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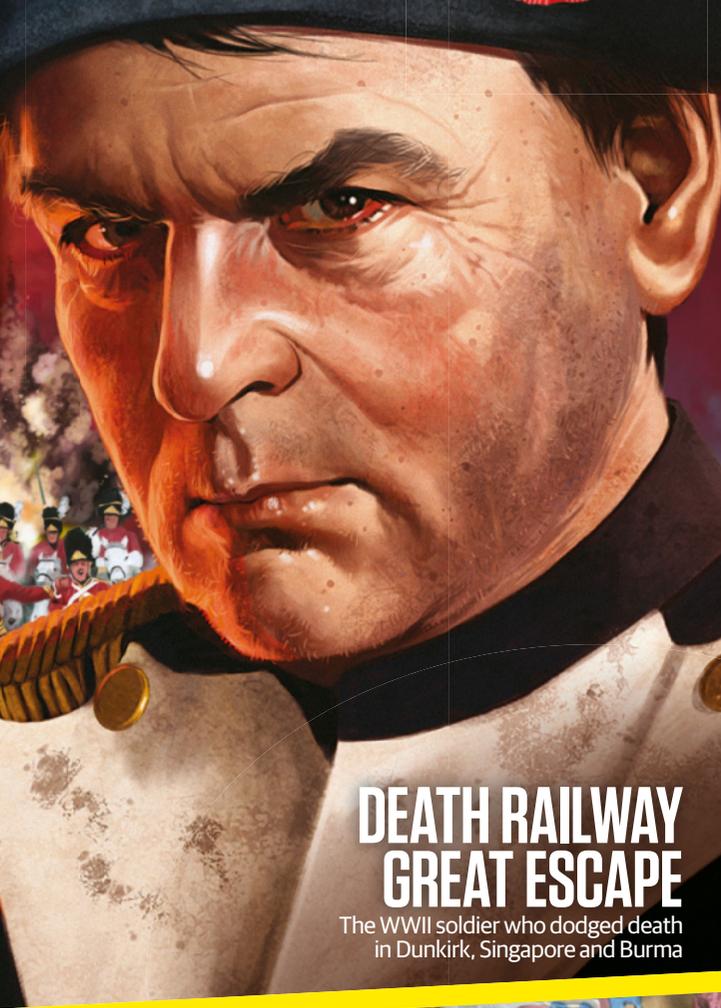
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Don't call me PRINCESS

The creator of the internet sensation *Rejected Princesses* shares ten unsung heroines and hellions that Disney would never touch

Written by Jason Porath

Out of the way, Ariel! Take a seat, Snow White! There's a new group of princesses in town but they are nothing like the Disney damsels. The blog-turned-book series *Rejected Princesses*, celebrating women too awesome, awful or offbeat for kids movies, has become hugely popular. Its writer and illustrator, Jason Porath, reveals some of his favourites.

Gracia's showing cross-stamped coins but conceals 18 Star of David-stamped coins behind her back



