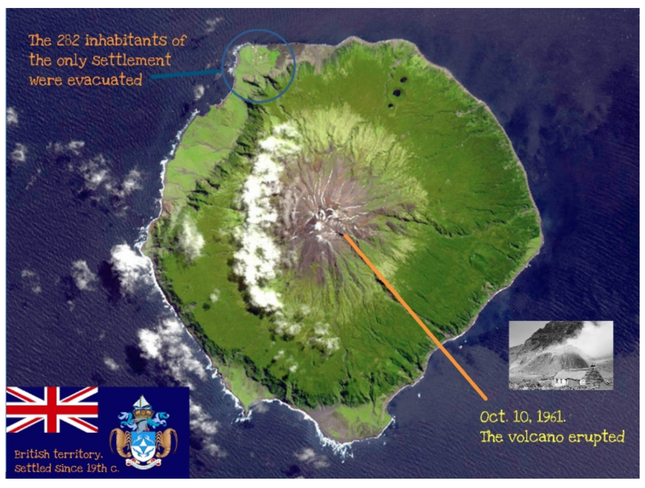
In October 1961, the eruption of a volcano in the remote island of Tristan da Cunha, a British territory in the Southern Atlantic Ocean, provoked the evacuation of all its inhabitants (about three hundred people), that were then resettled in England by the government of the United Kindgom. The evacuation lasted until 1963.
In this paper we will focus on the verying language used by the British government, on the one hand, the media in the other, and the evacuees themselves, regarding how to label the group of Tristanians that had fled from the hazard.



This poster is part of a ongoing research on natural catastrophes and the provision of special migratory rights during the 20th century, before the implementation of the Temporary Protection Status by the US in the 1990s.

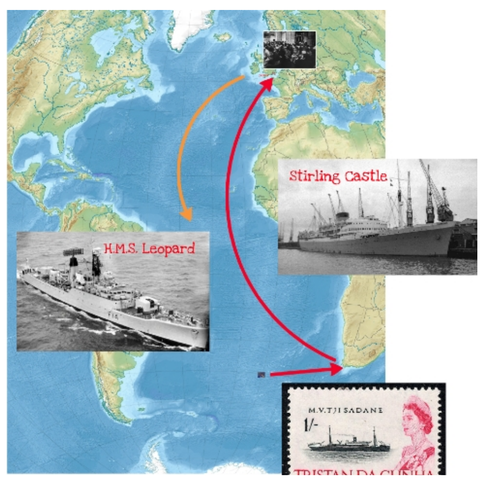
The case of Tristan da Cunha is quite interesting because of the short number of evacuees involved, that makes it easier to follow them.

Sources:
- British National Archives, Kew, MH 123/315 and 160/522 sections.
- The London Illustrated, The Times, The Guardian (UJ), The New York Times (USA), 1961 to 1963.

(1) The background: natural disasters and migratory rights during the 20th century.

(2) Eruption and evacuation.

Several accounts of the evacuation were offered either by witnesses or by contemporary reporters (Samuels, 1963; Mackay, 1963; Wheeler, 1962; Munch, 1964). At the very first moment, the population moved by their own means to Nightingale, a small desert island, only twenty miles away from Tristan da Cunha. The British Navy dispatched a destroyer to take care of and evacuate the population to a safer and better provisioned location, but in the meantime, a Dutch liner sailing close by, the *Tjisadane*, approached the island and shipped the islanders to Cape Town, South Africa. From there, they were transferred to England, and finally the total population of the island was settled in a former Royal Air Force facility in Calshot, Surrey, near the port of Southampton (Wheeler, 1962: 679).



As Roberts states, "the arrival of the island population in the United Kingdom provided a unique opportunity for studying the health of this formerly isolated community. During their stay, while the facilities and services of modern medicine were made available to them, investigations of many faces of their general biology were made under the auspices of the Medical Research Council;" (1971: 465. Also Tyrrel et al.,1967; Shibli et al., 1971).

