

Comment & Analysis

ALAN, YUSRA AND THE OTHERS

A year on from Alan Kurdi's death, only Germany has lived up to Europe's moral imperative to welcome Syria's refugees



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fence on its border with Serbia. The UK chose to leave the EU over a few lies, including about immigration. Even traditionally generous Scandinavia has become unrecognisable: refugees entering Norway have all their possessions confiscated. After strong criticism from international human rights organisations, wedding rings were considered of "special emotional value" and are now exempt.

COMPASSION FROM GERMANY

Germany was the only exception in understanding Europe's moral imperative: it welcomed as many as one million people. Angela Merkel went from being the most hated politician in Europe to Time magazine's person of the year: "Angela Merkel, Chancellor of the Free World," its cover proclaimed. "In many regions war and terror prevail," she said. "States disintegrate. For many years we have read about this. We have heard about it. We have seen it on TV. But we had not yet sufficiently understood that what happens in Aleppo or Mosul can affect Essen or Stuttgart. We have to face that now."

Europe's hysteria is unjustified. Those 1.5 million refugees represented barely 0.2% of its population. In the meantime Turkey has welcomed more than two million refugees, while Jordan and Lebanon have accepted almost a million and a half each. Across the Atlantic, the US has admitted only about 1,900 refugees. It is not without reason that The Economist magazine calls Barack Obama "deporter-in-chief": his administration has expelled more than two million people in the past four years, more than the previous Bush administration in its eight years of government. As I write these lines, another five million people face deportation. Furthermore, one of the two current presidential candidates has proposed to ban all Muslims from entering the US.

WELCOME IN CANADA

In glorious contrast, Canada has increased immigration levels to their highest in more than a century. In a recent interview, John McCallum,

Canada's immigration minister in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's new Liberal government, said: "I think the openness of Canadians to immigrants is a competitive advantage for Canada. A large majority of Canadians favour the Syrian refugees. A major problem I have is that I cannot bring refugees in fast enough to satisfy the generosity of Canadians who want to take them in."



Where do we find ourselves today? More than 65 million people around the world have been forced into exile. Of these, there are 21.3 million refugees. Every day 34,000 people are forcibly displaced as a result of conflict or persecution. This is the reality in which we live and somehow the world must adapt in the most intelligent, compassionate and efficient way to offer realistic and long-term solutions.

This year's Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro included a team of ten refugees: two Syrian swimmers, two judokas from the Democratic Republic of Congo, a marathon runner from

Ethiopia and five middle-distance runners from South Sudan. It is in my view thanks to the Alan Kurdi effect that we know their names: Rami Anis, Yiech Pur Biel, James Nyang Chieng-jiek, Yonas Kinde, Anjelina Nadai Lohalith, Rose Nathike Lokonyen, Paulo Amotun Lokoro, Yusra Mardini, Popole Misenga and Yolande Bukasa Mabika.

Syrian swimmer Yusra Mardini's vessel started sinking in the Aegean Sea with some 20 passengers on board. With her sister Sarah and two other swimmers they pushed the boat for three hours towards Greece, the birthplace of the Olympic Games. They managed to reach the island of Lesbos. She then travelled north with a group of asylum-seekers to Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Austria before arriving at their final destination, Germany, exactly a year ago, in early September, when Alan Kurdi's body was found.

• Alan's name was initially misreported by much of the media as Aylan

This is the beach where three-year-old Syrian Kurd Alan Kurdi's body was found on 2 September 2015. Day after day, more bodies washed ashore on the same beach. Yet those bodies remained invisible, as did the previous ones up to that September day. Why was this photograph published on the front pages of hundreds of newspapers around the world? "The beach where Europe dies," wrote Mario Calabresi in an editorial for La Stampa. "Can we publish the photograph of a dead child on the front page of a newspaper?" he asked.

After an initial negative answer, Calabresi changed his mind and explained: "This photograph demands that each and every one of us should stop for a moment and face what is happening on the beaches where we spent our vacations. We cannot procrastinate; dodge between our fears and impulses of compassion. This is the last chance for Europe's leaders to live up to the challenge of history. And it is the chance for every one of us to take stock in the ultimate meaning of existence."

Of all the comments triggered by this image, I found Calabresi's words the most ethical and the most inspiring. As a consequence of the impact of that extraordinary photograph by Nilüfer Demir, the Syrian refugee crisis suddenly became a European crisis. Europe panicked. Faced with a million and a half refugees attempting to cross its borders, most of Europe decided to close them. Some countries, such as Poland, went even further by expelling refugees. Hungary built a 108-mile-long

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MAKE A GIFT TO SAVE LIVES AT SEA

Alfredo Jaar's project The Gift (2016) aims to raise awareness of the humanitarian crisis and funds for Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), a charity that helps rescues refugees in distress at sea. During Art Basel in June, 10,000 boxes were handed out by volunteers. A further 2,000 were distributed in Malta and Italy. Each contained an image of the stretch of Turkish beach where Alan Kurdi's body was found and featured Mario Calabresi's La Stampa editorial about the drowned child.



One of the 12,000 boxes handed out this summer