

THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS  
CONTEXTS

Series Editors: Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann  
and Ben Barkow

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THE EVIAN  
CONFERENCE  
OF 1938 AND  
THE JEWISH  
REFUGEE CRISIS

Paul R. Bartrop



# The Holocaust and its Contexts

Series Editors

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More than sixty years on, the Holocaust remains a subject of intense debate with ever-widening ramifications. This series aims to demonstrate the continuing relevance of the Holocaust and related issues in contemporary society, politics and culture; studying the Holocaust and its history broadens our understanding not only of the events themselves but also of their present-day significance. The series acknowledges and responds to the continuing gaps in our knowledge about the events that constituted the Holocaust, the various forms in which the Holocaust has been remembered, interpreted and discussed, and the increasing importance of the Holocaust today to many individuals and communities.

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The Evian Conference  
of 1938 and the  
Jewish Refugee Crisis

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To  
*The memory of all those for whom the Evian Conference represented  
a lost opportunity*

## PREFACE

The Evian Conference, which took place in France between July 6 and July 15, 1938 met at the invitation of United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt with the intention of discussing, in depth, the nature of the immigration policies of the invited nations, and, in accordance with those, what the options were for accepting refugees from Nazi Germany. Those attending were there to consider what steps could be taken to facilitate refugee migration ... but no country was expected in any way to depart from its existing immigration regulations. Much would indeed be discussed, but when the meeting's final recommendations were made no definite action on behalf of the refugees was proposed—only that the deliberations should continue and a subsequent meeting should take place in London.

This is a story about a joint global effort which had as its major objective the quest to do nothing. The conference, it will be argued, was successful in achieving what it set out to achieve, namely, to enable an exchange of information among the states attending. Nothing more. Contrary to what has become post-Holocaust popular wisdom, the delegates did not meet for the purpose of opening doors for refugee Jews, or forcing certain countries to ease their restrictions, or saving Jews from the Holocaust. In 1938 there was as yet no Holocaust from which Jews needed saving.

There was, however, a refugee crisis, and as a consequence the various nations of the world were confronted with a situation that has many parallels to our own time. Should an open-door policy be permitted

for anyone claiming refugee status? Should quotas be imposed, and, if so, how are the decisions to be made regarding numbers and eligibility? Should refugees be permitted entry on a short-term, long-term, or permanent basis? Should refugees be allowed in regardless of the prevailing economic situation? Should refugees of a different religious or ethnic background to the majority population be given the opportunity to arrive? If so, should they be allowed to stay, thereby potentially transforming the existing social fabric? The issues in 1938 (as today) were many, and the need to deal with them, urgent.

Thirty-two nations attended the Evian Conference; others sent observers, while a large number of private organizations with an interest in the refugee crisis showed up in the hope of putting their case and persuading the delegates to open their respective countries' doors.

This book describes why the conference was called, who the main actors were, and what the various delegations had to say about the refugee emergency and how their country would address it. It does not delve into the motives behind the stances adopted by those attending; the internal political dynamics involved in each country's position were often way too complex for elaboration here. The literature is thus patchy; in some cases, highly detailed studies have been written attempting to explain the policies of certain countries; for others, very little has appeared in sufficient measure to give us an insight into priorities or options.

Moreover, this short study has avoided the temptation of reporting on the wide variety of responses to the conference, preferring to outline the meeting itself. The large press gallery reported in depth on the delegates' statements, and in many countries official reports were made public. A scholarly treatment of responses to Evian would, of necessity, produce a much longer volume than the current study; it is to be hoped that others, building on the foundation laid here, will begin the process of examining these responses.

When we analyse the addresses made by the delegates it becomes apparent that often they did not arrive with prepared instructions from their governments. All too frequently, it seemed, their statements were extemporized, as they acted safe in the knowledge that they were interpreting faithfully their governments' views. As a result, we are looking here at a gathering of representatives who were, in essence, projecting a comprehensive global perspective of official reactions to the refugee crisis caused by Nazi Germany. It is not a pretty picture.



In preparing this work, I have been fortunate over many years to be able to utilize a variety of archival collections. One of the joys of documentary research is that one often finds documents emanating from sources other than those of the government or agency where one is undertaking the research, or of finding replies to correspondence that might be missing from another archive on the other side of the world. I would thus like to place on record my gratitude to the reference staff of the following institutions that have assisted me as I undertook much of the research leading to this short volume: in the United Kingdom, the Wiener Library, London; the People's History Museum Archive and Study Centre, Manchester; the Board of Deputies of British Jews Archives, London; and The National Archives, Kew; in Australia, the National Archives of Australia, Canberra; in Canada, the Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

The reference librarian responsible for holdings in History at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), Rachel Tait-Ripperdan, has provided extensive assistance throughout the project, as have my Chair in the Department of Social Science, Nicola Foote, and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Robert Gregerson. Within my Department I have received the unwavering support of our Executive Secretary, Carey Fells. While also looking after the interests of nearly thirty other faculty members, she has always taken care of the many appeals I make on her time, and but for her assistance I frequently would have been lost.

