

## READING

# Memory and Decision Making in Europe Today

In fall 2015, Europe was facing its greatest humanitarian crisis since World War II. Thousands of refugees and migrants were arriving weekly, by land and by sea. Most were fleeing a brutal civil war in Syria; others came from Afghanistan and Iraq. The International Rescue Committee estimated that more than 1 million refugees and migrants from the Middle East had arrived in Europe by the end of 2015.<sup>1</sup> People in many European countries were wary of allowing refugees to enter; others struggled to find the resources and the political will to meet their needs. In an article titled “Treatment of Migrants Evokes Memories of Europe’s Darkest Hour,” *New York Times* reporter Rick Lyman described how the refugee crisis raised uncomfortable echoes of World War II and the Holocaust.

BUDAPEST — In Hungary, hundreds of migrants surrounded by armed police officers were tricked into boarding a train with promises of freedom, only to be taken to a “reception” camp. In the Czech Republic, the police hustled more than 200 migrants off a train and wrote identification numbers on their hands with indelible markers, stopping only when someone pointed out that this was more than a little like the tattoos the Nazis put on concentration camp inmates.

Razor-wire fences rise along national borders in Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary and France. Many political leaders stoke rising nationalism by portraying the migrants as dangerous outsiders whose foreign cultures and Muslim religion could overwhelm cherished traditional ways.

“It was horrifying when I saw those images of police putting numbers on people’s arms,” said Robert Frolich, the chief rabbi of Hungary. “It reminded me of Auschwitz. And then putting people on a train with armed guards to take them to a camp where they are closed in? Of course there are echoes of the Holocaust.”

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<sup>1</sup> International Rescue Committee, “Europe marks 1 million refugees,” Uprooted website, last modified December 22, 2015, accessed June 3, 2016.

Europeans are facing one of the Continent's worst humanitarian crises since World War II, yet many seem blind to images that recall that blackest time in their history.

This migrant crisis is no genocide. The issue throughout the Continent is how to register, house, resettle or repatriate hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees, a daunting logistical challenge. But perhaps not since the Jews were rounded up by Nazi Germany have there been as many images coming out of Europe of people locked into trains, babies handed over barbed wire, men in military gear herding large crowds of bedraggled men, women and children.

At the same time, the images may reveal a deeper truth about Europe and its seeming unpreparedness for a crisis so long in the making: While extolling the virtues of human rights and humanism, it remains, in many parts, a place resistant to immigration and diversity.

As a result, some here are reacting in ways that recall some of the Continent's darkest impulses.

"They must be oblivious because who would do that if they had any historical memory whatsoever," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. "It's amazing, really. Certainly those images of the trains can't help but conjure up nightmares of the Holocaust."

Rabbi Frolich was especially struck by the lies used to manipulate the migrants.

"They tell them that the train was going to Austria and then take them to a camp instead," the rabbi said. "I don't think the police got instructions from the government to do it this way, but it is very similar to what happened to Jews in the 1940s."

Jan Munk, chairman of the Jewish Community of Prague, was inclined to be generous in his interpretation of the episode.

"I understand the reasons why the police marked migrants with numbers," he said. "They are under a lot of pressure and stress and simply did not realize the connotations it would have. It was indeed tasteless and reminded me of the numbers at Auschwitz, but I know it was not done on purpose."

But for others, the fact that it was not done on purpose was even more frightening, showing a puzzling historical disconnect in many of the very places that the Holocaust caused the deepest devastation.

“It may be correct that they didn’t know, but the insensitivity and the ignorance of the imagery their actions evoked is stunning; it’s just sickening,” said Jonathan Greenblatt, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, in New York.

It is not that the Holocaust has been forgotten or ignored. There are memorials in nearly every major city on the Continent. Just this summer, Romania’s president signed into law a bill making it illegal to deny the Holocaust or to display fascist symbols.

One of the most revered memorials in Budapest is a series of shoes perched along the Danube riverfront. They refer to the World War II massacre of Jews by fascists who forced them to take off their shoes and shot them, letting their bodies fall into the river.

“And this memorial, that you cannot walk past without pausing to contemplate, this beautiful memorial, is in the same city where many of these other things are happening now,” said Babar Baloch, regional spokesman for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “It’s mind-boggling.”

The historical parallels are sometimes inescapable.

The migrant-crowded train station in Szeged, the southern Hungarian city nearest the Serbian border, contains a decades-old memorial to the victims of the Second World War. It shows a series of railroad cars with pleading and helpless arms protruding from the windows.

In Budapest, at the Keleti train station, whose periphery has been turned into a squalid migrant camp, the first train that came to take away desperate migrants on Thursday — ostensibly for the Austrian border, actually for a detention camp — chugged into the station behind a locomotive bearing the slogan “1989 Europe Without Borders.”

And there may be more to come.

On Friday, the Hungarian Parliament passed the first half of a set of revisions to refugee laws that would, among other things, allow the creation of so-called transit zones along the Serbian border. Newly arrived migrants would be confined to these zones, which

must be within 60 meters of the border (about 200 feet), until their cases are resolved, and those cases would have to be decided within eight days, with just three more for possible appeals.

If it is determined that they had already passed through a country deemed “safe” on their route to Hungary, as they almost certainly would have, they would be sent back under the law.

But with migrants arriving at a rate of about 3,000 a day, in just 10 days the population of the camps could be approaching 30,000.

“I cannot call them anything other than concentration camps,” said Gabor Gyulai, refugee program coordinator for the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Budapest. “These refugees arrive, in horrible condition, and then you put them in this concentration camp?”

Parliament is expected to pass a second raft of refugee laws by next week, giving greater authority to the police and the military, including the right to enter any home to search for migrants who might be hiding there.

For many migrant advocates, what is so puzzling about this historical amnesia is that the countries taking the hardest line are among those that suffered the most during World War II and produced the most refugees in the war’s aftermath.

“In Europe, we benefited from humanitarian assistance and the acceptance of refugees after the disaster that was World War II,” Mr. Roth said. “It’s as if there is such a short memory that there is no sense that Europe, now that it is healthy and successful, owes anything to any other people in need.”

Mr. Gyulai pointed out that the first major operation that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees undertook after its founding was dealing with the 200,000 refugees displaced when the Soviet Union crushed the 1956 rebellion in Hungary.

“It’s hard to understand how people lose their sense of history so quickly,” said Andrew Stroehlein, European media director for Human Rights Watch. “We all say we have

learned the lessons of history, but to be turning away these desperate people who are fleeing a horrific situation suggests that we haven't learned the lessons at all."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Rick Lyman, "Treatment of Migrants Evokes Memories of Europe's Darkest Hour," *New York Times*, September 4, 2015, accessed June 3, 2016. Reproduced by permission from the *New York Times*.

## Connection Questions

1. How does this article connect the history of the Holocaust to the refugee crisis of 2015? What imagery from the 2015 refugee crisis echoes events of the Holocaust? What deeper issues connect the two events?
2. Kenneth Roth, the director of Human Rights Watch, laments the “short memory” of Europeans. What does he think they should remember? How might a “sense of history” inform decision making about the refugee crisis? How could it shape Europeans’ universe of obligation?
3. How might you connect some of the key moments or themes you’ve encountered in this book with the refugee crisis? What are some of the key differences between the past and the present?
4. Are there “lessons of history”? Why do some people embrace this idea? Why might others reject it?