Although political refugees have existed for most of European history, only since the mid-nineteenth century has the process of individuals' fleeing the land of their birth—as a result of political, social, or economic persecution—taken on the characteristics of a mass movement. This has been especially true of the Jewish migratory movements from eastern Europe that followed the Russian pogroms of 1881, 1882, and thereafter. Nevertheless, only as a result of World War I and the subsequent social and economic upheavals associated with the rise of the so-called successor states and totalitarian regimes in eastern Europe can a refugee problem be said to exist.

The First Wave, 1933-1938

Jews figured prominently in the first wave of refugees who fled Germany immediately after Hitler took power in January 1933. There are different estimates, based on many sources, of the number of Jews who emigrated from Germany during 1933. According to the 1938 report of the Reichsvertretung Der Deutschen Juden, 52,000 Jews left Germany in 1933 and 37,000 remained abroad. In November 1941 the Reichsvertretung submitted a report to the German authorities stating that 63,000 Jews had emigrated in 1933 but not indicating how many had remained abroad. Since the Jewish community kept records of only those emigrés who received aid from the community, and not of those who left on their own, the emigration figures are not conclusive. No official obstacles were placed in the path of those who wanted to leave, and government policy encouraged them to do so. The pace slowed somewhat in 1934 and most of 1935, but accelerated notably after the Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 deprived Jews of German citizenship and prompted extensive new exclusions from economic and public life.

Most of the emigrés went to neighboring countries. The principal destination was France, although substantial numbers also traveled to the Netherlands, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. Many anticipated that their exodus would be temporary, for there was widespread expectation that the Nazis would not remain long in power. Often only individual family members departed, assuming that it was in the family or personal interest for some to remain in Germany. Occasionally, emigrés returned on short visits, and some even came back to live in Germany, having failed to establish themselves abroad or having misjudged the situation at home, assuming that persecution had "stabilized." To block this influx, the Gestapo issued orders in 1935 to intern returnees in concentration camps.

Some Jews remained in Germany to avoid the increasingly heavy emigration tax (Reichsfluchtsteuer) and because strict regulations limited remittances of income from Germany. Up to 1938, the exodus remained limited; just over one-fourth of the 525,000 German Jews had left. Within the Reich, many Jews maintained their economic position until the end of 1937, and there were periodic indications—mistaken, as it turned out—that things might improve.
The Second Wave, 1938-1941

All this changed in 1938, when the flow of emigration quickened substantially, flooding neighboring countries with frightened, impoverished German Jews. The exodus became a mass migration, with entire families uprooting themselves and becoming refugees. During 1938, Nazi policy toward Jews clarified, focusing at this time on emigration: the objective, it was plainly said, was to rid Germany of its Jews. One reason for this shift was the incorporation into the Reich of the two hundred thousand Austrian Jews; with the Anschluss, the Nazis realized that expansion brought in more Jews than were removed by emigration. Their conclusion was to speed up the process by initiating forced expulsion. Berlin dispatched SS-Untersturmführer Adolf Eichmann, groomed as an expert on such matters, to Vienna to organize the exodus. Austrian Jews now knocked urgently at the gates of receiving countries. Between April and November of 1938, fifty thousand left the newly incorporated territory—over thirty thousand more than left Germany in the same period.

The German Jews also lost their fragile material position at home. With the recovery of the German economy and the end of unemployment, Arisierung ("Aryanization," or the confiscation of Jewish property) intensified, with the object of removing Jews entirely from economic life. In addition, a new wave of violence throughout the Reich convinced many Jews that there was no future for them in Germany. In October, as a result of threats by the Polish government to denationalize eighteen thousand of its expatriates in Germany, Berlin expelled masses of Jews. Thousands of them were dumped in the Polish border town of Zbaszyń, their entry to Poland blocked by the Polish government. After Kristallnacht, on November 9-10, 1938, departures intensified. To these refugees were added others from Czechoslovakia, part of which was absorbed into the Reich early in the following year.

In all, it has been estimated, about 150,000 additional Jews fled Germany after this turning point. Many more would certainly have done so had there been places where they could go. More would have left if the war had not broken out, in September 1939. The problem was to find precious space on a ship and to secure the rare entry visas and other documents necessary to travel abroad. Some 71,500 Jews left the Greater German Reich between September 1939 and the end of 1941, when all exits were finally sealed. These represented about a fifth of the Jews remaining in the expanded German state. Most of them went to Britain, to the Western Hemisphere, to Shanghai, or to Palestine. The least fortunate remained in western Europe, where many were again engulfed by Nazism in 1940.

