**‘Heavy is the Responsibility for All the Lives that Might Have Been Saved in the Pre-war Years’**

British Perceptions of Refugees 1933–1940

Rachel Pistol

How welcoming Great Britain was to refugees in the 1930s and 1940s depended on many factors, including the age, gender, class and profession of an individual. Members of some of the British professions did all they could to rescue their persecuted brethren from the continent, while others did all they could to bar those who might potentially cause competition in the job market. This article considers how welcoming the professions and general public were to the internees in the years preceding the Second World War, how popular opinion changed after the fall of France and the Low Countries, and how Eleanor Rathbone and some of her peers campaigned to debunk the popular myths surrounding the refugees. Much of the rhetoric from this time period will seem familiar to those reading the newspapers and listening to news reports nowadays, showing how much still needs to be learned from this turbulent time in history.

Keywords: refugees, immigration, Jewish refugees, Eleanor Rathbone, refugee policy, Second World War, German immigrants, Austrian immigrants

The rhetoric surrounding the influx of refugees in recent years bears remarkable similarities to the rhetoric surrounding the influx of refugees from Europe during the 1930s. The fear of the ‘other’, of individuals or groups that communicate in a different language, or who have different cultural norms, remains unchanged. In 1930s Europe, where countries were struggling with the Great Depression and high levels of unemployment, dealing with an influx of refugees was no more a straightforward matter than it is today. This article will examine some of the responses of the professions, general public and politicians towards refugees in the late 1930s and during the early stages of the Second World War. For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on German and Austrian immigrants.

Many of the fears surrounding immigration in the 1930s were economically based. Refugees arriving in Great Britain during the 1930s were considered not only on the merits of their case, but also on how they ‘might be fitted into the economy without detriment to British nationals’.[[1]](#endnote-1) The British Medical Association (BMA), for example, was against the admittance of any specialists into the country, though were willing to allow a limited number of General Practitioners entry as they were ‘less likely to attract attention’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Dentists were also wary of any increase in their numbers. Between 1935 and 1937, 183 doctors and 78 dentists were admitted to practise in Great Britain. However, Home Office policy remained that of restricting the number of alien immigrants, even in the professions.[[3]](#endnote-3) The only doctors permitted to practise were ‘exceptional cases’.[[4]](#endnote-4) The notoriously xenophobic tabloids were only too keen to suggest the country was being overrun with unlicensed medical practitioners. The *Daily Express* published an article on 11 July 1938 that claimed, ‘In the last few months 220 German and Austrian refugee doctors have been allowed to enter Britain to practise. The law allows them to practise – even to set up in Harley Street as specialists – without registration and without any question of their qualifications’.[[5]](#endnote-5) In actuality, the admission of 200 to 300 doctors was an increase to the profession of less than one per cent of the 45,000 British doctors practising, and these doctors had arrived over the space of several years, not just a few months.[[6]](#endnote-6) As one senior civil servant noted, ‘it would seem contrary to the traditions of this humane and liberal profession to refuse this small measure of help to their professional brethren who are the victims of a mediaeval persecution’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Eleanor Rathbone was vocal in her criticism of the attitudes of some of the professions. In her pamphlet, *Falsehoods and Facts about the Jews*, published in 1944, Miss Rathbone suggested that Britain’s policy of restriction had ultimately hampered the British war effort, as

many more Jewish physicians and surgeons would have come to this country if the British Medical Association had not, for fear of competition and possible under-cutting, rejected the Government’s proposal to admit up to 500 refugee doctors and insisted on limiting to 50 per annum the number of foreigners admitted to practise. Now Germany is said to be suffering from an acute shortage of doctors, whilst we also have too few, and they are over-worked. The German shortage would have been greater and ours less but for this policy of restriction.[[8]](#endnote-8)

What seemed like a suitable compromise for the professions before the outbreak of war resulted in unexpected complications further down the line.

