

Jewish Immigration Restrictions in the Context of Canadian Eugenics
During the Interwar Period and Post WWII

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While Canada has had laws restricting who could enter the country prior to Confederation, it is important to note that it took the Prime Minister of the time, John A. Macdonald, two years since Confederation to formulate and enact Canada's first 'national' policy. Ever since, the laws and regulations implemented have undergone changes, leading to shifts in the social, political, and economic atmosphere of the country.¹

Immigration has indeed benefited Canada via its contribution to the economy and the creation of new jobs for Canadians. Immigrants aid in improving the pool of "Canadian-born existing and limited workers" by filling in gaps within the labour force, paying taxes, and purchasing goods, housing, and transportation which elevate Canada's economy overall.² While Canada's immigration legislation continues to benefit the country today, we shall never ignore how these enforced implementations have affected people of various ethnicities and nationalities over time. What began as the 'open-door' policy (the Immigration Act of 1869) slowly shifted towards the implementation of restrictive immigration measures which can be seen within the Immigration Act of 1906.³ Over the course of 37 years, the Canadian government had agreed to move from an 'open-door' approach to a limited one. The guiding principle behind this is quite an intriguing subject matter to explore.

¹ Dyk, Lindsay Van. "Canadian Immigration Acts and Legislation.", Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-immigration-acts-and-legislation.

² Immigration, Refugees And Citizenship Canada. "Government of Canada." Canada.ca. December 31, 2020. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/campaigns/immigration-matters/track-record.html>.

³ 1906 Immigration Act, Library and Archives Canada, Statutes of Canada, *SC 6 Edward VII, Chapter 19* (1906).

Following Confederation in 1867, welcoming a large influx of immigrants became a top priority for the federal government for a variety of reasons. The main motives were to stimulate the economy, settle the west, and to ensure national supremacy.⁴ The first Immigration Act of 1869 proclaimed an 'open-door' scheme, that turned out to be ethnically selective.⁵ It preferred British and American immigrants, followed by northern, then central Europeans.⁶ Asians, Blacks, and Jews were the least favoured.⁷ When WWI broke out, the Canadian government made a swift decision to halt all immigration from hostile countries. Germany, Hungary, and Austria were among those countries.⁸ Those who had immigrated to Canada from those nations prior to WWI were subject to stringent immigration measures enshrined within the War Measures Act of 1914.⁹ The most common of these individuals were Jews who were subsequently referred to as 'enemy aliens'.¹⁰ This paper will examine Jewish immigration restrictions in the context of Canadian eugenics. It will assert that Canadian immigration laws were complex forms of eugenic practices since they played a role in endorsing anti-Semitic beliefs, and they segregated the Jewish population by prohibiting them from entering Canada during the years leading up to, during, and after WWII.¹¹

⁴ "Max and Tessie. A Brief History of Jewish Immigration. Zelikovitz Centre for Jewish Studies." Carleton University. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://carleton.ca/jewishstudies/wp-content/uploads/A-Brief-History-of-Canadian-Immigration.pdf>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The measures implemented within the 1906 Immigration Act did not forbid the entry of immigrants on the basis of culture, ethnicity, or nationality, yet the government had the authority to prohibit entry to any class of immigrants when deemed necessary or expedient.¹² These strictures were amplified within an alternative immigration policy, the 1910 Immigration Act, a policy that guided the federal government's overall position on immigration until the imposition of the more liberal Immigration Act of 1952.¹³

Over time, restrictive immigration policies carved out a central path that began to welcome this notion of eugenics¹⁴ into the legislation.¹⁵ Eugenics as a social phenomenon reached its peak popularity in the early decades of the 20th century.¹⁶ The concept first became popular in Germany, beginning in 1933 when Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich worked together to eliminate races, particularly the Jews as they deemed them inferior.¹⁷ Over time, the practice began to be practiced around the world, and was highly embraced by governments and institutions, and prominent individuals of eugenics across the globe.¹⁸ Canada too had enacted eugenic policies, the most common of which were forced sexual sterilization procedures, and segregation (racial segregation and sequestering the mentally ill).¹⁹ Just as Germany aimed to 'purify' its citizens of "deficient inherited characteristics",

¹² 1906 Immigration Act, Library and Archives Canada, Statutes of Canada, *SC 6 Edward VII, Chapter 19* (1906).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Eugenics is defined as the practice of developing the human race through the selective breeding of individuals with specific desirable hereditary characteristics. It seeks to alleviate human suffering through the process of 'breeding out' disease, disabilities, and other so-called unwanted characteristics from the human population.

