

When Faith Becomes a Reason to Flee: Jewish Refugees (1933–1945) and Rohingya Refugees (2012–Present)

Throughout history, religion has been a powerful force, shaping cultures, building communities, and offering people a sense of identity and belonging. But when the concept of belief and faith becomes a basis for fear, hatred, and violence, it can instead divide entire societies and tear millions of lives apart. Across different time periods and continents, countless individuals have been forced to leave everything behind because their beliefs did not align with those of the majority. These people are also known as “refugees,” defined by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention as someone who is forced to flee their country due to a fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (UNHCR, 2025). This essay focuses specifically on the religious dimension of the refugee crisis, comparing Jewish refugees under Nazi Germany (1933-1945) and Rohingya Muslim refugees in Myanmar (primarily from 2012-present). While ethnic identity played a role in both cases, religion was a central justification for their persecution. In both contexts, religious identity created a barrier and marked these communities as “outsiders” and eventually forced them to migrate in search of a better future. This essay will first examine how religion was the central cause of persecution. Second, it will compare how religious persecution led to displacement and loss of national belonging. Third, it analyses how international responses to religious refugees were shaped by political hesitation and religious bias. Finally, it explores how religion intersected with gender to expose refugee women to unique forms of violence. In doing so, this essay argues that religion has consistently been used as a tool for exclusion and persecution, driving refugee crises across time. From Nazi Germany to modern-day Myanmar, religious identity has marked communities as threats, leading to violence, statelessness, and forced migration which are patterns that continue to repeat globally.

First and foremost, it is crucial to underline how religious identity was treated as a threat in both Germany and Myanmar, as a factor to be truly feared. Under Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime in the 1930s, Jewish people were often blamed for Germany’s large-scale issues. Nazi propaganda painted them as dangerous, untrustworthy, and “lesser” people. The

anti-semitic hatred led to organized discrimination, Jewish people lost their jobs, their shops were boycotted, their books were burned, and their rights were slowly being stripped away. In 1933 alone, approximately 45,000 Jews and 10,000 non-Jewish Germans fled Germany (Anne Frank House, 2018). During the events known as Kristallnacht in 1938, 267 synagogues were destroyed, 7,500 businesses were looted, and around 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. They were seen as not just religious outsiders, but enemies of the nation. Similarly, the Rohingya in Myanmar have faced the same kind of state-driven hatred. As a Muslim minority in a Buddhist-majority country, they've been pushed out of society for decades. In 1982, Myanmar passed a law that denied them citizenship, even though many had lived there for generations. The government calls them "Bengali" immigrants, outsiders in their own land. After a massive wave of violence broke out in Rakhine, more than 742,000 Rohingya, half of whom were children, ended up fleeing to Bangladesh in 2017 (UNHCR, 2024). Because they are Muslim, their villages have been destroyed, their families killed, and their futures stolen. Since 2021, more than 1.3 million refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar have been hosted in other countries, and over 75% of the Rohingya refugee population are women and children (UNHCR, 2024). Entire communities were burned down by Myanmar's military, forcing over a million Rohingya to flee, mostly to Bangladesh. In these parallel experiences, religion was the reason for exclusion causing millions of refugees to be displaced and taken into a completely new life. These communities were criminalised for believing in a different God, treated like threats for holding on to their faith and it became the reason they were hunted.

Second, religious persecution often leads to more than just the physical act of migration but also a loss of national identity and legal status. Refugees around the world are forced to leave behind their homes, cultures, and often even their names, becoming invisible in a world that struggles to accept them. Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany were not always legally considered stateless, but in many ways, they were treated as though they were. Many countries at the time, including the United States, placed strict immigration quotas and bureaucratic barriers that made it nearly impossible for Jews to find refuge. For instance, U.S. policies during the war required financial guarantees and background checks that most fleeing Jews could not provide. Between 1940 and 1945, only about 100,000 to 110,000 German-speaking Jewish refugees entered the U.S., despite the fact that over 6 million Jews were being persecuted or killed (Rutland, 2023). This loss was not only physical but deeply