Immigrants were allowed to practise in most professions only when classed as an ‘exceptional case’. In the case of law, refugees considered suitable by one of the Inns of Court were able to study for the Bar, but no alien was able to practise as a solicitor.[[9]](#endnote-9) Architects were more forgiving, allowing refugees to practise in Britain and join the Architect’s Register provided they had demonstrable experience in the profession.[[10]](#endnote-10) Many eminent academics were offered posts at British universities to help them escape from Europe. Oxford University was particularly adept at creating posts attached to its colleges that offered refuge to a large number of eminent German and Austrian academics.[[11]](#endnote-11) 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’.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Professions aside, refugee merchants were discouraged from trading in Britain unless there was ‘ample evidence that their establishment here would be likely to benefit British trade’.[[13]](#endnote-13) Shopkeepers and retailers were invariably refused admission to Britain as their work was in direct competition with British labour.[[14]](#endnote-14) Students were allowed to enter the country so long as their maintenance was guaranteed for the duration of their course, and that definite plans for emigration were in place.[[15]](#endnote-15) Government guidance reminded consular officials that, ‘Even if they are not personally undesirable, the admission in large numbers of refugees who have no resources and no definite prospects would create serious social and economic problems. The test should be whether or not an applicant is likely to be an asset to the United Kingdom’.[[16]](#endnote-16) The Home Secretary remarked to the Board of Deputies of British Jews in 1938 that ‘with all the sympathy in the world it would not be right to overlook the position of our own labour market’.[[17]](#endnote-17) However, there were still ways of entering the country to work. For women, this primarily meant entering Britain as a domestic servant, companion, cook or governess in private employment.[[18]](#endnote-18) Similarly, some men were able to obtain positions as butlers, agricultural workers or gardeners.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The majority of the Great British public were not aware of the persecution many of the immigrants had suffered. Moritz Bonn, a refugee who arrived during the 1930s, remembered that whenever he criticized Germany, ‘it was more natural to [my English friends] to assume that I was prejudiced than that they were blind … I shut up’.[[20]](#endnote-20) As Tony Kushner has noted, ‘Many actually doubted the authenticity of Jewish persecution, and fears about Jewish power persisted throughout the war. As late as 1944, a survey showed that 9 percent of the British population felt threatened by Jews’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Several Members of Parliament were keen to make the distinction between different types of immigrants. In the years immediately preceding the outbreak of war, MPs such as Eleanor Rathbone, Victor Cazalet, Josiah Wedgwood and Geoffrey Mander, among others, regularly questioned the government about policies relating to refugees. Several MPs urged the government to accept Jewish refugees from Germany into Palestine, and urged the Dominion governments to also accept refugees.[[22]](#endnote-22) Those who particularly understood the plight of the Jews even went so far as to suggest deporting pro-Nazi Germans from Britain, so that their places might be filled by refugees.[[23]](#endnote-23) The Rt. Hon. Josiah Wedgwood, Labour MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme, regularly asked the government to comment on individual cases that came to his attention regarding refugee suffering. He also campaigned for flexibility in the way refugees could gain entrance to the country.[[24]](#endnote-24) Eleanor Rathbone and Peter Agnew suggested that a British Foreign Legion might be created in which refugees with training as soldiers could be put to use in future conflict.[[25]](#endnote-25) Some sections of the populace, therefore, were genuinely sympathetic to the plight of the refugees in the years preceding the war, and despite some negative views given voice in the press and in right-wing circles, the refugees were mostly accepted into Britain. However, when war was declared between Germany and Britain, the immigrants became not just refugees, but also enemy aliens. Prohibited areas were created where no enemy alien could reside, but there were no plans for wholesale internment. Tribunals were established in order to classify enemy aliens into three categories: ‘A’ for those considered a threat to national security and who were immediately detained; ‘B’ for those whom the tribunals were unsure about, leading to a curfew and prohibition on owning items such as bicycles, cameras and binoculars; and ‘C’ for genuine refugees of Nazi persecution, not considered a threat to security. Classifications varied considerably, with some tribunal judges showing particular understanding, and others considerable prejudice. There was also some confusion over how the types of classification should be used. Theoretically, therefore, any enemy alien posing a threat to the British public was locked up, and any alien still free could be considered an ally. However, this period of tolerance was not to last. In May 1940, the rapid fall of France and the Low Countries caused widespread hysteria across the nation, and fears of a Fifth Column were rife. The Ministry of Information’s Home Intelligence department compiled reports of the growth of anti-alien feeling in the general population. No one could believe that the countries could have fallen without sabotage or foreigners assisting the invaders. With the prospect of an invasion of Britain a terrifying reality, the fear of a possible Fifth Column was fanned into flame.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Towards the end of May 1940, the order for general internment of all males and some females was given. Those suffering from serious medical conditions or considered too frail were supposed to be exempted, but in practice this was often not the case. Registered medical practitioners at Huyton Camp in Liverpool prepared a list of 109 internees they considered unfit for camp life in June 1940.[[27]](#endnote-27) Winston Churchill acknowledged that ‘there are a great many people affected by the orders which we have made who are the passionate enemies of Nazi Germany. I am very sorry for them, but we cannot, at the present time, and under the present stress, draw all the distinctions which we should like to do’.[[28]](#endnote-28) Ministry of Information reports showed that ‘the action taken against potential Fifth Columnists is strongly approved, and it is considered that these precautions should be carried to even greater lengths’.[[29]](#endnote-29) Once the internees were eventually confined on the Isle of Man, though, they were then resented for having a ‘holiday’ on taxpayers’ money.[[30]](#endnote-30) Where enemy aliens avoided internment, they were still viewed with suspicion. There were demonstrations against refugees of other nationalities, and it was very hard for refugees who were not interned to find employment.[[31]](#endnote-31) However, despite the anti-alien feeling in May and June, by July there was ‘criticism not only of the desirability of internment but of the methods by which it is carried out’, as the ‘indiscriminate internment of all aliens distresses more thoughtful people who regard it as evidence of panic action’.[[32]](#endnote-32) It is important to note that internment was still a popular policy in general, but certainly in intellectual circles it was considered a mistake. As Rhys Davies said in a House of Commons debate in August 1940:

