

# Daniel Defoe, *A Brief History of the Poor Palatine Refugees* (1709)

## Abstract

In the eighteenth century, the term “Palatines” was a widely used term for German emigrants in the Kingdom of Great Britain. And in fact, the majority of the thousands of people who emigrated from the Holy Roman Empire to Great Britain in 1709 within a very short period of time were actually Palatines. The devastation caused by wars as well as hunger and poverty due to the unusually cold and harsh winter of 1708/09 were the main motives of the Palatines for emigration, along with religious disputes. Additionally, hopes triggered by a widely known pamphlet regarding the British colony of Carolina in North America drove the Palatines in droves to sail to Great Britain. The great number of migrants (around 13,500) posed huge logistical problems for the British Crown and the population, fueling resentment against the “Poor Palatines.” One of the voices calling for charity was Daniel Defoe (c.1660-1731), the world-famous and popular author of *Robinson Crusoe*. In his *Brief History*, he advocates for the integration of the Palatinate people while using the rhetorical devices customary in such polemic pamphlets. Defoe finally refers to the value of immigrants for the wealth and prosperity of a nation and cites the example of the reception of the Huguenots in Brandenburg after 1685. (See: Edict of Potsdam 1685)

## Source

“Honoured Sir,

In the last Letter you gave me the Honour of receiving from you, besides other material Subjects worthy your curious and learned Pen, you were pleas'd to say, That the News of the Arrival of so many poor distress'd Palatines, in a Time when there was no flagrant Persecution in those Territories, was a great Surprize to the People in your Country; and that admitting and subsisting so many Strangers in South Britain, in a Time when Trading was low, Employment scarce, a long War on our Hands, and all sorts of Provisions at such excessive Rates, was so variously discours'd among you, with plausible Arguments pro and con, that it seem'd difficult to determine, whether those that spoke in Favour of receiving and supporting the Palatines, or those that vehemently oppos'd the Admission of any more Strangers into England, (especially as Affairs are now circumstantiated) are in the Right? Some will have it, that entertaining and making future Provision for the Palatines, in their present deplorable Condition, 'till they can be so dispos'd of as to support themselves by their own Industry and honest Labour, is not only a great Act of Christian Charity, but an Honour, and a considerable Advantage to the whole British Nation, by augmenting its Strength and Grandeur, promoting Trade, and increasing the Riches of the Kingdom: Whilst others loudly declaim against that Opinion, and say, That bringing in such great Numbers of Foreigners at this Juncture, is, to make Provisions still dearer; to eat the Bread out of the Mouths of our Native Handicrafts-Men and labouring People, and increase the Number of our Poor, which are too many, and too great a Burden to the Nation already. This Objection, Sir, you are Pleas'd to say, which fills too many Mouths with Noise and Clamour, is none of your raising our countenancing, (and I already believe it) being entirely resign'd to the charitable Side, and to obey her Majesty's Command, and follow her Religious Example, in doing your utmost towards the Relief of these distress'd Protestant Brethren; only you would be supply'd with Arguments from London, which you call the Fountain-Head of Discourse to answer the Pretensions and Clamour of Persons prejudic'd against the poor Palatines, that you may thereby be able to answer their Objections, in order to promote Interest of those suffering Christians, when the