Gracia Mendes Nasi

The Oskar Schindler of the Inquisition

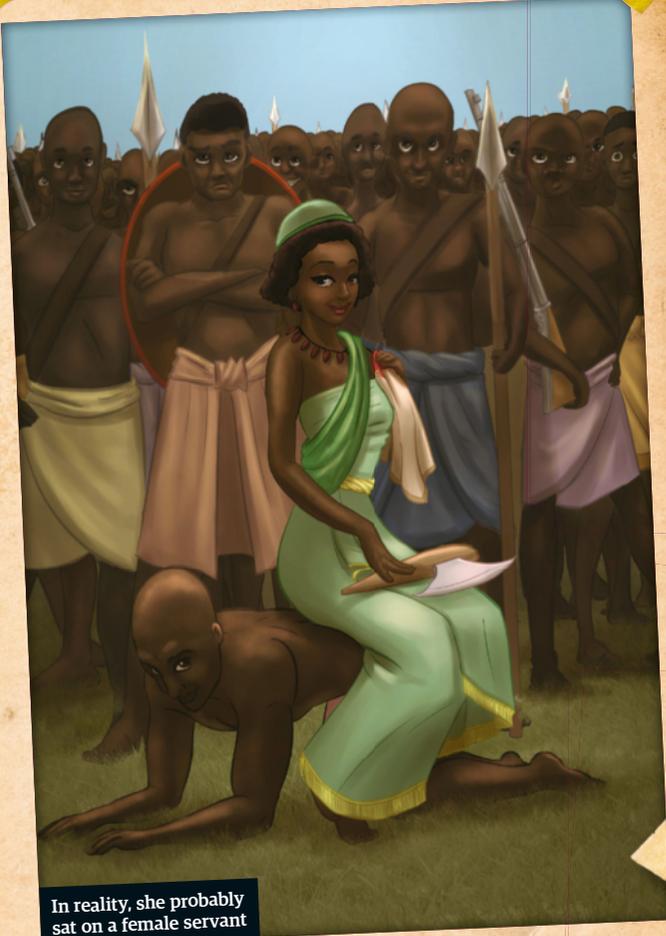
1510-69

Targeted by the brutal Spanish, Portuguese and Italian Inquisitions, non-Catholics living in southern Europe were subject to torture by mob, ransacking, and ultimately expulsion from their home countries. However, the Jews of this period had a guardian angel looking over them: wealthy shipping magnate (and smuggler) Gracia Mendes Nasi. Born Beatriz de Luna, she had, like many others, to keep her religion a secret. But as she got more involved with the running of her merchant husband's business, she grew emboldened to do exactly what she wanted - Inquisitors be damned. When the Inquisition began, she established a massive network of safe houses, spies, and messengers to shuttle refugees from as far away as Lisbon to Jew-friendly Constantinople. She eventually moved to Constantinople herself and began living openly as a Jew, using her Jewish name of Gracia. She even tried establishing a fledgling Jewish state in what is modern-day Tiberias, Israel. She helped so many hundreds of people and did so much good, that several people thought she might be the Jewish messiah. Much of the Sephardic Jewish population of today owes its continued existence to her exhaustive work.

Nzinga Mbande

The mother of Angola 1583-1663

Here's how the legend goes: the Portuguese had invaded the African nation of Ndongo (present-day Angola) and taken its king prisoner. The king's sister, Nzinga, approached them for negotiations but when she arrived, they didn't offer her a chair. Unperturbed, she ordered a servant to get on all fours and sat on their back, like a stool. After the meeting, she slit the servant's throat in full view of everyone, declaring that "the queen of Ndongo does not use the same chair twice". She then moved south, conquered a tribe of cannibals and waged war on the Portuguese for 35 years. While some details of her story are definitely sketchy - she almost certainly didn't slit anyone's throat - it's a testament to her formidable reputation that those are the rumours that got spread about her. After decades of her waging economic and military war against them, the Portuguese eventually negotiated a peace treaty. There are statues of her all over Angola to this day.



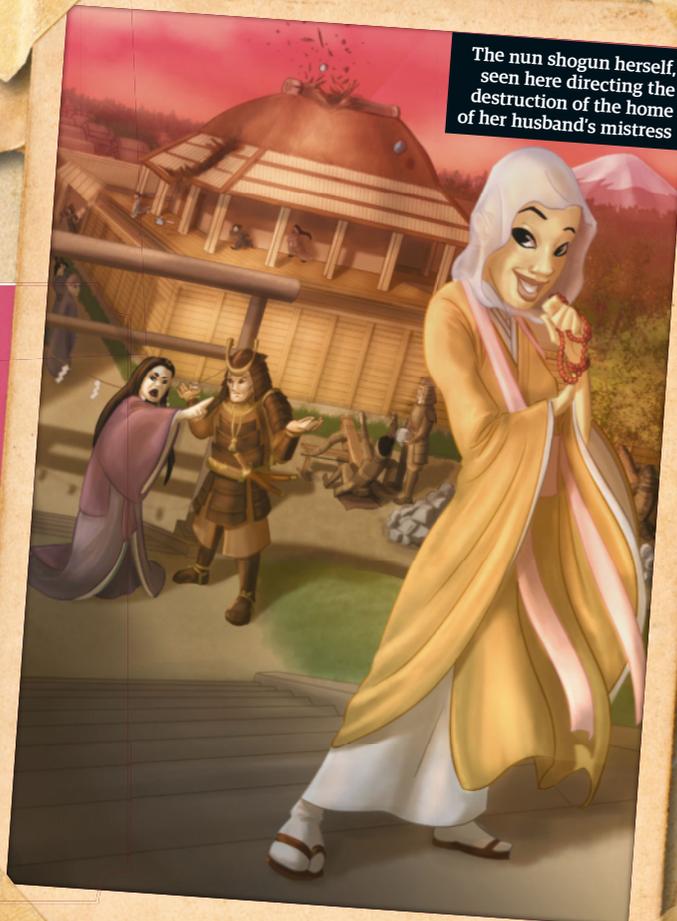
In reality, she probably sat on a female servant