a number of newspapers demanded, ‘Intern the lot’. There were also voices in this House of Commons that spoke very nearly on the same lines. The Government succumbed, and interned the lot. Unless I am mistaken, some of those newspapers then turned round, when these people were interned, and began to criticise the Government for having taken the very action they demanded. That is a lesson to us all not to follow the dictates of the newspapers.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The refugees who were interned were not forgotten by the MPs who had campaigned on their behalf before the conflict began. The poor conditions in the early camps were brought up in House of Commons debates.[[34]](#endnote-34) The worst memories of internment stem from the early days of confusion, when little was prepared and the internees were moved on what seemed to be whims of government bureaucracy. However, the knowledge that British MPs would speak on behalf of the internees offered some hope for improvement. MPs also insisted on plans to be implemented for the release of refugees.[[35]](#endnote-35) The first to be released were those with skills beneficial to the war effort, such as scientists, engineers, agricultural workers and those willing to sign up to the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps, a largely logistical unit that was considered an insult to many who wanted to bear arms against the Nazis.[[36]](#endnote-36) The internees, while fearful over their future, could at least gain some solace then from the fact that their cause was being championed in the Houses of Parliament and other circles.

In conclusion, Major Cazalet summed up the British position well:

there has been a tremendous influx of refugees from various countries and that influx has been accompanied by, and coupled with, fears of invasion and Fifth Column activities, with the result that there has been a tremendous public demand for the internment of practically every one whose family has not lived here for 100 years, in complete disregard of the individual merits of the cases concerned – a totally un-English attitude to adopt towards a problem of this kind. I fear that the authorities in this matter have been somewhat stampeded, even against their own better judgment … I think it is understandable, and up to a point excusable, but what is not excusable is delay in sorting the cases and in keeping large numbers of people for a long period in internment, when they ought to be released.[[37]](#endnote-37)

There is no doubt that Britain accepted a large number of refugees and introduced a range of policies to offer sanctuary to tens of thousands of those fleeing Nazi persecution from Germany and Austria during the 1930s. However, as the responses of some of the professions show, there was a limit as to how many refugees were permitted admission. Many MPs supported the refugees and wanted Britain to do everything it could to assist them. Despite the best of intentions, the underlying problem was ‘the inescapable reality that in a time of widespread unemployment no country in the world was prepared to accept large numbers of destitute immigrants’.[[38]](#endnote-38) A few months into the war, the attitude changed drastically towards the refugees, and they were seen not only as an economic threat, but also as a threat to national security. Popular feeling was for wholesale internment, but after a few months, the mood changed towards that of trying to utilize the refugees’ skills as a resource to bolster the British war effort. The fact that popular opinion sways so significantly over such a short space of time demonstrates how we need to be wary of the fickleness of policies made to appease hysterical masses.