¹⁵ History.com Editors. "Eugenics." History.com. November 15, 2017. Accessed March 24, 2021.

<https://www.history.com/topics/germany/eugenics>.

¹⁶ "Learn About the Holocaust History." Montreal Holocaust Museum. July 02, 2020. Accessed March 24, 2021.

<https://museeholocauste.ca/en/>.

¹⁷ Kuhl, Stefan. *The Nazi connection: Eugenics, American racism, and German national socialism*. Oxford University Press, 2002, page 61.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Canada sought to do the same but in its own peculiar way.²⁰ This was done through the implementation of racist ideology and race-based antisemitism.²¹ The concept was mainly used in Canada to control and sterilize First Nation citizens, those who were considered disabled, the feeble – minded, and the poor, as these were the communities that were deemed as ‘impure’ as believed by the nation at the time.²² The Jewish community was another community that Canada had opted to keep under control as well. This was done through the Canadian government’s implementation of strict provisional immigration policies outlined in various parliamentary records respectively.

The restrictive immigration policies of Canada’s Immigration Act of 1910 ranked immigrants according to their desirable characteristics, precisely, specific features and genes that the term eugenics would contend to breed out. On the basis of this ranking system, immigrants were put into one of three groups of which immigrants from western and northern Europe including Germany were classified as “preferred immigrants,” whereas those from Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Russia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Rumania and the Baltic states were classified as “non-preferred” immigrants.²³ The Canadian government also reached an agreement with Canadian railway officials that effectively permitted them to act as Canadian immigration agents in Europe for the purpose of recruiting agriculturalists from non-preferred countries.²⁴ What about Jews though? No matter what status they held or what country of origin they came from, Canadian

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid.

²² McLaren, Angus. *Our own master race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885-1945*. University of Toronto Press, 1990, page 213.

²³ IRVING ABELLA, and HAROLD TROPER. *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, page 13.

²⁴ Ibid.

immigration officials made the ruling to not let them into the nation at all.²⁵ All Jews, irrespective of citizenship or place of birth – including those from Germany – were lumped into a Special Permit Class.²⁶ This class was “devised and implemented in the main to restrict further immigration of Jews”.²⁷ In effect, Canadian immigration officials and their Cabinet associates intentionally altered immigration legislations without question in Parliament, so as to make immigration more difficult for Jews than for other immigrants holding the same citizenship.²⁸ As previously stated, this was accomplished through the integration of racist ideology and race-based antisemitism into the Canadian legislation.

After 1923, immigration policies were at their most stringent, severely restricting the entry of immigrants into Canada, especially those classified as non-preferential, and not to mention, the severe limitations on those who classified as Special Permits. After 1923 and the rise of the Nazi Regime (ten years later), Canada had closed its doors entirely to Jewish immigrants for more than 25 years (1923 – 1948) until after the Second World War. During his third consecutive term in office (1935 – 1948), Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and his cabinet ministers implemented stringent immigration policies and held utmost responsibility for the maintenance of such policies. One example of his strict opposition towards Jewish immigration can be seen within his diary entry, published on Tuesday March 29, 1938.

