

REFUGEES FROM NATIONAL SOCIALISM ARRIVING IN GREAT BRITAIN 1933-1945

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From 1933 to the outbreak of the Second World War, the persecution of Jews, the Roma, homosexuals, and political opponents to National Socialism in Germany and Austria caused many refugees to flee Europe for Great Britain. These refugees came in two waves—the first from 1933 to 1937, followed a much larger migration in 1938 and 1939.

A TRICKLE OF REFUGEES

During the early 1930s, it was easiest for the wealthy to leave Germany and travel to Britain as these individuals had private means and good international contacts while those without these benefits found it more difficult to leave Europe. Britain, like the rest of the western hemisphere, was still recovering from the effects of the Great Depression and was reluctant to encourage immigrants who might challenge the British workforce for employment.

During the 1930s, many of the fears surrounding immigration were economic, which meant that cases were considered by how individuals might fit into the economy without detriment to British nationals rather than by humanitarian concerns. One might have expected professionals to have been welcomed over less skilled labourers but there was significant opposition to skilled immigration from several professional bodies, including the British Medical Association (BMA) and the British Dental Association (BDA), both of which were concerned about allowing foreign **doctors** and **dentists** to enter Britain to practice. Besides the obvious fears over competition, British doctors and dentists were unjustly suspicious about the competency of their Continental education as the majority had been banned from practising medicine

by anti-Jewish discriminatory laws passed by the Nazis from 1933. Between 1935 and 1937, a mere 183 doctors and 78 dentists were admitted to work in Britain, an insignificant number relative to the numbers already practicing in Britain; this was consistent with the Home Office's policy of only admitting 'exceptional' cases, namely individuals internationally recognised in their field. Not all professions so opposed helping refugees. For example, architects allowed refugees to practise in Britain, provided they had professional experience, and many universities and colleges were quick to offer assistance to their European colleagues by creating positions for well-known academics.

Professions aside, shopworkers were invariably denied admission to Britain as their work was considered in direct competition with native British labour. Merchants were actively discouraged from trading in Britain unless it could be proved that their business would benefit British trade. The Home Office exhibited consistency in its approach of not allowing the British labour market to be jeopardised, even for a deserving cause. Therefore, opportunities for the immigration of refugees during the early to mid-thirties were limited.

Despite these restrictions there were still ways that refugees could and did enter the country. There were no restrictions on refugees taking jobs in domestic service, provided they had an offer of employment, and the majority of female refugees immigrating to Britain during this time arrived either as domestic servants or nurses. Many former middle-class German women used this as an opportunity to escape Hitler's Germany but were only allowed to remain in Britain if they remained in service after their arrival. In some cases, once a woman had obtained a position, her husband might also receive an offer of work for the household as

a manservant or chauffeur. The general British population were not aware of the persecution of minorities on the continent and refugees quickly learned not to discuss their suffering outside of the refugee community. It was also possible for students and schoolchildren to migrate to Britain for their studies, although they were expected to leave upon completion of their course of study.

Another essential criterion for refugees wishing to travel to Britain was that individuals had to demonstrate they would not need assistance from the British State. Various organisations such as the YMCA and other charitable bodies tried to establish schemes where young men could receive training in agricultural work in Britain so they could then emigrate to jobs abroad. Ultimately, many of those able to enter the country did so on transmigration visas, issued on the understanding that Britain was only a stop on their journey to the Americas, South Africa or **Australia**. Under these methods, by the end of 1938, approximately 30,000 refugees had entered Britain.

ORGANISED RESCUES POST-1938

In November 1938, Nazi organised pogroms, known collectively as Kristallnacht, erupted across Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland. Jews were attacked and murdered, and synagogues, property and businesses were destroyed. In the aftermath, up to 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and transferred to Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and other concentration camps. In response to this surge of violence it became clear to the British government that anyone to whom they offered visas would likely remain in the country. The British Jewish community quickly pushed for

further assistance to help Jewish refugees escape from Nazi oppression and many rescue operations were launched with the Kindertransport and **Kitchener Camp** rescues being the largest.

THE KINDERTRANSPORT

From December 1938, under pressure from refugee organisations and British public opinion, the British government agreed to offer refuge to an unspecified number of children under the age of 17 from Germany and German-occupied territories. Every child had to have a personal or institutional financial guarantor in Britain and the expectation was that the children would return to their parents/guardians once the immediate crisis was over. In total, nearly 10,000 children travelled to Britain as part of the Kindertransport scheme.

Departing from major cities that included Berlin, Vienna, and Prague they travelled by train to ports in Belgium and The Netherlands before sailing to Harwich on the east coast of England. In the beginning, many of the children were chosen because one or more of their parents were in concentration camps or the children were homeless or orphans. However, this quickly changed to choosing middle-class children who were considered assimilable into British families or who were 'attractive children' in the hope this would encourage more sponsors to come forward. Some of the Kindertransport children lived with the families who had agreed to sponsor them whilst others went to the Dovercourt Bay Holiday Camp, near Harwich, until longer term accommodations could be secured.

