

The welcome to Ukrainian refugees is uniquely compassionate. Discuss.

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Introduction

On the 24th of February 2022, Ukrainian people's lives were left in disarray; families and friends were separated, homes and businesses were destroyed within minutes and thousands of lives were lost. This was a result of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that began in 2014. There were over 6 million people who were homeless, fleeing the country, and needing to be welcomed into neighbouring countries: Poland, France, Spain and the United Kingdom¹. This created a refugee crisis².

The current essay discusses in detail the welcome Ukrainian refugees received, to decipher if it was compassionate, unique and in line with Sikh Jurisprudence.

Compassion

Arguably, the response could be perceived as compassionate; sympathetic and a genuine concern for other people's adversities³. Many world leaders: Scott Morrison, Alexander De Croo, and Kalina Konstantinva, publicly declared to welcome and support Ukrainian refugees. For example, Alexander De Croo stated "*from the first hour, the first day, people in Belgium have opened their hearts and their homes for families on the run*". Similarly, Kalina Konstantinova pledged her support "*we have full confidence that we are capable and prepared to welcome and take care of more people in need,*"⁴ Other potential examples of a compassionate welcome include £2.8 billion worth of humanitarian aid that has been sent to Ukraine and used to support refugees⁵, the United Kingdom (UK) household sponsorship scheme; British citizens offering to welcome Ukrainian refugees into their homes⁶, and the large amount (5.2 million) of refugees accepted into Europe⁷.

Conversely, it is also possible to argue that the welcome Ukrainian refugees received was not compassionate, and instead was hostile, racist, unjust and unreasonable. It has been documented that African, Caribbean, and Asian (non-white) refugees suffered undue discrimination when fleeing the war⁸. African medical student: Rachel Onyegbule reported being told black people were not permitted to board the train

¹ UNHCR, 2022. *Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation*. [online] Data.unhcr.org. Available at: <<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

² Bajaj, S.S. and Stanford, F.C., 2022. The Ukrainian refugee crisis and the pathology of racism. *bmj*, 376.

³ Woodford, K., 2003. *Cambridge advanced learner's dictionary*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Citizen, G., 2022. *41 Inspiring Quotes From World Leaders Showing Their Support for Stand Up for Ukraine*. [online] Global Citizen. Available at: <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/world-leader-quotes-stand-up-for-ukraine/>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

⁵ Ainsworth, D., 2022. [online] Available at: <<https://www.devex.com/news/funding-tracker-who-s-sending-aid-to-ukraine-102887>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

⁶ GovUK, 2022. *Homes for Ukraine: record your interest*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <<https://www.gov.uk/register-interest-homes-ukraine>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

⁷ BBC, 2022. *How many Ukrainian refugees are there and where have they gone?*. [online] BBC News. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-60555472>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

⁸ Waldie, P., 2022. *Africans and Asians fleeing Ukraine subjected to racial discrimination by border guards*. [online] Globe and Mail. Available at: <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-africans-and-asians-fleeing-ukraine-subjected-to-racial-discrimination/>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

and those that did board the train were forcibly removed against their will⁹. Non-white refugees also reported being subjected to violence, segregation, racial slurs and being forced to walk across the borders in freezing weather conditions¹⁰.

Compassion and Sikh Jurisprudence

Sikh jurisprudence is the legal structure based on Sikh principles that guide the lives of Sikh people. Examples of these principles include Seva; the requirement to serve others¹¹, gender and social equality, and Kirpan; a small sword carried by Sikh women and men, which signifies their obligation to protect the weak¹². On one hand, it is reasonable to believe the welcome Ukrainian refugees received aligns with Seva and what the Kirpan signifies. Alternatively, it is also reasonable to believe that the welcome rivals Sikh jurisprudence specifically the principles of gender and social equality as “Ukrainians have been prioritized over African, men and women, at every point”¹³.

Uniqueness

Perhaps the welcome to Ukrainian refugees was unique. Historically refugees from other countries were treated with less compassion. In 2021, only 48,000 refugees from Afghanistan were granted Asylum in Europe¹⁴, whereas in 2022 5 million Ukrainian refugees have been recorded in Europe.

As a third-generation West Indian immigrant, I have often had the privilege to hear stories from older relatives; great grandparents, aunts and uncles about how they were welcomed to Britain during the Windrush generation; a generation of West Indian immigrants who immigrated to Britain to help rebuild the country after World War Two (WW2). Unfortunately, they were met with hostility; spat on, demeaned and treated like second class citizens. More recently, between 2012-2017, many members of the Windrush were wrongfully detained, deported and had their citizenship revoked after the home office destroyed thousands of documents confirming the generations British status. The British immigration and migration system was labelled as “deeply flawed” and “discriminatory”¹⁵. Debatably, the welcome was both unique, as many other migrants and immigrants were not afforded the same welcome.

The essay will argue that the welcome was unique. However, compassion was predominantly shown to white Ukrainian refugees and thus this does not align with Sikh jurisprudence by exploring the differences in how white and black and Asian refugees were treated and drawing consistent parallels with Sikh jurisprudence.

