

# How Postwar Immigration Shaped Canada

Finn Hofbauer

Multiculturalism is often thought of as a key part of Canada's national identity, but it wasn't always this way. ("Statement") Historically, Canadian immigration policy was very restrictive and discriminatory; the ideal immigrant was white, English-speaking, and originating from England or the US. Acceptance was heavily biased towards those who fit the bill, and immigration policies expanded only when necessary (Troper). The Great Depression only led to stricter policies and outright prevention of immigration (Schwinghamer). Ultimately, it was the postwar immigration wave and the following economic boom that led to Canada's multiculturalist society.

**"Countrysides were turned into battlegrounds, and cities were bombed to rubble."**

World War II's ravaging of Europe left thousands of displaced persons seeking refuge. The six years of conflict had left a wake of destruction in Europe; countrysides were turned into battlegrounds, and cities were bombed to rubble. Most civilians evacuated elsewhere, away from cities and towns, but once the war ended in Europe, many were in other countries, without a home. Alongside them were survivors of concentration camps, POWs, and slave labourers. In total, WWII led to more than 55 million people displaced from their home countries. The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration aided in the resettlement of displaced persons and quickly returned many to their countries of origin (Popowycz). However, of the displaced, roughly 1.5 million refused to return to their countries of origin and remained refugees.



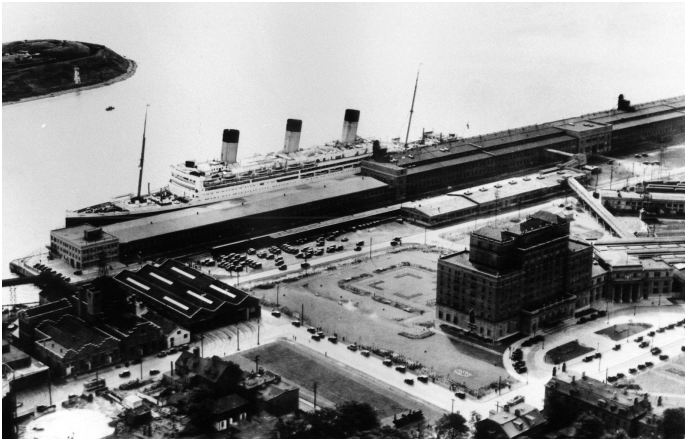
*Displaced persons in Germany, 1945 (Mapham)*

Although Canada was initially reluctant to accept immigrants after the war, its growing economy meant this would soon change. The first group of people that was allowed to immigrate to Canada were war brides and children of Canadian soldiers (Belshaw). Soon thereafter, a bill was passed, allowing Canadian citizens to sponsor the immigration of first-degree relatives (Siegel). Finally, in 1947, the labour shortage created by the postwar economic boom led to the government expanding immigration policy to allow able-bodied refugees to come to Canada (Belshaw). This was generally under a one-year contract to meet labour needs. While earlier generations of immigrants had been mostly workers and farmers, the new wave of displaced persons contained many more well-educated professionals (Parks Canada Agency). Canada had become



*Refugees arriving in Halifax, 1948 (Canada)*

an increasingly industrial nation with immigrants filling jobs in urban areas, in fields such as construction and manufacturing. These changes would not be the the last, as immigration policy continued to evolve in the years following, especially in regards to discrimination.



*Pier 21, where hundreds of thousands of postwar immigrants landed (National Harbours Board)*

Following the postwar boom, immigration continued to expand, drastically shifting Canada's demographics. From 1947 to 1956, Canada saw close to a 4 million-person increase in population. Of that, around 1.5 million were from immigration alone (Statistics Canada, "150 Years"). This growth meant a few things. It changed politics, as immigrants had new priorities and perspectives which politicians had to now consider, as immigrants made up a significant voting group (Belshaw). Additionally, many new citizens had little connection to the British monarchy, which weakened Canada's ties to it (Britannica). Immigrants also had a significant effect on their local communities. Most immigrants ended up in major Canadian cities with many buying houses and starting businesses near those of a similar ethnic background. This led to the formation and growth of ethnic enclaves (Zucchi 14-15). These communities facilitated cultural preservation and provided a social environment for new citizens.

Ultimately, what initially began as an economic necessity soon became a cornerstone of Canadian society. The immigrants who arrived after

World War II quickly adapted to life in Canada and started building new communities across the country. Ethnic neighbourhoods grew and became important parts of many large cities (Zucchi 1). By the mid-1960s, the children of these

