ANTISEMITISM IN CANADA

During the Great Depression

Background

During the 1930s, the Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler, came to power in Germany. The Nazis were a deeply racist, white supremacist and antisemitic group. However, hatred against Jews and other minorities was not limited to Germany. Today, many forget that at that time, antisemitism and even Nazism were common in many other Western countries, including Canada.

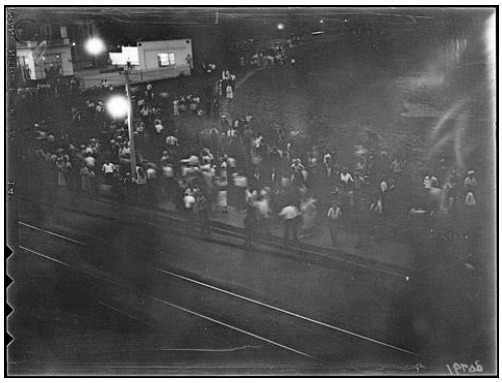
Antisemitism had been widespread throughout Canada well before the 1930s. Jews faced discrimination every day in many different forms. In Canadian schools, Jewish children were often **bullied** and called **racial slurs**. The number of Jews admitted to **university** programs was often limited. Even when they were able to graduate, many **businesses refused to hire** them. As a result, Jews often had to change their names and hide their identities in order to get jobs. Jews were even **banned** from many leisure activities, including many golf clubs, beaches, clubs and hotels.

Treatment of Jews During the Depression

"Swastika Club" members appearing in *Toronto Daily Star* newspaper in 1933

During the Great Depression, discrimination and antisemitism grew stronger. Many Canadians faced desperate economic conditions including unemployment, poverty and homelessness. In these difficult times, some Canadians looked for **scapegoats** - someone to blame for their suffering. Immigrants and Jews became common targets. In Quebec, for example, an organized campaign to **boycott** Jewish businesses was launched. The goal was to drive Jewish people out of the province. In Toronto, "**Swastika Clubs**" were formed. These groups publicly displayed the Nazi symbol on their clothes and on flags to intimidate Jewish residents of the city. They would often patrol areas like the Beaches, harassing and threatening Jewish families who were trying to enjoy a day at the beach.

The Christie Pits Race Riot of 1933



The only known photograph of the Christie Pits Race Riot of 1933

One of the most violent antisemitic events occurred on August 16, 1933 during a baseball tournament at Christie Pits Park in Toronto. One of the teams playing was predominantly Jewish. As the game ended, a gang of young men known as the "Pit Gang" unfurled a large Swastika flag from the crowd in an effort to provoke the Jewish players. Hitler and the Nazis had come to power in Germany only a few months prior and the Swastika was a clear symbol of support for the Nazis and hatred for Jews. A brawl quickly broke out between the Jewish men and the Nazi sympathizers. Baseball bats, lead pipes and other weapons were used. Soon, much of the crowd joined in. Both sides called for reinforcements and the fighting spilled over into the neighbouring streets. The battle went on for nearly six hours before police could regain control. The **Christie Pits Race Riot** was the largest antisemitic riot in Canadian history. While the mayor of Toronto spoke out against the use of the swastika symbol in the city, other political leaders in Canada fueled the flames of antisemitic hatred.

Nazism in Canada

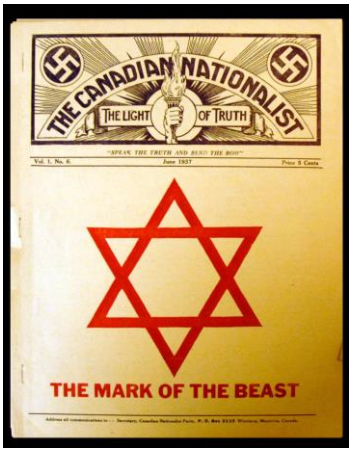
Arcand in 1933

Adrien Arcand was a fiercely antisemitic journalist based in Montreal, Quebec. He was a fanatical follower of Adolf Hitler, referring to himself as the "**Canadian Fuhrer**" - a German term meaning "leader" that Hitler adopted as his official title. He openly attacked Jews in his newspapers and speeches, calling them "cockroaches" who should be "exterminated." This however did not stop **R.B. Bennett**, leader of the federal Conservative Party, from allying with Arcand during the 1930 election. Arcand was hired by the Conservatives to help gain support in Quebec against Prime Minister Mackenzie King and the Liberals. While Bennett strongly denounced communism and socialism as threats to Canada, he said nothing about the threat of Nazism and took no actions to stop it.