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Briefs for that Purpose shall be read among you, with design to make your Collections bear some Proportion to the Necessities of the miserable Strangers. To this, Sir, you are pleas'd to add a modest Request, That I would also accomodate you with the exact Number of the Palatines already arriv'd? From what Provinces they came? How they were reduc'd to these Extremities? That Methods were taken for their Subsistence at their first coming? How since? And after what manner they are to be dispos'd of, that it may be rebound to the eternal Honour of her Majesty, the Glory of our Religion, and the Advantage of the Nation, themselves, and their Posterities? Now, Sir, that I might comply with your Commands, gratify your Expectations, and answer the charitable Designs mention'd in your Enquiry, I have for some Time made it my Business to inform my self of every particular Circumstance contain'd in your Letter, which I hope will apologize for delaying my Answer, since I would not ground it upon private Fancies, erroneous Suggestions, or vulgar Reports, but upon such authentick Testimonies, and warrantable Proceedings, as might become me to give, and you to receive and communicate to other good Men like your self, who I fear have been too much impos'd upon by false Notions in Policy, heterodox Maxims in point of Religion, and scandalous Reflexions upon the legislative Powers; or else it could not be a Doubt at this Time of Day, wether multiplying the Number of Inhabitants conduces to the Strength, Grandeur, and Wealth of a Kingdom, since it's the constant and experimented Principle of alle the rational part of Mankind, that People are the Riches, Honour, and Strength of a Nation, and that Wealth increases in an equal Proportion to the additional Number of Inhabitants; for which Reason, the wise Law-giver advis'd the Grecians, if they would be rich and potent, and make a considerable Figure in the World, to abate the Pride and Vanity of their Shows, Sports, and Games, and augment the Number of industrious, active, and laborious Peeploe, who would both defend them in Times of War, and make them wealthy and dreaded in Times of Peace. It's needless to tell you, Sir, that are so well acquainted with Roman History, that Rome being an Asylum to Strangers, was the Project that made her Mistress of the greatest Part of the then known World; and all Nations that have pursu'd the same Methods, have likewise found their own Account in it. But not to rove so far from Home, or trace the obscure Footsteps of Antiquity, I will give you some remarkable Instances in the constant Practices of some of the wisest and most politick neighbouring Princes and States, who thought it their Interest as well as their Honour, to give Encouragement and Invitation to such industrious Strangers, a seither Oppression in Point of Conscience, or otherwise, had driven out of their native Countries to seek a Livelihood elsewhere. Thus the late Duke of Brandenburg, who was inferior to none in the Knowledge of the Duties of Religion, and the true Maxims of Government, out of Christian Compassion to the persecuted Protestants of France, invited them to come and settle themselves in his Dominions; and when they came, among other transcendent Priviledges, gave them Timber, and the Carriage of it, to build them Houses in such Places as they chose to settle in, and from a hundred Crowns a Man, to provide themselves with such Necessaries as were requisite to qualify them to gain their Livelihoods: All which Favours they so well improv'd, that the Elector's Charity, in a little Time, was requited with more than a double Return of Profit to his own Revenue; insomuch that his Son, the present illustrious King of Prussia, the Reward of their Industry, has lengthen'd their Grant of Years from fifteen to twenty one, in which they were to be exempted from the Payment of publick Taxes, and other Impositions. The like charitable Office was done by the fame Duke Elector of Brandenburg for the poor Palatines, who, by the barbarous Usage of the French, were forc'd to leave their own Country, and to retire into this Duke's Territories in Germany. There is also a printed Relation in the German Tongue, of the great Immunities and Priviledges granted by the Duke to a Colony of Palatines, that came out of their own Country, and settl'd at Magdeburgh, in the Year 1689, in which those distress'd Protestants found a safe Retreat, a comfortable Substance by their own Industry, and is now said to be worth 100000 Crowns a Year to the present King of Prussia; and indeed he must needs be an utter Stranger to the Affairs of Europe, that is ignorant how many other great Things the King of Prussia has done for poor distress'd Protestant Refugees since that Time, and still continues to do for them as Providence administers Occasion; in which God so blesses him, that it always turns to his own secular Advantage, as well as the Satisfaction of his Conscience, in doing God to the

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Household of Faith. And why those charitable Actions, that are thought glorious in other Princes, should be complain'd of in Great Britain, I can imagine no other Reason for, but want of due Information in the Premises, and retaining ancient Errors in prejudice of known and experimented Truths.”

Source: Daniel Defoe, *A Brief History of the Poor Palatine Refugees, Lately Arrive'd in England*. London, 1709, pp. 1-5.

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