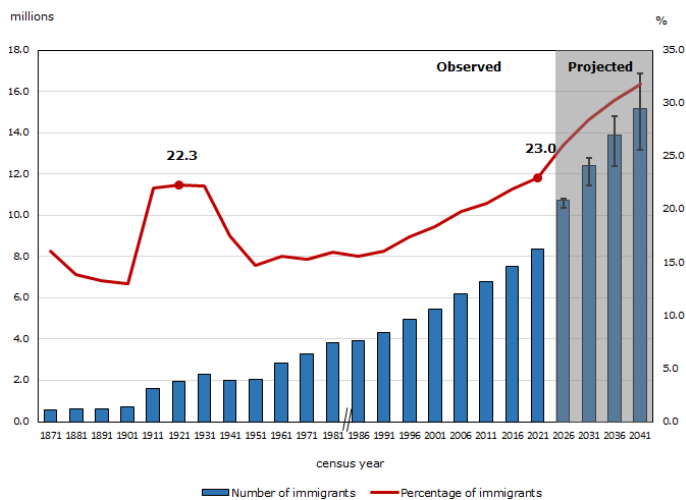
## **"Today, immigrants make up nearly a quarter of Canada's population"**

immigrants were entering schools and joining the workforce, bringing new perspectives and experiences. These growing immigrant populations became an important political force, motivating politicians to pay attention to their needs and experiences (Belshaw). As more immigrants continued to arrive throughout the 20th century, Canadians became more aware of different cultural backgrounds and immigration policies became more inclusive. Today, immigrants make up nearly a quarter of Canada's population and continue to play a crucial role in supporting Canada's economic growth (Statistics Canada, "Immigrants"). Ethnic enclaves still exist across Canada, adding cultural richness to their communities. (Zucchi). Overall, World War II played a pivotal role in shaping Canada's multicultural society. The surge in immigration following the war heavily supported Canada's economy, and



*Vancouver's Chinatown, a famous ethnic neighbourhood, 1960 (Mann)*

acted as a motivation for change. Without this



*Growth of immigrant population and percentage of overall population over time. (Statistics Canada)*

policies would likely have remained restrictive for much longer and Canadian society would be far less diverse.

## Works Cited

“The Arrival of Displaced Persons in Canada, 1945-1951 National Historic Event.” Parks.canada.ca, Parks Canada Agency, 17 June 2022, parks.canada.ca/culture/designation/evenement-event/personnes-deplacees-displaced-persons. Accessed 29 Nov. 2024.

“150 Years of Immigration in Canada.” Statcan.gc.ca, Statistics Canada, 29 June 2016, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016006-eng.htm. Accessed 1 Dec. 2024.

Belshaw, John Douglas. “5.11 Post-War Immigration.” Opentextbc.ca, BCcampus, 17 May 2016, opentextbc.ca/postconfederation/chapter/5-11-post-war-immigration/. Accessed 27 Nov. 2024.

“Canada - Early Postwar Developments | Britannica.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020, www.britannica.com/place/Canada/Early-postwar-developments. Accessed 1 Dec. 2024.

Canada Science and Technology Museum Archives. Refugees Arriving from Europe 1948 Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. 1948, www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=401729611986099&id=100064471908661&set=a.240058598153202. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

“Immigrants Make up the Largest Share of the Population in over 150 Years and Continue to Shape Who We Are as Canadians.” Statistics Canada, Government of Canada, 26 Oct. 2022, www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-

quotidien/221026/dq221026a-eng.htm. Accessed 1 Dec. 2024.

National Harbours Board. Pier 21 in 1934. 1934, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pier21in1934.jpg. Accessed 13 Dec. 2024.

Mann, Grant, and Natural Color Productions, Ltd. Chinatown at Night. Postcard, 1960, www.flickr.com/photos/45379817@N08/6979421330/in/photostream/. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

Mapham, Jim. Displaced Persons and Refugees in Germany. Nitrate, 18 May 1945, www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205205216. Accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

Popowycz, Jennifer. “‘The Last Million:’ Eastern European Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany.” The National WWII Museum, The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, 4 Apr. 2022, www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/last-million-eastern-european-displaced-persons-postwar-germany. Accessed 4 Dec. 2024.

Schwinghamer, Steve. “Deportation from Canada during the Great Depression | Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21.” Pier21.Ca, Peir 21, 20 July 2021, pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/deportation-from-canada-during-great-depression. Accessed 28 Nov. 2024.

Siegel, Leah. “The Postwar Immigrant Wave - British Columbia - an Untold History.” Bcanuntoldhistory.knowledge.ca, Knowledge Network, bcanuntoldhistory.knowledge.ca/1950/the-postwar-immigrant-wave. Accessed 27 Nov. 2024.

“Statement by the Prime Minister on the 50th Anniversary of Canada’s Multiculturalism Policy.” Prime Minister of Canada, 8 Oct. 2021, www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/statements/2021/10/08/statement-prime-minister-50th-anniversary-canadas-multiculturalism.

Troper, Harold. “Immigration in Canada.” The Canadian Encyclopedia, 22 Apr. 2013, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/immigration. Accessed 28 Dec. 2024.

Zucchi, John. A History of Ethnic Enclaves in Canada. 2007. Canadian Historical Association, 2007, pp. 14–15, cha-shc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/5c374f720-fa95.pdf. Accessed 1 Dec. 2024.