Tristanians "were provided jobs in garages and service stations, in various kinds of factories, and in road construction." (Munch, 1964)

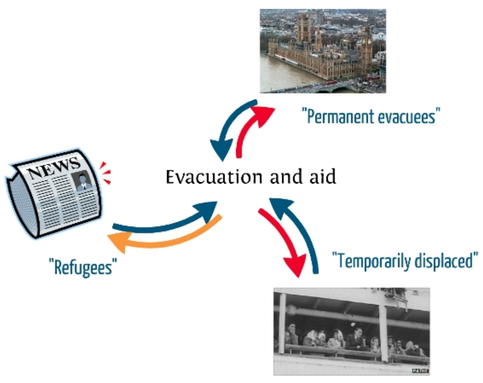
"During their stay, while the facilities and services of modern medicine were made available to them, investigations of many faces of their general biology were made." (Roberts, 1971)

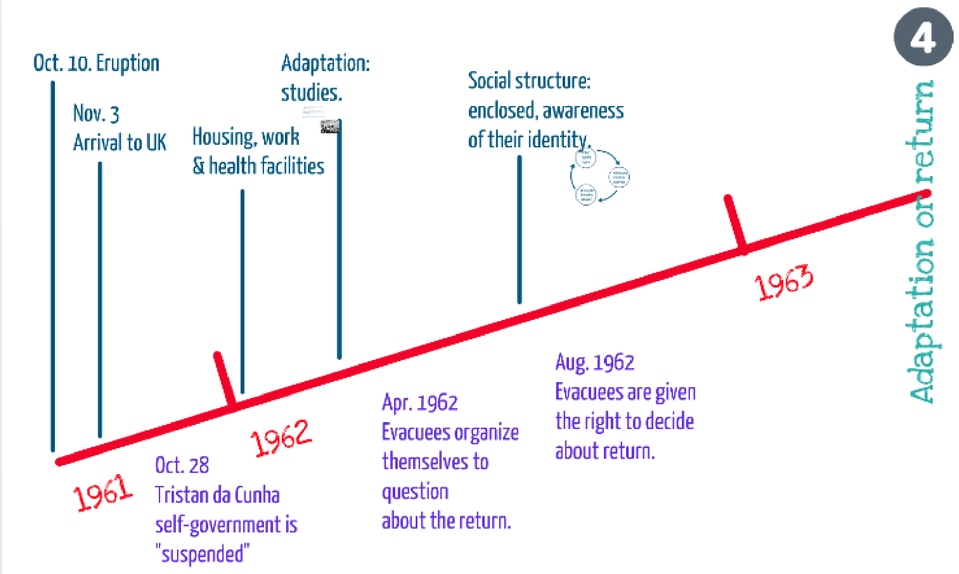
The main objective of the government policy was to easy their adaptation to -and make them prefer the perspective of- a new life in Europe.

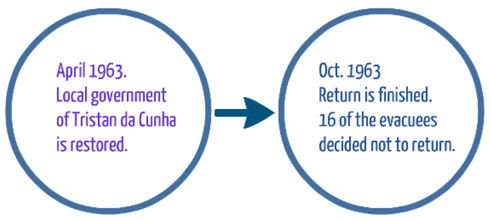
(3) Refugees vs. evacuees.

