

The Closed Door to Canada

An Investigation of the Antisemitism Behind the Canadian Government's
Immigration Policy for Jews from 1933 to 1939

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Antisemitism is “prejudice against or hatred of Jews,” which has been present for millennia.¹ Between 1933 and 1939, the Nazi party created over 400 decrees and regulations to restrict Jewish private and public life.² Many targeted by the policies had to leave their homes. Unfortunately, Canada was not welcoming of Jewish immigrants, and some historians argue that this was due to antisemitic beliefs in the country. This paper will focus on key Canadian government officials, public opinion, and the influences of the Great Depression on Jewish immigration to Canada.

Though creating an immigration policy is a complex process, one important factor is the opinion of the government officials creating the policy. When analyzing Canada’s Jewish immigration policy, PM King and his director of the Immigration Branch F.C. Blair are key government officials. With the restrictive decrees and regulations on Jewish people created by the Nazis, many attempted immigration to Canada, though these two figures were not entirely accepting. In a letter to the former Commissioner of the Saskatoon Board of Trade, Blair reacted to the idea that many Jewish people may immigrate to Canada, saying that “the poor Jew all over the world” should be told, “frankly why many of them are unpopular.”³ He includes his opinion that “if [Jews] would divest themselves of certain of their habits” they would be “popular in Canada,”⁴. Blair’s prejudice towards Jewish people is evident, though its significance lies in how his actions against Jewish immigration confirm his antisemitic influence. When Canada was invited to attend a conference in Evian, France on possible solutions to the refugee problem in Europe, Blair prepared to decline the invitation, feeling

¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Antisemitism,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed March 21, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism>

² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Antisemitic Legislation 1933-1939,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed March 21, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitic-legislation-1933-1939>

³ Freida Miller, *Open Hearts - Closed Doors* (Vancouver: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, 1997), https://www.vhec.org/images/pdfs/openhearts_guide.pdf

⁴ Freida Miller, *Open Hearts - Closed Doors* (Vancouver: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, 1997), https://www.vhec.org/images/pdfs/openhearts_guide.pdf

that Jewish refugees would be too difficult to assimilate in Canada.⁵ However, his beliefs were not unique in the Canadian federal government, as seen in the PM's journal entries. On March 29, 1938, King wrote that he must "seek to keep this part of the continent free from unrest and from too great an intermixture of foreign strains of blood," referring indirectly to Jewish immigrants.⁶ Though his comment may seem simply protective over the fragile stability within Canadian society, his actions - like Blair's - reveal his true intent. After King decided Canada must attend the conference as every other invitee except Fascist Italy had accepted to sit on the committee, Jewish Canadian Members of Parliament (MPs) requested a formal audience with the Prime Minister and seven pro-refugee MPs to discuss their plan.⁷ Though the Jewish MPs were hopeful that they could solidify a plan to accept 5000 Jewish refugees into Canada over four years at the formal audience, King requested a meeting with a special cabinet committee instead, which he would personally appoint. Demonstrating his opposition to their appeals, King appointed two ministers from Quebec who were known to be openly antisemitic.⁸ As a result of King's decision, their appeal failed, and Canada's policy at Evian would disregard any Canadian Jewish interests.⁹ The actions of Blair and King confirm the antisemitic discrimination at the root of their beliefs, showing the significance of the figures' opinions to the policies of the entire country. Although their personal beliefs are essential to this investigation, Canada was a representative democracy, so the beliefs of the people they represent must be further explored.

While federal government officials allowed their antisemitic prejudices to influence their actions, they were not absolute rulers of the country and needed to keep public opinion

⁵ Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Key Porter Books Limited, 1991), 16-19.

⁶ William Lyon Mackenzie King, "The Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King," Library and Archives Canada, Accessed March 21, 2022, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/prime-ministers/william-lyon-mackenzie-king/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=18924>

⁷ Abella and Troper, 22.

⁸ Abella and Troper, 22-23.

⁹ Abella and Troper, 26.

in mind when creating policies. No matter the issue of concern, leaders of a representative democracy like in Canada had to maintain support from the public to be re-elected. In a speech to a Quebec audience regarding Jewish immigration, Conservative party leader Robert Manion stated he would oppose it “so long as any Canadian remained unemployed.”¹⁰ According to Abella and Troper, this statement was supported across Quebec, with many agreeing that Canada accepted too many Jewish immigrants. However, the public in English Canada did not share the same reaction. Instead, strong opposition to Manion’s stance on Jewish immigration came from newspaper articles and letters to Manion from outside Quebec.¹¹ The Jewish MPs may have been a minority in the Canadian federal government in the 1930s, but support from English Canada demonstrates the significance of the push for the federal government to admit more Jewish immigrants. With the pro-refugee feelings in English Canada, one would expect King’s government to demonstrate this support through their decisions. In a study of the Canadian Immigration Record in response to Irving and Abella’s work, author Justin Comartin argues that the policies made by the Canadian federal government must be examined “within their time,” referring to antisemitic beliefs that existed within the country at the time.¹² Though it may be true that historians can examine events within their context, the idea that all of the Canadian public was against allowing Jewish refugees into the country is a generalization, revealed by the support shown by some English Canadians as previously discussed. King’s government thus made changes to the immigration policy following Kristallnacht in November of 1938, with the policy for refugees admitting those “joining first degree relatives resident in Canada in a position to receive and care for them.”¹³ While the change seems to agree with the pro-refugee stance, it retains

¹⁰ Abella and Troper, 59.

