

Bermuda Conference,

Conference convened by the United States and Great Britain on April 19, 1943, ostensibly to find solutions for wartime refugees. In fact, it marked the high point of efforts by officials in both nations to thwart a move for more effective action to rescue European Jewry.

The idea of convening a refugee conference grew out of a need, felt first by British authorities in the final months of 1942, to defuse public protest after revelations were confirmed that the Nazi regime had actually begun a policy of systematic liquidation of Jews.

The British initiative rekindled a familiar diplomatic game between the two Allied governments. Diplomatic dispatches from both sides were prefaced with long recitations of the efforts they had undertaken in the rescue cause. The American dispatches even mentioned the internment of Japanese-Americans as evidence of the heavy burden the country was supporting. Resentful of the initiative's implication, American dispatches spoke of the forthcoming conference as if the idea had originated in Washington, much to the chagrin of the British, who hastened to correct the misimpression.

The site of the meeting also created some conflict, since neither side wanted to be linked directly to the refugee-rescue debacle - the lack of any serious effort to rescue Jews. Thus, Canada discouraged a suggestion that the conference convene in Ottawa, and the State Department (see united states department of state) rejected Washington. Finally Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long suggested the island of Bermuda, which, because of its inaccessibility during wartime, would allow both sides control of the press, and the conference itself could be kept free of the representatives of private agencies such as the joint distribution committee (JDC) and the World Jewish Congress.

As preparations for the conference developed, it was clear that both sides had set such severe limitations on what might be discussed and who might speak at the plenary sessions that the conference would have virtually nothing to show for its trouble. There was an insistence that the Jewish character of the problem be played down and a more universal approach assumed. The British, in the face of information that the Germans had earmarked the Jews for extinction, insisted that Jews were merely one of many victimized groups. The State Department continued to employ the term "political refugee," a euphemism to conceal the racial character of the refugee problem. In fact, neither side wanted to discuss the matter of the "Final Solution" but preferred to limit debate to the "refugee question." Even at that, the prohibition on circumventing American immigration laws that had been invoked at the Evian Conference remained in force. In the event (claimed as unlikely) that shipping should become available, the American delegation insisted that prisoners of war receive priority over refugees. Actually, there never was a shortage of ships with empty holds returning to American ports. Discussion concerning Palestine, the likeliest haven, was ruled out, as was the possibility of direct negotiations with Berlin. Not even the suggestion of sending food packages to concentration camp inmates was accepted for discussion, although the British themselves had established a precedent for such a policy by feeding the inhabitants of occupied Greece throughout the war. The conference found itself in the embarrassing situation of having little left to discuss.

The disparity in rank between the two delegations also caused unforeseen problems. Composed of Richard Law, son of a former prime minister and parliamentary undersecretary of state, and Osbert Peake and George Hall of the Home Office, the British delegation far outranked the American. This was especially so after Myron Taylor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's personal emissary to the Vatican, and James G. McDonald, former League of Nations high commissioner for refugees from Germany, declined to head the American delegation. The State Department was compelled to settle for Harold Willis Dodds, president of Princeton University; Sen. Scott Lucas, Democrat of Illinois; and Rep. Sol Bloom, Democrat from Manhattan and

chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. The last-mentioned, a Jew, was destined to become the most controversial member of the American delegation because Jewish rescue agencies found him unacceptable. Two of the technical experts supporting the American delegation, G. Robert Borden Reams and Robert C. Alexander, had earned similar reputations among rescue advocates for their adamant opposition to refugees. The only sympathetic member of the delegation was George Backer, whose leading positions in the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) and the Jewish Telegraph Agency made him especially knowledgeable about the fate of European Jewry.

The composition of the American delegation; the refusal to include Joseph Schwartz, head of the European branch of the JDC; the rejection of rescue suggestions by Joseph Proskauer, head of the American Jewish Committee, and by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, head of the American and World Jewish congresses; and the fact that the State Department limited the number of press correspondents to five, representing the major news agencies, convinced even the most hopeful rescue advocates (mostly, but not exclusively, American Jewish groups) that the Bermuda Conference would be simply a ploy to deflect an aroused public opinion.

Yet even that objective eluded the conferees, who tried to find a strategy that could create the illusion of action while at the same time making certain that nothing untoward was in fact done. Much time was devoted to the notion of revitalizing the intergovernmental committee on refugees (IGCR), which was originally created at the Evian Conference in 1938 to enter into negotiations with Berlin on the refugee question. But the disinterring of the virtually defunct agency posed problems. Since negotiating with the Nazi regime had now been ruled out by the delegations, neither side was willing to fund the IGCR, and certainly the Jewish agencies, which had originally underwritten it, were reluctant to enter into an agreement that they felt was designed to thwart rather than to aid rescue. The second objective - to enhance the flow of refugees out of areas such as Spain and Switzerland, where they had found a

precarious haven, by establishing a refugee camp in North Africa - offered more hope. But this suggestion, rather than dealing with the millions in the Nazi grip, focused on those whose lives, though uncomfortable, were at least not in danger. Moreover, there was much opposition by the United States War Department and the British Foreign Office to establishing such a camp in a Muslim area. It was not established until over a year after the conference ended, when it was too late to do any good.

An early press release, sounding a hopeful note, stated that all problems were being discussed openly and good progress was being made. In fact, both delegations manifested the fear that Berlin would "dump" refugees with the Allies and use them as a weapon to compromise the Allied drive for final victory. The conference was in danger of rejecting all proposals and thereby defeating its own goal of soothing an aroused public opinion. It was George Backer, speaking to the conference on April 25, who pointed out this danger. He observed that shipping was in fact available, and that by limiting its concern to those who had found haven in neutral nations the conference would have nothing significant to show. It should at least try, Backer urged, to rescue 125,000 Jews in eastern Europe who imminently faced certain death. Backer made a special plea to save the thousands of Jewish children who could assure a Jewish future despite the radical losses. But this plea too was rejected.

A brief optimistic news bulletin that spoke of the possibility of helping "a substantial number of refugees" marked the end of the conference, but a final report of the deliberations and conclusions was not published until December 10, 1943, eight months later. The public embarrassment that Backer had predicted came to pass. The American Jewish press was virtually unanimous in condemning the conference. Some spoke of it as a particularly cruel duplicity in the midst of a mass-murder operation. Public protest, rather than being stilled, reached new heights. Even the small camp established in North Africa in March 1944 housed only 630 refugees, and strict orders were issued by the State Department that there should be "a good mix" in selecting them.

The use of a conference to assuage an aroused public sentiment reveals much about the American aspect of the Holocaust. It illustrates that even when it was possible to arouse an otherwise lethargic public about the fate of European Jewry, government officials experienced few qualms in devising strategies to deflect its concern. Both the British and American governments were willing to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid doing what needed to be done. The episode gives historians a clue to the atmosphere and intentions surrounding the rescue of the Jews