In 1934, Arcand founded a Canadian Nazi political party called the "National Socialist Christian Party" (later known as the National Unity Party). The party's followers were known as "**Blue Shirts**" in reference to the violent Nazi supporters in Germany known as "Brownshirts." The party had some minor success, with several thousand members joining until it was finally outlawed during the Second World War. Other Nazi leaders with significant followings in Canada including **Joseph C. Farr** of Toronto and **William Whittaker** of Winnipeg.

William Whittaker (right) was a war veteran and former KKK member. From Winnipeg, he founded the *Canadian Nationalist Party*, a small but powerful Nazi group that promoted antisemitism by wearing swastikas and speaking publicly about fake theories regarding a global Jewish conspiracy. They even took to the streets and held several parades and Nazi rallies. Their newspaper publication, *The Canadian Nationalist* (right), featured antisemitic propaganda inspired by messaging from Nazi Germany.

William Whittaker wearing his Nazi "brownshirt" uniform c.



Antisemitic propaganda published in the *Canadian Nationalist* newspaper

"None is too many" Canadian Government Response to the Jewish Refugee Crisis

As life in Germany became harder for people who were the targets of Nazi brutality, many fled the country. They became **refugees** fleeing from persecution. Jews were the largest group of refugees, numbering more than 800,000 people. In these desperate circumstances, the US, Canada and other Western countries were called upon to accept Jewish refugees. Yet Canada only admitted about 4000 Jews between 1933 and 1939. As a percentage of the country's population, this was the lowest number of any Western country. When **Frederick Blair**, the Canadian Minister of Immigration, was asked how many Jewish refugees Canada should accept, he answered: "**None is too many**." Antisemitism was not limited to fringe Nazi groups - it was widespread among Canada's ruling elite.

In desperation, Canadian Jewish groups held large demonstrations in the late 1930s pleading for their government to help. In Ottawa, **Cairine Wilson**, Canada's first female senator, became one of the leading voices against the government's "closed door" refugee policy. She was one of the few non-Jews supporting the Jewish refugees: "We must be big enough and courageous enough to admit to Canada a fair share of the unfortunate persons involved," she said in a speech. Eventually, she turned to Prime Minister Mackenzie King, asking him to force Frederick Blair to accept more Jewish refugees. King refused to take any action.

Prime Minister Mackenzie King and Antisemitism

Wilson did not realize just how antisemitic Mackenzie King was himself. In 1937, when the persecution of German Jews under the Nazi regime was well known to the world, King went on an

official state visit to Berlin to have a friendly meeting with Hitler. King was thrilled about the meeting, recording every detail in his private diary. Far from criticizing the ruthless Nazi leader, King's diary was filled glowing admiration for Hitler. One Canadian newspaper recently referred to the former Prime Minister as having a "man crush" on Hitler. In his diary, King referred to Hitler as "eminently wise," a "mystic," a "deliverer of his people from tyranny." He continued: "He [Hitler] smiled very pleasantly, and indeed had a sort of appealing and affectionate look in his eyes. My sizing up of the man as I sat and talked with him was that he is really one who truly loves his fellow man and his country…his eyes impressed me most of all. There was a liquid quality about them which indicated keen perception and profound sympathy."

While Mackenzie King may not have been a Nazi himself, he certainly admired Hitler and shared many of the same antisemitic beliefs. Back in Canada, King had gone so far as to buy all the land around his country home so that no Jews could move in near him. Cairine Wilson's efforts to help Jewish refugees would find no support from the Prime Minister and his government.

The MS St. Louis Tragedy

In early 1939, as increasing persecution and brutal violence against Jews in Germany made international headlines, more than 900 Jewish refugees fled Germany on a ship called the *MS St. Louis* (right). The ship sailed first to Cuba with the hope of being granted permission to enter the United States. But the American government refused to accept them.

Passengers onboard the MS St. Louis. After being refused entry to Canada, most were eventually killed

In desperation, the ship sailed to Canada and appealed to the government to save them. But the Canadian government also refused. Frederick Blair tried to explain the government's refusal: "If these Jews were to find a home [in Canada], they would likely be followed by other shiploads," he said. "No country could open its doors wide enough to take in hundreds of thousands of Jewish people who want to leave Europe: the line must be drawn somewhere." In the end, the *St. Louis* was sent back to Europe, where most of its passengers would eventually be killed in the **Holocaust**.

In 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau officially **apologized** for Canada's refusal of the *MS St. Louis* and for its mistreatment of Jewish refugees during the 1930s.

Further Reading

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