

Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust

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The flight of Jews out of Nazi Germany has been the subject of much attention. Virtually every country that witnessed the entry of Jews in the 1930s has had its experiences discussed in at least one book.⁽¹⁾ Britain is no exception. The historical investigation of Jewish immigration into Britain began with the opening of government archives in the 1970s, though prior to this many contemporaries wrote their accounts of the movement of European Jews to Britain. As early as 1936, whilst the migration of Jews was still underway, Norman Bentwich published *The Refugees from Germany, April 1933 to December 1935*,⁽²⁾ covering the first wave of arrivals. He followed this up in 1956 with *They Found Refuge. An Account of British Jewry's Work for Victim of Nazi Oppression*,⁽³⁾ an insightful work that remains relevant today. Bentwich was well placed to comment on the movement of Jews into Britain because of his personal involvement. Other contemporary works were published covering the subject. Norman Angell's and Dorothy Thompson's *You and the Refugee* appeared as a Penguin Special in 1939. Critical of the government handling of the refugee crisis, this work suggested that the refugees should be permitted to seek employment as this would both relieve them from having to accept charity and enable them to make a contribution to the British economy.

The internment of the refugees in 1940 prompted the publication of another Penguin critical of government policy, François Lafitte's, *The Internment of Aliens*. This book has since been reprinted, with a new introduction in which the author did not back down from his position of 48 years earlier.⁽⁴⁾ Yvonne Kapp and Margaret Mynatt's, *British Policy and the Refugees 1933-1941*,⁽⁵⁾ was written in 1940, though not actually published until 1997. Both of these books are critical of the government's immigration policy, reserving their harshest judgements of the internment of refugees as enemy aliens in 1940. The internment of enemy aliens during World War II is a subject that has remained the most criticised of the government's policies towards Jewish refugees. The knee-jerk reaction of the government caused by the invasion scare has been the subject of several historical studies, all of which have utilised government sources that were unavailable to Lafitte, Kapp and Mynatt.⁽⁶⁾

The first historical account of the Jewish refugees who entered Britain fleeing Nazism which utilised the then newly-opened government records, was *Island Refuge*,⁽⁷⁾ written in 1973 by A.J. Sherman. Republished in 1994, it remains as one of the most informative works written on the topic. Sherman charted the formation of government policy, concluding that Britain had been lenient in permitting entry to as many refugees as it did. This work was followed by Austin Stevens, *The Dispossessed*,⁽⁸⁾ whose treatment of the subject is more journalistic than Sherman's work. Since the publication of these two works, the topic of

Jewish immigration has been studied from a variety of angles. Colin Holmes covered the rise of political antisemitism in his *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939*,⁽⁹⁾ showing the impact of antisemitism on the Jewish refugees who arrived. This work has remained the standard account of antisemitism in Britain, although it can also be complemented by Gisela Lebzelter's, *Political Anti-Semitism in England 1918-1939*.⁽¹⁰⁾ Bernard Wasserstein's *Britain and the Jews of Europe*,⁽¹¹⁾ which appeared at the same time, goes beyond being merely a study of Jewish refugees who entered or attempted to enter Britain and includes an examination of the British attitude towards European Jewry and the issue of the British mandated territory of Palestine. More recently, antisemitism during the war has been covered by Tony Kushner's *Persistence of Prejudice*,⁽¹²⁾ which, as well as examining government sources dealing with immigration, also considers the impact of antisemitism on British society as a whole.

