

‘Jews and other foreigners’: Manchester and the Rescue of the Victims of European Fascism, 1933-1940

Review Number:

1217

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 March, 2012

Author:

Bill Williams

ISBN:

9780719085499

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£95.00

Pages:

496pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

Jennifer Craig-Norton

Britain’s role in the refugee crisis created by the rise of fascism has been examined from many angles, and not always critically. Early works did little more than extol British humanitarianism and celebrate refugee successes. More recently, government policy and Anglo-Jewish responses have received more nuanced assessments, and a lively debate over the extent of British largesse towards Jewish refugees has ensued.

In this field, Bill William’s new volume, *‘Jews and other foreigners’: Manchester and the Rescue of the Victims of European Fascism, 1933–1940*, represents a unique and original approach to the subject. In one aspect, it is more expansive than its predecessors in its scrutiny of the 1930s refugee crisis. Williams does not limit his attention to Anglo-Jewish responses, but casts his net widely, catching among others, Quaker, Catholic, Communist Party and even Rotarian efforts on behalf of refugees. Similarly, he broadens his focus to include non-Jewish victims of fascism, devoting chapters to the plight of Basque children and political refugees. Paradoxically, the book is also more narrowly focused than previous works in the field, for this is not a national study, but a chronicle of one city’s response to the refugees from fascism. Herein lies the originality of Williams’ approach, for no previous study has recorded and synthesized the responses of a single locality to the refugee crisis of the 1930s.

Only five years after the end of the Second World War, the first studies of Great Britain’s response to the refugee crisis of the 1930s and 1940s appeared. Books such as *Britain’s New Citizens: The Story of Refugees from Germany and Austria* (1) and Norman Bentwich’s *They Found Refuge* (2) congratulated Britain on its

humanitarian efforts in saving refugees and celebrated refugee assimilation and success. It was not until the 1980s, with the opening of new sources and archives, that scholars began turning a critical eye on governmental and citizen responses. Prominent authors attempted to deconstruct the narrative of Britain's humanitarianism, and to demonstrate the inadequacy of the government's immigration policies. This counter-narrative also portrays the response of the Anglo-Jewish elite as both timid and self-interested in failing to press for a more generous immigration policy from the Home Office. More recent examinations of the experiences of refugees have called into question Britain's self-image as an asylum from intolerance and persecution. Not surprisingly, this revisionist turn has invited counterclaims defending both the government and Anglo-Jewry.

In his short introduction, Bill Williams acknowledges this widening debate, and demonstrates his command of its terms. In a brief but compelling discussion he notes how the rescue of refugees in Great Britain has been comfortably viewed as flowing from the liberal tradition and the refugee experience has been framed as a narrative of gratitude. He avers, however, that his present volume can only 'suggest the degree to which British policy towards refugees filtered down to people and institutions in a particular city and the way in which local conditions reinforced (or, less frequently, contradicted) its messages' (p. 7). While one might have wished Williams to have countered such prevailing narratives more explicitly, his modest goal is admirably achieved in the chapters that follow.

Of necessity, any volume dealing with refugees from European fascism will be primarily about its Jewish victims, and as the quotation in the title suggest, this is the case here. Only three of its 23 chapters chronicle responses to non-Jewish victims of fascism, though the chapter on the Basque children, at 44 pages, is the longest one in the entire book. This chapter stands alone in both structure and content, and serves as an example of Williams at his best. It also provides a glimpse of what he might have achieved had he chosen to take the same approach consistently throughout the book.

A brief introduction to the subject contextualizes the crisis, and here Williams deftly weaves the Manchester reaction to the plight of the Basque children into the larger national conversation and its notions of Britain's humanitarian tradition. This chapter is subdivided into sections, the first few of which are mostly expository. Those that follow analyse the responses of the Manchester region to the Basque crisis and cite these reactions within a national framework. The final subsection, 'Jews and Basques' skilfully juxtaposes the responses to two of the victim groups whose experiences are detailed in this book.

The conclusion Williams draws is that the Basque children enjoyed a broad civic response, both moral and financial, 'that had no equivalent in the case of Jewish refugees' (p.129). This is explained in part, Williams asserts, because (unlike most of the Jewish refugees at that point) these victims were 'innocent' working-class children, who arrived unencumbered by stereotypes and prejudices of the kind that accompanied adult Jewish refugees. He also demonstrates that even at this late date, widespread revulsion for Nazi Germany had yet to take hold in Britain. Included in this section are astonishing details of Manchester middle-class tourism in Nazi Germany in 1937 as well as the spectre of Hitler Youth groups invited to tour England and given public opportunities in Manchester to defend the regime's dismissal of Jewish staff from German universities.

Counter-intuitively, one of the groups least engaged with the rescue of Basque children the author claims, were Manchester's Communists. The preference of the Communist Party of Great Britain, in Williams' assessment, was for 'propaganda over action' and they were 'no more than articulate and sympathetic observers' throughout the period of refugee arrivals in the 1930s (p. 131-2). This was true even in respect to refugees from the German Communist Party, the KPD, whose arrival via Czechoslovakia was largely aided by Quakers. The establishment of a branch of the KPD in Manchester is the subject of one of the more fascinating chapters in this volume. Their largely covert activities provide one of the few examples of a refugee group organizing successfully to effect the escape of their fellow victims.

Illuminating the experiences of and responses to these far less well known refugee groups makes up only a small fraction of the entire study, however. Most of the chapters are, understandably, devoted to Jewish

victims of fascism. Even here, however, Williams covers new ground. In addition to outlining the rescue activities of better known groups such as the Quakers, he also surveys the actions of Manchester's other Christian communities including Catholics and Lutherans, the city's business and academic communities, and civic groups such as the Rotarians. His decision to focus on a single metropolitan region enables the author to bring to public attention the philanthropic and humanitarian efforts of a range of organizations and individuals whose efforts have never before been chronicled in this way.

Within each of these chapters, varying in length from a few to 30 or more pages, Williams introduces the reader to the leading figures, gives a brief contextualizing history and describes the scope of rescue efforts. We learn, for example, that Manchester University offered a total of 33 temporary academic posts to Jewish refugee scholars between 1933 and 1942, and that the Lancashire Industrial Development Council was instrumental in attracting several refugee industrialists and their German expertise to the area. This is also undoubtedly the first study in the field to document the relief efforts of a local branch of the Rotary Club International which established and maintained a refugee hostel for Jewish boys in Manchester. This hostel only functioned for a few months, however, and was forced to close in 1940 when its occupants, Jews fleeing Nazi oppression, were interned by the British government as enemy aliens.

Putting the rescue efforts of a single locality under the microscope allows for a much more detailed study of Anglo-Jewish actions than has previously been attempted. Earlier studies have interrogated the divisions among British Jewry and their effect on the rescue of endangered European Jews. Most of these, however, have tended to concentrate on the Anglo-Jewish elite, who had access to the corridors of power, and to conflate Anglo-Jewry's actions on behalf of refugees. None have so thoroughly investigated the many and varied efforts undertaken by a well-established, often orthodox Jewish middle class, which in the case of Manchester was a substantial and activist constituency.

In this context Williams introduces several remarkable Jewish philanthropists whose financial and spiritual generosity helped Manchester support one of the largest Jewish refugee communities in the country. Outside of Manchester, few will have heard of men like Eli Fox, Adolph Cassel, Arthur Kershaw or the Livingstone family of Southport, all of whom purchased or donated homes and property for the establishment of refugee hostels. He even devotes a chapter to the activities of a unique Mancunian, Lionel Cowan, a Jew by birth who became an activist Quaker and who worked tirelessly for refugees, raising money, finding homes and guarantees, teaching English and organizing a hostel

In addition to this, Williams devotes chapters to the rescue efforts of individual Jewish communities and organizations such as the Stockport Hebrew Congregation, the Women's Lodge of B'Nai Brith, and the Manchester Yeshiva, all of which supported and maintained refugees in hostels and schools. Coordinating most of these efforts was the Manchester Jewish Refugees Committee, whose work was overseen by Nathan Laski, president of Manchester's Jewish Representative Council for most of the 1930s and who worked closely with the main Jewish refugee organizations in London.

Williams turns a critical eye to Laski's influence over the rescue and relief activities of Manchester's Jewish community. He places Laski squarely among the 'deferential, even apologetic, and certainly cautious' (p. 13) Anglo-Jewish elite whose attitudes towards the rescue of Jews from Nazi Europe was informed by fears of disturbing the hard-won equilibrium that had been established between Jewish and non-Jewish Britain by arousing anti-Semitic feeling in the population. These concerns led the Representative Council to jealously guard its authority over rescue and relief activities, and it gave no official sanction or support for initial efforts in the early 1930s by individuals like Isidore Apfelbaum, and groups such as the Women's Lodge of B'nai Brith. Laski's concern for the communal reputation blunted his ability to publicly express his personal anguish over the plight of German Jewry, seriously limiting the rescue efforts that might have been achieved before 1938. Williams concludes that Laski was so hamstrung by his sense of loyalty to larger British objectives that it was not until after the shock of the Anschluss and *Kristallnacht* that he was able to give a full throated plea for a more liberal immigration policy for Jewish refugees.

In the same way that Williams has been able to document the range of responses to Jewish refugees, he has

in this volume been able to make more detailed distinctions among the many refugees seeking admittance into the UK. Manchester's efforts on behalf of Jewish refugee academics, scientists and scholars, and the children brought by the *Kindertransports* are well covered in this volume. Britain's response to these groups has been well documented in other studies, but less well known, and also documented here, are the ultra-orthodox refugee children, rescued by Dr Solomon Schonfeld, the young Zionists, brought to England to farm communally in preparation for immigration to Palestine, the Yeshiva students, the Jewish aged, and the Dutch 'War refugees' – youngsters brought to England in 1940.

Several chapters on the *Kindertransports* highlight one notable limitation in his coverage. Only the refugee hostel experience is explored here, leaving out the placement of scores of children in private foster homes. The hostel experience was not a universal one, as might seem the case in this reading, and it is certain that, among the over 800 children placed in the Manchester region, many were living in private homes.

Readers who expect Williams to knit all these disparate elements together into one flowing narrative may be disappointed. These are, for all intents and purposes, stand-alone chapters. To be sure, a few ubiquitous Mancunians such as Nathan Laski reappear frequently, but no strong, central argument ties the 23 chapters together. This, however, is not necessarily a criticism of the book. Williams perceived it as his remit to piece together the puzzle of Manchester's broad and varied response to the refugee crisis of the 1930s and it is this thread that connects the parts together. When viewed as a collection of essays, Williams' study functions beautifully as a reference work, and the wealth and scope of material here more than makes up for any deficits in cohesion and flow.

His long association with Manchester and its history has enabled Bill Williams to marshal an impressive array of public archival and private sources, including interviews, oral histories and unpublished memoirs. Structurally, the only disappointment is the index. A volume of such astonishingly detailed information deserves a much more comprehensive and thorough index, especially given the fact that it is bound to be used as a reference work by many scholars. Additionally, since Williams makes a concerted effort to locate the reception centres, synagogues, Jewish neighbourhoods, hostels and businesses geographically in the region, those readers unfamiliar with Manchester and its environs would have been well served with a map or two.

The more serious concern is Williams' hesitancy to engage more directly with the national question of Britain's response to the refugees of the 1930s. His brief but incisive introduction addressing the lens of gratitude through which the refugees' experience has been persistently viewed, his sharp critique of Laski's appeasement and control, and his short conclusion which makes some imaginative and provocative observations about various groups' motivations for rescue, all hint at the directions Williams could have ventured into had he been so inclined. Broad conclusions are never definitively drawn from this study, although the Manchester region, with its 8,000 refugees, might justifiably have been used as a case study through which to examine the wider national response.

Williams' strength is his facility in wrestling an incredible amount of detail into manageable chunks, but he largely leaves the reader to make up his or her own mind. The impression one is left with at the end of the book is that the overall response of Manchester was an uneven mixture of generosity and timidity. On the one hand, individual Mancunians and religious, civic and academic groups in Manchester demonstrated a remarkable humanitarian willingness to financially, morally and physically support refugees. On the other hand, the relative paucity of academic posts offered by the University, the almost complete absence of response by Christian groups other than the Quakers, the ugly undercurrent of anti-Semitism in the Rotary Club, and the diffidence of the Jewish leadership in the years before 1938, all complicate the picture.

With his encyclopaedic knowledge of Manchester, its history and its personalities, Williams might have used his wealth of material to engage more explicitly with the larger national response to the victims of European fascism. However, the distinctiveness of this work is indisputable and it sets the standard for a new kind of micro-historical approach to the subject.

Notes

1. The Association of Jewish Refugees, *Britain's New Citizens: The Story of Refugees from Germany and Austria*, (London, 1951).[Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. N. Bentwich, *The Rescue and Achievement of Refugee Scholars; The Story of Displaced Scholars and Scientists 1933–1952* (The Hague, 1953) and *They Found Refuge: An Account of British Jewry's Work for Victims of Nazi Oppression*, (London, 1956).[Back to \(2\)](#)
-

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1217>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/8321>