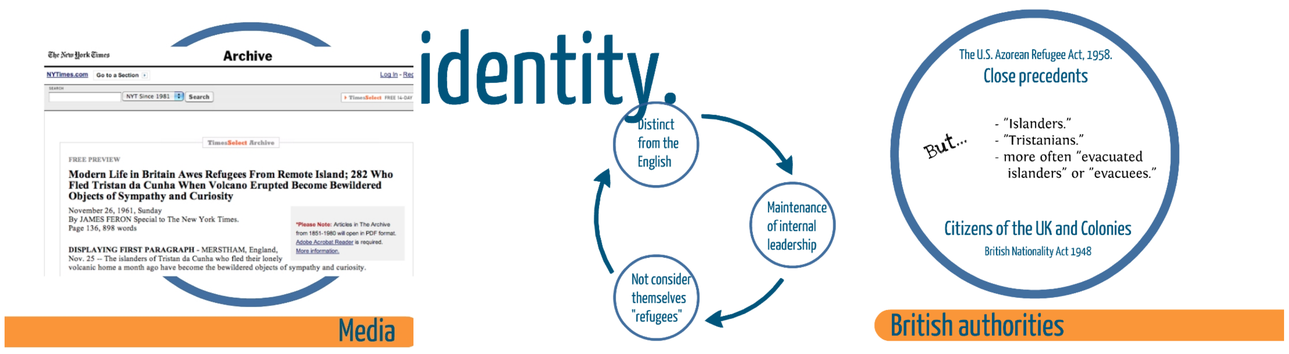
The evacuated islanders of Tristan da Cunha were never referred to as "refugees" by the British government, at least in any official document. Two were the dominant denominations that British authorities and officers used when describing or prescribing the initiatives carried out with regard to the Tristanians: "islanders" or, more often, "evacuated islanders" and "evacuees.".

Journals and newspapers soon started speaking about the "refugees" from Tristan da Cunha. *The London Illustrated*, in its issue of 28 Oct. 1961, was one of the first in applying the term "refugees" to the evacuated islanders: with the publication of some photographs taken on-board of HMS Leopard, the journalist stated that "it was not until the refugees (..) reached Cape Town on their way to England that the outside world learnt the full story of the volcanic eruption." Two weeks later (Nov. 11), the same journal explained the arrival of the Tristanians to Britain on Nov. 3 and the "messages of welcome" that Prince Phillip and the Archbishop of Canterbury had given "to the refugees". Soon, the international media, such as *The New York Times*, also started using the same terminology to refer to the displaced islanders.









By Dec. 1961, the volcano was still alive according to some information provided by ships that were passing nearby, but during the first third of 1962, an expedition led by the British Royal Society reported a decrease in the intensity of the eruption and forecasted its end, thus assessing that there was no further risk for the colony (Harris 1962; Blair, 1964). The news brought by the expedition started a debate among evacuees on the question of return, and because of the reluctance of British authorities to permit it, in April 1962 "a first open expression of protest" arose among Tristanians (Munch, 1964: 374). Self-organization followed, when a group of leading families called for a meeting to write a collective letter asking the British government to authorize their return.
The experience of Tristanians during their stay in Calshot actually strengthened their group structure and consciousness and therefore placed difficulties in their expected adaptation. As Munch says, before their evacuation "the social structure of this community was simple and informal, consisting of a number of largely independent family units tied together by bilateral kinship and mutual recognition, but without any formal authority or control." (Munch, 1964: 369-370). Loudon (1966) highlights the importance of the maintenance of these informal ties that structured the social hierarchy of the island during the evacuation. Living in the same facility did not encourage assimilation: Tristanians had "little communication with the English. They seldom left their enclosed village except for work and shopping trips." (Munch, 1964: 373). Even the distinctiveness of the English dialect spoken on the island (Schreier, 2002) emerged as a sociolinguistic marker for defining the collective identity of the evacuees. As a conclusion, "an increase in the Islanders' awareness of their peculiar identity as a value" took place/ocurred (Munch, 1964: 373).
According to Loudon (1980), Tristanians "did not considered themselves refugees," but instead as temporarily displaced people. Return was always, for most of the community, the necessary resolution to the evacuation. As time went by, a clash between the needs of the evacuees and the projects of the government arose. Dibben and Chester (1999: 147) highlight the relevance of the psychological risk reduction in the decision-making processes following evacuations because of volcano eruptions: they state that *once the activity peak of the eruption has decreased, displaced communities usually ask for return despite there still being some kind of risk to public health and security. This was the case, among others, of Tristan da Cunha's 1961 eruption.*

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