

After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called for an international conference to promote the emigration of Austrian and German refugees and create an international organization whose purpose would be to deal with the refugee problem. The President invited delegates from thirty-two countries, including the United States, Great Britain, France, Canada, six small European democratic nations, the Latin American nations, Australia, and New Zealand. The conference was convened in Evian, France from July 6–16, 1938. Its declared goal was to deal with the refugee problem, however, Roosevelt made it clear that no country would be forced to change its immigration quotas, but would instead be asked to volunteer changes.

During the conference, it became painfully obvious that no country was willing to volunteer anything significant to help the refugees, whom everyone understood were Jewish refugees. The British delegate claimed that Britain was already fully populated and suffering from unemployment, so it could not take in a larger number of refugees. His only new offer consisted of allowing British territories in East Africa to take in small numbers of refugees. The French delegate declared that France had reached “the extreme point of saturation as regards admission of refugees.” Myron C. Taylor, the American delegate, allowed that the United States would make the previously unfilled quota for Germans and Austrians available to these new refugees. Other countries claimed the Depression as their excuse for not accepting refugees. Only the Dominican Republic, a tiny country in the West Indies, volunteered to take in refugees—in exchange for huge amounts of money. The world’s democracies had made it extremely clear that they were not willing to help European Jewry.

The only operative step taken at the conference was the establishment of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (ICR). Its goals were to help safe haven candidate countries develop opportunities for refugee settlement, and to try and convince Germany to allow organized emigration. However, ICR member countries did not give the organization either the funding or the authority it needed to make a real difference.



ABOUT THE PHOTO

US delegate Myron C. Taylor delivers a speech at the Evian Conference on Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Evian-les-Bains, France, July 15, 1938. Photo courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.