**Comparing Syrian and Jewish Refugees from *The Washington Post***

Earlier this week, WorldViews ran [a post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/17/what-americans-thought-of-jewish-refugees-on-the-eve-of-world-war-ii/) that cited a set of polls conducted in the United States in the build-up to World War II. Broadly, they illustrated the extent to which American public opinion was largely against the arrival of refugees from Europe, many of whom were Jews.

The polls had been [highlighted on Twitter](https://twitter.com/HistOpinion) by Peter Shulman, a historian at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio. The WorldViews story that followed -- "[What Americans thought of Jewish refugees on the eve of World War II](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/17/what-americans-thought-of-jewish-refugees-on-the-eve-of-world-war-ii/)" -- ended up being one of the most read articles on our Web site. Clearly, it posed a history lesson that resonated with many readers, as the United States is now in the grips of a new conversation over refugees.

Naturally, the story generated a lot of feedback and reaction, both positive and negative. Some readers appreciated the nod to the past as evidence of a deep strain of nativism in American politics.

"Here in Canada we had the same angst about dealing with the boat people from Vietnam but history has shown that the nay-sayers were wrong," wrote one reader. "I'd also like to point out that 100 years before the Jews were rejected, the Irish famine refugees were being treated with the same hostility."

Others were less convinced: Numerous reader e-mails angrily rejected any connection between Jewish refugees and their current Syrian counterparts. In the latter, it was repeatedly argued that (with varying degrees of profanity) Muslims can't assimilate, represent an evil religion and seek to wreak violence on the West.

"There was not even a question of Jews fomenting attacks in the United States," wrote one reader. "Your intent is to pull on the politically correct heartstrings."

The point here is that, in the 1930s, there most certainly *was* a question of Jews "fomenting" some sort of trouble. As WorldViews [wrote earlier](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/02/europes-current-anti-migrant-rhetoric-carries-echoes-of-1930s-anti-semitism/), a considerable proportion of Americans viewed Jewish refugees with the similar kind of suspicion that's now on display in social media and from leading Republican politicians, who have issued loud calls to block arrivals of Syrian refugees.

Jews were viewed as [harbingers of dangerous ideologies](https://www.timeline.com/stories/syrian-refugees-world-war-II-jews), particularly communism and anarchism. There were [pronounced fears](https://theintercept.com/2015/11/18/syrian-jews-refugees/) that fifth columnists and spies would infiltrate the country through the tide of refugees fleeing fascist Europe.

Lee Fang, writing at the Intercept, compiled [a very useful guide](https://theintercept.com/2015/11/18/syrian-jews-refugees/) to the rhetoric at the time. Here are some highlights:

*John B. Trevor, a prominent Capitol Hill lobbyist,*[*argued against*](http://www.amazon.com/Paper-Walls-America-Refugee-1938-1941/dp/0394736591)*a proposal to settle Jewish refugees in Alaska, claiming they would be potential enemies — and charging that Nazi persecution of the Jews had occurred “in very many cases … because of their beliefs in the Marxian philosophy.”...*

*Rep. Jacob Thorkelson, a Republican from Montana, warned at the time that Jewish migrants were part of an “invisible government,” an organization he said was tied to the “communistic Jew” and to “Jewish international financiers.”...*

*“I have heard on good authority that an Executive order has given immigration authorities permission to let down the usual bars in favor of the so-called Jewish refugees from Germany,” declared Julia Cantacuzene, a Republican activist in New York, according to a front page New York Times article that ran on May 18, 1938. Cantacuzene, the granddaughter of President Ulysses Grant and an ardent opponent of President Franklin Roosevelt, claimed that the Soviet revolution occurred only because Communist agents had snuck into Russia to “instill their insidious poison onto the Russian people.” She claimed that the same would happen here: “Under these lax regulations, many Communists are coming to this country to join the ranks of those who hate our institutions and want to over throw them.”*

It's impossible not to hear the echoes of this sort of language and thinking now in our polarized present, where prominent voices in the American right wing are casting the Syrian refugees as potential foreign agents, bent on sowing chaos and disrupting the American way of life. A mayor in Virginia raised [the prospect of internment camps](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/roanoke-mayor-david-bowers-reject-refugees-like-us-interned-japanese/2015/11/18/9714681a-8e34-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html), a gesture to a sad chapter in American history that even a supposed "PC-apologist" -- another barb hurled at WorldViews -- could not have imagined entering the conversation.

"The situations are not exactly parallel and I’m not saying that they are," Shulman [told TIME magazine](http://time.com/4118178/paris-attacks-jews-syrian-refugees-history/) in an interview this week. "But in terms of a heavily politicized, nativist response to a refugee crisis, we have been here before. And the example of Jewish refugees fleeing Europe in the late ’30s is most poignant because we know how it ended."

Polls [appear to show](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/11/19/republican-voters-dont-want-to-let-syrian-refugees-in-what-should-gop-politicians-do/?postshare=9911447946405016&tid=ss_tw) that many Americans seem comfortable stigmatizing hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees -- people who are fleeing a hideous war zone -- because of the violence carried out by an extremist fringe. This is despite the fact that the United States does have an extensive vetting process in place for refugees. And it completely misses the many [heart-warming stories](https://t.co/SgJe6oNAU1) of refugees building new lives and becoming proud Americans.

Syrian refugees in the United States have become a political football after the Paris attacks. Here are the facts. (Gillian Brockell/The Washington Post)

Syrian refugees in the United States have become a political football after the Paris attacks. Here are the facts. Watch: 5 things to know about Syrian refugees in the U.S. (Gillian Brockell/The Washington Post)

As Michelle Ye Hee Lee, writing for The Washington Post's Fact Checker, [details](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/11/19/the-viral-claim-that-not-one-refugee-resettled-since-911-has-been-arrested-on-domestic-terrorism-charges/?postshare=7941447942350318&tid=ss_tw), there were very few incidents of refugees resettled in the United States committing acts related to terrorism:

*A State Department spokesperson said of the nearly 785,000 refugees admitted through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program since 9/11, “only about a dozen — a tiny fraction of one percent of admitted refugees — have been arrested or removed from the U.S. due to terrorism concerns that existed prior to their resettlement in the U.S.  None of them were Syrian.”*

The backlash against Syrian refugees arriving in the United States was sparked by the Paris terror attacks, where it's suspected -- but not confirmed -- that one of the assailants came through a refugee processing facility in Greece on a fake Syrian passport. So far, all the identified attackers are European nationals.

Nothing puts the U.S. conversation about refugees more in perspective than France's own insistence -- declared by President François Hollande on Wednesday -- that it will still take in [some 30,000 Syrian refugees](https://t.co/SgJe6oNAU1) over the course of the next two years. In spite of the traumas of the past week, Hollande said, "our country has the duty to respect this commitment."