emotional, affecting how refugees saw themselves and their place in the world. Hannah Arendt, a German-Jewish philosopher and refugee herself, captures this pain in her essay *We Refugees* (1943) describing how losing a home, language, and community leaves refugees feeling invisible and disconnected. She writes, “we lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life; we lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world; we lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings.” . This quote from her essay illustrates how refugees experience physical pain as well as a loss of social and legal identity because they were denied citizenship, protection, and a place in society. This depicts how many Jews including Arendt no longer felt connected to the countries they came from or the ones they escaped to. In this way, they experienced psychological statelessness, even if not always legally. Likewise, the Rohingya refugees in Myanmar have faced similar exclusion and denial of citizenship, reflecting a continuing pattern of religious persecution that strips people of both legal status and a sense of belonging. According to Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law, Rohingya Muslims are completely denied citizenship. They're not just rejected by society, they are legally invisible. This means they cannot access healthcare, education, or move freely at all (UNHCR, 2024). Over one million Rohingya have been forced to flee to places like Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, which is now the world’s largest refugee camp (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2023). These camps offer little more than survival, with no chance for proper schooling, employment, or a return home. In the testimony of Razia Sultana, a Rohingya survivor and human rights advocate, many refugees live in deep mental pain, shame, and isolation. In 2016 and 2017, 745,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar to Bangladesh. While Sultana was supporting these refugees in Bangladesh she said, “More than 300 villages burned down overnight, just like a massacre.” Sultana explains that “People fought for their life, they jumped the border, crossed the Myanmar river and took shelter in Bangladesh... it was like a disaster – people didn’t have anywhere to stay or any food.” Her story shows that statelessness forces people to leave their homes and also strips them of legal protections and basic rights, putting their safety and dignity at great risk (Laignee Barron, 2019). Although Jews and Rohingya differ in terms of legal definitions, with Jews often holding national citizenship before fleeing, both groups experienced profound emotional trauma and lifelong displacement. In this case, religion, instead of providing comfort or protection, became the reason for being torn away from one’s roots and sense of belonging.

Third, the international response to religious refugees has often been slow, limited, and influenced by political interests, racism, and institutional failure. While many countries claim to support human rights, their actual treatment of religious refugees has shown that empathy is selective and dependent on the circumstance. During World War II, the United States and other Western nations failed to provide real protection for most Jewish refugees. Despite growing evidence of Nazi violence, immigration policies remained strict. The US only allowed 27,000 immigrants per year from Germany and Austria combined, and even those numbers were rarely reached due to paperwork demands, security fears, and anti-Semitic attitudes (Rutland, 2023). The War Refugee Board and Jewish organisations did manage to help some refugees, but over 6 million Jews were murdered while much of the world remained passive (Popowycz, 2022). For the Rohingya, the situation is not markedly better. Many Southeast Asian nations, such as Thailand and Malaysia, have not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, which means that Rohingya refugees have no guaranteed legal protections. Even though countries like Malaysia and Thailand do host large numbers of Rohingya, estimated around 168,400 in Malaysia and 84,000 in Thailand, they are usually treated as undocumented migrants, denied work, education, and protection (UNHCR, 2024). As of today, many of these refugees live in camps with no right to work, travel, or receive formal education. Abdul Hassan, a 55-year-old Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh's Nayapara camp, shares: "As a Muslim, I could not pray freely [in Burma]... I hope for a good situation in Burma, that the Muslims can pray their prayers, and that my children can get an education." His words reflect how religious identity plays a key role in exclusion and forced displacement, while the world's weak response shows that politics often matter more than doing what's right. He continues, "We have one room for twelve people... The women cannot move freely without a burqa... Separate latrines for women would be very good." His account shows that basic needs such as space, privacy, and dignity are still unmet decades after displacement. Despite fleeing in 1992, Hassan and his family remain in limbo, while other Rohingya refugees who are being displaced more recently are on the same path (Medecins Sans Frontières, 2002). The stories of both Jewish and Rohingya refugees reveal a clear pattern that religious persecution continues to produce stateless communities, while the global response is hesitant with no nation directly acting on the issue. Whether in 1940s Europe or modern Southeast Asia, states have repeatedly failed to take meaningful action to protect religious minorities in crisis.

