Ark of Civilization: Refugee Scholars and Oxford University, 1930-1945

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Author: Sally Crawford

Jas Elsner

Katharina Ulmschneider

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Reviewer: Rachel Pistol

We are all familiar with modern debates in the media regarding the politics of refugee rescue and arguments surrounding which immigrants should be prioritised for rescue and aid. The idea of Britain maintaining the security of its borders and screening immigrants for ‘desirable’ qualities is nothing new in British history, and many of the debates that are currently happening are familiar from the 20th century, which makes the publication of Sally Crawford, Katharina Ulmschneider, and Jas Elsner’s collection of essays on Oxford University’s rescue of refugees during the 1930s particularly timely and relevant. *Ark of Civilization: Refugee Scholars and Oxford University* is an ambitious interdisciplinary collection of articles comprising 23 chapters, in addition to the introduction, contributed by 24 authors. The book is divided into thematic sections that cover the specific academic disciplines engaged in by refugee academics, the world of publishing, and the contextual background to refugee rescue.

In April 1933, all Jews were forbidden in Germany to work in the civil service, and this ban extended into the academic community. Jewish professors lost their university positions and were dismissed from their posts. This desperate situation led to suicide in some cases, while other individuals started to plan their escape. As has often been the way in academia, networking usually played a key part in academics finding a new role – be it permanent, or as part of their journey to the United States. Oxford University in the 1930s was very different to the Oxford University with which modern scholars are familiar; it was much smaller and had less of an international reputation, yet despite this fact became particularly adept at creating roles for European academics.

Different professions took different approaches in their willingness to accept their persecuted brethren from the continent. What most professions had in common, however, were requirements for individuals to be classed as exceptional in their field in order to qualify for refuge. No other profession has been rated as generous in its aid to its own as academia, and as Marion Berghahn has noted 'This rescue operation of scholars by scholars, especially if compared with the performance of other professional bodies, was very remarkable notwithstanding its limitations'.⁽¹⁾

The stories of the Jewish émigré scientists and their contribution to the war effort is much better known than that of those in the arts and humanities, and this volume seeks to address this imbalance. Oxford was unable to offer refuge to all those who sought sanctuary, and the pattern made clear in this collection of essays is that

a very specific type of person was being rescued from the Nazis – only those people (predominantly men) who had made, and who would continue to make, a significant and internationally important contribution to scholarship (p. 3)

As reflects this, *Ark of Civilization* is predominantly a male-oriented affair, though mention is made of female artists and the families of male academics where sources exist.

One of the major sources for this collection of papers has been the archives of Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL). Created in 1933 by William Beveridge 'to help protect, fund, and find work for displaced German academics' (p. 3), the organisation has gone through several name changes, but still continues to this day in its remit to both look after refugee academics and support academics who are under threat in their home country. As a result of the extensive use of similar archival sources there is naturally a large amount of repetition between the book sections, and as the chapters are focused on such a small geographic area, again there is much in the way of overlap. However, the editors have done an excellent job of linking the various chapters so that the reader can easily navigate the relationships between the refugees and the networks which they created. The significant overlap is unsurprising given the nature of the volume and reinforces the idea of Oxford as an 'Ark of Civilization' in which the lives of the refugee academics were intricately entwined with each other. This fact is inescapable and offers valuable insight into how academic networks fostered rescue attempts and protected certain prominent academics.

The fact that Oxford offered sanctuary to a disproportionately large number of academics is one that deserves celebration, of which this volume does an impressive job. This is not to assume that the transition from Nazi persecution to British society was seamless. Laurence Brockliss, in his chapter on 'Welcoming and supporting refugee scholars', explains how refugee academics had to contend with xenophobia and anti-German sentiment as much in Oxford as anywhere. Much in the same way that doctors, dentists, and others campaigned to keep refugees from increasing competition in their profession, some academics resented this influx of foreigners whom they considered to be taking opportunities away from British academics. Another problem with which the refugee academics had to contend were the cultural differences between the university system in Britain and that of Germany. The Oxford tradition of tutorial teaching was alien to German faculty who devoted most of their time to research rather than teaching, as Anthony Grenville points out in his overview chapter of 'Academic refugees in wartime Oxford'.

Through the exploration of different subject areas the reader learns about the significant contributions of individuals such as the great classical scholar Eduard Fraenkel, influential historian Arnaldo Momigliano, and famous artists such as Ernst Eisenmayer, Kurt Weiler, and Kurt Schwitters. This is but a cross section of the characters detailed in *Ark of Civilization*, and hints at the exceptional achievements these refugee scholars made regardless of whether their time at Oxford was long or short. Many of these scholars went on to pursue careers in the United States or returned to Germany after the war. Regardless of where the emigres ultimately ended up, the opportunity to spend time at Oxford changed the course of the lives of those who had the chance to escape Nazi Europe – saving physical, intellectual, and creative lives.