The study of Jewish immigration during the thirties has also been furthered by several other works that deserve mention. Gerhard Hirschfeld's edited work, *Exile in Great Britain*,⁽¹³⁾ contains articles covering both government policy in general and more specific case studies of particular aspects of those able to enter Britain from Nazi Germany. In addition, a conference in 1988 led to the publication of *Second Chance. Two Centuries of German-speaking Jews in the United Kingdom*,⁽¹⁴⁾ which contains many relevant papers on inter-war Jewish immigration, including one by Louise London herself, in which she outlines some of the arguments that will be found in this present study.⁽¹⁵⁾ Marion Berghahn's work, *Continental Britons*, concentrates on the refugees themselves and examines aspects of assimilation and acculturation.⁽¹⁶⁾⁽¹⁷⁾ Furthermore, Tony Kushner's 1994 study, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*,⁽¹⁸⁾ provides a summary of not just the government attitudes towards Jewish refugees both inter and post-war, but also with the attitude of the British and American governments and society towards the Holocaust. Finally, Bill Rubinstein has entered the field, with his controversial study, *The Myth of Rescue*,⁽¹⁹⁾ in which he criticises virtually all who have written on this topic, claiming that Britain was not only lenient in its attitude towards Jewish immigrant, but also that there was nothing else they or the Allies could have done to relieve the suffering of Continental Jewry. Rubinstein accuses previous authors of being ahistorical in their examination of inter-war Jewish migration, arguing that the Holocaust could not have been predicted and, as a result, receiving countries should not be criticised. It can be imagined that Rubinstein would also have problems with London's work, since she too is critical of the government's restrictive attitude towards Jewish immigration in the 1930s and 1940s.

The study of Jewish immigration seems to have matured from a subject that was on the periphery of even Anglo-Jewish history, into a serious topic for mainstream historians. With all of this previous work that has been undertaken on the entry of Jewish refugees, the question of whether another book on this topic is needed, has to be addressed. The simplest way to answer this query is to ask whether London's work adds anything new to the topic. The answer is undoubtedly 'yes'. She goes beyond the sources that previously have been utilised, and opens up new areas of interest, as well as presenting a well-developed and supported argument.

Louise London is uniquely qualified to complete a study of British immigration history. A solicitor who has dealt with modern day refugees, she is herself a child of Jewish refugees. Her thesis, which is the basis of this book, was completed at London University in 1992 and she has already published several articles from this.⁽²⁰⁾ London's conclusions towards British immigration policy are more critical than those of Sherman's. Though by the second edition of his work he had examined the more recent literature critical of the behaviour of the government in dealing with Jewish refugees, he maintained, nevertheless, that Britain was generous in its attitude. The arguments presented here are diametrically opposite to this. London states that Britain did not view Jewish refugees in a humanitarian light, but through the eyes of self-interest. More could have been done in trying to assist Jews fleeing from Nazi Germany and also to permit the shattered remnants of European Jewry to enter post-Holocaust Britain.

London's work follows in the line of those more critical of Britain's role in the Holocaust, most notably Martin Gilbert, Tony Kushner and David Cesarani.⁽²¹⁾ In fact, Cesarani and Kushner are able to lay claim to a new school of thought on Anglo-Jewish relations.⁽²²⁾ In his work Kushner has advanced the argument that

Britain's claim to be a liberal, tolerant country is not true. A form of antisemitism lies at the heart of Britain's liberality in that there is a desire in British society for the Jews to assimilate and, when they choose not to, they are viewed as problematic, which is an argument with which London would certainly concur. She begins her work by stating that between 1933 and 1948 Britain held a consistent line on limiting Jewish immigration (p2). Refugees would be assisted only if it was in the interests of Britain, a concept that holds true today if the attitude taken by many towards the current issue of asylum is considered. Thus, while Britain would 'tolerate' a certain amount of immigration for humanitarian reason, this 'toleration' was limited by several interlinked factors.

