# Seeking Refuge: Understanding Refugees in Canada

**Subject(s):** History, Civics, Social Science, Law, Politics  
**Grade Levels:** 9-12

<table>
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<th>Specific Student Learning Objectives:</th>
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<td>• Students will be able to define and appreciate what it means to be a refugee, particularly within a Canadian context;</td>
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<td>• Students will demonstrate an understanding of rights and responsibilities with regard to refugees;</td>
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<td>• Students will develop a basic understanding of refugees and the treatment of refugees through a historical lens.</td>
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*This lesson plan fulfills multiple provincial curriculum expectations. For a list of Overall and Specific curriculum expectations as outlined by the Ontario Ministry of Education, please refer to the accompanying document, *Seeking Refuge, Curriculum Links.pdf.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enduring Understanding(s)/Big Idea/Essential Questions</th>
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<td>• Who are refugees and what is the definition of a refugee?</td>
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<td>• Do we have an obligation to refugees?</td>
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<td>• How has Canada treated its refugees?</td>
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<td>• How ought Canadians treat refugees in the future?</td>
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**Context:** This lesson is intended to introduce students to the concepts of refugee protection. Although the lesson requires an open mind and certain level of maturity in discussing some potentially sensitive topics, it does not assume any prior knowledge.

**PREAMBLE:**
In order for this lesson – or, really, any critical-thinking lesson – to be effective, students must be given clear permission to disagree. Divergent points of view must be encouraged throughout the lesson so that the issues raised can be fully and meaningfully explored. There are no right answers to these questions, and part of the lesson is to help students understand how challenging and interesting issues of fairness, citizenship and justice can be. Quite aside from adding to the debate, encouraging diversity of opinion and point of view is vital to fostering democratic habits and active citizenship.

**Introduction**

**Minds On: Forced to Run**

1. To produce the appropriate mindset and atmosphere, provide students with Handout #1 - *Forced to Run*. This exercise will enable students to position themselves in the place of those who have no choice but to leave everything behind and seek asylum elsewhere.

**Materials**

Handout #1 – Forced to Run: Included in this package

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1 This is an adaptation of the “You Must Run!” activity developed by Medecins Sans Frontieres – found at [http://refugeecamp.org/resources/Forced-to-Leave-EN.pdf](http://refugeecamp.org/resources/Forced-to-Leave-EN.pdf)
**Possible Extension:** This exercise can be used as an introductory homework assignment where students can actually bring the things they would pack into class and share their choices and reasons with others.

2. Conclude the activity by drawing attention to the fact that refugees are *forced* to leave their families, friends, homes and communities. They are often made to do so with very little notice and with no certainty of the future. The activity will hopefully allow most students to recognize the hardships and difficulties of leaving everything behind and seeking asylum elsewhere. You may use the following questions to focus your conversation:

- Leaving one’s life behind is certainly difficult. What might be some reasons that would compel you to run?
- What are some reasons that might force people to run?
- How important are the things we take with us? Are they just material objects? How important are they to our survival, well-being, sense of self and belonging?

**Action**

**Part 1 – Who are refugees?**

Now that students have an idea of what it may be like to leave one’s life behind with little notice, they can begin to create a working definition of *refugees* that they are comfortable with and are able to use with confidence.

1. Project an image of Albert Einstein, the famous physicist, on the wall. Have students ‘popcorn’ ideas and concepts that they know about him. You may choose to write all of these on the board as a mind-map.²

Of the elements students identify, the one most pertinent to this lesson is Einstein’s identity as a Jewish born German citizen who was forced to escape Nazi Germany in the 1930s after Hitler had taken power.

2. Use Einstein’s story to demonstrate that refugees are forced to flee their country of origin because of *fear of harm or persecution*.

3. Project a secondary image of another prominent refugee that students may be familiar with. You may wish to visit UNHCR’s webpage [http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c74-page1.html](http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c74-page1.html) to learn about more refugees who have made a difference in our society. Highlight the wide variety of individual refugees and the contributions they have made.

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² This activity is adapted from the UNHCR Facilitator’s Manual for Young Educators – found at [http://www.unhcr.ca/documents/facilitators_manual-e.pdf](http://www.unhcr.ca/documents/facilitators_manual-e.pdf)
Possible Extension: As a potential homework activity, you can have students visit UNHCR’s website on prominent refugees. Instruct them to pick one individual, among the hundreds listed, and conduct a research project on the story and struggle of the refugee as well as the reason they believe that the UNHCR has chosen to include him/her on their list.