[We] must be careful not to seek to play the role of the dog in the manger so far as Canada is concerned, with our great open spaces and small population. We must nevertheless seek to keep this part of the Continent free from unrest and from too

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, page 14.

great an intermixture of foreign strains of blood as much as the same thing lies at the basis of the Oriental problem. I fear we would have riots if we agreed to a policy that admitted a number of Jews. Also, we would add to the difficulties between the Provinces and the Dominion.²⁹

This excerpt from his diary entry describes Mackenzie King's response towards the Jewish refugee crisis in Europe during the time. As can be seen, Mackenzie King was against helping the Jews. He saw the Jewish people as a detrimental group towards the Canadian economy, particularly the agriculture sector. This indicates how he perceived them: as illegitimate colonists. King assumed that illegitimate colonisers would have had a negative influence on the role of agriculture in the Canadian economy. In what way? Crops cultivated by illegitimate colonists were thought to interfere with the nation's social construction of whiteness, and not to mention, keeping the nation hygienic as the term eugenics would imply. Since the Jews were perceived as racial pollutants, and an economic deadweight to the Canadian economy, Mackenzie King may have made the decision (shaped by his anti-Semitic convictions of course) to not accept Jewish agriculturalists in order to preserve the notion of white supremacy and not to mention, the nation's agricultural sector.

Mackenzie King's refusal to admit Jews from Germany between 1933 and 1948 was a form of eugenic practice that portrayed himself as an anti-Semite. This can be seen through the three kinds of fears he articulated in his writing. First, he believed that riots would be caused if a policy were put in place to accept a certain number of Jews into Canada. Second, he believed that an increase in difficulties between the Provinces and the Dominion would

²⁹ King Mackenzie, William Lyon. *Diary of W.L Mackenzie King. Vol.15, p.1. 1935 - 1938.* 29 March 1938. Archives of the Holocaust, edited by Paula Draper and Harold Troper.

be caused (due to the profound influence it tended to have on Canadian culture and identity). And finally, he feared his political career would be in jeopardy if he embraced the Jews at all. These fears are simply justifications given by Mackenzie King to mask his racist and eugenic vision for Canada's future, and not to mention, Canada's version of a deterministic theory.³⁰

Moreover, from the beginning of the implementation of immigration policies in Canada, Canada sought to 'Canadianize' the arrival of newcomers.³¹ This ideology failed to work at times because Mr. Frederick Charles Blair, director of the Government of Canada's immigration during WWII, Prime Minister Mackenzie King, and the majority of the existing population of Canada viewed the Jewish population as being "unassimilable".³² Following the failure of this ideology, a pattern of segregation (immigration segregation) and discrimination began to grow.³³ J.S. Woodsworth, who served as Winnipeg MP from 1921 to 1942, believed that the reason behind this pattern was due to those of eastern and southern European descent who had failed tremendously to conform to the laws of the land, and change their cultural and religious beliefs in order to become a part of Canadian society.³⁴ In other words, Woodsworth's observation on residential clustering patterns

³⁰ In philosophy, Determinism is defined as a theory in which all events, including moral choices, are completely determined by previously existing causes. Canada essentially borrowed its deterministic theory from other Special Permit countries, like the Fascist government of Italy which had already moved to restrict immigration out of Italy before Canada did. This triggered nations like Canada to theorize the Special Permit class of its own country.

³¹ Woodsworth, J. S. (James Shaver), 1874-1942. 1909. "Strangers within Our Gates, or, Coming Canadians." P. Chung Published Works. Toronto : F.C. Stephenson. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0114660>, page 213.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

implies the reasons as to why the Jews did not want to assimilate with the overall Canadian English – speaking white population.

As the Director of Immigration, Mr. Frederick Charles Blair wielded considerable power in formulating policies and deciding who would be admitted into Canada during WWII. Immigration standards in the pre- and immediate post WWII era were more based on race, not merit. In a memo written for an article in the Canadian Year Book of 1940 under the title of Racial Origins of Immigrants, F.C. Blair argued that:

Where there is any considerable immigration into a democratic country, the racial and linguistic composition of the immigrants is of great importance. Canadians prefer that settlers should be of a readily assimilable type, already identified by race or language with one or other of the two great races now inhabiting this country, and prepared for the duties of Canadian citizenship. Settlers from southern and eastern Europe are less readily assimilated, and the Canadianizing of the people who have come from these regions in the present century is a problem both in the agricultural Prairie Provinces and in the cities of the east.³⁵

