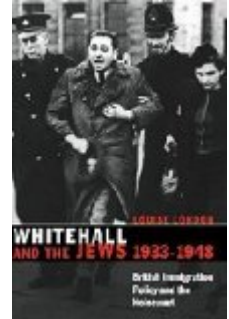


Louise London. *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy and the Holocaust.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xiii + 313 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-63187-7.



Reviewed by Steve Paulsson

Published on H-Holocaust (October, 2002)

Louise London's excellent survey comes at a time when Britain is engaged in an animated debate over "bogus asylum-seekers" and "economic migrants," in the course of which Britain's alleged traditional generosity towards "real" refugees is often trotted out to justify a hard line against the newest wave. And what better example of this generosity than Britain's hospitality to 80,000 Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in the 1930s?

Except that, as London reminds us, British immigration policy "was designed to keep out large numbers of European Jews--perhaps ten times as many as it let in.... [E]scape to Britain was an exception for the lucky few; exclusion was the fate of the majority" (p. 12).

The German Jews in the 1930s were in fact treated as "bogus asylum seekers" (because their lives were not yet in immediate danger) and as "economic migrants" (because, having lost their means of livelihood, they would benefit economically by coming to Britain). In effect they were treated as immigrants who were trying to jump the queue, rather than as people in desperate need. The language was different in those days,

but the underlying attitude was the same: in the minds of officials and much of the public, the "refugee problem" had nothing to do with the problems of the refugees themselves and everything to do with the expense and inconvenience of helping them. In practice, expense and inconvenience were minimal, since "generosity" was extended only to the well-heeled, the well-qualified, and the well-connected. In November 1938, after the Kristallnacht pogrom, Home Secretary Samuel Hoare told Parliament that the 11,000 Jews whom Britain had admitted thus far had created jobs for 15,000 Britons; he advised keeping up the policy of "very careful selection" that had led to such a positive result (p. 104). In other words, the Jews should be kept out unless Britain could make a profit out of them.

In the end Britain did admit about 70,000 "suitable" Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, on top of 10,000 transmigrants. The government was particularly receptive to elite emigrants such as Sigmund Freud and Karl Popper, and the bulk of the immigrants were doctors, scientists, lawyers and other economically useful categories of peo-

ple. British hospitals actively recruited German Jewish doctors, for example. The deed of which Britain is proudest was the admission of 10,000 children in 1939 under the Kindertransport scheme, but these children were admitted on condition that they would not be a burden on the state; their parents, Jewish organizations, private charities, or hospitable individuals had to pay for their transportation and upkeep. The scheme separated them from their parents, and as events worked out, of course, most of them were orphaned. Britain's policy was relatively generous if measured in numbers: though not at the top of the league table, Britain admitted more Jewish refugees than did such traditional countries of immigration as Canada and Australia, and per capita more than the United States. But all these countries observed the same principles, so that Britain appears not so much as more generous as less ungenerous than the others. Why did officials think like that? Those in the field, who could see for themselves the tragedy that was unfolding in Nazi Germany, were often sympathetic and even willing to circumvent official policy. Frank Foley, recently recognized as a Righteous Gentile, is only the most prominent example; as Passport Control Officer at the British Embassy in Berlin, he stretched Foreign Office rules to help hundreds of German Jews reach Britain or Palestine. Public sympathy, also, went out to refugees who reached Britain and, therefore, became politically difficult to remove. Once there, legally or not, they were typically allowed to stay. (The same is true today. Recently, probably alarmist estimates put the number of asylum-seekers in the country at more than a million, while annual expulsions run in the hundreds.) For that reason, the Chamberlain government and the bureaucrats in Whitehall were most anxious to introduce visas and entry restrictions to stem what they saw as the problem at its source. Out of sight, out of mind.

As London points out, visas were a relatively new development in Europe, a response to the large-scale movements of people made possible

by new modes of transportation combined with the emergence of strong, rich democracies that provided places of refuge. The stimulus for the introduction of immigration controls was the waves of immigration that followed the Russian pogroms in 1881-1882 and 1903-1905. To stem this influx of Jews, the 1905 Aliens Act was introduced, the first British law to regulate the entry of foreigners. Britain's "traditional generosity towards refugees" had thus been the result not of policy, but of the absence of policy. This defect was remedied when it became problematic. At first Jewish refugees received assistance just from private charities; the British government began helping them financially only after Munich, when guilt over having abandoned Czechoslovakia to its fate led to some feeling of obligation towards its citizens. Even so, the financial help was limited to helping the Czech government resettle Sudeten Jews within Czechoslovakia. For immigration purposes, a distinction was made between political refugees--such as Socialist parliamentarians, who were treated sympathetically and given priority--and "racial" refugees, who were treated with suspicion. As a result, Britain was even more restrictive towards Jewish refugees from the Sudetenland than it had been towards the German and Austrian Jews. Britain did not know, of course, that they would soon fall into the hands of the Nazis.

The plight of the German Jews became a major public issue only after Kristallnacht. The Kindertransport scheme was introduced as a result, but at the same time the resistance to adult refugees, if anything, increased *pari passu* with the increased clamor of Jews anxious to leave. Children aside, only 17,000 Jews were admitted in the final year of peace.