“She did what any good mother would do — she deposed him and took the reins herself”

Masako Hojo

The nun who became shogun 1156-1225

From early on, Masako Hojo made sure to let everyone know she was not a woman to be trifled with. When her shogun husband cheated on her, she raised an army and destroyed the other woman's house in a move referred to as *uwanari-uchi* - literally translated as 'strike of the after-wife'. She was so respected and feared that when her husband died, rumours spread that her detached spirit had somehow haunted him to death - though in truth, she appears to have loved him rather intensely to the end of her days. After her husband died, she entered a monastery. But when her son proved himself an incompetent tyrant who couldn't run the country or properly fend off assassins, she did what any good mother would do - she deposed him and took the reins herself, becoming the first and only nun to rule Japan.



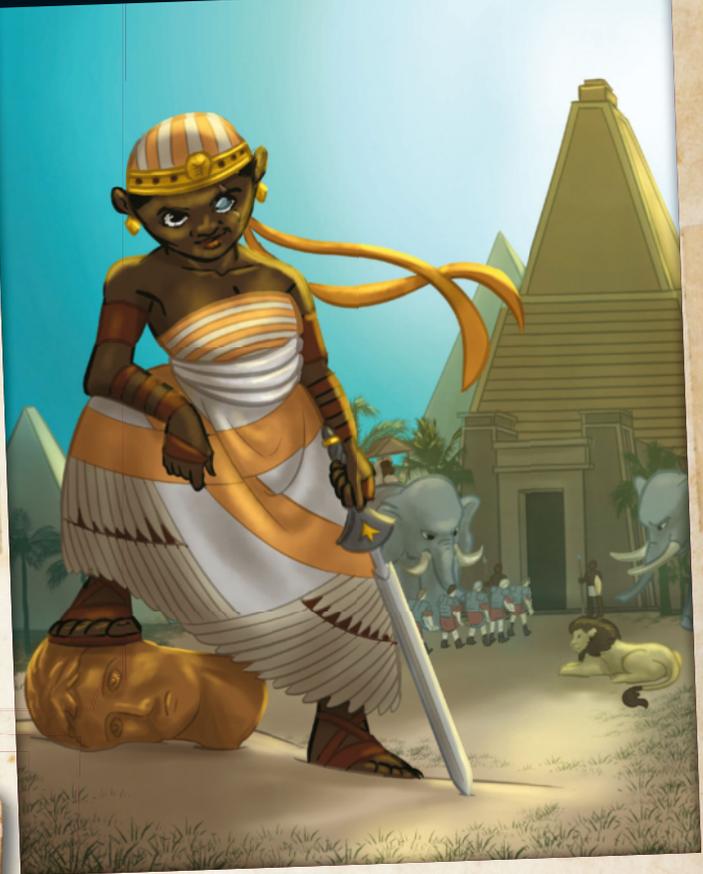
The nun shogun herself, seen here directing the destruction of the home of her husband's mistress

Amanirenas

The one-eyed queen who fought Rome tooth and nail **c.60-c.10 BCE**

In the early 1900s, archaeologists in Sudan uncovered a temple belonging to the ancient kingdom of Kush. To the surprise of everyone, resting inside the temple, hundreds of miles from the borders of the Roman Empire, lay a well-preserved head of Emperor Augustus, separated from the rest of the statue. The story of this decapitated head dates back to the time of Cleopatra where, in the wake of her death, certain Roman factions set their aims south of Egypt. Countering them was a fearsome one-eyed Nubian queen, Amanirenas. Seeing her neighbours attacked, she pre-emptively sacked two major Roman cities, took captives and defaced many of Augustus' statues. Rome's counter-attack was swift and brutal, destroying the Kushite capital city, but Amanirenas fought on, likely using some terrifying tactics: other Kushite rulers were known to have fed captives to lions, or bringing war elephants to battle. Perhaps Amanirenas did the same. In the end, Rome agreed to lasting peace, without making them pay tribute. Never again did Rome venture south of Egypt.

The name 'Candace' comes from the word for female Kushite rulers: kandake



Noor's father taught Sufism in Western Europe

Noor Inayat Khan

The Indian princess who became a British spy **1914-44**

There were few people less likely to become a British spy. Noor Inayat Khan was an honest-to-god Indian princess, a klutzy children's book author and a Sufi Muslim mystic - which meant she was a strict pacifist who couldn't lie. But when the Nazis took Paris, she gave everything up and joined the war effort as a spy. Assigned to be a radio operator in occupied Paris, she was thought of as basically cannon fodder: the average lifespan for that job was six weeks and her instructors doubted she'd even last that. Making things worse, the entire Parisian operation was arrested on her second day in Paris - leaving her alone. But she refused offers of extradition and proceeded to crush it at her job. Changing routes, appearances and everything about herself, she lasted five months before being betrayed and arrested. She went down kicking, punching and screaming, despite being a lifelong pacifist. She lied under torture, despite being a Sufi mystic, forbidden to lie. She nimbly ran across roofs in escape attempts, despite being a klutz. She gave the Nazis absolutely nothing. She died before a firing squad weeks before her concentration camp was liberated. Reportedly her last word, shouted at her executors, was "Liberté". She was 30 years old.

"THEY HAVE TO HAVE AGENCY"

Former DreamWorks animator Jason Porath reveals how he picks the fascinating women for his hit series



What inspired you to create this blog about awesome women?

When I was working at DreamWorks, an article went around talking about how the *Frozen* girls were bad role models. Being a bit

of a scamp, I put it to my coworkers that we could come up with much worse role models and brainstormed on who the worst candidate for an animated princess could be.

While many of the suggestions were purely black humour, I also tossed out a number of historical figures, like Boudica and Nzinga Mbande, neither of whom were familiar to anyone at the table. I thought that was a shame and I wanted to see it exist, so I started drawing. It went viral, I got a book deal, and here we are.

What do you look for in a candidate?

Three things: they have to have agency, personality and conflict. If they lack agency, it's a tragedy. If they lack personality, it's boring. If they lack conflict, it's a resume. Beyond that, I look for people from cultures I don't know much about because it's a great way to learn about other societies and periods of history, to find out about their greatest heroes (or villains). I don't search for women worthy of emulation or derision, per se - I look for people who have interesting stories.

How do you go about doing your research?

I keep a massive spreadsheet of everyone I've ever considered. It has a summary of their story, ethnicity, era, what part of the world they frequented and special representations like LGBT, religion and disability. From there, I'll often start on Wikipedia and Google Books to get as close to the original source materials as possible. Then it's usually off to the library, JSTOR or archive.org.

I'm constantly limited by the number of languages I know and the limited scholarship available on certain areas of the world. There's no shortage of historians covering World War II and Ancient Rome, but try getting anything on pre-colonial Africa or South America and you're rolling the dice. Even major Korean, Chinese and Japanese historical documents are often not translated to English, or only in limited fashion. It's maddening.

Each of your illustrations wonderfully brings the characters to life. How do you decide on what to include in your art?

I'll do all my book research first and then often do some visual research to see what the objects in their world looked like - what type of clothes they wore, what ships they sailed, what they looked like. Then I'll list out all the major points of their story that stood out to me, and some characteristics of their personality. From there, I try to put as many of them in one picture as possible, ideally by finding some visual metaphor for the lesson I found in their life.

How do you think these women bucked the trend of 'great' historical figures, typically presented as male?

If there's a difference in how men are portrayed, I'd argue it's that history books are more comfortable with men having flaws. Coverage of Ada Lovelace often leaves out that she was an opiate addict. Coverage of Helen Keller leaves out that she was a socialist firebrand. Coverage of Joan of Arc leaves out that she was a terrifying warlord. Somewhere along the line, Genghis Khan and Timur had their accomplishments taken in sum total, whereas the lives of Malinche and Ranaivonona I are often still talked about uncritically.

