

READING

The Evian Conference

US President Franklin Roosevelt called for an international conference in 1938 to discuss the growing Jewish refugee crisis intensified by the German takeover of Austria.

In July 1938, delegates from 32 nations met in Evian, France. They were joined by representatives from dozens of relief organizations and other groups, as well as hundreds of reporters. At the conference, each delegate formally expressed sorrow over the growing number of “refugees” and “deportees,” boasted of his nation’s traditional hospitality, and lamented that his nation was unable to do more in the “present situation.”

Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King wrote in his diary around that time, “We must . . . seek to keep this part of the Continent free from unrest and from too great an intermixture of foreign strains of blood.” In his view, nothing was to be gained “by creating an internal problem in an effort to meet an international one.”¹

The British, noting that many refugees wanted to go to Palestine, which was then under British rule, said they would like to admit more refugees, but in view of the ongoing conflict between Arabs and Jews, it was not a practical solution. The French claimed that their country had already done more than its fair share. The Americans noted that Congress would have to approve any change in the nation’s immigration laws—legislation that set a limit on the number of immigrants the United States would accept from each country each year.

Historians Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman describe the responses of other countries at the conference:

Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama stated that they wanted no traders or intellectuals, code words for Jews. Argentina said it had already accommodated enough immigrants from Central Europe. Canada cited its unemployment problem. Australia said that it had no “racial problems” and did not want to create any by bringing in Jewish refugees. Imperial countries such as Britain, France, and the Netherlands said that their tropical territories offered only limited prospects for European refugees. League of

¹ Quoted in Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948* (New York: Random House, 1983), 17.

Nations High Commissioner Sir Neill Malcolm was openly hostile to the idea of a new refugee organization . . . *The Washington Post* headlined one story on the conference, “YES, BUT—.” It noted, “it has been a disappointment, if not altogether a surprise . . . that delegates take the floor to say, We feel sorry for the refugees and potential refugees but—.”²

The Dominican Republic was the only country that agreed to accept Jewish immigrants. In 1937, the nation’s leader, Rafael Trujillo, had ordered his soldiers to massacre thousands of Haitians at the Dominican border. Historians believe he hoped that accepting Jewish refugees might repair his image internationally. He also hoped that Jews would marry local inhabitants and “lighten” the population. He granted visas to a thousand Jews who were to live in Sosúa, a special community established for them.

² Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 109.