Europe, the ‘Dark Continent,’ Is the Stage for Another Great Migration

By Peter Gatrell, NYT, March 14 2022

Mr. Gatrell is a historian of modern migration and the author of “The Unsettling of Europe: How Migration Reshaped a Continent.”

Another great migration is underway.

At least two and a half million Ukrainians have fled Russia’s merciless bombardment to countries across Europe, while roughly another two million have been internally displaced within Ukraine. It is a tragic upheaval: families have been split apart, homes abandoned, lives upended. What’s happening is a horror, a human travesty.

Yet the situation, however bleak, is not without precedents. At the height of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, one million people fled their homes. By the time the war ended in late 1995, half of the population had been displaced, many of them internally. Over the course of the 20th century, Europe — the “dark continent” in Mark Mazower’s memorable phrase — was the stage for numerous refugee crises.

To the people seeking shelter and security amid a brutal war, that’s of little comfort. But there’s something significant in the fact that Europe — and the world — has risen to the challenge of accommodating and protecting great numbers of refugees before. What’s more, large movements of refugees have spurred the development of more humane and just approaches to refugee settlement.

In an imperfect world, where at least 82.4 million people were forcibly displaced by the end of 2020, it’s worth remembering these efforts. In the past, calamity has often been the crucible of change. And today, in the welcome extended to Ukrainians across the continent, we might see the glimmers of a better future.

“The word ‘refugee,’” wrote the renowned journalist and war correspondent Martha Gellhorn, “is drenched in memories.” In Europe, those memories cast a long shadow, none more so than World War II. And with good reason: In the war’s aftermath around 10 million ethnic Germans — men, women and children — were expelled from East-Central Europe. And more than half a million Ukrainians and at least one million Poles were displaced when the border between Poland and the Soviet Union was redrawn.

These historical episodes help us to understand the present. But the numbers tell only half the story. Alongside some of the great upheavals in the past have come collective, international responses. In many cases, as with the refugees fleeing Franco’s Spain during the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s, these have been, first and foremost, the provision of emergency humanitarian aid in the form of food, shelter and temporary settlement. Countries around the world, including Russia, have contributed to such efforts.

But refugee crises have also led to more durable, institutional solutions. In fact, it was events in Russia and East-Central Europe that first led politicians and diplomats to hammer out some formal protections for refugees. The Russian Revolution and the ensuing civil war prompted the League of Nations to create the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees in 1921, the first international institution to support refugees.

In recent years, the architecture of refugee protection has been found severely wanting. [...]

This time the response has been different. Europe has been overwhelmingly hospitable to the Ukrainians escaping the war. European Union member states have agreed to provide them with the right to live and work within the bloc, as well as access to social welfare and education. This instant recognition is, of course, deeply welcome. But it's strikingly more generous protection than is available to Syrian and other asylum seekers incarcerated in squalid camps in Greece. Likewise, the warmth extended to Ukrainian refugees contrasts starkly with the racist hostility experienced at Ukraine's western borders by Africans and Asians trying to escape violence.

Yet it's possible to spy in the outpouring of sympathy for Ukrainians an opportunity to push for better treatment for all refugees. Can Europe's leaders, so long at odds over the question of migration, be persuaded to enlarge their responsibility to safeguard the lives of people who flee violence, no matter where they come from? Could the current crisis in Ukraine actually be a catalyst for substantially improving the rights of refugees around the world?

These might seem like utopian, even naïve, questions. But the history of Europe suggests otherwise. In dire circumstances, bold and creative thinking has produced a better, more humane world. It can happen again. Will anyone rise to the challenge?