Religion does not affect all refugees in the same way as it often intersects with gender. The violence faced by refugee women is often even more brutal and dehumanising than men due to the role of religion between genders. In both Jewish and Rohingya communities, women experienced targeted attacks that left lasting scars on certain individuals and even entire societies. Jewish women during this time were often viewed as the least valuable. Their bodies were used for Nazi experiments, sexual abuse, and forced sterilization. In concentration camps, many women were raped by soldiers or subjected to horrifying medical tests. Jewish women, in particular, were targeted by Nazi doctors like Dr. Josef Mengele, who performed brutal experiments on female prisoners in Auschwitz, using their bodies for forced sterilisations, twin studies, and other inhuman procedures that stripped them of dignity and life (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). Their Jewish identity made them enemies of the state, while their female identity made them vulnerable to violence. They were killed, stripped of all dignity, and used as objects to be tested, humiliated, and destroyed. Rohingya women have faced similarly horrifying experiences. During military attacks on Rohingya villages, rape was used as a weapon of war. According to reports by Razia Sultana, women were gang-raped, mutilated, and often beaten to deaths in front of their families. Survivors face lifelong trauma, and even when they escape to refugee camps, they are often blamed or rejected by their own communities (Laignee Barron, 2019). Their experiences are silenced not just by the military but also by cultural shame around sexual violence. Being Muslim and female, these women are punished twice, first by those who attack them and again by a world that failed to protect or even acknowledge their suffering. As Wai Wai Nu, a Rohingya refugee, activist, and former political prisoner, explains, “personally, as a Rohingya woman, I feel that I have been subject to greater discrimination than if I were a Rohingya man or if I were a non-Rohingya woman. It is hard to describe this discrimination because it’s not visible or easily measurable. I can just feel it.” These painful experiences show that gender and religion multiply the pain for these vulnerable women (Nu, 2016). Being a woman of faith, whether Jewish or Muslim, can mean facing the worst forms of abuse during times of displacement.

Religion has long shaped societies and offered people meaning, but in the cases of Jewish and Rohingya refugees, it became a source of suffering, exclusion, and displacement. Both communities were persecuted for what they believed, turning a deeply personal part of

human identity into a reason for violence. As seen through their histories, religious identities led to discrimination, forced migration, and the painful loss of legal status and national belonging. International responses, then and now, have often been defined by delay, political convenience, and a lack of true empathy. Furthermore, when religion intersects with gender, women face even more extreme forms of brutality and silence. The experiences of Jewish and Rohingya refugees show religious persecutions are not a thing of the past, it is an ongoing crisis that continues to displace and destroy lives. Recognizing these patterns is not enough, the global community must take faster, fairer and more humane action to protect those who are targeted simply for their faith. Only then can religion return to being a source of peace rather than a cause of pain. This devastating reality urges us to remain vigilant about persecution happening today, to investigate and respond to crises beyond those widely known, and to expand research into other regions and groups affected by religious discrimination. Only through ongoing awareness and commitment can we hope to break the cycle of religious exclusion and violence solely based on faith.

Work Cited

Ali, A. (2017, April 25). *"We Refugees" (1943) – an essay by Hannah Arendt.*

<https://amroali.com/2017/04/refugees-essay-hannah-arendt/>

Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. (2023, October 20). *Refugee protection in Southeast Asia.* Bpb.de.

<https://www.bpb.de/themen/migration-integration/regionalprofile/english-version-country-profiles/541947/refugee-protection-in-southeast-asia/>

Laignee Barron. (2019, March 27). *"I Am Doing This for Every Place Where Rape Is a Weapon of War." Meet the Woman Documenting Sexual Violence Against Myanmar's Rohingya.* Time; Time.

<https://time.com/5559388/razia-sultana-rohingya-myanmar-sexual-violence-documentation/>

Medecins Sans Frontières. (2002, April 1). *Rohingya refugees - testimonies* | MSF. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) International.

<https://www.msf.org/rohingya-refugees-testimonies>

Nu, W. (2016). *Testimony with Wai Wai Nu*.

<https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Testimony%20with%20Wai%20Wai%20Nu.pdf>

Popowycz, J. (2022, April 4). “*The Last Million:*” *Eastern European Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*. The National WWII Museum | New Orleans.

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/last-million-eastern-european-displaced-persons-postwar-germany>

Rutland, S. D. (2023). *The Unwanted: Refugees, Migration and Resettlement*.

Psu.pb.unizin.org.

<https://psu.pb.unizin.org/holocaust3rs/chapter/4-1b-the-unwanted-refugees-migration-and-resettlement/>

The (im)possibilities of escaping 1933 – 1942. (2018, September 28). *Anne Frank House*.

Anne Frank Website; Gertjan Broek.

<https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/impossibilities-escaping-1933-1942/>

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2019). Josef Mengele | Biography & Facts. In

Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Josef-Mengele>

UNHCR. (2024, August 22). *Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained*. [Www.unrefugees.org](http://www.unrefugees.org).

<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/>

UNHCR. (2025). *The 1951 Refugee Convention*. UNHCR.

<https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>