

## Roosevelt Calls the Meeting

*No country would be expected or asked to receive a greater number of emigrants than is permitted by its existing legislation.*

United States State Department invitation (The National Archives, Kew (hereafter TNA), DO 35, file 716/M576/1, memorandum to His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom from the Embassy of the United States, London, March 24, 1938.).

**Abstract** This chapter examines the origins of the Evian Conference of July 1938. Showing that it was the initiative of United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the chapter examines the domestic political stimulus behind his calling of the meeting in the immediate aftermath of the German invasion of Austria in March 1938. The chapter analyses the wording of the invitation to selected nations of the world to attend the projected conference to discuss the Jewish refugee problem, and what this wording signified. The chapter places the idea of the conference within the context of its time, showing that it was not intended to open up immigration for refugees but, rather, to discuss the policies of the various countries that would be attending the meeting once it was convened.

**Keywords** Roosevelt · Invitation · Refugees · Conference

On March 12, 1938, Hitler's Eighth Army marched into Austria without resistance, taking over Austria in what was called the *Anschluss* (literally, "connection," though more frequently referred to as "union"). Although this had been expressly prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Hitler's expansion into his homeland drew no intervention from the Western powers. Images from this time show Austrians greeting German soldiers enthusiastically, treating the invaders as liberators and excited by the prospect of joining in Germany's economic recovery. For most Austrians the *Anschluss* was very much hoped for; for others, however, it was a forced annexation—in short, an occupation.

Austria had been a place where antisemitism had thrived for a long time. According to Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, it was in Vienna that he first identified Jews as "others;" after the *Anschluss* anti-Jewish measures would be introduced in Austria on an unimagined scale. Within weeks the new Nazi regime imposed harsh laws intended to introduce and entrench the legal separation of Jews from all aspects of Austrian society. Measures were instituted designed to encourage mass emigration; these included arrests and beatings, together with public humiliation—for example, through forcing Jewish men and women to clean streets using a toothbrush while being subjected to venomous taunts by onlookers. The first six weeks of Nazi rule saw an institutionalized antisemitism that had been developing in Germany over the previous five years now introduced throughout Austria, with shock leading thousands of Austrian Jews to commit suicide.<sup>1</sup>

International responses to the *Anschluss* were immediate, though ineffectual. French political life at the time, for instance, was in turmoil; the Radical Socialist Party government of Camille Chautemps had resigned on March 13, paving the way for a return of Léon Blum and the final death throes of the Popular Front. Not only was France therefore in no position to oppose the invasion; the administration, with other concerns domestically, made no official comment.<sup>2</sup> The Vatican supported an independent Catholic Austria and denounced the *Anschluss*. In Britain, a policy of appeasing the dictators had already led to the resignation in February 1938 of the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, paving the way for an unopposed Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to consent to what, in his view, were Adolf Hitler's legitimate demands.<sup>3</sup>

American responses were conditioned by a long-standing policy preference of isolation from European affairs that dated from the First World War. As such, all United States positions regarding Germany (and

Europe generally) were marked by pronounced hesitancy, informed by American cultural biases, internal political developments, media coverage, and, in the case of the Jews, an unhealthy antisemitism.

After the First World War, many Americans believed that turning inward and staying out of world affairs would insulate their nation from conflict and war. This isolationism was reinforced by the advent of the Great Depression, and further buttressed by a profound sense of xenophobia, the intense dislike and distrust of anyone or anything deemed “foreign.”

It was no surprise, then, that the United States Congress began enacting legislation as early as 1921, as a direct response to America’s involvement in the First World War, curtailing immigration. The Immigration Act of 1924 further limited arrivals, and, because of the way the Act was structured, it severely restricted the acceptance of applications from southern and Eastern Europe—the very region where millions of Jews resided.

From a political standpoint, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stood little to gain but much to lose if he moved too hastily on the issue of immigration and Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, and it is in this context that consideration must be given as to why it was that in March 1938 he sent out an invitation to a large group of selected countries to attend a conference that would determine the disposition of tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of German and Austrian Jews seeking to flee Nazi persecution.

Roosevelt’s motives in calling such a conference appear to have emanated from his desire to deflect some sectors of American public opinion which were beginning to lean towards a liberalization of immigration regulations. By taking the initiative globally, he could show that the United States was playing a leading role in trying to find a holistic solution to the refugee issue, and that the problem was not to be deposited onto any specific countries. This deflection would take the form of a new organization that would discuss the best ways to manage refugee resettlement.

United States policy had hitherto already been under considerable strain just dealing with refugees from Germany,<sup>4</sup> but now, with an additional 181,882 Austrian Jews (167,249 of whom resided in Vienna) to take into account, the potential for a humanitarian disaster loomed large. The *Anschluss* thus forced Roosevelt’s hand, aggravating an issue that was already growing out of hand.