The first, was the perceived effect that this process could have on the fabric of British society. The charge that antisemitism would increase if too many Jewish refugees were granted entry was stated throughout the inter-war period, by both by government officials and the already-established Anglo-Jewish community. The second factor that was cited was employment, or more precisely unemployment. For this reason, refugees were landed on condition that they did not seek to enter the labour market without permission from the Ministry of Labour. This stipulation, however, was waived in two cases, firstly for refugees able to leave Europe with their business intact and willing to establish new firms in Britain and secondly for those who were able to enter Britain as domestic servants. Thus, on the one hand, refugees had to be able to either create jobs in Britain or had to demean themselves by working in low-paid, low skilled employment, whatever their former circumstances. A third factor was that of assimilation. Foreign Jews were expected both by the government and by the Anglo-Jewish establishment to conform to the British way of life and to minimise their 'foreignness'. They were inundated with advice to avoid showing their alien nature, such as not speaking German in public. Fourthly, the refugees were landed on a temporary basis, on the understanding that they would in the future leave Britain. Whilst in reality some 40,000 remained in Britain, this had not been the government's intention. Refuge was to be for a limited time, in the hope that most would seek other countries in which to settle permanently. Lastly and of greatest importance, was the issue of finance. From the very beginnings of this movement, the Anglo-Jewish community was expected to find the funds that would be required to support the refugees whilst they were in Britain. Foreign Jews were not to become chargeable to state finance in any shape. Again this situation would change, as by 1939 the Anglo-Jewish community had exhausted its funds and came to rely upon government grants.

Throughout her work, London shows the complexity of government policy towards refugees. She reveals how the government actually sought to avoid introducing specific legislation to limit the number of Jews that entered Britain. Whilst in the United States there was quota system that dictated how many refugees of particular nationalities could enter, in Britain's legislation remained vague on the issue of refugees. Throughout the inter-war period immigration into Britain took place under the provisions on the 1919 Aliens Act and subsequent Aliens Orders. This had originated in the 1914 Aliens Act, an emergency measure that had been passed in the first few days of the First World War. Under this legislation, power to decide immigration policy rested almost exclusively with the Home Secretary. After Hitler's rise to power in Germany, when it was first noted that the number of German Jews arriving in Britain had increased dramatically, it was decided at Cabinet level not to introduce new legislation. This situation continued until the introduction of visas for immigrants from Germany and Austria in 1938. These had been introduced so that the government could be more selective over who was granted entry. In the words of one official, visas allow immigrants to be selected "at leisure and in advance." [p.59] Even with visas, however, the government and, more specifically the Home Office, were reluctant to outline immigration policy. As London effectively shows, the government maintained this policy of trying to avoid having a policy throughout the period that she examines. By not having a specific policy, the government could be as restrictive or as compassionate as it (or rather the Home Secretary) chose to be.

London's work goes beyond September 1939, when all issued visas were cancelled on the start of war. She emphasises the government's reluctance to admit Jewish refugees during the war and the consistent government line that the rescue of Jews was not a war aim. In fact, the government maintained that the only way to rescue European Jewry was for the Allies to win the war in the shortest possible time. This is the most contentious part of the book and the section that with which a critic such as Rubinstein, would focus

upon. London has very much followed the lead of Kushner in his criticisms of British inaction when it came to the issue of Jews during the war. Britain did not want to be seen to be fighting a war on behalf of Jewry is the standard accusation levelled. This stance, in Kushner's view, shows the antisemitism that was an integral part of the British government's 'liberality'. London, too, is critical of government policy and she covers the failed schemes that were suggested to assist the Jews being persecuted in Nazi-dominated Europe. However, this section does need to be contextualised more. Was it possible that anything realistic could have been done to rescue the Jews? The answer is probably 'no'. The main criticism, however, lies elsewhere. The government's largest failure was not its failure to the rescue European Jews, something that was impossible to do. The failure was, firstly, to keep silent on what was happening in Nazi Europe. More information about the Holocaust should have been made public, along with more specific mention of the fact that the Jews were being persecuted and exterminated because of their race. Secondly, the government's complete denial that the rescue of Jews was impossible should not have deflected them from attempting to ascertain if something could have been done. When opportunities did arise, the government sought to find a way to avoid doing anything to assist the Jews, rather than seeing if the opportunity could be exploited.