Closing the Doors

Throughout Europe and America, immigration policies of the period were conditioned by severe economic depression. In this pre-Keynesian era, restrictions were everywhere seen as the antidote to the economic ills of the capitalist world. Governments attempted to curb the labor supply, reduce government spending, and prevent commitments to future expenses. Hard times practically everywhere brought to the surface currents of antisemitism, which were sometimes part of more extensive waves of xenophobia and racism. In consequence, barriers against immigration were hastily erected everywhere. Western European countries did so in the early 1930s. The Soviet Union, in the throes of Stalin's purges, remained cold and inhospitable to Hitler's victims, even when they were Communists. The British, faced with the Arab revolt in Palestine (1936-1939), began to limit entry just at the moment when Jewish refugees were prepared to go there in large numbers. In Canada and the
United States restrictive policies governed Jewish immigration, with only a few thousand permitted to immigrate each year.

Before 1938, however, temporary havens certainly existed in Europe, and refugees managed to leave, giving formal assurance that they would not work in their host country and would eventually move elsewhere. But the international climate was cold and forbidding. The League of Nations, whose High Commission for Refugees (the Nansen Office) had done important work during the 1920s, had practically nothing to offer the refugees. A High Commission for Refugees (Jewish and Other) from Germany emerged from the League of Nations discussions in Geneva in 1933, and was separated from the parent agency in the hope that it could deal with Hitler's Germany. However, this body with a cumbersome name failed to make an impression on the policy of any state, and its director, James Grover Mcdonald, quit spectacularly in 1935, protesting the international failure to act against Germany. As the flow of refugees increased, so did the work and expense involved in facilitating their passage, a burden entirely borne by Jewish agencies. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) was the largest of these. It worked closely with the Jewish Colonization Association, Hicem (an amalgam, established in 1927, of several Jewish emigration and immigration organizations), the Jewish Agency for Palestine, and other groups.

Restrictions everywhere hardened into firm barriers in the late 1930s, particularly after the Anschluss and the widely observed plight of the Austrian Jews, who faced furious Nazi pressure to leave their country. Those in charge of such questions now feared a totally unmanageable flood of unwanted refugees. Many of the fugitives from the Reich became stateless, having either lost their German nationality or been stripped of their Czech or Austrian citizenship after the absorption of their countries. An international conference at Evian in July 1938 gave widespread publicity to the plight of the refugees, but failed to achieve any change in the overall climate of restriction. The Jewish observers left the meeting feeling bitter and alone. An Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (IGCR) emerged from the deliberations, but this body had no ability to change national policy, which constituted the principal obstacle to refuge.

The Jews increasingly appeared on the international stage as mendicants, since they were now being driven virtually destitute from their homes. One resolution of the crisis was negotiation with the Germans, but this path was rejected by receiving countries, which feared that negotiation might encourage an even greater exodus. In 1933 the Nazis had negotiated the Haavara Agreement with the German Zionist Federation and the Anglo-Palestine Bank, permitting German Jews who went to Palestine to take a percentage of their capital with them. After Kristallnacht some Nazi officials attempted to negotiate a similar arrangement with host countries in the West, but without success.

At the end of the 1930s, policymakers in the countries enacting further immigration restrictions did not have only Germany in mind. They were also concerned that, because an equally great danger existed for the Jews in eastern Europe, the tens of thousands of Jews from the Reich might soon be joined by millions from Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Behind such fear lay the deepening antisemitism in those countries, along with the severe impoverishment accompanying the Depression. Throughout the area right-wing regimes fanned the flames of popular antipathy toward Jews, which occasionally even broke into the open with violent attacks.
In 1939 the doors slammed shut in one traditional country of immigration after another. After the Munich Conference, governments in the West grimly prepared for the war they had so long hoped to avoid. With their White Paper of 1939 (the MacDonald White Paper), the British placed severe limitations on Jewish access to Palestine, in practice raising a firm barrier. Panic-stricken Jews now sought any possible haven. Corrupt consular authorities sometimes sold entry permits to Latin American countries. About seventeen thousand German and Austrian Jews managed to reach the international port of Shanghai, practically the only place on the globe that required no visas or other documentation for entry, and later a haven for many Polish Jews as well. Other Jews, without legal means of staying in one country, had to continue moving from one place to another.

**Wartime Refugees**

About 110,000 Jewish refugees were spread across Europe when war broke out in 1939. In western European countries, Jewish fugitives from Nazism were often interned, though they were frequently released after it was recognized that they posed no threat. After the outbreak of war, Jews continued to flee the Nazis, with the greatest movement in eastern Europe. An estimated 300,000 Jews, almost 10 percent of the entire Polish Jewish population, fled German-held territory in western Poland and crossed into parts occupied by the Soviets. During the following months, close to two million Jews came under Soviet rule for the first time, in parts of Poland and Romania as well as in the Baltic states. Substantial numbers of these, deemed suspect and threatening to the new process of Sovietization, were uprooted and dispatched to the eastern regions of the USSR, along with many of their non-Jewish neighbors.

