

'Bound for Nowhere'?: Refugee Journeys to the British Caribbean 1938-1944

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Refugees who came to the British West Indies in the 1930s were, in the words of the Joint, a leading American Jewish charity, 'bound for nowhere', coming as a result of forced migration from Nazi Germany. For them, their destination was 'nearly' the new world, in that these were places of last resort. They came because of the lack of visas required in some British colonies, an official oversight soon corrected by Government once shiploads began to arrive daily in British colonies like Trinidad. In this period, refugee agencies were confronted with harsh choices that have contemporary resonance in aiding so called 'illegal' emigration or leaving refugees to an uncertain fate. During the war, further ships with refugees came to British West Indian colonies but this time sent as a result of Allied government priorities, or because they were taken from ships bound for North America and temporarily interned. In the British Caribbean, refugees entered a colonial world where the world recession had caused economic hardship and lack of employment opportunities. A world where the franchise was still based on property, and the Colonial Office in London still determined security and immigration policy. For a generation of West Indians who had fought in the First World War, social, political and economic change was due, and welcoming refugees, or another group of European potential colonisers, was not popular. However, many West Indians also identified with the persecution that Jewish refugees were suffering, making direct comparisons to their ancestor's enslavement. While the majority of refugees did leave post-war for countries like Canada, the US and Palestine, some put down roots and today form part of the complex fabric of contemporary West Indian identity.

This paper looks at the historical connections between the Caribbean and wartime Europe, through the movement and temporary placement of refugees throughout the British Caribbean.