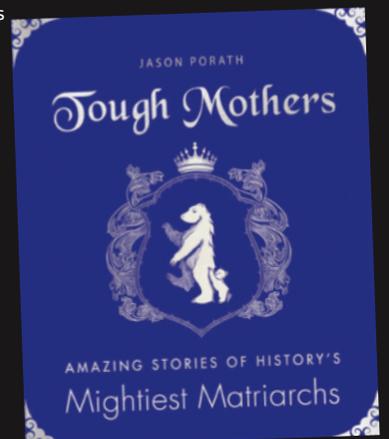
Your new book, *Tough Mothers*, focuses on history's incredible matriarchs. Why did you choose to highlight them specifically?

I think the social construct of motherhood is fairly limiting: about the most hurtful thing you can call a mother is to say she's a 'bad mum'. The pressure is suffocating. It's the norm for them to do this enormous amount of labour, sacrificing everything, and they're still undervalued and underestimated. I wanted to show motherhood in its many incarnations, and show just how much our mothers and grandmothers went through.

Are there any women today who you think would make great Rejected Princesses?

I try not to cover modern-day figures because the dust hasn't settled. I look at Benazir Bhutto in all her messy, frustrating, corrupt glory in *Tough Mothers* but I prefer to be able to take a longer view on their life. Moreover, many admirable figures, like Malala Yousafzai, are already being lionised in their lifetimes, and I tend to focus on more obscure people.

However, I'd love to explore confederate-flag-snatcher Bree Newsome, child-marriage-abolisher Theresa Kachindamoto and the late royal-turned-opium-smuggler Olive Yang down the line. I'm also hugely curious as to what the #NeverAgain activists, particularly Emma Gonzalez, will do in the future.



Tough Mothers: Amazing Stories of History's Mightiest Matriarchs celebrates the women from history with fierce maternal instincts. The book is released on 17 May in the UK.

Many streets, schools, and even military units across the Middle East bear her name



Khawlah bint al-Azwar

Warrior poet of early Islam **7th century**

The rider in black had surprised everyone. The forces of early Islam were on a mission to rescue their comrade Dirar from the Christian Byzantines, when a mysterious soldier clad in black and green rushed forth, mowing down Romans like grass. When the commander finally tracked down the soldier, drenched in blood like "a crimson rose petal", their identity was uncovered: Khawlah bint al-Azwar, sister of the captured Dirar. She went on to help free her brother and then settled back down a bit, helping out as a nurse. That is until she, too, was captured by the Byzantines, along with a group of middle-aged women. While her fellow captives were resigned to their fate, she rallied them, suggesting they uproot the poles holding up their tent and fight their way out. As they did so, they let loose with diss poems such as "We have decided that today we will rectify your brains with these tent-pegs and shorten your life-spans, thus removing a spot of disgrace from your ancestors' faces". Her escape so impressed the Byzantine commander that he offered to marry her on the spot and be her master. Her verbatim reply: "You wretched unbelieving son of an unchaste adulterer! By Allah! I will take this peg and gouge your eyes out. You are not even worthy of herding my camels and sheep, let alone claim to be my equal!" If you're thinking at this point that you want to be best friends with her, well, get in line.

Rejected Princesses



Can't you just imagine a musical number happening in this funny scene?

Khutulun

The undefeated wrestler princess c.1260-c.1306

Genghis Khan's great-great-granddaughter had one rule: if you wanted to marry her, you had to beat her in wrestling and if you lost, you owed her 100 horses. She ended up with 10,000 horses and no husband. An expert equestrian, archer and athlete, Khutulun was famous for splitting off from the Mongol forces and quickly picking off enemies, just to intimidate them. She left quite the impression on historical tourists like Marco Polo and Rashid al-Din. She even shows up in the Netflix series *Marco Polo*, although her character there is an utter betrayal of her historical personage: the on-screen woman is immediately thrust into a Romeo-and-Juliet relationship that never existed. Sad as this is, it's hardly the first time her story has been warped – she is also the inspiration for the story, and later opera, *Turandot*. In that European retelling of her life, she becomes a woman who challenges her suitors with riddles instead of wrestling, killing them if they lose. The opera is about her finally giving in to love. While the West may continue mangling her legacy, the Mongolians of today still find ways to subtly revere her. Notably, traditional Mongolian wrestler outfits are open-chested to show that the contestant is not a woman, in deference to the undefeated Khutulun.