4. Conclude the activity by asking students to identify similarities/common threads in each of the refugees’ stories. Students should be able to recognize that, although their countries of origin and circumstances may be different, refugees all fled their homelands out of fear of persecution and concern for their welfare.

Although this extension can be supplemented by any number of sources, consider referring to UNHCR’s list of Prominent Refugees Who Have Made a Difference as a starting point or a source of inspiration: [http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c74-page1.html](http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c74-page1.html)

Action – Part 2
Defining “Refugee” – Who Decides?

1. Scenarios: Provide the class with Handout #2 – Potential Refugee Claimants. Brief them on their roles and duties as new officers in charge of recommending refugee applications for approval. (This activity can be done either in groups or individually.)

2. Student’s responses should be explored with the aim of developing a working definition of “refugee”. Using students’ input, develop criteria (on the board or through a visual organizer) for an acceptable definition of the term “refugee.”

Note: Throughout this exercise, instances may arise when the use of particular words may lead to misunderstanding. It is important to monitor the conversations to reduce misinformation. A common misconception is that refugees are cheating a country’s immigration system by “jumping the line” of immigration applications, or that the term “refugee” is synonymous with illegal immigrants/alien. It is important to highlight and clarify these misconceptions.

A refugee is someone who is forced to flee for his/her life, while an immigrant is someone who chooses to move to another country.

Terms like “illegal immigrants”, “illegal aliens”, “queue/line jumpers” are problematic because they suggest that refugees who must enter a country without documents are engaging in criminal activity. International law recognizes that because refugees’ lives may be in immediate danger, they may have no choice but to enter a country without the requisite documentation, using false documentation, using unauthorized border crossing points or enlisting the aid of human smugglers.³

³ For an accessible clarification of some of the terms and concepts used in this lesson, refer to the glossary provided by the Canadian Council of Refugees at [http://ccrweb.ca/en/glossary](http://ccrweb.ca/en/glossary).
3. Once the students have completed their ‘working’ definition of “refugees”, contrast and compare it with the following definition, which comes from the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention (This Convention gives rights to refugees and outlines the legal obligations of countries who have signed onto the convention. Canada signed on to the Convention in 1969):

   A refugee is someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

4. After reading the UN Convention definition of a refugee, ask students to reassess their two refugee applications and determine if the applicants meet the criteria of a Convention refugee.
   a. Note that Mr. E is not a Convention refugee. Although his life is at risk, it is not due to racial, religious, national, ethnic, or political persecution.
   b. Poverty and social conditions are not grounds for protection and refugee status. Do you think this is fair? Why or why not? Do you think there are other grounds which ought to be included in the definition of a Convention refugee?

5. Our Obligation to Others*: If possible, use this moment to raise the very important question of whether Canada (or any other country) should have an obligation to provide asylum to refugees.
   a. Why should we help those who arrive at our borders seeking refuge?
   b. Are there moral, ethical, historical or even economical reasons we should help others?
   c. Should we only help those who may be able to help us in return?
   *Keep in mind that there is no particular ‘right answer’ to these questions and that all students must feel comfortable in expressing their opinions – ensure that voices are heard on all sides of the deliberation.

Consolidation and Debrief
Thinking about refugee policy - Yesterday and Today

At this point of the lesson, it is important to provide students with some sense of history and an understanding of Canada’s changing attitude towards refugees.


Refer to the following glossary provided by the Canadian Council of Refugees for accurate terms and definitions: [http://ccrweb.ca/en/glossary](http://ccrweb.ca/en/glossary)

Handout #3: “Voyage of the SS St. Louis: Journey Towards a Better Future” included in this package.
2. Following the article, if resources permit, show students the short film entitled “No One Wanted Us – The Tragic Voyage of the SS St. Louis” [link](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaiU9YJmod0&feature=related).

Class discussion:
Debrief the article and short film through a class discussion. Keep in mind that the purpose of this exercise is to get students to think critically, not only about Canada’s attitudes and behaviours in the past, but also about how policies (particularly concerning refugees) are formulated. It is important for students to recognize that, like most things, Canada’s policies are the product of a number of competing interests and forces.