Blair has also revealed his strict aversion towards Jewish immigration. It is also important to note that this passage explicitly represents government policy. As set out in a CBC Television Clip aired in 1982³⁶, the kinds of government policies implemented intended to reflect the antisemitic perspectives of political representatives of the time.³⁷ Though Blair's quote represents a variety of things, it is important to note that the following passage most critically reflects the government policy of the time because it represents the same kind of attitude that Mackenzie had towards the acceptance of Jewish immigrants as can be seen in the aforementioned diary entry of March 29, 1938. Blair's position as Director of

³⁵ Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives, Canadian Jewish Congress, CA, Box 29, File 300.

³⁶ About the history of racism in immigration policy.

³⁷ Finlay, Mary Lou, and Barbara Frum. "Jews Not Welcome in Wartime Canada." CBCnews, CBC/Radio Canada, 6 Oct. 1982, www.cbc.ca/player/play/1769014292/.

Immigration put him at the forefront of a closed door policy in regards to the acceptance of Jews into Canada at the time.³⁸ Furthermore, Blair's correspondence in the federal archives is riddled with anti-Jewish remarks. Antisemitism was not only a major factor that contributed to the rise of eugenics in Canada, but it also shows how Canadian immigration laws supported those views, effectively preventing Jews from entering Canada on the whole. Blair labeled Jews as less readily assimilated on the basis of the kind of race they possess and the kind of language(s) they speak. This illustrates how antisemitism exacerbated cultural intolerance with a new 'science' of racism.³⁹ This ultimately adds to the notion of racial segregation, another approach to eugenics of the 20th century.

Mr. Blair had also written a letter to F. Maclure Sclanders, published on September 13, 1938, in which he articulated his emotional hatred towards Jews:

And so it goes, the poor Jews all over the world seem very unpopular and yet as you remark there are some very fine people amongst them. I often think that instead of persecution it would be far better if we more often told them frankly why many of them are unpopular. If they would divest themselves of certain of their habits I am sure they would be just as popular in Canada as our Scandinavians.⁴⁰

Mr. Blair's blunt expression of his dislike for the Jews can be seen through two very important points he made, one in which he mentions that the Jews must be willing to discard some of their habits to be accepted into Canada, and secondly, that he has labeled the following letter *Confidential*. The kinds of habits are nothing but an implicit antisemitic

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Schoenfeld, Stuart, "Jewish Canadians". In The Canadian Encyclopedia. Historica Canada. Article published December 03, 2012; Last Edited March 18, 2020. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/jewish-canadians>

⁴⁰ Blair, Frederick C. *A letter to F. Maclure Sclanders from Immigration Director, F. C. Blair*. Letter. Ottawa: The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship, Sept. 13, 1938. <https://carleton.ca/ches/wp-content/uploads/Closed-Doors.pdf>.

conviction in which Mr. Blair implies that the Jews were nothing but impure human beings, and no matter what kind of habits they inhibited, they were no where near assured entry. Blair's antisemitic convictions reflect his disdain for the impureness of Jews. This character trait, he claims is what drove the majority of the English-speaking white community to dislike them as well, a quality or "habit" he believed they ought to divest themselves of.

The following two excerpts by Blair lay out his views on the Jewish community, and give this understanding as to why he rejected a number of Jewish refugees on board SS MS St. Louis in May 1939, an incident that gave Canada the chance to welcome them during a time of need. It can be seen that, because Blair, who forbade Jews from the very beginning of the interwar era and the years leading upto the Second World War, he was left unable to easily alter the immigration policy in effect of the time. This left him with only one option: to send the refugees back to where they came from.