“While the West may continue mangling her legacy, the Mongolians of today still find ways to subtly revere her”

Julie d'Aubigny

The sword-slinger who burnt down a convent to seduce a nun 1670-1707

Julie d'Aubigny – known better in her time as La Maupin – was the closest thing humanity's ever come to producing a real-life Bugs Bunny. This bisexual opera singer flirted and fought her way across Europe, dressing in men's clothes and seducing men and women with abandon. When one of her female lovers was spirited off to a nunnery by her overprotective father, Maupin entered the convent herself... and set it on fire to aid their escape. Three months later, she dropped her lover back off with her father and ran off into the night. She went on to get into so many duels she had to twice be pardoned by Louis XIV, who mused that the anti-dueling laws governed men but said nothing of women. Her real story is difficult to untangle from fiction – her biography was often related as a morality tale with her turning from her wanton ways late in life, rejoining her husband and dying aged around 37.



Beauty marks were the French fashion of the time – the placement of Julie's communicates passion

Ada Blackjack

The sole survivor of an ill-fated expedition to the Arctic **1898-1983**

It was a dumb, dumb plan. A bunch of overconfident explorers were going to claim Wrangel Island - a desolate wasteland 300 kilometres northeast of Siberia - for Britain, although the country didn't want it. To that end, they tried to hire as many Inuit helpers as they could, which was just one in the end: Ada Blackjack. She'd grown up in cities and didn't have any of the sewing or trapping skills they needed, but she went anyway as she needed money for her sick son. The expedition went horribly, with the team stranded there for two years instead of the one they'd planned for. As the team split up, Ada was left to care for one member who was dying of scurvy. She taught herself to shoot, trap and improvise, and kept him alive far longer than anyone could have expected. When the rescue ship finally came, she was the only survivor - but her trials didn't end there. The ship's captain began spreading rumours that she was a prostitute and had let the men die while eating their food. Despite her hatred of the spotlight, she travelled from Alaska to Los Angeles to give an on-the-record interview destroying the captain's story, and then disappeared back north, living an anonymous life into her 80s.

The Red Shirts, as Garibaldi's armies were named, took their design from Anita's sewing



Anita Garibaldi

The mum who fought in three revolutionary wars **1821-49**

It's a rare thing to find a woman who fights in a revolutionary war, and it's rarer still to find one who fights in two. Rarest of all, one who fights in three. Yet Anita Garibaldi did just that - while pregnant. A Brazilian woman married to an alcoholic soldier, she had few prospects until Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi came to town. The bad boy of 1830s Latin America, Garibaldi aimed to rid Brazil of Portuguese rule and get help in waging a similar war for Italy's independence. The two immediately caught each other's eyes and before long, Anita had left her husband and joined Garibaldi's crew. Not content to merely be a historical plus one, she manned cannons, fought raiders, protected the horses, stole arms and marched through rain and snow, often while carrying their children. She fought in wars to free Uruguay and Italy but eventually succumbed to malaria during her fight. She went out in a blaze of glory: pregnant with her fifth child, slashing at soldiers on horseback, riding on with such fervour that one enemy later remarked, "Is that a woman or is it the devil?"



The expedition's cat, Vic, also survived

NEXT ISSUE

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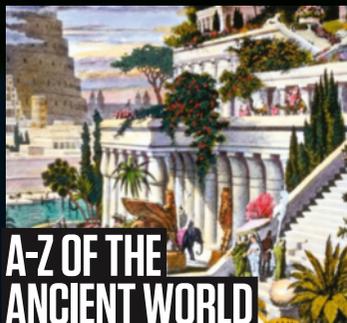
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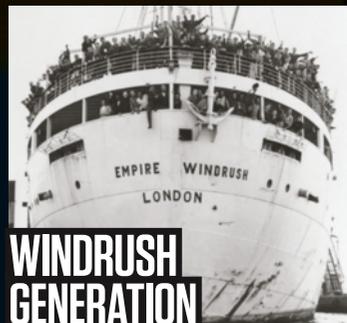
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