American scholar David Wyman, in an important study from 1968, concludes that Roosevelt was motivated by concerns other than sympathy when calling the conference.<sup>5</sup> As he shows, *Time* magazine, assessing Roosevelt's initiative in calling a conference on refugees, concluded that this was an expression of U.S. disapproval of the way in which Nazi Germany was treating its Jews.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this was true; certainly, it presented an opportunity to offer some measure of condemnation without saying so explicitly. On the other hand, there was little doubt, either at home or abroad, that the international refugee question could not be solved other than through the United States taking the lead. Existing international bodies were unable to deal with the situation, and no other country had the capacity (or, presumably, the will) to take charge unilaterally.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, strong evidence exists to the effect that the initiative did not actually originate with Roosevelt, but with the State Department—in particular, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Under Secretary Sumner Welles, and Assistant Secretary George S. Messersmith. As Wyman shows, it was far preferable for the United States to be proactive in the matter—in the words of Cordell Hull, “to get out in front and attempt to guide” the direction in which discussions would lead—than in being forced into a situation that could be to America's detriment.<sup>8</sup> Hull was quite explicit: in his words, it would forestall “attempts to have [America's] immigration laws liberalized.”<sup>9</sup>

The *New York Times*, for its part, was of the view that the suggestion originated with Roosevelt himself, and the President did little to disabuse readers of this view. On April 4, 1938, as shown by Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, “FDR claimed personal ownership” of the proposal, informing Arthur Sweetser (an American member of the permanent Secretariat of the League of Nations and an ardent peace campaigner during the interwar years) that the idea was “*my* proposal,” which he developed personally. Roosevelt told Sweetser that “it struck me: why not get all the democracies to share the burden.”<sup>10</sup>

The wording of the invitation was crucial if Roosevelt was to please everyone. Under America's 1924 Immigration Act, quotas for Austria and Germany had been separate, and he had already permitted a merger of quota numbers for the two countries in light of the *Anschluss*. While providing greater options for Austrian Jews than beforehand, though, without any real change taking place on the ground, this had the potential of making it appear to American anti-immigration campaigners that

he was increasing the quota overall. To intercept such charges, the wording of the invitation made it clear that the initiative would not coerce any state when it came to easing immigration restrictions. The directive sent from the State Department to the United States Ambassador in the United Kingdom, Joseph P. Kennedy, was explicit: would the governments being invited

be willing to cooperate with the Government of the United States in setting up a special committee composed of representatives of a number of governments for the purpose of facilitating the emigration from Austria, and presumably from Germany, of political refugees. Our idea is that whereas such representatives would be designated by the governments concerned, any financing of the emergency emigration referred to would be undertaken by private organizations with the respective countries. Furthermore, it should be understood that no country would be expected or asked to receive a greater number of immigrants than is permitted by its existing legislation.<sup>11</sup>

*No country would be expected* ... these were the key words. They would return to haunt the conference and set it on a course which, for many, was redolent of infamy in the years to come.

The statement concluded with the following explanation to the American people of why it had been considered necessary to become involved in this ostensibly *European* situation in the first place:

[The government] has been prompted to make the present proposal because of the urgency of the problem with which the world is faced and the necessity of speedy cooperative effort, under governmental supervision, if widespread human suffering is to be averted.<sup>12</sup>

In an acute dissection of the invitation, Saul S. Friedman has summarized its essence by noting that the wording established “hard principles” from which it would prove difficult for anyone to stray. Noteworthy among them were the following:

(1) That no particular ethnic, political, or religious group should be identified with the refugee problem or the calling of the conference; (2) that nothing should be done to interfere with the operations of existing relief organizations, no matter how ineffectual those organizations might be; (3) that all assistance for refugee work should be drawn from purely voluntary

sources; and (4) that no nation should be required to amend its current immigration laws to accommodate the refugees.<sup>13</sup>

On one other issue the wording of the invitation was notable; it did not mention Jews at all, but, rather, “political refugees.” This was of profound significance, and has been largely overlooked in discussions of the Evian Conference. While everyone assumed the conference was about Jews, the language from the start betrayed a key misreading of the situation. The Nazis were forcing Jews out of Germany and Austria according to a *racial* category, not a political one. Referring to the refugees as political provided Roosevelt and his advisers with a loophole they could exploit as developments unfolded, but, as it turned out, no-one was fooled. “Political refugees” effectively became a shorthand term for “German and Austrian Jews” from the outset.