British refugee policy in the 1930s is not indefensible. The government could not have anticipated in 1939, or at the time of the Evian conference in 1938, that the Nazis would commit genocide against the Jews. They had reason to fear that

an open-door policy towards refugees would only encourage other states, with far more Jews, to follow the Nazis' example. Admitting large numbers of Jews would stimulate anti-Semitism at home (this essentially anti-Semitic argument, blaming the Jews themselves for the hatred directed towards them, was also advanced by Jewish organizations). It was argued, further, that the Nazis might use the occasion to smuggle agents into Britain, and above all that the immigrants would compete with the unemployed for jobs made scarce by the depression.

None of these arguments stands up to closer scrutiny, however. By 1938 economic recovery was well under way; as Hoare noted, immigrants (after an adjustment period) generally contribute far more to an economy than they draw from it, and the moral obligation to aid those in need should surely outweigh mere economic calculations. (Nowadays, Britain is bound by the 1951 U.N. Convention on the Status of Refugees to give asylum to refugees once they have landed, but this merely formalizes what was already the case in practice anyway. If anything it makes the government even more determined to keep refugees from landing.) Native British Nazi sympathizers, of whom there were not a few, would have made far more effective agents than any outsider; in any case there is not a single known case of a Jewish immigrant serving the Nazis. The argument that some people should not be helped because it would encourage others to seek help is morally bankrupt; the argument that to help the victims of persecution would encourage other persecutors is speculative and should properly lead to the conclusion that ways should be found to discourage persecution, not that its victims should be abandoned. Finally, though Britain could not have known that Nazi Germany was going to murder the Jews, there were strong reasons for suspecting such a possibility--not least, Hitler's speech of 30 January 1939, threatening "the annihilation of the

Jewish race in Europe," which was widely reported at the time.

The government was prepared to suspect the worst, in other words, when it came to the possible future actions of Poland or Rumania, but was blithely optimistic about Germany. The constant was inaction: inaction out of normal bureaucratic inertia, of course, but also inaction because in either case the refugees and not Britain would bear the cost. London's reading of British policy is not new: Bernard Wasserstein made essentially the same points in his *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945* (1979; second edition, 1999). London's study complements Wasserstein's rather than replaces it. While she provides a great deal more detail on prewar policy than Wasserstein does, wartime policy--Wasserstein's subject--occupies only two of the ten chapters and is treated in rather cursory fashion; for example the Struma affair and its consequences are disposed of in half a paragraph. London also does not deal to any great extent with Palestine, which really lies outside the ambit of her study since it was under the jurisdiction of the Colonial Office rather than the Foreign Office. But it is a pity that London chose to restrict herself in this way, since without Palestine a key piece of the puzzle is missing.

Still, a detailed examination of Britain's peacetime handling of this key refugee crisis is useful and timely. If there is a moral to this story, it is that democratic governments naturally incline towards inertia and *raison d'etat*, behaving ethically only when public pressure drives them to it. Public pressure prevented the Jews from being driven out once they had arrived, the Kindertransports and such other concessions as were made. But public pressure was inconsistent; it could also be xenophobic and protectionist, whenever the human face of the refugees was not visible.

Nowadays, of course, there is television, which can bring the plight of refugees into people's homes however far away they are, but it is

somewhat frightening to think of television, with its surpassing superficiality and sound-bite culture, as the guardian of a nation's conscience. Television will tug at the heartstrings for a moment and then go on to the next sensation. Thus audiences are now perhaps more hardened than those of seventy years ago. The saga of the *St. Louis*, which was driven from pillar to post with its cargo of Jewish refugees, did finally engage public sympathy enough that the refugees were taken in. The sinking of the *Struma* with all hands embarrassed the government into treating subsequent refugee boats with greater leniency. But the recent death of a group of Chinese immigrants who suffocated while trying to enter Britain illegally has stimulated only a demand for sterner efforts to keep them out, and the Australian government seems to have gained in popularity by refusing to take in a boatload of desperate Afghans. Even in the global village, humanity and compassion still have to struggle—perhaps harder than ever—against xenophobia and protectionism.

The outcome of these pressures is a refugee policy that is superficial and short-term in its outlook and caught in a permanent cycle of crisis management. It pays attention to the motives and circumstances of the refugees at the moment when they seek asylum, and does not take their long-term prospects into account. The government now proposes to direct refugees to designated, neighboring countries of refuge, thus removing the economic burden from countries like Britain, which allegedly cannot afford it, and onto countries like Congo, which apparently have limitless resources. Or perhaps governments feel it more cost-effective to support people in squalid camps, where they have no prospects, than to allow them to come to places where, with some investment, they can make an economic contribution. As I write, a commendable proposal is before Parliament to liberalize the treatment of refugees once they are here, but the determination to keep them out has not flagged.

These parallels should not be pushed too far: in the real world, other things are never equal, and there is no present-day situation that cannot be distinguished (as the lawyers would say) from the case of the Holocaust. Instead we have to look to this story, apart from its intrinsic interest, as a source of insights. The Holocaust is a limiting case, a "plight of refugees" that developed as far as it possibly could into a campaign of total extermination—under conditions, of course, of total war. It would be wrong, therefore, to view Louise London's book as mainly a source of ammunition for present-day polemics. Still, it provides much food for thought.

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Citation: Steve Paulsson. Review of London, Louise. *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy and the Holocaust*. H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

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