KITCHENER CAMP

Less well known was the **Kitchener Camp** rescue, a British-run operation designed to offer temporary refuge to Jewish men arrested and sent to concentration camps after Kristallnacht. The plan was for the men in Kitchener Camp to transmigrate to other countries once they had obtained visas, with priority given to those expected to leave within a year. The camp was established at a former Army camp in Richborough, on the outskirts of Sandwich in Kent. The Central British Fund for German Jewry, now known as World Jewish Relief, oversaw the transport, maintenance and general care of the men along with, for some, their wives and children. Altogether, the lives of some 4,000 refugees were saved by the Kitchener Camp rescue.

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR AND ENEMY ALIEN TRIBUNALS

As soon as Britain declared war on Germany in response to the German invasion of Poland, all German and Austrian nationals living in Britain were automatically designated '**enemy aliens**'. During the First World War, male enemy aliens of military service age were interned, and many were repatriated. Aware that most German and Austrian immigrants living in Britain in 1939 were refugees from Nazi oppression, the British government wanted to avoid a policy of mass **internment** and instead hoped to use the refugee community to support the British war effort. After war was declared, around 120 **tribunals** were set up around the country to interview all enemy aliens and classify them into three categories, A, B and C:

A – Considered a threat to national security requiring immediate internment;

B – Considered suspect and subject to certain restrictions;

C – Considered to be a genuine refugee from Nazi oppression.

Between two and three hundred enemy aliens were arrested and interned immediately war was declared from lists prepared by MI5 of known Nazis and others potentially hostile to Britain. These internees were then joined by approximately 600 individuals categorised A by the tribunals, including known Nazi sympathisers as well as anti-fascists such as communists and trade unionists who were considered to be against the British war effort.

The vast majority of enemy aliens remained at liberty (though there were sections of the country in which they could not live known as 'protected areas', often near the coast). The tribunal decisions were notoriously inconsistent depending on the magistrate in charge with some overusing the B category while others classified almost all enemy aliens as C. This became a significant problem in May 1940 when B category women were interned.

The war put an end to immigration for the most part, though some intrepid refugees were able to enter Britain via ships from the continent until the fall of France. Those entering the country at this point without entry visas were arrested and housed in prisons in case spies and saboteurs were masquerading as refugees.

MASS INTERNMENT

Until May 1940, British authorities saw no reason to intern the large numbers of enemy aliens in categories B and C. However, after the fall of Low Countries and France in quick succession, fears of the existence of a fifth column of German saboteurs grew. Encouraged by the tabloid press, which published unsubstantiated scaremongering articles about foreigners, the public started to call for something to be done about the aliens in their midst. The threat of invasion of the British mainland by the Axis forces remained very real, and consequently the government thought it prudent to intern all male enemy aliens, regardless of classification, between 16 and 60 years of age and all women in category B, sometimes with their children. The idea was not to intern all enemy aliens long term but to remove the immediate threat using mass internment and then release 'friendly' aliens only once their loyalty could be guaranteed. These arrests were made from mid-May until early July 1940.

By July 1940, approximately 80,000 Germans and Austrians had found refuge in Britain, even if briefly before migrating onwards. Around 29,000 enemy aliens were interned, comprising approximately 24,000 Germans and Austrian refugees, while the remainder were predominately Italians who were interned once Mussolini declared war on Great Britain in June 1940.

In 1939 and early 1940, the relatively few A category internees were housed in prisons and three **holiday camps** in Clacton, Seaton and Paignton. Their occupants were a diverse mixture of committed fascists and left-wing adherents including communists (some of them Jews), which led to conflicts between these ideologically opposed groups. It was some months

before the fascists were separated from the refugees and sent to a camp in Swanwick.

To accommodate the huge influx of internees in May, June and July 1940, temporary camps were established all around the country in a wide variety of hastily requisitioned sites including empty hospitals, halls, barracks, disused cotton mills, and several racecourses, as well as an unfinished new housing estate outside Liverpool. Most of these were closed as the more permanent camps were established on the **Isle of Man**. The mass internment caused disappointment and despair among genuine refugees, though most recognised the move as an understandable response by a country facing imminent invasion. However, there was considerable frustration at the length of time it took for cases to be reviewed and releases made.

THE ISLE OF MAN INTERNMENT CAMPS

By the time the internees arrived at the **Isle of Man** many of the initial problems such as housing Nazis with refugees had been ironed out. Men were housed in various camps in the towns of Ramsey, Douglas, Onchan, and Peel. These camps consisted of hotels and boarding houses surrounded by barbed wire. On the south of the island, the towns of **Port Erin** and **Port St Mary** were used to house about 4,000 interned women and children, where they lived side by side with the locals (residents of the towns were able to enter and exit using residents permits). In the early days of internment, women were sent to Holloway Prison and if there was no one able to look after their children the children were temporarily taken into care. Once on the Isle of Man, children could join their mothers in

internment and in 1941 a married camp was established in Port St Mary.

