

Politics and Economics in 1930s Britain

This sheet gives you some background information about Britain during the 1930s. Imagine what it would be like to be a refugee like Martin Bloch arriving in this country. What kind of country would they see and what kind of welcome do you think they had when they arrived here?

For many people in Britain the 1930s was a period of great hardship. The Wall Street Crash in 1929 started a worldwide economic depression that lasted for much of the decade. Old industries such as steel, ship-building and coal mining suffered the most. For the people of Britain the spectre of unemployment was always present.

Unemployment Figures in Britain

January 1929	1,434,000	January 1935	2,397,000
January 1930	1,534,000	January 1936	2,229,000
January 1931	2,671,000	January 1937	1,766,000
January 1932	2,794,000	January 1938	1,927,000
January 1933	2,979,000	January 1939	2,133,000
January 1934	2,457,000		

Politics in 1930s Britain

The general election of 1929 saw the Labour Party become, for the first time in their history, the largest party in Parliament. They then formed the government under Ramsey MacDonald. On 23rd August 1931 the Cabinet voted to cut unemployment benefit by 10%. Several ministers resigned. MacDonald then formed a new 'National' government with many Labour MPs, Conservative MPs and some Liberal MPs. MacDonald was expelled from the Labour Party but the Labour Party did not recover its strength until 1945.

The 1930s also saw the rise of minor parties that offered radical solutions to Britain's economic problems. Both the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and the British Communist Party gained in popularity. The BUF looked to Nazi Germany and fascist Italy for inspiration whilst the Communists were inspired by Soviet Union under Josef Stalin. The BUF never gained any seats in Parliament while the Communists managed to win just one seat in 1935.

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Jewish immigration to Britain in the 1930s

Along with artists such as Martin Bloch there were other Germans who wanted to come to Britain in the 1930s. Some of them, like trade unionists and socialists, were escaping political persecution. The largest group of Germans to arrive in Britain in the 1930s were Jewish.

In the years after the Nazis came to power in 1933 life for German Jews became more and more difficult. In 1935 a law was passed that excluded Jews from many jobs and forbade them from marrying non-Jewish Germans.

Many Jews wanted to leave Germany but many European countries were reluctant to allow them in, including Britain. High unemployment and some distrust of Jewish people meant that the British government made it very difficult for Jews to come to these shores. Anybody who wanted to come to Britain had to have a job waiting for them and a 'sponsor', who would guarantee that they had enough money to live in Britain. Many British Jews employed German Jews as cooks or housekeepers even though they were highly educated people. It was simply a way of getting into the country.

The Night of Broken Glass

In November 1938 the Nazis launched two nights of terror against the Jews known as "Kristallnacht" (the night of broken glass). Synagogues were burnt, Jewish shops destroyed and looted and thousands of German Jews arrested. After this, the desire to leave Germany became even more frantic.

The "Kindertransport"

The British government allowed in 50,000 German Jews between 1933 and 1939. This compares with 134,000 who went to the United States and 130,000 to Latin America and Asia. However, in 1938 and 1939 over 9000 unaccompanied Jewish children, from babies to teenagers, were allowed to come and live in Britain. They came on what was called the "Kindertransport". Many of them never saw their families again.

Books on Britain in the 1930s

Keith Laybourn	<i>Britain on the Breadline: A Social and Political History of Britain, 1918-1939</i>
Malcolm Muggeridge	<i>The Thirties in Great Britain</i>
Robert Opie	<i>The 1930s Scrapbook</i>
John Peacock	<i>The Nineteen Thirties (Fashion Sourcebook)</i>
Ross Stewart	<i>Britain Since 1930</i>

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