The Second World War marked a turning point in the nature of immigration and settlement. Many countries had absorbed successive waves of immigrants over the centuries, generally because of persecution in their homelands, or as a result of colonial exploitation and expansion. But the post-war period was characteristically different and was essentially about ‘race’.

Prior to the War, most people in western democracies had had very limited experience of black people – then described as ‘coloured’ – and the black communities, such as they were, were very small and localised. By 1950, for example, there were only around 100,000 black people in the whole of Great Britain, mostly living in the London docklands area and other coastal cities. By 1968, the number of people from all ethnic minority backgrounds had risen tenfold, to 1 million (Daniel, 1968, p. 9). In Britain, and no doubt other western countries too, this sudden growth was in a world where white people still believed that they were innately superior to other races – and to foreigners generally. In a survey published in 1969 their ‘pecking order’ was quite clear with only 22 per cent of British people believing that they were on the same level as, or inferior to, people from Africa; 23 per cent took the same view in respect of people from Asia and 56 per cent and 69 per cent in respect of European and American people respectively (Rose et al., 1969, p. 567).

In Britain, black people were settling alongside the almost exclusively white host population in considerable numbers, moving into their neighbourhoods, working in the same factories, using the same public transport, shops, schools and social facilities. Further, they were apparently intending to re-locate on a permanent basis and expecting to receive equal treatment as British subjects and citizens. Jobs were not only available to them, but their labour was needed to fuel the post-war re-building and expansion plans. For many British people, it mattered not that their fellow countrymen had, for years, exploited many of the countries from which the newcomers came, nor, that they had provided personnel to fight alongside them in the War, this was a change that challenged the very idea of the ‘rightful place’ of
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the British amongst the other peoples of the world. New policies, backed by new legislation and procedures to regulate these new relationships, were inevitable.

Across Europe, there was the same wind of change, with the former colonial powers like the Netherlands and Belgium, also drawing upon their former colonies to provide labour. Others focussed more on ‘guest worker’ schemes, which created the illusion that the newly established multiculturalism was reversible. Whilst each developed different models to come to terms with the changes, they have all struggled to emerge as cohesive societies and the difficulties continue to threaten the success of multiculturalism to this day.

Aliens and foreigners

The boundaries of nation states have become increasingly permeable as transport and communication links have improved and become more widely accessible. Foreigners were regarded as ‘aliens’, up to the early part of the twentieth century, with legislation framed accordingly. Foreigners were comparatively rare, especially outside the ports and major cities and their status and the level of tolerance towards them was often low, with little or no expectation of the granting of rights equal to those of existing citizens. With the exception perhaps of high-ranking nobles, foreigners were often treated with great suspicion and even contempt.

Foreigners had, however, been of sufficient number to form themselves into recognisable communities over many centuries, and in Britain, Jewish communities were the first to establish themselves as long ago as in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, although they were occasionally the subject of anti-Jewish atrocities, including massacre and expulsion (Winder, 2004, pp. 34–9).

Many other groups found their way to Britain, including those known as ‘gypsies’, a term which might have been corrupted from ‘Egyptians’ (ibid., p. 42), who were the subject of many a harsh measure. For example, in Britain a law of 1713 provided that all persons ‘pretending to be gypsies, or wandering in the habit or form of counterfeit Egyptians’ would be whipped, given hard labour and sent to their place of last settlement, or place of birth’ (Algerant, 2004).

Many came to Britain for religious reasons, especially protestants from Flanders and, most notably, the Hugenots, in the sixteenth century, escaping persecution in France. Whilst England was seen as offering religious tolerance, the Hugenots nevertheless suffered terrible mob violence and the same fate befell some of the many groups of entrepreneurs and craftsmen who came from a range of European countries. These included Italians, who were not only the subject of vicious attacks, but also a new alien tax (Winder, 2004, p. 43). Diversity grew by degrees and included a small number of black people as a spin-off from the slave trade. According to Winder (ibid.) in his