While Blair was largely responsible for interpreting government immigration policies, it was Prime Minister Mackenzie King and his cabinet ministers who held a great deal of control over these policies during much of the 1920s and again after 1935.⁴¹ Not only did Mackenzie King reflect anti-Semitic attitudes towards Jews, but he eventually began to admire Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi Regime, after giving him a visit in Berlin in 1936.⁴² In a diary entry of June 29, 1937, King outlined his thoughts on Hitler, and found that:

⁴¹ King Mackenzie, William Lyon. *Diary of W.L Mackenzie King. Vol.15, p.1. 1935 - 1938.* 27 June 1937. Canadian Library and Archives.

⁴² Ibid.

My sizing up of the man as I sat and talked with him was that he is really one who truly loves his fellow – men, and his country, and would make any sacrifice for their good. [He appeared to be] a man of deep sincerity and a genuine patriot.⁴³

This excerpt indicates Mackenzie King's inclination towards Adolf Hitler. King's sympathy with Hitler's "sincerity" and "genuine patriot[ism]" surely affected his own attitudes towards the Canadian Jewish community of the time and his openness to accepting Jewish refugee immigrants from Europe. Besides, the Second World War had not broke out when the MS St. Louis arrived in Canada, nor at the time of King's visit to Hitler, which means there was no way Mackenzie King could have begun to view Hitler as an enemy. That being said, the events of the MS St. Louis seem to have logical implications, knowing Mackenzie King's outlook on the Jews during this time. As can be seen in his diary entry of March 29, 1938, Mackenzie King did not show any concern for the Jewish refugee problem in Europe at the time. This can be seen in the reflection he gave in writing on the Evian Conference held that year. In short, Mackenzie King's unwillingness to step up for Jewish refugees, especially at a time of need, is merely an example of his anti-Semitic views, which inevitably contributed to the weight of the notion of eugenic ideas on mid-20th century Canadian immigration policy.

While the enactment of the 1952 Immigration Act was intended to simplify the administration of immigration policy in Canada, and to improve the jurisdiction of the governor-in-council, the new act did not act as a major deviation from previous law.⁴⁴ The reason being was it effectively codified existing immigration polices and provided a legal

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ 1952 Immigration Act, Library and Archives Canada, Statutes of Canada, *SC 1 Elizabeth II, Chapter 42* (1952).

structure within which the government had the power to pass new orders and regulations.⁴⁵ In addition, unrestricted authority was granted to the minister of citizenship and immigration board, which enabled him to revoke immigration permits when deemed necessary or expedient.⁴⁶ Further, the act continued to prohibit judges and courts from reviewing, reversing, altering, and above all, simply interfering in immigration proceedings unless they connected to an English speaking white citizen residing in Canada in one way or another.⁴⁷ Thus, although eugenics had eased through the implementation of a new Immigration act, it continued to play a part within the legislation throughout much of the post – World War II era.

On the bright side, after the Second World War, Canada opened its doors to a number of immigrants, particularly Jews. The changes in immigration policy can therefore be characterized as positive. In the late 1940s, approximately 40,000 Holocaust survivors had immigrated into Canada.⁴⁸ They had slowly begun to integrate into a more so-called Canadian way of life. The removal of strict antisemitic discriminatory practices were just starting to be slackened, and although it undertook several years to come up with a fairer immigration policy, a revised and final act, the Immigration Act of 1976, was eventually implemented. This act marked a substantial shift in Canadian Immigration legislation. It was one of the first immigration acts to explicitly outline the underlying objectives of Canadian immigration policy, and to identify refugees as a distinct class of immigrants.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Dyk, Lindsay Van. "Canadian Immigration Acts and Legislation.", Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-immigration-acts-and-legislation.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Approximately 10 years later, the Canadian Multicultural Act of 1988 was implemented, a legislative framework that extended the existing policy of multiculturalism by expanding its focus.⁵⁰ Revisions to the policy were deemed necessary to better represent Canada's increasingly diverse racial and ethnic composition.⁵¹ Although Canada had gradually changed its way to building a more diverse society for everyone, one shall never ignore the darkened facets of Canadian history, which were comprised of antisemitic eugenic theories once upon a time.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid.