

## Introduction

# The Indochinese Refugee Movement and the Launch of Canada's Private Sponsorship Program

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This special issue of *Refuge* comes as Canada is receiving a second tranche of Syrian refugees processed in Beirut in May 2016. They are admitted as government-assisted refugees (GARs), privately sponsored refugees (PSRs), and Blended Visa Officer-Referred (BVOR), a category where the UNHCR selects the refugees for resettlement and the Canadian government and private sponsors share the costs and commitment for settlement of the refugees in Canada.<sup>1</sup> The historical precedent for Canada's Syrian program took place forty years ago when 60,000 refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were admitted. These included 25,978 GARs, and 32,281 under the newly launched private sponsorship program. An additional 1,790 were sponsored by relatives in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

It is not entirely serendipitous that, as shocking images from the Mediterranean motivated Canadians to press their government to react to the needs of the Syrians in 2015 and 2016, Canada's response to the Indochinese refugees in 1979 and 1980 was cited as a model to emulate.<sup>3</sup> In the past three years, a series of academic and public events have focused on the movement of refugees from former Indochina, including events across the country in 2015 that commemorated the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the start of the movement of Indochinese refugees to Canada. In addition, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian groups organized an event in Ottawa recognizing the anniversary of the awarding of the Nansen Medal to the people of Canada. The release

of two acclaimed novels, Vincent Lam's *The Headmasters Wager* and Kim Thuy's *Ru* brought the Indochinese refugee movement into sharp focus for the first time in decades.<sup>4</sup>

The guest editors of this special issue met for the first time in 2012. Mike Molloy was giving a series of lectures at Ontario universities on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Ugandan Asian refugee movement of 1972. His host at York University's Centre for Refugee Studies was the acting director, James C. Simeon. When Simeon learned that Molloy and a group of colleagues from the Canadian Immigration Historical Society (CIHS)<sup>5</sup> were working on a book—*Running on Empty: Canada and the Indochinese Refugee Movement 1975–1980* (McGill-Queen's University Press, Spring 2017)—he suggested that CRS and CIHS host a conference on the refugees from former Indochina. The conference took place in November 2013 at York University and heard the testimonies of Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees. Individually and collectively, these speakers reflected on the processes of becoming refugees, their arrivals in Canada, their first encounters with sponsors, and their long-term adaptation to life in Canada. The conference also included panels of former visa officers, media representatives, political leaders, community activists, and coordinators as well as academics.

Preparation for the 2013 conference revealed a surprising lack of academic attention to Canada's Indochinese refugee movement, given its magnitude, its impact,<sup>6</sup> and

the enormous barriers that confronted refugees in adapting to and integrating into Canada. W. Courtland Robinson's *Terms of Refuge*<sup>7</sup> provides a thorough examination of the refugee crisis and the international response but touches on the Canadian effort only briefly. Howard Adelman's *Canada and the Indochinese Refugees*<sup>8</sup> remains a relevant examination of the policy choices of the government and how Canadian civil society responded but contains little on the overseas operation. Having been published in 1982, the book came too early to describe the challenges that newcomers faced in adapting to a country so vastly different from their own. Lawrence Lam's *Vietnamese-Chinese Refugees in Montreal: Long-Term Settlement* (1985)<sup>9</sup> makes a useful contribution in this regard, as does his *From Being Uprooted to Surviving: Resettlement of Vietnamese-Chinese "Boat People" in Montreal, 1980-1990* (1996).<sup>10</sup> And Doreen Indra's "Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement: A Research Bibliography," (1984)<sup>11</sup> makes a useful contribution in listing the most helpful sources available.

