

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jeff Lesser. *Welcoming the Undesirables: Brazil and the Jewish Question*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08412-4; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-08413-1.

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Jeffrey Lesser's *Welcoming the Undesirables: Brazil and the Jewish Question* tells the poignant and puzzling story of how earlier this century, in spite of the power of anti-Semitic politicians and intellectuals, Jews made their exodus to Brazil, "the land of the future." What motivated the Brazilian government, Lesser asks, to create a secret ban on Jewish entry in 1937 just as Jews desperately sought refuge from Nazism? And why, just one year later, did more Jews enter Brazil legally than ever before?

Lesser uses exhaustive archival research, conducted in Brazil, Israel, the United States, and England, to reveal the convoluted workings of Brazil's wartime immigration policy as well as the attempts of desperate refugees to twist the prejudices on which it was based to their advantage. Lesser's subtle analysis and telling anecdotes shed light on such pressing issues as race, ethnicity, nativism, and nationalism in post-colonial societies at a

time when "ethnic cleansing" in Europe is once again driving increasing numbers of refugees from their homelands.

Jeffrey Lesser's meticulous, level-headed and prodigiously researched volume transforms our understanding of twentieth century Brazilian immigration policy toward the Jews and adds an important new dimension to the worldwide history of Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. His close examination of racial, religious, and ethnic imagery as they applied to Jews has wide implications for students of twentieth-century history.

Not the original, portuguese title of this book: *O Brasil e a Questao Judaica: Imigracao, Diplomacia e Pre-conceito*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago Editora, 1995.

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