Inequalities at the Borders

Racial Inequalities at the Borders

Controversially, the welcome to non-white Ukrainian refugees could potentially be considered as wholly uncompassionate. Kass, an African engineering student living and working in Ukraine, recalled her experience of fleeing the war as “traumatic” and “super racist”. Kass recalls

⁹ Stephanie Busari, C., 2022. *Foreign students fleeing Ukraine say they face segregation, racism at border*. [online] CNN. Available at: <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/28/europe/students-allege-racism-ukraine-cmd-intl/index.html>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

¹⁰ Bajaj, S. and Stanford, F., 2022. The Ukrainian refugee crisis and the pathology of racism. *BMJ*, [online] p.0661. Available at: <<https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj.o661>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

¹¹ Sohi, K.K., Singh, P. and Bopanna, K., 2018. Ritual participation, sense of community, and social well-being: a study of seva in the Sikh community. *Journal of religion and health*, 57(6), pp.2066-2078.

¹² Bagga, R.S., 2006. Living by the Sword: The Free Exercise of Religions and the Sikh Struggle for the Right to Carry a Kirpan. *Mod. Am.*, 2, p.32.

¹³ Stephanie Busari, C., 2022. *Foreign students fleeing Ukraine say they face segregation, racism at border*. [online] CNN. Available at: <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/28/europe/students-allege-racism-ukraine-cmd-intl/index.html>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

¹⁴ Walsh, P. and Sumption, M., 2022. *Afghan refugees in the UK - Migration Observatory*. [online] Migration Observatory. Available at: <<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/afghan-refugees-in-the-uk/>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

¹⁵ Gentleman, A., 2022. *Windrush scandal explained*. [online] Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants. Available at: <<https://www.jcwi.org.uk/windrush-scandal-explain>> [Accessed 20 August 2022].

the Ukrainian guards “dividing people [...] those who were white, and those who were not” and white women and children were able to board trains before black women¹⁶. In a similar vein, Barlaney, another African student, also reported having to wait separately from white Ukrainian refugees and that white refugee’s safety and ability to flee was prioritized. During Barlaney’s attempts to flee the country she felt “unequal” and that the treatment she received was comparative to how wild animals are treated¹⁷. Like the accounts of segregation and degradation, many non-white refugees have reported being subjected to extreme violence. Allegedly, Ukrainian border guards were “beating foreigners” profusely. Importantly, some were hospitalised because of this¹⁸. In support of this, men of Indian, Nepalese and Somalian heritage were viciously kicked and beaten with batons according to the Times¹⁹.

Undoubtedly, these reports were not warmly received by all. Some brandished the reports as lies, untruths, “Russian propaganda”²⁰ and race baiting, verbal attacks against an ethnic group. The Ukrainian national guards elected spokesperson declared “there is absolutely no division by nation, citizenship, or class at the border”²¹. Seemingly suggesting all people regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic background are being treated equitably and with compassion. Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore the deeply emotional and compelling first-hand accounts of African students that have been shared globally about their personal experience at the borders, and the hostile welcome they received.

Perhaps this is true and all refugees, irrespective of skin colour were met with hostility by UK border officials and immigration services. On the 22nd of March 2022, there were 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees and only 50 of them had been welcomed into the UK. Potentially, this is not due to lack of trying or refugees not wanting to seek Asylum in Britain but is because the government was unwelcoming and imposed unnecessarily difficult requirements for refugees to meet. Boris Johnson promised to grant 200,000 eligible refugees; those who can prove they have a direct close relative in Britain, asylum. Undoubtedly, when someone is fleeing a war, it seems inhumane to ask them to look for records such as birth certificates, marriage certificates and family records to prove their relationship.

Another example of this was refugees needing to complete a visa application to move to the UK, like they would have needed to complete prior to the war, no amendments were immediately made. Once again, it seems entirely unreasonable to expect someone fleeing war bombs and artillery to be able to sit down and have the time to complete the visa application form. For those that were able to find internet access and submit the application form by the 22nd of March 0.9% of those applications were granted visas. This was perceived by some as the British wanting to “keep these Ukrainians away from our shores”. Additionally, some refugees report being told by British officials to go to “Paris or Brussels”. This suggests that all refugees were not welcomed into the UK with compassion. Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore

¹⁶ Peris Rotman, A., 2022. *They Called Ukraine Home. But They Faced Violence and Racism When Fleeing*. [online] Time. Available at: <<https://time.com/6153276/ukraine-refugees-racism/>> [Accessed 21 August 2022].

¹⁷ Pietromarchi, V., 2022. *More African students decry racism at Ukrainian borders*. [online] Aljazeera.com. Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/2/more-racism-at-ukrainian-borders>> [Accessed 21 August 2022].

¹⁸ Pietromarchi, V., 2022. *More African students decry racism at Ukrainian borders*. [online] Aljazeera.com. Available at: <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/2/more-racism-at-ukrainian-borders>> [Accessed 21 August 2022].

¹⁹ Peris Rotman, A., 2022. *They Called Ukraine Home. But They Faced Violence and Racism When Fleeing*. [online] Time. Available at: <<https://time.com/6153276/ukraine-refugees-racism/>> [Accessed 21 August 2022].