The internees were given a certain amount of autonomy in all the camps and were able to organise many aspects of day to day living including the creation of canteens, 'popular universities' where classes were given on all sorts of topics, concerts and other entertainments.

TRANSPORT ABROAD

During May and June 1940, the British government feared the Isle of Man would not have sufficient capacity to hold internees so the Dominion governments were asked if they would be willing to look after the most 'dangerous' of the category A male internees. Canada and Australia agreed to assist, and four transports were despatched to Canada with one to Australia. The first two sailings were filled with category A internees, captured enemy civilian merchant seamen and prisoners of war but subsequent shipments included many B and C category internees. Tragically, the second ship to leave, the **Arandora Star**, was torpedoed on its way to Canada with the loss of a great many Italian and German internees. When news of this tragedy emerged, there was a public outcry and the transport abroad policy was ended but not before two further boats had sailed for Canada and one to Australia.

For those who made it to Canada and Australia their camps and conditions were quite different from those on the Isle of Man. The first ship to arrive in Canada held prisoners of war and both pro-Nazi and anti-fascist category A internees. Convinced that the British had sent only the most dangerous aliens, the internees

were treated as prisoners of war. This set the tone for the following transports and it was a long time before the opposing groups of internees were separated. In Australia, by contrast, after a very gruelling seven weeks at sea in overcrowded and unsuitable conditions aboard HMT **Dunera**, exacerbated by mistreatment by their British guards, the internees found that the Australian authorities soon recognised their true identities as refugees and they were treated with a certain degree of sympathy. However, both Canada and Australia initially resisted the idea of releasing internees into their countries, requiring that refugees be returned to the UK for their freedom. Ultimately they relented, and nearly 1,000 were released into Canada (predominantly students wishing to continue their education) with approximately 850 released in Australia to join the Australia Labour Battalion.

RELEASE FROM INTERNMENT

Almost as soon as the orders for mass internment were given there were plans to allow enemy aliens to be released. A series of White Papers were drawn up under which internees, provided they had been classified as C by the original tribunal or had been re-classified under a second tribunal as C, could apply for release. Initially, categories were limited to roles immediately useful to the war effort such as **engineers**, **doctors**, agricultural workers or those willing to sign up for the Auxiliary Military **Pioneer Corps**. Gradually more categories were created which made it easier for aliens friendly to the Allied cause to be released. Internees could also be released in order to emigrate abroad, although those in Canada and Australia had to return to the U.K. for their release before being allowed to leave for the United States. U.S. immigration

regulations were later relaxed if internees could prove they had the money to pay the fare to America had they not been transported abroad. Review of all cases took time and caused much vexation, particularly for those who had been sent abroad. Many of those released went on to serve in the armed forces, the intelligence service, or their communities in other ways. A significant proportion of those classed as 'enemy aliens' at the start of the war ultimately remained in Britain and forged successful lives in their country of adoption.

CONCLUSION

From the point the Nazis assumed power and introduced discriminatory laws against Jews and other persecuted groups it became a necessity for those who had the financial means and the contacts to leave Germany. Still suffering the effects of the Great Depression, the British were reluctant to accept refugees who might either compete with the British labour force or become a charge on the state. Most immigrants arriving in Britain during the 1930s had to either have money or connections or be willing to work in service. After Kristallnacht, the trickle of refugees from Germany and German-occupied territories became a flood as it became apparent the Nazis wanted to expel all Jews and other non-Aryans from their nation. The Kindertransport rescued nearly 10,000 children and 4,000 men with some of their wives and children were rescued via Kitchener Camp. Many others were granted visas to Britain with the expectation that they would later emigrate, which many did. During the war these refugees were considered 'enemy aliens' and thousands were interned. The majority were released within a year to 18 months and

went on to remain in Britain after the war, many becoming naturalised British citizens as soon as they were allowed from 1946. It is impossible to know the exact numbers who found refuge in Britain even if only temporarily while en route to another nation but somewhere in the vicinity of 80,000 refugees arrived in Britain during the 1930s.

FURTHER READING

To read more about the migration of Jewish refugees to Britain during the 1930s, see Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) and Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees, and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The definitive book on Kitchener Camp is Clare Ungerson, *Four Thousand Lives: The Rescue of German Jewish Men to Britain, 1939* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2014). On the Kindertransport, suggested reading includes Vera K. Fast, *Children's Exodus: A History of the Kindertransport* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010) and Jennifer Craig-Norton, *The Kindertransport: Contesting Memory* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019). For more information on internment see Rachel Pistol, *Internment during the Second World War: A Comparative Study of Great Britain and the USA* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) and Peter and Leni Gillman, *Collar the Lot! How Britain Interned & Expelled its Wartime Refugees* (London: Quartet Books, 1980).

CITATION:

Pistol, Rachel: "Refugees from National Socialism Arriving in Great Britain 1933-1945", *Refugees, Relief and Resettlement*: Gale, a Cengage Company (2020).