Use the following questions to focus the conversation:

1. What lessons can Canada learn from the story of the SS St. Louis in terms of its refugee policies today?
2. Should the number of refugees affect the way countries respond? There were 937 Jewish people on board the ship who were seeking refuge. Cuba, the US and Canada denied them all the right to land. Do you think their response would have changed had there only been 100 refugees? What if there were 100,000?
3. At the time, Cuba, the US and Canada were experiencing an economic crisis (mass unemployment). Should this have an impact on a country’s decision to admit or refuse refugees?
4. Why do you think the officials denied the passengers of the SS St. Louis entry? Should governments be permitted to use these reasons, today, to deny entry to others?
5. Could there be legitimate reasons to deny someone asylum? How can we balance these reasons with helping those who are in need of our protection?

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Additional Resources
- Fahamu Refugee Programme: “African Union Refugee Definition”, [link](http://www.refugeelegalaidinformation.org/african-union-refugee-definition)
- UNHCR: “Prominent Refugees”, [link](http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c74-page7.html)
- UNHCR: Multilingual Game, “Against all Odds”: [link](http://www.playagainstallodds.com/)

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**Forced to Run**

**Handout #1**

For as long as you can remember, your parents have been worried about your family’s safety and future. Talks about the growing problems in your country have dominated dinner conversations almost every night.

Although these conversations typically bore you, you’ve noticed an increased sense of fear and anxiety in your parent’s voice and behavior.

One day you get home from school and you see your mother waiting with three suitcases around her. She tells you that your father’s been arrested for no apparent reason and that you have 20 minutes to pack what you can carry.

“What’s happened to dad? Why do we have to run? Where are we going to go?” are all questions you want to ask your mom, but you can tell from the tears in her eyes and the fear in her voice that the answers will have to wait.

In the following table list the items that you would pack knowing that you may never return. For every item that you list, provide a reason you have chosen to pack that item. Keep in mind that you only have about 20 minutes to pack all of the items and that you must be able to carry everything by yourself.

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This is an adaptation of the “You Must Run!” activity developed by Medecins Sans Frontieres – found at [http://refugeecamp.org/resources/Forced-to-Leave-EN.pdf](http://refugeecamp.org/resources/Forced-to-Leave-EN.pdf)
You have recently been hired as an officer in charge of evaluating and recommending refugee claimant applications for approval. Today you’re lucky to receive only two applications. Check one of the boxes below to indicate whether you reject the claimant’s application or recommend it for approval. Provide reasons for your selection.

**Application #1: Mr. E**

The government in Mr. E’s country does not subsidize medication or medical treatments. For the past 20 years, Mr. E has worked in a factory earning a meager income with which he is barely able to afford the medication he requires for his heart condition.

Recently, because of an economic crisis in his country, Mr. E and countless others have lost their jobs. As a result, he can no longer afford his medication. His doctors have told him that without a steady supply of the medication, he will not live much longer.

In a neighbouring country where there is a much stronger economy, job prospects are considerably better and healthcare is subsidized for all residents.

With the help of some friends, Mr. E travels to the border and applies for refugee status, claiming that he will not survive if he remains in his own country.

Please check the box that applies and provide the reason for your rejection or recommendation.

- [x] Recommended for approval
- [ ] Rejected

Reason for decision:

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6 This is an adaptation of the UNHCR Facilitator’s Manual for Young Educators, Appendix F – found at http://www.unhcr.ca/documents/facilitators_manual-e.pdf
You have recently been hired as an officer in charge of evaluating and recommending refugee applications for approval. Today you’re lucky to receive only two applications. Check one of the boxes below to indicate whether you reject the claimant’s application or recommend it for approval. Provide reasons for your selection.

Application #2: Ms. J

Ms. J is not particularly religious and does not care much about politics. Recently she has been sensing increasing hostility towards her and her family members.

Although she normally brushes off these types of incidents, she is frightened by the growing trend of violence against others sharing her minority religious background and race in her community. One day she is confronted by a group who belong to the ethnic and religious majority and they threaten to harm her if she doesn’t leave the country immediately.

Fearing for her safety and the safety of her family, she has asked the police for help, but since the police are themselves largely made up of the ethnic and religious majority, they are reluctant to help her and have only said that they would ‘look into it’.

After hearing numerous reports of attacks on people belonging to her ethnic group and religious background, Ms. J flees with her family to another country, claiming refugee status upon arrival.

Please check the box that applies and provide the reason for your rejection or recommendation.

