

Great Britain

Country in northwestern Europe. Before and during World war II, Great Britain's policy on intervening in Germany's affairs and its policy on accepting refugees from Nazi-dominated Europe developed and changed based on the course of world events.

Despite Great Britain's victory over Germany in World War I, the British did not come out of the war unscathed: thousands of soldiers had perished and much money and materials had been spent. The British army was nowhere near ready for another world war, while the public was not ready to support a program to rearm the military. Thus, Britain tried to cover up its weakness with a policy of "appeasement." This meant that it tried to keep war at bay by making compromises and letting potentially dangerous countries, such as Germany, do what they wanted without stopping them. Britain also pursued a policy of appeasement because some British authorities felt guilty over the harsh way they had dealt with the vanquished Germans after World War I, and thus wanted to make it up to them. Therefore, when Germany invaded and annexed Austria in March 1938, Britain did nothing. When it became painfully obvious that Hitler planned to invade Czechoslovakia next, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain actively tried to cooperate with and appease him in order to avoid all-out war in Europe. At the Munich Conference of September 1938, Chamberlain met with Hitler in Germany, and officially gave Hitler his consent to annex the Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain declared that he had achieved "peace in our time," and truly believed that he had actively avoided another world war.

However, Hitler did not live up to his word, and in March 1939 he took the next step in his quest to dominate all of Europe by occupying the rest of Czechoslovakia. By that time, Britain realized that its appeasement policy had been a complete and utter failure, and Chamberlain and his government were forced to find a new way of dealing with Germany. They guaranteed military support to Romania and Poland, which they expected would be Hitler's next stomping grounds. When Germany did indeed invade Poland in September 1939, Britain stood by its promises, and declared war on Germany. From then

on, and especially after Winston Churchill took over the job of prime minister in May 1940, Great Britain was completely committed to once again vanquishing Germany, with "no negotiations" and "unconditional surrender" as its new foreign policies. From the fall of France in June 1940 until the turn of events in 1941 (the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), Britain faced Nazi Germany and its allies alone. The British played a fundamental role in the defeat of the Axis powers.

Britain's response to Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis also evolved before and during the war. Soon after Hitler rose to national power in Germany in January 1933, thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish refugees flocked to Great Britain, which had a longstanding tradition of admitting those in need of a safe haven. However, the British government made it rather difficult for refugees to enter. Based on the country's immigration laws of 1919, no distinction was made between the refugees and other immigrants to Britain, so the refugees were not granted any special treatment due to their special situation. Those that were allowed in were only accepted on a temporary basis.

The British public was quite sympathetic to the refugees, as were the Jews of Britain, who quickly began establishing refugee aid organizations, such as the Jewish Refugee Committee. In April 1933 the committee's director, Otto Schiff, and the chairmen of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Neville Laski and Leonard Montefiore, met with British government authorities; they promised them that the Jewish community would provide financial support for every Jewish refugee that entered Britain, and that no refugee would become a burden on the government. In fact, until the end of 1939, British Jewish organizations fully supported the thousands of Jewish refugees that entered Britain, with money, housing, education, job training, and help with further emigration.

After the *Kristallnacht* pogrom took place in Germany in November 1938, pro-refugee groups and certain members of Parliament put a lot of pressure on the government to change its immigration policy for refugees, and in fact, unlike other countries at that time, Britain eased its immigration regulations. In all, more than 80,000 Jewish refugees reached Britain by September 1939. However, when World War II broke out, Britain banned all emigration from

Nazi-controlled territories. Throughout the rest of the war, only some 10,000 Jewish refugees managed to find their way into Britain. In addition, the British White Paper of 1939 further limited European Jewry's chances of finding refuge in that it restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine, which was under the control of the British Mandate authorities.

For the lucky Jews who had successfully reached Britain before it closed its doors at the beginning of the war, life was not easy. Many highly educated people could only find work as domestics. After Germany invaded and conquered several Northern and Western European countries in mid-1940, the British public began to panic. Fearing that anyone with a German accent might be a spy, the British government began imprisoning Germans and Austrians who had settled in Britain, calling them "enemy aliens." This included Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied Germany and Austria. About 30,000 were interned in camps in Britain itself (where in some cases Jews and pro-Nazi Germans were put together), while 8,000 were deported to Canada and Australia (some of whom died when their ships were hit by torpedoes). As the threat of a German invasion passed, the prisoners were released and some of the deportees were returned to Britain.

From 1942 on, the British government knew about the Germans' execution of the "Final solution" However, after winning the war, Britain still did not open the gates of immigration to Palestine, and physically turned away thousands of Holocaust survivors who wanted to make a fresh start in a Jewish homeland. Only after the Jews in Palestine rebelled against the British Mandatory authorities did the British give up their control over the region.