In one sense, this was beneficial for Roosevelt, for an open ticket on “political refugees,” if pursued, would potentially have swelled numbers to completely unacceptable levels. The qualifier given in the invitation, for “Austria, and presumably Germany,” limited the geographical range from which refugees (political *or* racial) could come; otherwise the intended committee would have been swamped with issues relating to Jews from Poland, Romania, and Hungary, as well as Armenians from the Near East and refugees from the Spanish Civil War. Limiting the discussion to Germany and Austria, and without explicitly referring to Jews, was a master stroke perhaps unappreciated at the time.

Roosevelt’s invitation was sent to the selected countries in late March 1938. The British Foreign Office was informed that the committee to be established once the meeting had taken place would be discussing an issue that was of worldwide relevance. With this in mind, the invitation to London asked whether

the British Government (on its own behalf or on behalf of the self-governing Dominions) [would] be willing to cooperate with the Government of the United States in setting up a Special Committee composed of representatives of a number of Governments.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to Britain, therefore, the invitation to attend was extended to the British Dominions—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and South Africa—all of which at that time had only limited foreign representation. Should they agree to attend, it would add substantially to the

options for refugee resettlement, as all (save Ireland) were recognized as immigrant-receiving countries with untapped potential for population growth.

Overall, what did the United States invitation signify? Diplomats and political leaders throughout the world, it could be believed, were now breathing sighs of relief. If the United States was simultaneously leading the pack on the refugee question *and* at the same time saying no change in policy was envisaged, then no-one else would—or should—be expected to change theirs. The expectations embedded in the invitation were therefore relatively slight. Roosevelt's avowed justification (the alleviation of refugee distress) bore little resemblance to his underlying reasoning (to intercept any pressure that might be brought to bear against the United States from home or overseas).

It might therefore be said that the meeting, once called, generated hopes in some circles that did not align with the reality motivating it. How other states might view the initiative would remain to be seen; within the United States, however, a feeling of being let off the hook prevailed. In a memorandum from George Messersmith to Secretary of State Hull on March 31, 1938, the view was expressed that a number of immigration-related bills currently under consideration in Congress should be shelved until after Roosevelt's intergovernmental committee had met.<sup>15</sup> In other words, nothing by way of a commitment should be forthcoming, in line with the text of the invitation. If the invited countries were not expected to commit to doing anything definite beyond their existing policies, that would most certainly also apply to the United States.

## NOTES

1. For just a few insights into the *Anschluss* period see Dietrich Wagner and Gerhard Tomkowitz, *Anschluss: The Week Hitler Seized Vienna*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971; and Evan Burr Bukey, *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era, 1938–1945*, Durham (NC): University of North Carolina Press, 2000. With specific regard to the Jews of Vienna, see especially Ilana Offenberger, *The Jews of Nazi Vienna, 1938–1945: Rescue and Destruction*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
2. See Mary Antonia Wathen, *The Policy of England and France towards the "Anschluss" of 1938*, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America

- Press, 1954; and Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era*, London: Bloomsbury, 1997.
3. The literature on Britain's appeasement policy vis-à-vis Germany is vast; much of it incorporates studies regarding the British response to the *Anschluss*. Of many possibilities, see especially R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War*, New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1993; and R.J.Q. Adams, *British Politics and Foreign Policy in the Age of Appeasement, 1935–1939*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993.
  4. See in particular the arguments put forth in the following: Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938–1945*, New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers University Press, 1970; Saul S. Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy toward Jewish Refugees, 1938–1945*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973; David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938–1941*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968; Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933–1945*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988; and Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2013. For the later period, see also Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy*, New York: Hart, 1967; and David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941–1945*, New York: Pantheon, 1984.
  5. Wyman, *Paper Walls*, p. 44.
  6. Ibid.
  7. On Britain, see A.J. Sherman, *Island Refuge: Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich, 1933–1939*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees, and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; and (particularly for the later period) Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939–1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. For France, the best and most comprehensive study in English is Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
  8. Wyman, *Paper Walls*, p. 44.
  9. Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933–1948*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, p. 16.
  10. Breitman and Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*, pp. 103–104 (emphasis in text).



11. Cordell Hull (Secretary of State) to United States Ambassador to the United Kingdom (Joseph P. Kennedy), March 23, 1938, in United States of America, Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1938. General*, vol. 1, Washington, DC, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938, pp. 740–741. Located at <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS1938v01> (accessed June 30, 2017).
12. Ibid.
13. Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed*, p. 53.
14. TNA, DO 35, file 716/M576/1, memorandum to His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom, from the Embassy of the United States, London, March 24, 1938.
15. State CDF 840.48 Refugees/84/1/2, report by Undersecretary Messersmith to Secretary Hull, March 31, 1938. In John Mendelsohn (ed.), *The Holocaust: Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes*, vol. 5: *Jewish Emigration from 1933 to the Evian Conference of 1938*, Clark (NJ): The Lawbook Exchange Co., 2010, p. 173.

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