☐ Recommended for approval

☐ Rejected

Reason for decision:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

7 This is an adaptation of the UNHCR Facilitator’s Manual for Young Educators. Appendix F. Found at http://www.unhcr.ca/documents/facilitators_manual-e.pdf
Voyage of the SS St. Louis: Journey toward a better future

"Are you a Jew?" asked one of the guards.
"Yes," answered the child at the barrier.
"Jews are not admitted," snapped the guard.
"Oh please let me in. I'm only a very little Jew."

Such was a game played by children aboard the doomed SS St. Louis, the ship that set sail May 27, 1939, with 937 Jews from Germany headed for Cuba. All of them had valid Cuban visas, and were hoping to be saved from Hitler's coming madness.

During the ship's time at sea, Cuba's newly elected pro-fascist leaders invalidated almost all the visas. Unable to disembark at the island nation, the stateless refugees then set sail for Florida, where an American Coast Guard vessel shadowed the ship, even firing a warning shot across its bow in case the message wasn't clear: It was not wanted in America.

The New York Times wrote at the time: "Off our shores she (the St. Louis) was attended by a helpful Coast Guard vessel alert to pick up any passengers who plunged overboard and thrust them back ... The refugees could even see the shimmering towers of Miami ... the battlements of another forbidden city."

Gustav Schroeder, captain of the ill-fated ship, was a man of great humanity, despite his loyalty to the Nazi state. His sense of responsibility led him to determine that these refugees should not be abandoned.

Desperate, he headed for the shores of Canada outside Halifax Harbour, where the luckless Jewish passengers encountered the anti-Semitic Frederick Blair, director of the immigration branch of the Department of Mines and Resources, who not only refused the refugees entry, but later bragged about keeping Jews out of Canada (it was Blair's infamous "none is too many" stance on Jewish immigration that was to metastasize into government policy).

Eventually, after weeks at sea and rampant sickness aboard, despair and disillusionment overtook most of the passengers. A second editorial in The New York Times lamented, "We can only hope that some hearts will soften somewhere and some refuge be found. The cruise of the St. Louis cries to heaven of man's inhumanity to men."

Captain Schroeder remained resolute and, with the assistance of the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, negotiations with Britain, Belgium, Holland and France were successful, with each country accepting a total of some 900 passengers (29 had managed to get into Cuba). Tragically, with the exception of Britain, the Jewish passengers granted...

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temporary asylum in mainland Europe were caught in the Nazi blitzkrieg. More than one-third of them were murdered in the Nazi gas chambers and internment camps.

This past week, the government of Canada made a series of important announcements, acknowledging errors of past governments and providing resources to commemorate these blights on Canadian history.

Along with an announcement of funds for an educational program related to the St. Louis, recognition was also given to the Komagata Maru ship incident, where more than 350 potential immigrants from India were denied entry into Canada in 1914.

In the past, the Canadian government has recognized historical wrongdoings on the Chinese head tax and the dreadful internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II. History must be a vehicle of education, heartfelt lessons to future generations. Canada’s actions on these matters are to be commended.

Indeed, Canada has transformed itself in many ways in the last 70 years, not the least of which has been the evolution of our national attitudes toward the "other" – from intolerance to tolerance of difference, and now, in many cases, to a celebration of our diversity. The road so far travelled has been steep. Marking the errors of the past is the only way to safeguard our gains and prevent their erosion.

But what of an apology to the Jewish community for the hateful actions of Frederick Blair and Mackenzie King’s government in denying entry to the Jewish refugees of the St. Louis?

It is not up to Canadian Jewish Congress to ask for – or to accept – such a thing. Words of apology, however sincere, can only be accepted by those who have endured the insult or affront, and it is only from the victims that forgiveness be granted.

But even as that door has been closed by the passage of time, we can work together to ensure that the errors of the past are never repeated. And perhaps for the departed, that will be sufficient.

In the end, perhaps the best lesson one can glean from such tragic events (beyond the obvious) is to look at what happened to the captain of the St. Louis, Gustav Schroeder. Having sustained much damage during the war, the ship was sold for scrap. Schroeder, who never commanded another vessel, struggled to make a living. The few remaining Jewish survivors of his ship saw to it that he and his family were looked after.

In 1957, the West German government honoured Schroeder for having saved Jewish lives. Shortly before his death in 1959, the State of Israel honoured him as a "Righteous Among the Nations." It will be his memory we honour as we educate future generations.

*Bernie M. Farber is chief executive officer of the Canadian Jewish Congress.*