A decade after the refugees arrived there was a spate of studies on how the refugees had fared in different parts of Canada. Anh Ngo, one of the authors in this special issue, identified 85 scholarly works in a search of social sciences websites.<sup>12</sup> Among these, Morton Beiser's *Strangers at the Gate: The "Boat People's" First Ten Years in Canada*<sup>13</sup> is perhaps the strongest, but it focuses exclusively on British Columbia. *Ten Years Later: Indochinese Communities in Canada*<sup>14</sup> and *Uprooting, Loss and Adaptation: The Resettlement of Indochinese Refugees in Canada*<sup>15</sup> provide insights into Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian communities in different parts of the country. There is no overarching study that covers the experience of these refugees Canada-wide, and little academic work seems to have been done since the 1990s.

The 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon in April 2015 was marked by events across the country to recall the loss and suffering of the refugee experiences, acknowledge the welcome they received in Canada, and celebrate the rebuilding of lives here. The anniversary provided an occasion for the proclamation by Parliament on 30 April 2015 of a bill championed by Senator Thanh Hai Ngo designating 30 April as Journey to Freedom Day, despite opposition of the Vietnamese government and parts of the Canadian Vietnamese community.<sup>16</sup>

In June 2016, the Vietnamese Canadian Federation, Cambodian Association of the Ottawa Valley, and the Laotian Association of the Ottawa Valley came together to organize an event in Ottawa to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the awarding of the Nansen Medal to the people of Canada for their efforts on behalf of refugees. Individuals from these three organizations are collaborating with Carleton

University, the Canadian Museum of History, the Canadian Museum Association, Pier 21, and CIHS, among others, on an ambitious project called "Hearts of Freedom" to collect artifacts and 200 oral histories and produce a documentary and public history book. Involvement of the Canadian Museum of History has positioned community leaders to argue successfully that, when the Canadian History Gallery is opened next year, the arrival of the "boat people" and other Indochinese refugees will be part of the exhibit. Complementary initiatives are underway or contemplated in Montreal and Toronto.

This special issue of *Refuge* covers three broad areas dealing with the Indochinese refugee movement in Canada: the human experiences and memories of the refugees that led to their flight from their homelands and their ongoing settlement within Canada; Canadian refugee policies that shaped the Indochinese refugee movement in specific ways and how they have subsequently evolved; and how the mayor of one Canadian city mobilized his fellow citizens to receive Indochinese refugees almost two years before the rest of Canada.

**Priscilla Koh's** article examines the recollections of six Vietnamese Canadians from different regions of Vietnam. Their accounts reveal a rich diversity of experiences covering efforts to accommodate to the new Communist regime; the conditions that triggered decisions to escape and the consequent splitting of families; the boat experiences—smooth sailing and terrifying; life in the refugee camps where robbery, rape and murder were not uncommon but where kindness and mutual assistance were part of the experience as well; the decision to come to Canada and the post-arrival struggles. In some cases those interviewed managed to find employment, obtain university degrees, and pursue professional careers. Others were not so fortunate and struggled for years. The value of studies like Koh's is that they remind us of the human experiences of fleeing oppression and seeking asylum and that within each population displacement there are myriad individual experiences.

**Anh Ngo's** article delves deeper into the human experience with an examination of the barriers, divisions, and tensions within the Vietnamese community in Toronto. Sources of discord include intergroup differences stemming from war and displacement, mediated identities of region, class, and the different waves of arrivals. She examines discourses about the Vietnamese as "legitimate," "productive," and "inassimilable" refugees before discussing the results of a study involving focus groups and in-depth interviews delving into the frictions that exist within the community. Ngo highlights the problems faced by refugees from former North Vietnam and a tendency within the community to disparage later arrivals as "economic" refugees as opposed to the "genuine refugees" of the earlier arrivals. Her study

demonstrates the heterogeneity—and at times divisions—within populations that are too often outwardly perceived in group terms.

In the next paper **Anna N. Vu** and **Vic Satzewich** provide insights into the roles and perceptions of NGO settlement workers in refugee camps in Southeast Asia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. On the basis of interviews and information gathered from 14 former settlement workers, Satzewich and Vu examined the role of these “meso-level” workers in assisting refugees to navigate the selection systems of Western countries of resettlement. According to settlement workers interviewed for the study, refugees presented their situations to national resettlement officials in ways intended to maximize their chances of acceptance, based in part on rumours about which refugees were successful and why, as well as advice, not always reliable, from friends and families already in resettlement countries. The authors conclude that the experience of working with refugees had reciprocal benefits for workers and refugees alike and that the workers were profoundly changed by the experience.

The three next articles take the Indochinese refugee program as a point of departure and then follow three distinct but complementary vectors to the present. **Michael Casasola** examines how Canadian and UNHCR resettlement policies were affected by the Indochinese refugee experience and how they have alternatively diverged and converged over the succeeding decades. **Robert C. Batarseh** looks at the Indochinese Designated Class Regulation the government implemented on the eve of the 1979/80 resettlement program, how it was later modified to bring it into compliance with the Comprehensive Plan of Action, and how it foreshadowed current UNHCR and Canadian group processing practices. **Shauna Labman** discusses how the foundational “additionality” principle, which held that privately sponsored refugees would be admitted over and above the government’s refugee resettlement commitments, has been eroded over the years.

**Michael Casasola’s** article characterizes the resettlement of Indochinese refugees as a defining movement for refugee resettlement internationally and for Canada. Almost two million Indochinese were resettled between 1975 and 1997 from countries of first asylum and through orderly departure programs. Two innovations shaped the Canadian response: the Indochinese Designated Class that simplified the selection process, and the private refugee sponsorship program, which engaged tens of thousands of Canadians in helping new arrivals to adjust and greatly increased the number of refugees Canada was willing to resettle. Casasola describes the evolution of UNHCR’s post-Indochinese resettlement policy and the institutions (e.g., the Working Group on Resettlement and Annual Tripartite Consultations on

Resettlement, the Global Consultations, etc.) and the policies and practices that emerged to reinforce UNHCR leadership. He identifies the Canadian role helping to shape UNHCR policies and initiatives and traces parallel developments in Canada, including the fundamental changes implemented through the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA).

**Robert C. Batarseh’s** contribution covers the same period, but with a focus on definitions and the evolution of contemporary group-processing practices employed in partnership by UNHCR, Canada, and other resettlement countries. He describes Canadian experimentation with alternatives to the UN Convention Refugee definition going back to the Oppressed Minority Policy of the early 1970s, the three designated classes that emerged from the 1976 Immigration Act and successor categories rooted in the IRPA. Batarseh describes Canada’s role in revitalizing resettlement within UNHCR in the early 2000s. Perhaps the most interesting part of this article is his description of how concerns about pull factors, fraud, and security along with resource constraints has led UNHCR and the resettlement countries to a resettlement model that seeks out homogenous and self-contained groups of refugees that can be efficiently group processed, skipping time-consuming individual refugees’ status determination.

While Batarseh follows the impact of the definitional innovations that Canada pioneered in the Indochinese program, **Shauna Labman** examines how the Canadian private sponsorship program, launched just as the Indochinese exodus reached crisis proportion, has fared over the past 40 years. The viability of the sponsorship program is not merely a parochial concern: Canadian sponsors have provided quality, durable solutions for an estimated 225,000 refugees since the program was launched in 1978. Conceived as a complementary partnership, sponsorship, according to Labman, plays out as a “tug-of-war between the conflicting interests of government and sponsors over selection control and numbers.” When the program was first marketed to the churches and the voluntary sector, the notion of “additionality” was central: privately sponsored refugees would be admitted over and above government refugee targets and, therefore, would increase the overall Canadian contribution. In addition, sponsors would be free to choose their refugees by name or group. Labman documents a series of experiments where the government and sponsors payed varying proportions of the first-year settlement costs. She then explores the erosion of the bedrock additionality principle, particularly under the Harper government, including blurring the distinction between the two streams and the imposition of more complicated rules and procedures. Particularly troubling for sponsors was a pattern of ministers announcing international commitments with heavy

implications for the sponsors without prior consultation. How much of this was driven by ideology and how much by severe budget constraints and soaring settlement costs is unclear, but given the recent change in government, this article is most timely.

In the final article, **Giovanna Roma** describes how a few pieces of scattered documentation enabled her to reconstruct a forgotten piece of important Canadian refugee history. The evidence reveals that in the summer of 1977, two full years before the establishment of Operation Lifeline and Project 4000, the mayor of Windsor, Ontario, established a committee of civic leaders and activist clergy to sponsor Vietnamese “boat people.” Before there was even a formal private sponsorship program, the mayor’s committee had reached out to the visa office in Singapore and was receiving refugees, including from the famous *Hai Hong*. This local initiative had a surprisingly far-flung impact.

This special issue of *Refuge* was conceived as a vehicle for stimulating scholarship about the Indochinese refugee movement and its consequences. It is important to recall that when Saigon fell in 1975, Canada’s refugee resettlement programs had been open to non-Europeans for only five years and the intake of refugees from non-traditional sources 228 Tibetans, 100 Chinese from Hong Kong, approximately 7,000 Asians expelled from Uganda<sup>17</sup> (virtually all of the last were fluent English speakers)—was rather modest. The decision to admit 50,000 refugees fleeing by sea, and overland refugees from camps in Thailand, few of whom had ties in Canada, was and is remarkable. The rough and ready assessment of these refugees’ capacities in English and French done by the visa officers in Southeast Asia, based simply on whether an interpreter had to be used during interview, gives a hint of the challenge these newcomers would face: English speakers 4.3 per cent; French speakers 2.5 per cent; English and French 1.4 per cent; neither 91.8 per cent.<sup>18</sup>

Following the Indochinese, refugees from non-European sources would become the rule rather than the exception, so we would argue that the experiences of this large and highly varied movement has lessons to teach us far beyond the impressions gathered at the end of the first decade or so, both about the adaptation experiences of the refugees and the efficacy of Canada’s dual-track resettlement system.

One frequently hears that the private sponsorship program is superior to the government program.<sup>19</sup> By the end of 1980, the task force set up to manage the admission of the 50, then 60,000 refugees was receiving anecdotal indications to the contrary—the monthly allowance the government-assisted refugees received from the government and the independence (and privacy) it brought was highly valued and envied by the sponsored refugees. This was noted a

decade later in studies by Yuen-Fong Woon and Beiser. More work could be done on this issue.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, there has been little attention to the fact that a very high proportion of refugees were Sino-Vietnamese (30 per cent of the 60,000 identified with a Chinese mother tongue<sup>21</sup>) and it would be fascinating to know, four decades later, the extent to which they maintain a distinct identity or have perhaps assimilated in the larger Canadian Chinese community.

The locations of the private sponsors and deliberate destining decisions by the Immigration Department between 1979 and 1980 ensured that the refugees who came were spread across the country as never before, including small towns and rural communities. As early as 1980 officials were reporting a significant degree of secondary migration from smaller towns and rural areas in the direction of Canada’s largest cities. This would continue.<sup>22</sup> However not all moved on, and in an era when smaller Canadian towns and communities are desperate to attract and retain population, it would be fascinating to understand the reasons and factors that caused some to remain in the smaller communities.

It would be interesting to document how each of the Indochinese refugee communities has organized itself within Canada. As we note above, and some of the contributors have done in their articles, these communities have been very active in the celebrations that have marked the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon and mobilizing to get official recognition of 30 April as the annual day in Canada to mark the Journey to Freedom Day for all those who have sought asylum in Canada.

It is remarkable to note that there has been as little scholarship on the Indochinese refugee movement, the single largest and perhaps the most successful resettlement program in Canadian history. This special issue of *Refuge*, we hope, will serve as a primer for further research on this most fascinating humanitarian effort on the part of both the people of Canada and all levels of government in welcoming some 60,000 Indochinese refugees in such a short period to their country. A public policy initiative of this magnitude required bold political leadership, a dedicated public service that was willing to brave harsh and even hostile conditions at times, and a galvanized Canadian public that wanted to assist. It was a remarkable period that reminds us of what we are capable of in the humanitarian field when we are committed to assist those in need of refuge from persecution.

The Indochinese refugee movement has come to serve as a model for how to respond to our present-day refugee crisis that is unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea and in other parts of the world at unprecedented levels. Now, the new “boat people,” predominantly Syria refugees, are seeking



refuge from protracted armed conflict that has resulted in some 470,000 killed and over 4.2 million displaced.<sup>23</sup>

Our hope is that this collection will demonstrate how the Indochinese refugee movement has left its indelible stamp on Canadian society. But, equally, it has afforded Canada the opportunity to build on what has come before in resettlement programs. We hope that this special issue of *Refuge* will shine further light and provide additional understanding for the key elements and aspects of the Indochinese refugee movement that will prove helpful for forging future humanitarian refugee resettlement programs in Canada and abroad.

#### NOTES

- 1 Jacquie Miller, "By the Numbers: Privately-Sponsored versus Government-Sponsored Refugees," *Ottawa Citizen*, 26 February 2016, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/by-the-numbers-privately-sponsored-and-government-sponsored-refugees>. See the Government of Canada website at Blended Visa Officer-Referral Program: Sponsoring Refugees, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/vor.asp>. See also Michaela Hynie and Jennifer Hyndman, "From Newcomer to Canadian: Making Refugee Integration Work; Human Settlement Must Involve Creating the Right Conditions for Refugees to Be Integrated into Their New Communities," *Policy Options Politique*, 17 May 2016, <http://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/may-2016/from-newcomer-to-canadian-making-refugee-integration-work/>.
- 2 Employment and Immigration Canada, *Indochinese Refugees: The Canadian Response, 1979 and 1980* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1982), 20.
- 3 Peter Goodspeed, Atkinson Series, "Can Canada Duplicate Its Boat People Rescue with the Syrian Refugees?" *thestar.com*, 26 September 2014, [https://www.thestar.com/news/atkinsonseries/2014/09/26/can\\_canada\\_duplicate\\_its\\_boat\\_people\\_rescue\\_with\\_syrian\\_refugees.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/atkinsonseries/2014/09/26/can_canada_duplicate_its_boat_people_rescue_with_syrian_refugees.html). Judy Trinh, "Vietnamese Boat People of More Than Three Decades Ago Now Thriving, Proud Canadians; Drowned Syrian Boy 'Could Have Been You,' Sino-Vietnamese Mom Tells CBC Ottawa Reporter Judy Trinh," *CBC News*, Ottawa, 11 September 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/vietnamese-boat-people-of-more-than-3-decades-ago-now-thriving-proud-canadians-1.3223505>; New America Media: Immigration, "Déjà Vu: Syrian and Indochinese Refugee Movements," accessed 14 June 2016, <http://newamericamedia.org/2016/02/deja-vu-syrian-and-indochinese-refugee-movements.php>. See the Canadian Immigration Historical Society, CIHS *Bulletin* 73-A, April 2015, "The Indochinese Movement: Fortieth Anniversary," <http://cihs-shic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/bulletin-73-a-2.pdf>. It is also worth noting that this occurred in the midst of the 2015 federal election campaign and had a dramatic impact on the outcome of the election. For instance, see John Iverson, "Migrant Crisis Is Suddenly the Biggest Issue in the Election Campaign—and Harper Is on the High Wire," *National Post*, 3 September 2015, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/john-iverson-migrant-crisis-suddenly-the-biggest-issue-in-the-election-campaign-and-harpers-on-the-high-wire>. "Election Primer: Four Things to Know before You Vote," *Globe and Mail*, 16 October 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canada-and-the-refugee-crisis-four-things-to-know-before-youvote/article26363975/>. For the federal election results, see Elections Canada, 19 October 2015, Election Results, <http://enr.elections.ca/National.aspx?lang=e>.
- 4 See, for instance, the Canadian Immigration Historical Society, "Fortieth Anniversary of the Indochinese Refugee Movement in Canada," <http://cihs-shic.ca/indochina/>.
- 5 [www.cihs-shic.ca](http://www.cihs-shic.ca).
- 6 Canada's Vietnamese community today numbers some 300,000.
- 7 W. Courtland Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (London: Zed Books, 1998).
- 8 Howard Adelman, *Canada and the Indochinese Refugees* (Regina: L. A. Weigl Educational Associates, 1982).
- 9 Lawrence Lam, *Vietnamese Chinese Refugees in Montreal: Long-Term Settlement* (Downsview, ON: University of Toronto–York University Joint Centre on Modern East Asia Canada and the Pacific Programme, 1985).
- 10 Lawrence Lam, *From Being Uprooted to Surviving: Resettlement of Vietnamese-Chinese "Boat People" in Montreal, 1980–1990* (Toronto: York Lanes, 1996).
- 11 Doreen Indra, "Southeast Asian Resettlement in Canada: A Research Bibliography" (Ottawa: Canadian Asian Studies Association, Carleton University, 1984), Forced Migration Online Digital Library, [repository.forcedmigration.org/pdf/?pid=fmo:2166](http://repository.forcedmigration.org/pdf/?pid=fmo:2166).
- 12 Ngo consulted Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, PsycINFO, and Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts. Articles in these sources cover the period 1970 to 2016.
- 13 Morton Bieser, *Strangers at the Gate: The "Boat People's" First Ten Years in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 1999).
- 14 Kwok B. Chan, Louis-Jacques Dorais, and Doreen Marie Indra, eds., *Ten Years Later: Indochinese Communities in Canada* (Montreal: Canadian Asian Studies Association, 1988).
- 15 Kwok B. Chan and Doreen Marie Indra, eds., *Uprooting, Loss and Adaptation: The Resettlement of Indochinese Refugees in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Public Health Association, 1987).
- 16 *Journey to Freedom Day Act*, S.C. 2015, c. 14, Assented to 2015-04-23, <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/J-0.9/page-1.html>. See also Office of the Honourable Senator

- Thanh Hai Ngo, "Journey to Freedom Day Act," [http://senatorngo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Full-Binder\\_Journey-to-Freedom-Day-Act.pdf](http://senatorngo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Full-Binder_Journey-to-Freedom-Day-Act.pdf).
- 17 Employment and Immigration Canada, *Indochinese Refugees*, 32.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 19 "Why So Many Canadians Privately Sponsor Syrian Refugees," *Economist*, 3 March 2016, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/03/economist-explains-2>. "Research indicates that privately-sponsored refugees become more successful than their government-sponsored counterparts or asylum seekers who arrive under their own steam, perhaps because they have a support group from the moment they arrive."
- 20 Yuen-Fong Woon in Chan and Indra, *Ten Years Later*, 141; and Bieser, *Strangers at the Gate*, 121.
- 21 Employment and Immigration Canada, *Indochinese Refugees*, 23.
- 22 J. D. Love, deputy minister/chairman, Employment and Immigration Canada, "Indochinese Refugee Program: 1980-81," 4 September 1980, file 8700-1 pt. 3, vol. 1836, RG 76, Library and Archives Canada. See also Louis-Jacques Dorais, *The Cambodians, Laotians and Vietnamese in Canada*, Canada's Ethnic Group Series booklet no. 28 (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 2000), 11.
- 23 UNHCR Syria, Reporting Team Damascus, Syria, *Protecting and Supporting the Displaced in Syria: UNHCR Syria End of Year Report 2015*, [www.unhcr.org/56cad5a99.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/56cad5a99.pdf). See also Anne Barnard, "Death Toll from the War in Syria Now 470,000, Group Finds," *New York Times*, 11 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/world/middleeast/death-toll-from-war-in-syria-now-470000-group-finds.html>.

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