²⁰ Hundeyin, D., 2022. *The False Image of Africans in Ukraine*. [online] Inkstick. Available at: <<https://inkstickmedia.com/the-false-image-of-africans-in-ukraine/>> [Accessed 21 August 2022].

²¹ Bajaj, S. and Stanford, F., 2022. The Ukrainian refugee crisis and the pathology of racism. *BMJ*, [online] p.0661. Available at: <<https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj.0661>> [Accessed 21 August 2022].

the deeply emotional and compelling first-hand accounts of African students that have been shared globally about their personal experience at the borders, and the hostile welcome they received in comparison to that of white refugees.

Gender Inequalities at the Borders

As well as racial inequalities, gender inequalities have also been reported; 90% of Ukrainian refugees are women and children. Men aged between 18-60 are banned from leaving the country however there are exemptions which include men with disabilities, single fathers and fathers with three or more children.²² The men who were forced to stay behind were encouraged to go the frontline and fight the war. This disregarded the fact that many of them did not want to and wanted to reunite with their relatives who were able to cross the border. Men who were successful in illegally crossing the borders were called “traitors” and if caught severely punished. This difference in treatment has been described as “inhumane” and caused deep anguish and heartbreak within families who have been separated.

Debatably, men being encouraged to defend their country and defend those that are weaker is in keeping with Sikh principles and resonates with the ideas and notions affiliated with a Kirpan. Although, in the Sikh faith both women and men wear Kirpans, and both are expected to protect the weak. Considering this, one would expect for both Ukrainian women and men to be banned from leaving the country and be made to fight in the war. Undoubtedly, it is clear by now this is discrepant to Sikhism, gender and social equality are integral to the faith and this was not observed at Ukrainian borders. Debatably, the inequalities at the borders resonate with the pronounced inequalities at the Bar.

Inequalities at the Bar and the Guru Nanak Scholarship Foundation

Currently, only 17.9% of Queens Counsel Barristers, senior barristers who have been selected to provide counsel for the British Crown, are female.²³ Similarly, only 15.1% of junior barristers are from ethnic minority backgrounds and a disproportionate number of barristers in the UK attended independent fee-paying schools²⁴. The Guru Nanak Scholarship foundation, founded by Mukhtair Singh and the Sikh council aims to reduce such inequalities and incorporate the Sikh principle of social equality to the Bar and in turn wider society.

The charity is named after Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, and the first Sikh Guru. Throughout his life he travelled around Asia teaching ik onar; the belief that there is one God who dwells inside all his creations. He then proceeded to establish Sikhism which was based on the following principles: equality, virtue, goodness and love. The objectives of the charity include aiding social mobility and supporting those from underrepresented groups access professions that without support may be unobtainable. No parallels can be drawn between the objectives of the Guru Nanak foundation and the treatment non-white refugees were subjected to. In keeping with Sikhism and

²² Chevtayeva, I. (2022) *How Ukrainian men try to get around the ban to leave the country* | DW | 19.07.2022, DW.COM. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/how-ukrainian-men-try-to-get-around-the-ban-to-leave-the-country/a-62529639> (Accessed: 3 September 2022).

²³ Crundwell, E. (2022) *Gender in UK Bar 2022 Rankings* | Chambers UK Bar Legal Topics, Chambers.com. Available at: <https://chambers.com/topics/gender-in-the-2022-uk-bar-rankings> (Accessed: 3 September 2022).

²⁴ BSB, 2022. *Diversity at the Bar 2021 A summary of the latest available diversity data for the Bar*. [online] Barstandardsboard.org.uk. Available at: <https://www.barstandardsboard.org.uk/uploads/assets/be522642-160b-433b-af03a910a5636233/BSB-Report-on-Diversity-at-the-Bar-2021.pdf> [Accessed 21 August 2022].

the objectives of the Guru Nanak foundation, one would expect for someone whether it be the Ukrainian national guards or the Bar Standards Board to promote an equitable environment, in which all have equal opportunities.

Uniquely Compassionate and Sikh Jurisprudence

So far, the question: the welcome to Ukrainian refugees was uniquely compassionate, discuss, has been explored. The components of the questions; uniqueness and compassion have been explored independently of one other. By doing this it has become clear that the welcome was indeed unique and compassionate to some degree. Non-white refugees reported being met with extreme hostility and all Ukrainian refugees faced obstacles entering the UK. Nonetheless, there were examples of a compassionate welcome, examples include welcome hubs and the UK household sponsorship scheme. This partially aligns with Sikh jurisprudence and the objectives of the Guru Nanak scholarship foundation.

Taking this all into account, the country was proactive serving others (seva) during this crisis, it is undisputable that there are some parallels between the welcome and Sikh Jurisprudence. Likewise, Ukrainian men who were of fighting age, 18-60, remaining in Ukraine to protect their country and the weak, arguably conforms to principle of protecting the weak that the Kirpan symbolises. Notably, the racial and gender inequalities explored throughout the essay do not align with Sikh jurisprudence. Subsequently, this essay concludes the welcome aligned with Sikh jurisprudence to a small degree.