Meanwhile, in the areas of Poland held by the Nazis, hundreds of thousands of Jews were also on the move. Nazi plans involved a massive transfer of Jews from the German-incorporated parts of Poland to the rest of the country under Nazi occupation, known as the Generalgouvernement—a kind of reservation originally intended to be a vast dumping ground for the unwanted "ethnic refuse" of the Nazi-conquered east. Although these plans were halted after early deportations of Jews, the refugees continued to flow to towns and cities, dragooned by brutal occupation policies of ghettoization. Jewish refugees were jammed into every one of the ghettos created in Nazi-held territory. Evidence suggests that at least a million of Poland's three million Jews were torn loose from their homes by the effects of war and persecution during this period. Between 500,000 and 600,000 Jews—about one-fifth of Polish Jewry—died in ghettos and labor camps as a result of these Nazi policies.

For a short time in 1939 and 1940, Nazi strategists focused on the Lublin area, in the southeastern corner of the Generalgouvernement, as a concentration point for Jewish refugees who could not be accommodated elsewhere. This effort, subsequently known as the Lublin Plan, was seen as a temporary measure, following which its survivors would be dispatched even farther to the east, across Soviet territory. Tens of thousands of refugees were dumped into the Lublin region before Nazi priorities changed, and the plan was shelved. A year later the Madagascar Plan was considered by several German agencies, but no Jews were actually sent to that island in the Indian Ocean.

In the summer of 1941, during the weeks following the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, many communities of Polish and Soviet Jews were overrun too quickly for their inhabitants to become refugees. Eventually, hundreds of thousands of them were massacred by Einsatzgruppen and other
Nazi forces. On the Nazi side of the former border, very few Jews escaped, but as many as ten thousand refugees hid in so-called family camps in the often inhospitable countryside. About one and a half million Jews did manage to flee the German advance, ending up behind Soviet lines. Several hundred thousand were then scattered throughout the Soviet Union, where they suffered great mortality and privation during the war.

Other Jews fled elsewhere in Europe, pathetic eddies of humanity sometimes forgotten in the mainstream torrent of deportations and expulsions. Oddly, two Axis countries provided sanctuary to significant numbers of Jewish refugees. Italian forces protected Jews wherever Mussolini’s armies found themselves in occupation—in parts of France, of Greece, and of Croatia. Hungary, although tied to Nazi Germany and committed to its own anti-Jewish program, nevertheless received Jewish refugees unofficially from neighboring Poland and Slovakia. Occasionally, Jews managed to leave from Bulgaria or Romania, departing on the Black Sea. Their ultimate objective was Palestine, but refugee ships with this destination had to stop at Turkey to refuel and take on supplies of food. Turkish policy, which sought to avoid the use of a Turkish port for stopovers, proved to be an obstacle in the refugees’ path, and only a small number of Jews managed to land there. In 1941, for example, the Turks, urged on by the British, refused to allow passengers to land from the derelict Bulgarian steamer Struma, and forced it to leave the port of Istanbul. The ship, struck by a torpedo fired (in error) by a Soviet submarine, sank with great loss of life.

About 21,600 Jews managed to enter Switzerland, but thousands more were turned back or deterred from attempting entry because of that country’s harshly restrictive policy, tinged with antisemitism. Although its frontier was not officially open, Spain generally did not turn back those who made the perilous journey across the Pyrenees. Spanish policy made every effort to speed refugees out of the country, sending them on to the Portuguese port of Lisbon, from which thousands managed to leave for America. As many as 100,000 refugees passed through the Iberian countries during the war, a substantial number of whom were Jews. In the north, Sweden provided sanctuary for Jews from other Scandinavian countries, notably the 6,000 or so refugees from Denmark who fled quickly across the Øresund to Malmö in October 1943.

Outside Europe, obstacles remained in the path of Jewish refugees, despite the increasing availability to foreign governments of information about the extreme peril faced by the Jews in Nazi Europe. The gates to Palestine remained shut, and Jews who managed to enter, whether legally or illegally (smuggled into the country by Aliya Bet) numbered only 58,000. American policy remained restrictionist; the admission of Jews was strongly opposed by Breckinridge Long, the State Department official whose influence dominated policy. In April 1943, facing mounting public pressure in Great Britain and the United States, the Allies met at the Bermuda Conference to discuss the refugee problem. The British and American governments were determined, however, that the gathering would alter nothing in their policies. The conference’s results, therefore, were meager. In America, protest against inaction became louder, sparked particularly by young activists led by Peter Bergson. Gradually the climate shifted, and Franklin D. Roosevelt finally agreed, on January 17, 1944, to establish an agency devoted to the refugee problem and to the rescue of imperiled Jews, the War Refugee Board. The board’s representatives, both in the United States and abroad, set about their task with dedication and energy, and succeeded in saving many thousands of Jewish lives. Yet owing to the late establishment of the board, its work could not constitute much more than an afterthought.
Elsewhere too, the approaching end of the war brought about a loosening of restrictions and a greater movement of refugees. Swiss restrictions eased, and more Jews were now able to enter that country. The Swedes too became more willing to receive fugitives. Unfortunately, by this time few Jews were in a position to flee, and for millions it was already too late.

[See also the entries listed under Rescue.]

Further Readings

Bibliography


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