

Mail Online

Irish minister admits for first time that neutrality policy during WW2 was 'morally bankrupt'

- Justice Minister Alan Shatter says 'doors to state were kept firmly closed to Jews fleeing Hitler' while UK took thousands
- Sorry for way 'deserter' Irish soldiers fighting for allies were treated
- They were barred from jobs and state pensions on their return
- Links two issues and hints at upcoming official pardon

By [Lee Moran](#)

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Ireland has admitted for the first time that its 'morally bankrupt' regime of the 1930s denied visas to desperate Jews trying to escape from Nazi persecution.

Justice Minister Alan Shatter said that, following Adolf Hitler's rise to power, Ireland's anti-semitic Berlin ambassador Charles Bewley ensured 'the doors to this state were kept firmly closed to German Jewish families trying to flee'.

The admission came as he apologised for the way brave soldiers who 'deserted' the Irish Army to fight with the Allies during the Second World War were treated.



Denied: Jewish families, such as the ones pictured in this 1943 photo being rounded up in the Warsaw Ghetto, were denied entry to Ireland in the 1930s



Slammed: Irish Justice Minister Alan Shatter (left) said the administration of Eamon de Valera (right) in the 1930s was 'morally bankrupt'

He suggested the 4,983 servicemen, who were barred from jobs and State pensions on their return and condemned to poverty and stigma for the rest of their lives, were now likely to receive an official pardon.

And he linked the two issues to the administration of the time, led by Eamon de Valera, which he said had 'utterly lost its moral compass' in moves that still affected perceptions of the Irish now.

Mr Shatter, who is Jewish himself and MP for Dublin South, said the current regime was eager to make a complete break from the past.

He added: 'We should no longer be in denial that, in the context of the Holocaust, Irish neutrality was a principle of moral bankruptcy.'



Blocked: Mr Shatter said Ireland shut the doors to Jewish refugees once Adolf Hitler (pictured) came to power in Germany

He said the 'shameful position' was further compounded by de Valera's visit to the German Ambassador in 1945 to express his condolences on the death of Hitler.

He added: 'At a time when neutrality should have ceased to be an issue, the

Government of this State utterly lost its moral compass.'

In a landmark speech before tomorrow's Holocaust Memorial Day, he said he believed the dishonourable discharge the soldiers received was wrong.

He said: 'Many who fought in British uniforms during that war returned to Ireland. For too many years, their contribution in preserving European and Irish democracy was ignored.

'Some of those include members of our Defence Forces who left this island during that time to fight for freedom and who were subsequently dishonourably discharged from the Defence Forces.

'It is untenable that we commemorate those who died whilst continuing to ignore the manner in which our State treated the living, in the period immediately after World War II, who returned to our State having fought for freedom and democracy.'

He now awaits advice from Attorney General Máire Whelan about how to proceed. Of those who joined the war effort, there are estimated to be just 100 still alive.

Families of the men have welcomed the news of the pardon, after years of campaigning.

Paddy Reid, whose father Paddy and uncle Freddie left the Irish Army to fight with the British, said: 'I'm very happy to hear of the pardon.

'But there is also a deep sense of regret that it has taken so long for these men to be recognised for what they did.'

Paddy Snr joined the Allied Forces in 1941, when he was 17, and fought against the Japanese in Burma.

He died in 1988, aged 64. He joined the British forces to make money because he wanted to start a family, his son said.

However, he also felt he should stand up against the Nazis after hearing about the bombing of Guernica in northern Spain.

When he came back to Dublin, he found himself blacklisted and was prevented from getting work from 1946 until 1961.

'It was very tough trying to support eight children,' said Paddy Jnr. 'The stigma was very deep and a lot of people who fought came back to real abuse.'

'My father was a brave man and a good soldier.'

Those men fought for what they believed in – they don't make them like that any more.'

Dr Gerald Morgan, a lecturer in English at Trinity College Dublin and a campaigner for the deserters, said that the Irish Government was 'morally right' to pardon the men.

He added: 'This puts into context the sacrifices these individuals made.'

'They went off to fight, but paid a huge price.'

Retired Major-General David O'Morchoe, who joined the British forces just after the war, also welcomed the decision.

'I think the men who left the Irish Army would have felt a moral obligation to be involved but there were other considerations including financial ones,' he said.

'Many Irish people supported the war effort not in uniform.'

'But through working in the war industries in Britain at the time.'

The campaign to pardon the soldiers was kick-started a year ago when Robert Widders, a former soldier from Liverpool, published the book *Spitting on a Soldier's Grave*.

BRITAIN SAVED 90,000 JEWS FROM THE CLUTCHES OF HITLER



A total of 90,000 Jewish refugees from across Europe were welcomed into Britain during the 1930s.

Some 40,000 came from Austria and Nazi Germany, with the remainder coming from Italy, Poland, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

The flow stopped in 1938, as the threat of war with Germany escalated.

The exception was the Kindertransport (pictured above right) - an effort on the eve of conflict to transport Jewish children (their parents were not given visas) from Germany to Britain.

Around 10,000 children were saved by the scheme.

With the declaration of war, 74,000 German, Austrian and Italian citizens in the UK were interned as enemy aliens.

After individual consideration by tribunal, the majority, largely made up of Jewish and other refugees, were released within six months.



Flee: Jewish families were trying to escape Nazi Germany, where they faced eventual deportation to death camps such as Auschwitz in Poland

EAMON DE VALERA: THE FATHER OF IRISH REPUBLICANISM



Born in 1882 in New York to a Spanish father and Irish mother, Eamon de Valera (right) moved to Limerick, in Ireland, aged two.

He was a leader in the 1916 Easter Rising which proclaimed an Irish republic.

He was arrested but saved from a death sentence and sent to prison for two years instead because of his American birth.

He was a leader of Ireland's struggle for independence from Britain in the Irish War of Independence and of the anti-Treaty forces in the ensuing Irish Civil War (1922–23).

In 1926, he founded Fianna Fáil and was head of government from 1932 to 1948, 1951 to 1954 and 1957 to 1959 and President of Ireland from 1959 to 1973. Died in August 1975.