Special mention should also be made of the help provided by the Office of Research and Graduate Studies (ORGS) at FGCU, in particular through the backing provided by the ever-smiling Associate Vice-President for Research and Graduate Studies, T.C. Yih.

My assistant at FGCU for the academic year 2016–2017, Taylor Neff, worked her way diligently through a myriad of tasks, for all of which I am indeed grateful. One of these involved toiling for hours through the microfilmed collection entitled *Holocaust Refugees and the FDR White House*, reproduced from the Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the custody of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, National Archives and Records Administration, Bethesda, Maryland. This excellent collection, which appeared in 2006, was coordinated by Robert E. Lester, and is accompanied by a guide prepared by James Shields. The guide, and the collection, is indispensable when researching the Roosevelt administration and its responses to refugees during the Nazi period.

My dear friend and colleague at Stockton University in New Jersey, Michael Dickerman, read every word of the text; his insights, as in the past, have been perceptive and have enhanced the project overall. In addition, I am extremely grateful to my friend and mentor Michael Cohen, for reminding me of the vicissitudes of the English language.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the ongoing support given by my editors at Palgrave, Emily Russell and Carmel Kennedy, who worked hard in innumerable ways to ensure that this short volume met the standards of what is a very fine publishing house.

Finally, but by no means least, are my thanks to Eve, my best friend, wife, and muse. She, too, worked hard in a number of ways, both scholarly and non-scholarly, to ensure that this work would reach the light of day.

Omissions and shortcomings, of course, are my own. As stated earlier, it is my earnest hope that this book will be viewed as a stimulus for further examination of the Evian Conference, and that other researchers will develop new projects that build on the start that has been provided here.

Fort Myers, USA

Paul R. Bartrop

*The original version of the book was revised: Errors in the index and mismatch of copyright year between online & print renditions have been corrected.*

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## Introduction

*The urgent issues of war and peace relegated the question of refugees to the bottom of the international agenda. Yet something had to be done.*

Sir Richard Evans (Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory*, London: Little, Brown, 2015, pp. 257–258)

**Abstract** The Introduction outlines the reasons behind the need to call a conference on refugees during 1938, locating it within the context of German Jewish history up to the start of the Nazi period. It also gives a brief overview of the agencies established by the League of Nations prior to the ascent to office of the Nazis in Germany, showing why it was that these bodies were considered by the United States government to be inadequate in meeting the challenge imposed by the new refugee crisis following 1933. The chapter also introduces the argument that governments around the world were forced to develop refugee policies in the 1930s without the benefit of knowing about the Holocaust that was to come—and that as a result the historical record thus far has been blinkered in its appreciation of the refugee crisis.

**Keywords** *Anschluss* · Refugees · Germany · Jewish

In 1938 a joke was doing the rounds throughout Jewish communities in Germany and Austria. It went something like this: A Jew goes into a travel agency hoping to buy a ticket that would enable him to leave the Third Reich. The agent asks him where he would like to go:

“Switzerland?”

“No, they’re restricting Jewish entry there.”

“Brazil?”

“No, likewise.”

“How about the United States?”

“Sorry, quotas.”

“New Zealand, then?”

“No spaces available.”

Exasperated after having gone through more than a dozen possibilities, the clerk reaches behind his desk and brings out a globe of the world. “Choose,” he invites his customer. After a moment of contemplation, the Jewish man asks: “Do you have anything else?”

The international scene was anything but welcoming for the Jews of Nazi Germany as 1938 progressed, and after the union (*Anschluss*) of Austria with Germany in March of that year immigration regulations, already tight in most countries, became even more constricted. Two years earlier, the President of the World Zionist Organization, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, testified before the Peel Commission established by the British government for the purpose of exploring options for the Palestine Mandate. On November 25, 1936, Weizmann declared that the Jews of Europe faced a situation in which “the world is divided into places where they cannot live and places where they cannot enter.”<sup>1</sup> After the *Anschluss*, that situation was exacerbated significantly.

Up to this time, Jews in Nazi Germany had been reluctant to leave what, for the previous century and a half, they had considered to be their legitimate homeland.<sup>2</sup> Frequently raised in discussions of whether or not to stay was the sacrifice made by German Jews on behalf of Imperial Germany during the First World War, when almost 100,000 Jews wore the Kaiser’s uniform and 12,000 were killed in combat.<sup>3</sup> Despite the threat posed by the Nazis, most Jews after 1933 preferred to remain in Germany. When Hitler came to power on January 30, 1933, Germany’s Jewish population numbered around 525,000 (with 160,000 in Berlin alone); by 1939 just under 300,000 had left, meaning that nearly half