London's work also moves into the post-war situation. She examines the position of the refugees who had entered prior to 1939, showing how they were eventually able to apply for naturalisation. The immigration of Jews after 1945 is also examined. It is unfortunate that this section is so short, since virtually nothing has been written on this subject.⁽²³⁾ London shows how the new Labour government continued the restrictive policies that had been introduced prior to the war. London and all others who write on immigration, need to make more of this point, that the political hue of the party in power has little impact on immigration policy, which, on the whole, remains restrictive. London also compares the post-war entry of Jews with the European Volunteer Workers (EVW) scheme that the government established to bring foreign labour into a British industry short of man and woman power.⁽²⁴⁾ Her criticism is that the government sought to exclude Jews because of their Jewishness, whilst at the same time encouraging the entry of East Europeans. However, there are various problems with this claim. Firstly, the timing of the EVW scheme. It was introduced in 1947, by which time the majority of the displaced Jews in Europe had firmly decided to settle only in Palestine and so would not have wished to enter Britain. Secondly, though London mentions the political reasons behind the EVW scheme, namely the need to clear the displaced persons (DPs) from Europe, she does not cover the international aspects of this situation. Britain was obliged to do something to alleviate the post-war refugee situation in Europe, especially if it expected the United States to assist in its solution. Furthermore, in accepting a share of the DPs, Britain was able to combine humanitarianism with the advantage that these people could work in British industry. Thirdly, London views the scheme only on its positive terms, rather than seeing it as an exploitation of foreign labour carried out by a government which wanted to get British industry back onto a peacetime footing.⁽²⁵⁾ Finally, the government ensured that there was a fail-safe mechanism at the centre of the EVW scheme. If the former DPs proved to be unreliable, they could be deported back to Germany. It is doubtful that this would have been possible with Jewish immigrants, who would not have wanted to return to the country which had murdered so many of their co-religionists.

Throughout the period that London's work covers, there is an overall consistency in government refugee policy which can be summed up with several interlinked key themes that are used constantly by both ministers and officials. Tradition, precedent, sovereignty, individuality and temporary were the words most commonly used by ministers and officials when discussing Jewish immigration. Traditionally, it was stated, Britain was not a country of immigration, though it had accepted its fair share of refugees in the past. This claimed lack of an immigration tradition meant that Britain would not be able to offer refuge to the many refugees who would wish to come here. The fear of setting a precedent by relaxing immigration regulations prompted officials to claim that any relaxation was a one-off, an exception rather than the rule. Britain had to maintain its sovereignty over immigration. Though it would participate in the international efforts to solve the refugee problem, Britain had to maintain sovereign control over who would be granted entry. Furthermore, each case would be examined on its individual merits. Britain attempted to deal with the mass movement of Jews at an individual level. Though Britain did permit the entry of groups, for example the

Kindertransporte, this came under the heading of precedent. Finally, since it was suggested that Britain was not a country of immigration, the refugees would be admitted only on a temporary basis, pending their re-emigration to a country of permanent settlement. London shows how these themes permeate the story from 1933 until 1948.

For those who are knowledgeable about this topic this study contains many familiar arguments. Britain did not do enough to save Jews from the Holocaust, more refugees could have been admitted, but governments remained keen to exclude them because of their very Jewishness. London amasses a substantial body of evidence to back-up these arguments. It is interesting to note that she has not only examined the records of the Home Office or the Foreign Office (God save us all from studies that remain moribund within FO 371!), but has also included many references to Treasury records, interviews and private papers of some of the key individuals involved with Jewish immigration, adding a new light to the subject. The use of Treasury records allows her to support her argument that, in 1933, "British policy towards the refugees revolved around the issue of finance." (p26) After all, it was only after the Anglo-Jewish community's promise of 1933 that any Jewish refugee admitted would not become a burden on the state that the government decided not to introduce further restriction on German Jews seeking to enter Britain. This situation continued from 1933 until the end of the period examined by London and is key to an understanding of the government's immigration policy.

