts and famine. They lie at the heart of the extraordinary progress made by humans ever since. F&D

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