¹¹ Abella and Troper, 60-61.

¹² Justin Comartin, “Opening Closed Doors: Revisiting the Canadian Immigration Record (1933-1945),” *Canadian Jewish Studies*, vol. 24 (2016): <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/39961/36168>

¹³ Justin Comartin, “Opening Closed Doors: Revisiting the Canadian Immigration Record (1933-1945),” *Canadian Jewish Studies*, vol. 24 (2016): <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/39961/36168>

discrimination in its refusal to allow Jewish refugees to become an economic burden. So, although King's government acted to retain public support by representing the public's feelings in English Canada, it acted in a way that allowed the continuation of the antisemitic discrimination that was especially prevalent in French Canada and in the federal government.

Following the Great Depression in the 1930s, Canada struggled economically and socially, with many Canadians unemployed and homeless.¹⁴ When creating the immigration policies for Canada, the federal government was responding to these challenges by setting out to accept immigrants with "sufficient capital," "professional and technical" skills, or those coming to "establish new industries"¹⁵ in order to strengthen the Canadian economy. When faced with what to do about the many Jewish refugees trying to find safety in Canada, King explained to the Jewish MPs and community leaders that Canada could not accept Jewish refugees or immigrants while unemployment was still high.¹⁶ His argument was consistent with the previously outlined opinions in his journal, such as his belief that "nothing is to be gained by creating an internal problem in an effort to meet an international one."¹⁷ Although he later expressed his sympathy for the Jewish people attempting to enter Canada, it is clear that he and his government resisted accepting them based on the belief that they may worsen the economic situation in Canada. Despite the number of immigrants rising, the percentage of Jewish people among all immigrants to Canada decreased between 1936 and 1938.¹⁸

Although a lack of capital or skills in Jewish immigrants should explain the decrease in their acceptance to Canada, according to King, the reality was that many Jewish immigrants met

¹⁴ James Struthers, "The Great Depression in Canada," last modified November 17, 2021,

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/great-depression>

¹⁵ Justin Comartin, "Opening Closed Doors: Revisiting the Canadian Immigration Record (1933-1945)," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, vol. 24 (2016): <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/39961/36168>

¹⁶ Abella and Troper, 42.

¹⁷ William Lyon Mackenzie King, "The Diaries of William Lyon Mackenzie King," Library and Archives Canada, Accessed March 21, 2022, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/prime-ministers/william-lyon-mackenzie-king/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=18924>

¹⁸ Justin Comartin, "Opening Closed Doors: Revisiting the Canadian Immigration Record (1933-1945)," *Canadian Jewish Studies*, vol. 24 (2016): <https://cjs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cjs/article/view/39961/36168>

the immigration requirements but were turned away.¹⁹ In the late 1930s, Mark Sorenson - a railway company agent in Copenhagen - tried to help “young and well-off Jews” acquire Canadian visas, but every attempt ended in a rejection from Ottawa.²⁰ Though it may not be known for sure that antisemitic discrimination lay at the root of these rejections, Blair’s letter to Sclanders certainly reveal his prejudices that would influence immigration decisions as Director of the Immigration Branch. In the letter, he stated that “it need not surprise these people that a country which since Confederation has encouraged the immigration of the agricultural class, should favour other races than those who never or seldom farm.”²¹ With Blair further implying that Canada accepted German immigrants for their contributions to the economy,²² it is evident that the Canadian federal government was not simply looking for skilled workers with capital but for immigrants who would strengthen the Canadian economy without being Jewish.

From the evidence discussed, it is clear that antisemitic discrimination existed within Canadian immigration policy. Although the federal government had to represent the public’s feelings and work on rebuilding the economy following the Great Depression, this investigation found no reason that Canada could not accept more Jewish immigrants. In 2018, current Canadian PM Justin Trudeau delivered an apology for the Jewish refugees turned away by the Canadian federal government,²³ emphasizing that the prejudices of individuals - whether antisemitic or not - have no place in the policies of an entire country.

¹⁹ Abella and Troper, 72.

²⁰ Abella and Troper, 72.

²¹ Freida Miller, *Open Hearts - Closed Doors* (Vancouver: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, 1997), https://www.vhec.org/images/pdfs/openhearts_guide.pdf

²² Freida Miller, *Open Hearts - Closed Doors* (Vancouver: Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, 1997), https://www.vhec.org/images/pdfs/openhearts_guide.pdf

²³ “Prime Minister delivers apology regarding the fate of the passengers of the MS St. Louis,” Prime Minister of Canada, November 7, 2018, <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2018/11/07/prime-minister-delivers-apology-regarding-fate-passengers-ms-st-louis>

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