The only concern with any history of immigration, including London's, is that the full story is still not known. Under the 1919 Aliens Act, entry into Britain was in the hands of the Home Secretary. In practice this power was devolved to the Immigration Officers working at the ports of entry, who administered the entry of Aliens under the 1920 Aliens Order. London has certainly drawn attention to the possibility of discrepancy between policy decisions and how those decisions were actually put in to practice on a day-to-day basis, accepting that "The more generous aspects of the government's practice went largely unacknowledged." [p.46] This then is the crux of the problem for historians; whilst we have the records that cover the making of high policy, the individual case files are not yet publicly available. There is hope that a selection of these records will become available in the future. A new class of records at the Public Record Office, HO 382 Aliens Department: Aliens Personnel Files, has been established and contains some of the records that have already been opened, for example the case of William Joyce and that of Mikhail Borodin. Further cases will be deposited there, both of famous individuals and "specimen file[s] to illustrate how the Home Office handled various aspects of immigration control and how immigration policy was applied in actual cases." Apparently, the selection of pre-war files will be "generous", though this does depend on whether the person concerned is still alive.⁽²⁶⁾ It is believed that these files have the potential to change the study of immigration into Britain and will show that often officials looked favourably upon individual cases, even those which, in terms of government policy and legislation, would have been unable to gain entry.⁽²⁷⁾

Overall this book certainly adds to the topic and should be used as an example by others seeking to write the history of groups that migrated to Britain.. London clearly argues how the government's immigration policy was a non-policy. That legislation did not need to be amended for it to be restrictive, as the Home Secretary held the key to entry into Britain. Appeasement of Germany in the 1930s meant that Britain could not criticise the Nazi government for their treatment of the Jews. The unwillingness of Britain and other countries to view the refugee issue as one of international concern, has been a feature of the twentieth century. Restrictions against immigration have increased, while efforts to solve the problems that cause refugees have not been undertaken. London's work undeniably supports Chaim Weizmann's contention to the 1937 Peel Commission that 'the world is divided into places where [the Jews] cannot live and places where they may not enter'.⁽²⁸⁾

Notes

1. See, for instance, on the United States, David Wyman, *Paper Walls. America and the Refugee crisis, 1938-1941*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (1968) and Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945*

