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- Jewish refugees fleeing Russia, Eastern Europe and Germany arrived in Britain during the 19th and 20th centuries. Around 200,000 arrived over a 50-year period, averaging 4,000 per year.
- The turning point was a major change in policy by the Labour government in the late 1990s. In the 13 years that they were in office, between 1997 and 2010, net migration to the UK by non-Britons totalled over three million.
- Since the Conservatives took office in 2010, net migration to the UK by non-Britons has totalled 2.7 million.
- Today, the non-UK born population stands at 9.4 million (2018/19, [Office for National Statistics](#)).
- In 2018, the BBC withdrew a video on the history of immigration, which was aimed at teaching 14 to 16 year olds, after we wrote to them pointing out a number of problems with it (see our [piece](#)).

1. From the first millennium until the Second World War, episodes of immigration were quite small and usually demographically insignificant. Britain is certainly not “a nation of immigrants” as some claim and immigration on the recent and current scale is a new phenomenon.
2. We can measure historic immigration by looking at Census records. The Census first began to record people’s country of birth in 1851. Estimating the size of the foreign-born population before that is much more difficult. However historical records do give us some idea as to the scale of immigration.
3. In 1964 the International Passenger Survey was established and, in 1991, a more sophisticated measurement of immigration called the Long Term International Passenger Migration estimate was put in place. These allowed migration to and from the UK to be monitored on an annual basis.

Pre-History

4. The history of Britain before the Roman invasion is known as pre-history as we lack written records before the Roman invasion. However we know from archaeological and palaeontological evidence that the area now known as Britain has been inhabited for almost one million years. Those early populations of hunters were small and transient, as successive ice ages made the land periodically uninhabitable. Britain may only have been continuously inhabited for the last 12,000 years.
5. About 10,000 years ago the inhabitants of Britain began using the land for agriculture; some theorise that this was as the result of a migration. During the Roman Occupation, which began 2,000 years ago, the population of Britain was about 4-5 million. While there was undoubtedly some migration to the UK, it is probable that the population remained overwhelmingly indigenous. There were probably about 125,000 migrants in the UK during the Roman Occupation, or about 3% of the overall population.

Post Roman Occupation

6. After the end of the Roman Occupation, Britain's population fell markedly, perhaps to as little as 1.25 million. In this period, Britain experienced invasions and settlements by Germanic tribes but their size and scale are contested. Some historians believe that the number of Anglo-Saxons who came to the UK was relatively small, while others



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with perhaps as many as 100,000 coming.

9. It is estimated that by 1700, about 50,000 Huguenots (French Protestants) had settled in England making up as much as 1% of England's total population in 1700. The eighteenth century also saw German refugees known as 'Poor Palatines' arrive in Britain, with perhaps as many as 13,000 arriving.

10. By the 1901 Census there were 82,844 Eastern Europeans living in Britain. Small numbers of people came from Asia to Britain - there were perhaps a few hundred at the start of the 20th Century. The 1901 census showed that there were just 387 Chinese nationals in Britain. There was also some movement to and from Britain's colonial Empire. Many of those that came to live in Britain were the decedandnts of British settlers to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. In the eighty years between 1851 and 1931, the population born abroad increased by only about one million.

Post World War Two

11. After the Second World War, the pace of immigration increased considerably. For example, thousands of Poles, many of whom had fought for Britain in the Second World War, were offered British citizenship in 1947. The 1951 census recorded 162,339 Poles living in Britain. Britain also introduced a guest workers scheme after the war that enabled quite large numbers of other Eastern Europeans to come to Britain.

12. The Government introduced the British Nationality Act of 1948, which granted subjects of the British Empire the right to live and work in the UK. This was primarily intended to strengthen ties with the Dominions. The view of the government was that labour needs were mainly to be satisfied by those from Ireland and by 'European Voluntary Workers' - the closest thing to 'guest workers' that the UK has ever had. The Attlee government actually looked for ways of stopping the Empire Windrush or diverting it elsewhere. Direct recruitment from the West Indies came a bit later, on the initiative of the NHS, London Transport and others. Only about one in ten new Commonwealth migrants came to a specific job. From 1962, tighter restrictions were put in place, but migrants from the Commonwealth continued to come.

13. In the eighty years between 1851 and 1931, the population born abroad increased by only about one million. It increased slowly after the Second World War, growing by less than two million in the forty years between 1951 and 1991. As Figure 1 below shows the annual level of net migration since the 1960s.

Figure 1: Level of annual net migration to the UK (thousands) - Office for National Statistics (Figures incorporate latest adjustment as of February 2020 - see [ONS note](#)).



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1997 to the present day

14. In the late 1990s the pace and scale of migration increased to a level without historical precedent. Indeed, between 2001 and 2018 the foreign-born population doubled from 4.6 million to more than nine million. Part of the reason for this huge upturn in migration is that under the Labour Government of 1997-2010 immigration controls were relaxed. Over that period, net foreign migration totalled 3.6 million. This was the result of deliberate policy changes rather than changing patterns of migration or globalisation. The massive increase in the level of migration after 1997 is totally unprecedented in the country's history, dwarfing the scale of anything that went before.

15. Ahead of the 2010 general election the Conservatives campaigned on a pledge to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands. However, immigration reached record levels under the Conservatives. A Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition was formed and during David Cameron's period in office the system of non-EU migration underwent significant reform in an attempt to reduce its level. However, migration from the EU continued beyond the control of the UK government. Despite lacklustre efforts to reform the non-EU system and restrictions on benefit provision for newly arrived EU workers, net migration continued at very high levels. Since 2010, 2.2 million long-term net migrants have come to the UK from overseas.

16. The UK left the EU on 31 January 2020. This gives the power to the government to end free movement from the EU. While its published immigration plan may reduce low-skilled migration from Europe, there is also a strong risk that it will significantly increase work immigration from outside the EU. This is something that should be avoided in the context of the economic shock and rising unemployment resulting from the Coronavirus lockdown.

17. The graphs below show the change in the share and number of non-UK born in the total population since 1851.

Figure 2: Share of UK population that was born abroad. Details from Census 1851-2011 (no census carried out in 1941) and Office for National Statistics.



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18. To explore this topic in more depth please see our full History of immigration paper. To read more about the Labour Government of 1997-2010's impact on immigration click [here](#) for an analysis of the Conservative government's record on immigration between 2010 and 2015.