Certainly, the legacies of those offered sanctuary at Oxford are still felt today. German-speaking emigres established major publishing houses such as Weidenfeld, Thames & Hudson, Phaidon, and enjoyed influence in the Oxford University Press, as detailed in Anna Nyburg's chapter on 'German-speaking refugee publishers in Oxford'. The dedication of an entire section of *Ark of Civilization* to the contribution of refugees to the world of publishing is entirely necessary as the influence of a relative few had long-lasting repercussions, particularly in the field of art publications.

Not only were contributions to the art world made in terms of publications, but naturally art itself. When the Slade School of Fine Art was forced to relocate during the war it amalgamated with the Ruskin School of Art and was housed in the Ashmolean Museum. Refugee artists such as Milein Cosman, born in Gotha and brought up in Dusseldorf, sketched poignant images that captured the trauma of fleeing one's nation of birth, as discussed in Ann Rau Dawes' chapter 'Milein Cosman at the Slade'. Artists were not just interested in honing their craft, but also their politics, as shown by the creation of the anti-fascist exile organisation Young Austria in 1939 in which artists such as Eisenmayer played and which is discussed in Fran Lloyd's chapter on refugee support networks. This interweaving of art, culture, and politics is a key theme that recurs throughout the book.

In terms of financial support for the refugees, money came from a variety of sources. The Quakers provided money to some academics, and Oxford Colleges were often able to provide small subsistence grants which did not cover the same level of lifestyle to which most German academics had previously been accustomed. The SPSL was also a source of hardship grants to help tide academics between what were often fixed term contracts until a scholar could obtain a permanent academic position in the UK or tenure in the USA. Philip Davies' chapter on 'Oxford, the SPSL, and Literae Humaniores Refugee Scholars' provides a much needed overview and analysis of the reception granted to refugee scholars in Oxford. As such it provides additional context for the bulk of the chapters which focus on individual refugee stories.

When war broke out in 1939, initially refugees were able to remain at liberty, despite automatically becoming 'enemy aliens'. However, following the rapid fall of France, Belgium, and The Netherlands in 1940, there were fears that a Fifth Column of Nazi spies could be disguised in the ranks of foreigners who had been admitted to the country. Mass internment of male enemy aliens and some women and children started from May 1940, and those living in Oxford were in no way immune from this policy. Enemy aliens were usually arrested by local police, sent to temporary transit camps (which could be race tracks, partially built housing estates, or disused buildings), before then being sent to the Isle of Man. Some internees were then transported abroad to Canada and Australia. The duration of internment varied from individual to individual, but for many it was over in a year to 18 months, with release either back into the community or into the Pioneer Corps, from which 'enemy aliens' were eventually allowed to enter the ranks of the standard British military.

Internment was a tumultuous time for the refugees and, as such, rightly receives a large amount of attention in this volume. Relationships forged in Oxford prior to the war were often continued in the camps. In the early days, Oxford University was supportive of internment, but following the removal of a large number of academics from the university it was soon decided to form a committee that could assist with the release of these refugee academics. Harold Mytum's 'Networks of association' explains the work of this committee, as well as focusing on the social and intellectual lives of academics on the Isle of Man. Many academics ended up in Hutchinson Camp in Douglas, on the Isle of Man, which was in many ways considered to be the most intellectual of the camps. As Bojan Bujic notes in his chapter 'Shipwrecked on the Island of the Blessed', although the 'loss of freedom was hard to bear', at least many scholars were in the company of their fellow Oxford brethren and could take part in 'the lively cultural activity of lectures and readings' (p. 316).

Each of the chapters in *Ark of Civilization* offers a different aspect of understanding how the tumultuous years of the 1930s and the Second World War affected the trajectories of some truly brilliant minds who were fortunate enough to be recognised as experts in their fields. For those less well established in their

academic careers, help was still possible, but only if the individual was well connected. While many academics might not have picked Oxford as their first choice, ‘refugees...had to make the most of whatever possibilities they had’ (p. 222), and were generally grateful for the opportunities which they received. It was not an easy or straightforward experience for these scholars to reinvent themselves in pre-war and wartime Britain, but this is exactly what they did, most notably in the case of Paul Jacobsthal, who in Germany founded the subject of prehistoric archaeology but then became a Celtic archaeologist upon arrival in Oxford. This reinvention in the midst of trauma, separation, and anxiety is truly remarkable, yet this is what is often expected from refugees. The cases in *Ark of Civilization* are exceptional and add to the understanding of not only the years of uncertainty in the lead up to the Second World War, but also the present climate of Brexit Britain. Hostility to foreigners is nothing new, and remembering the significant contributions refugees have made in Britain and beyond is an essential part of contextualising debates both then and now.

Notes

1. Marion Berghahn, *Continental Britons: German-Jewish Refugees from Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2007), p. 79.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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