- , New Brunswick, New Jersey: Tutgers University Press (1970); on the Netherlands, Bob Moore, *Refugees from Nazi Germany in the Netherlands, 1933-1940*, Dordrecht; Boston; Lancaster: Nijhoff (1986); on France, Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933-1942*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (1999); on Canada see Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948*, Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys (1982); on Australia see Michael Blakeney, *Australia and the Jewish Refugees, 1933-1948*, Sydney: Croom Helm (1985), on Brazil see, Jeffrey Lesser, *Welcoming the Undesirables*, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press (1995); and on India, Anil Bhatti and Johannes H. Voigt (eds.), *Jewish Exile in India 1933-1945*, New Delhi: Max Mueller Bhavan (1999).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. London: Allen & Unwin (1936).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. London: The Cresset Press (1956).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. London: Libris (1988, first published by Penguin Books, 1940).[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. London: Frank Cass (1997).[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. See Peter and Leni Gillman, *'Collar the Lot': How Britain Interned and Expelled its Wartime Refugees*, London: Quartet Books (1980); Ronald Stent, *A Battered Page? The Internment of 'His Majesty's Most Loyal Enemy Aliens'*, London: Deutsch (1980); David Cesarani and Tony Kushner, *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain*, London: Frank Cass (1993).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. London: Frank Cass (2nd edition, 1994, first published, 1973). [Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. London: Barrie and Jenkins (1975). [Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. London: Edward Arnold (1979).[Back to \(9\)](#)
 10. London: Macmillan (1978).[Back to \(10\)](#)
 11. London: Leicester University Press (2nd edition, 1999, first published by Oxford University Press, 1979).[Back to \(11\)](#)
 12. Manchester: Manchester University Press (1989).[Back to \(12\)](#)
 13. Leamington Spa (1984).[Back to \(13\)](#)
 14. Edited by Werner Mosse, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), (1991).[Back to \(14\)](#)
 15. Louise London, 'British Immigration Control Procedures and Jewish Refugees, 1933-1939' in *Ibid.*, pp.485-517.[Back to \(15\)](#)
 16. London: Macmillan (1984).[Back to \(16\)](#)
 17. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson (1998).[Back to \(17\)](#)
 18. Oxford: Blackwell (1994).[Back to \(18\)](#)
 19. London: Routledge (1997).[Back to \(19\)](#)
 20. Louise Anne London, 'British Immigration Control Procedures and Jewish Refugees, 1933-1942' Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of London (1992). Her previously published articles include the one already cited from *Second Chance* (see footnote 15 above); 'British Government Policy and Jewish Refugees 1933-45', *Patterns of Prejudice* vol.23, no.4 (1989) pp26-43, 'Jewish Refugees, Anglo-Jewry and British Government Policy, 1930-1940' in David Cesarani, *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1990) pp163-190, 'British Reactions to the Jewish Flight from Europe' in Peter Catterall and Catherine Morris (eds.), *Britain and the Threat to Stability in Europe 1918-45*, Leicester: Leicester University Press (1993) pp.57-73; 'Refugee Agencies and Their Work, 1933-39', *The Journal of Holocaust Education* vol.4, no.1 (Summer, 1995) pp.3-17; 'Whitehall and the Refugees: The 1930s and the 1990s', *Patterns of Prejudice* vol.34 no.3 (2000) pp.17-26.[Back to \(20\)](#)
 21. See, for example, Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, London: Mandarin (1991); Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*, *idem.*, 'The British and the Shoah', *Patterns of Prejudice* vol.23, no.3 (Autumn 1989) pp.3-16, *idem.*, 'The Impact of the Holocaust on British Society and Culture', *Contemporary Record* vol.5 no.2 (Autumn 1991) pp.349-375; David Cesarani, *Britain and the Holocaust*, London: Holocaust Educational Trust (1998), *idem.*, *Justice Delayed* London: Heinemann (1992).[Back to \(21\)](#)
 22. This is especially true now as both of these academics are based at the University of Southampton, where there is a long tradition of studying Anglo-Jewish history. The University also has the Parkes Library, a growing archive collection on Anglo-Jewry and regular seminars are held on Jewish history.[Back to \(22\)](#)

23. The only real examination has been carried out by Tony Kushner in his article, 'Holocaust Survivors in Britain: An Overview and Research Agenda', *The Journal of Holocaust Education*, vol.4, no.2, (Winter 1995) pp.147-66, and in his book with Katherine Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide*, London: Frank Cass (1999), though it is also mentioned as a side issue in David Cesarani, *Justice Delayed*.[Back to \(23\)](#)
24. For the EVW scheme see Diana Kay and Robert Miles, *Refugees or Migrant Workers?*, London: Routledge (1992); J.A. Tannahill, *European Volunteer Workers in Britain Manchester*, Manchester University Press (1958) and David Cesarani, *Justice Delayed*.[Back to \(24\)](#)
25. This is very much the argument advanced by Kay and Miles, *Ibid*.[Back to \(25\)](#)
26. Roger Kershaw and Mark Pearsall, *Immigrants and Aliens. A Guide to Sources on UK Immigration and Citizenship*, Kew: Public Record Office (2000) p.19.[Back to \(26\)](#)
27. Private information.[Back to \(27\)](#)
28. Cited in Michael Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press (1985) p.185.[Back to \(28\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept the review and will not be responding further.

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