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**Notes**

1. . A. J. Sherman, *Island Refuge: Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich 1933–1939* (Ilford, Essex: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1994), 82; House of Commons (hereafter cited as HC) Deb., 2 April 1936, vol. 310, cols 2108–2109. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Doctors: attitude of British medical bodies, National Archives, Kew (hereafter cited as NA) HO 213/257, 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . HC Deb., 28 May 1937, vol. 324, cols 562–563. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Persecuted Jews: correspondence with Danzig Consulate-General, NA HO 213/93, 1937; British legal reaction to German race laws relating to Jewish emigration, HO 213/94, 1938; HC Deb., 14 July 1938, vol. 338, cols 1501–1503. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . *Daily Express* (11 July 1938) clipping in Doctors: attitude of British medical bodies, NA HO 213/257. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Eleanor Rathbone, *Falsehoods and Facts about the Jews* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1944), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Persecuted Jews: correspondence with Danzig Consulate-General, NA HO 213/93. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Architects, NA HO 213/266, 1939. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Paul Jacobsthal, ‘Memoirs of Professor Paul Jacobsthal, Onetime Internee of Hutchinson Camp’, held at the Manx National Archives, Douglas, Isle of Man, MS 11626. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . Ibid*.*, 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Persecuted Jews: correspondence with Danzig Consulate-General, NA HO 213/93. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Ibid*.*; British legal reaction to German race laws, NA HO 213/94. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Persecuted Jews: correspondence with Danzig Consulate-General, NA HO 213/93; HC Deb., 11 July 1939, vol. 349, col. 2066. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . British legal reaction to German race laws, NA HO 213/94. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Meeting with Board of Deputies of British Jews, NA HO 213/42, 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Proposed moves to register foreign domestic servants, NA HO 213/5, 1938. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Hilda Ogbe, *The Crumbs off the Wife’s Table* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2001), 2–3; Imperial War Museum, Evelyn Ruth Kaye interview, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Marion Berghahn, ‘Jewish Refugees in Britain’, in *European Immigrants in Britain, 1933–1950*, ed. Johannes-Dieter Steinert and Inge Weber-Newth (Munich: Saur, 2003), 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in British Society during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . HC Deb., 5 June 1939, vol. 348, cols 22–24; 14 February 1939, vol. 343, cols 1571–1572W. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . See Geoffrey Mander, Liberal MP for Wolverhampton East, in HC Deb., 7 July 1938, vol. 338, cols 568–569. Other MPs were less positive. Wil Thorne, Labour MP for West Ham Plaistow, believed, as did many others at the time, that immigrants instantly had all the same rights and privileges as Britons and that there was no distinction between the two. HC Deb., 14 July 1938, vol. 338, cols 1498–1499. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . HC Deb., 18 April 1939, vol. 346, cols 190–193W. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . HC Deb., 7 March 1939, vol. 344, cols 1904–1905. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . For examples, see observations made 18–22 May, in Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang (eds), *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports on Britain’s Finest Hour – May to September 1940* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), 8–9, 13–14, 17, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Margaret Harkins, ‘Alien Internment at Huyton during World War II’, in *A Prominent Place: Studies in Merseyside History*, ed. John A. Davies and Janet E. Hollinshead (Liverpool: Liverpool Hope Press, 1999), 119. See also P. Lachs, ‘Memoirs of Unnamed Internee and Letter Requesting Help in Securing the Release of a Brother Interned on the Isle of Man’, held at the Manx National Archives, Douglas, Isle of Man, 1940, MS 11689 for a description of those unfit for internment held at Warth Mills, Bury, arguably the most unpleasant of all the internment camps. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. . Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. . 25, 27, 29 and 30 May 1940, in Addison and Crang, *Listening to Britain*, 34, 44, 52, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. . 31 May 1940, in ibid*.*, 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. . 4, 5, 6 June and 13 July 1940, in ibid*.*, 78, 81, 86, 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. . 6 and 23–25 July 1940, in ibid., 197–198, 253–254, 265, 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. . HC Deb., 22 August 1940, vol. 364, cols 1475–1586. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. . HC Deb., 8 August 1940, vol. 364, cols 428–434W; 20 August 1940, vol. 364, cols 1104–1107; 6 February 1941, vol. 368, cols 1065–1067; 6 August 1940, vol. 363, cols 10–14; 4 June 1940, vol. 361, cols 751–752. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. . Benjamin Riley, Labour MP for Dewsbury, HC Deb., 7 November 1940, vol. 365, cols 1464–1465W; 15 August 1940, vol. 364, cols 942–947; 15 August 1940, vol. 364, cols 980–984W; 1 August 1940, vol. 363, cols 1382–1390. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. . HC Deb., 1 February 1940, vol. 356, cols 1301–1303W; 1 August 1940, vol. 363, cols 1374–1376. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. . HC Deb., 10 July 1940, vol. 362, cols 1208–1306. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. . Sherman, *Island Refuge*, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)