Refugees season at the Imperial War Museum in London: A century of crises, but the real causes ignored

Paul Mitchell
24 November 2020

The ambitious “Refugees” season at London’s Imperial War Museum (IWM), explores “refugee experiences throughout history and ongoing issues faced by those affected... through two major exhibitions, a new artistic commission and a series of immersive events.”

IWM curator Simon Offord declares, “The world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record, but with media attention less prevalent than it was in 2015, now more than ever it’s important for IWM to bring 100 years of refugee voices and experiences back to the forefront.”

According to data from this year’s UN Refugee Agency’s (UNHCR) Global Trends report, almost 79.5 million people had been forcibly displaced as of the end of 2019. This accounts for 1 in every 97 people on the planet (or almost 1 percent of the global population)—the highest level recorded in 70 years. The largest group among these are 45.7 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs)—meaning people displaced to other areas within their own country. According to a Global Report on Internal Displacement—issued by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, part of the Norwegian Refugee Council—these tens of millions were internally displaced as a result of conflict and violence in 61 countries. The majority are displaced in Syria, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Yemen and Afghanistan. Another 5.1 million people in 95 countries are displaced because of natural disasters.

At the Refugees: Forced to Flee exhibition, objects from the museum's collection are used to illustrate the refugee crises arising from World War One, World War Two, the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus, the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) and the Iraq War (2003-2011). The continuing wars in Afghanistan and Syria and the attempts by refugees from these countries to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe are also featured.

The exhibition asks the questions “But what drives this displacement? Why do people leave their homes?”

The IWM should be well placed to answer. The museum considers itself “a global authority on conflict and its impact on people's lives.” It has incredible resources, an unparalleled collection of artefacts, access to the most modern interactive techniques and exhibition design and can call upon the world's leading artists and commission new artistic works.

Grace Schwindt's intriguing ceramic sculptures are based on a conversation with an individual refugee reminiscing about home-life before conflict. For “Mrs Schumacher and the Gordons”, Schwindt talked to her own grandfather Gerhard Süssmann whose family lost their Berlin flat in 1938. Süssmann recollects demonstrations, Nazi-Communist street fights and his neighbour “Mrs. Schumacher” who had once helped Vladimir Lenin to travel from Zürich to revolutionary St Petersburg in 1917 in the so-called “sealed train”.

On display are several paintings by Shorsh Saleh depicting his experiences as an Iraqi refugee who spent two years “illegally” crossing borders and eight years waiting for asylum in the UK. His strikingly designed carpets, hand-woven by Kurdish women in Iraq, are also on show.

In Indre Serpytyte's neon light artwork “Constellations”, seven refugees’ journeys across the Mediterranean are represented as stars in the sky, where “the collections of lines and circles denote the stops and starts along the way, but also allude to a universal language of astronomy.”

“Life in a Camp” is a 30 square-metre film installation, where the visitor is surrounded by scenes from the Moria refugee camp on the Greek Island of Lesbos. Designed to hold 2,200 people, Moria became home to more than 18,000, mainly Syrian, refugees. The footage also includes the effects of the devastating fire in September 2020, which left more than 12,000 people without shelter.

The future for refugees becomes even more grisly in the “Face to Open Doors” interactive installation by the creative studio Anagram, where the visitor can experience an interrogation in an imaginary future by an artificial

© World Socialist Web Site

intelligence (AI) border guard.

We are told that in 2014 on the US-Mexican border there were a series of trials with a machine called AVATAR (Automated Virtual Agent for Truth Assessments in Real-Time) and the European Union (EU) has funded an AI-based lie detector project, iBorderCtrl, to detect whether asylum seekers are lying.

There is no doubt the exhibition succeeds in creating greater sympathy for the terrible plight of refugees. But it covers for the callous attitude of successive British governments to refugees, suggesting, falsely, at one point that they have "welcomed people with initiatives intended to help them settle and find work".

The exhibition also makes much of the "welcome" to just 10,000 Kindertransport children reluctantly granted asylum in Britain, and then only after the 1938 Nazi "Kristallnacht" pogrom. The children had to leave their parents behind and have a "guarantor" in the UK to provide for their upkeep. The fact that Britain, like governments internationally, turned their back on millions of Jews fleeing the Nazi regime—consigning them to a near-certain death in 1930s Europe and during the Second World War—is ignored.

Today, the UK accepts fewer refugees than most other European countries and is the only country in Europe that does not have a statutory time limit on the detention of migrants. The UK has been key to the EU's creation of a Fortress Europe that keeps desperate families apart and condemns thousands to death, including the 20,000 migrants who have perished while crossing the Mediterranean and the almost 300 asylum seekers that have died trying to cross the English Channel since 1999. The exhibition's only comment on these inhuman policies is a brief mention of some research that has shed "critical light on the European Union's migration policy agenda".

Similarly, the exhibition downplays the role of the media in fomenting xenophobic sentiment. It criticises some outlets for "seeking to demonise" refugees, but the only examples on display are a couple of newspapers from small far right outfits—the National Association (1939) and British National Party (2001). The filthy history of the mainstream press, from the *Daily Mail's* support for Hitler's brownshirts to the lurid anti-migrant hysteria whipped up during the Brexit referendum campaign by the right-wing tabloids, is ignored.

As to the causes of the continuous refugee crises over the last century, the exhibition answers with the obvious "conflict", "modern war", "threats of violence" and "social breakdown" but this begs the question, what causes these phenomena?

The huge numbers of refugees produced in the twentieth century compared to previous periods of history coincides with the development of imperialism; the struggle between the major capitalist nation-states for global hegemony in an increasingly integrated world; the sharpening contradiction between the world economy and the nation-state system upon which capitalism is based; and the ever more fundamental incompatibility of socialised productive forces with private ownership of the means of production.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US ruling elite sought to exploit America's unrivalled military might as a means of countering US capitalism's long-term economic decline. By means of military aggression, Washington sought to establish its hegemony over key markets and sources of raw materials, starting with the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Britain, once the leading imperialist power, saw its global interests best secured through a military alliance as a junior partner of Washington.

Decade-long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq waged under the pretext of the "war on terror"—a piece of propaganda perpetuated by the exhibition—and justified with a pack of lies about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" devastated entire countries and killed hundreds of thousands of men, women and children.

Then followed the US-NATO war for regime change in Libya, turning it into a so-called "failed state", and the Syrian civil war—with proxy armies armed and funded by US imperialism and its allies in an attempt to replace the country's President Bashar al-Assad with a more pliant Western puppet.

The continuous refugee crisis is the result of this criminal imperialist policy pursued over the last decades. No one has been held accountable for it and the terrible suffering caused the world over. The "Refugees" exhibition continues to let the real criminals off the hook.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site