

19 America and the Holocaust

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The Second World War was the deadliest conflict in human history. More than 53 million people perished and whole towns and cities were annihilated in this roaring global inferno. The hardest hit was the Soviet Union, which felt the full fury of the invading Nazi war machine. Some 25 million Soviets were killed—by far the largest casualties of any other country. Compared to the destruction wrought in China, Japan, the Soviet Union, and Europe, the United States suffered relatively light casualties. There were no invasions of the American mainland, no bombing raids on American cities, no civilian massacres. Total American military deaths came to 408,000. By comparing statistics, we do not mean to slight those who died for our flag. Every American fighting man killed was a terrible sacrifice and a devastating blow to those who loved him.

As the next selection shows, the casualty rates of countries tell only part of the war's tragic story. The virulent anti-Semitism of Hitler and his Nazi henchmen led them to a "final solution" to the "Jewish question": the creation of hideous death camps, which systematically exterminated 6 million European Jews—men, women, and children alike. Winston Churchill called it "the most terrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world."

How could the Allies have allowed this "terrible crime" to happen? Could the United States have stopped it? Did it even try? Many critics contend that American leaders did not do nearly enough to help the Jews of Europe, instead abandoning them to their fate. William J. vanden Heuvel disagrees. He points out that restrictive immigration laws limited the number of refugees America could accept before Hitler "put the lock on the most terrible dungeon in history." The author concedes that there were influential people in Congress and the State Department who were anti-Semitic. Even so, after anti-Semitic riots swept Germany in November 1938, more than half of all immigrants to the United States were Jewish.

Vanden Heuvel defends Roosevelt's Jewish policy, contending that the president and first lady were free of the prejudice that infected other Americans. Roosevelt knew about the death camps—he had read about them in a report from German refugee Gerhard Riegner, who warned that European Jews were being "exterminated in order to resolve, once and for all, the Jewish question in Europe." When a group of Jewish leaders called on Roosevelt, the president assured them: "We shall do all in our power to be of service to your people in this tragic moment." True, FDR refused to bomb railroad lines leading to the death camps, arguing that committing all military resources to defeating Germany as soon as possible would save more lives. Many Roosevelt critics question the validity of that argument, but not vanden Heuvel. He maintains that Roosevelt, given

political realities and wartime priorities, did in fact do all he could to aid Europe's Jews. After reading this provocative essay, you will want to decide for yourselves if this argument is convincing and supported by the weight of evidence. For the opposing point of view, consult David S. Wyman's The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945 (1984).

GLOSSARY

AUSCHWITZ The most notorious of the Nazi death camps. The Allies rejected any thought of bombing this concentration camp and the railroad tracks leading to it, and most mainstream Jewish groups agreed that the first victims of a bombing of Auschwitz would be the Jewish prisoners, who, if they survived the assault, would have no place to run. Moreover, the Germans could easily rebuild the railroad lines. The Allies believed that the best way to save Jewish lives was to end the war as soon as possible.

CHURCHILL, WINSTON In the spring of 1940, he replaced the disgraced Neville Chamberlain as England's prime minister. Churchill's courage bolstered Great Britain during its darkest hours when Nazi bombing brought this nation to near collapse.

DICKSTEIN, SAMUEL Democrat who chaired the House subcommittee on immigration. Like Congressman Emanuel Celler of Brooklyn, he wanted to ease the quota restrictions to allow more Jewish immigrants to enter the United States, but he feared that such actions would provide reactionaries with an opportunity to further limit immigration.

EVIAN CONFERENCE President Roosevelt helped organize this humanitarian effort "to facilitate the emigration from Germany and Austria of political refugees." It was largely a failure because of the presence of American immigration quotas and Hitler's refusal to permit refugees to keep some of their assets in order to start a new life.

GOEBBELS, JOSEF Hitler's propaganda minister. Goebbels used radio and films to promote the Nazi cause at home, foment hatred toward European

Jewry, and exaggerate German successes on the battlefield.

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE In 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt was one of the founders of this organization, which won sanctuary in America for many of the most prominent victims of Hitler's persecution.

KRISTALLNACHT German word meaning "glass night," referring to the noise of breaking windows. In November 1938, anti-Semitic riots that resulted in looting and arson scarred much of Germany. Little was done to contain the senseless violence, which was a signal of much worse to come. In response, President Roosevelt extended the visas of twenty thousand Germans and Austrians in the United States so that they would not have to return home.

LONG, BRECKENRIDGE Assistant secretary of state who allowed his biases to influence the restrictive immigration quotas established by Congress. These quotas limited the number of Jewish refugees who sought sanctuary in the United States.

MANN, THOMAS Well-known humanist and German exile who believed that compromise was impossible in dealing with Hitler. He influenced policymakers in the United States to use the threat of force when negotiating with the Nazis.

NUREMBURG LAWS In 1935, the Nazis severely restricted the rights of Jews through the Nuremburg Laws, a series of measures that limited the professions they could enter and barred marriage and sexual intercourse with gentiles. Hitler's purpose was to force German Jews to emigrate so that he could confiscate their property.

RIEGNER, GERHART A representative of the World Jewish Congress whose telegram, in August

of 1942, helped confirm the presence of Nazi death camps such as Auschwitz.

ST. LOUIS In May of 1939, this ship carried 936 passengers, most of them Jewish, to Cuba, where all but 22 were refused sanctuary. Since the American government's strict immigration laws prevented their entry into the United States, American diplomats helped find temporary safety for them in other countries. However, most of those countries, like France and Belgium, eventually faced Nazi occupation and did not remain safe havens.

VICHEY, FRANCE After Hitler had overrun much of France, Marshal Petain established a dictatorial government in the city of Vichy that collaborated with Germany. Petain offered no resistance when the Nazis deported French Jews to extermination camps in Eastern Europe.

WANNSEE CONFERENCE In January 1942, the Nazi leadership formulated the "Final Solution" at this meeting in Berlin. Hitler's misguided belief in a pure master race of German "Aryans" resulted in a cruel plan to exterminate Europe's Jews.

WELLS, SUMNER President Roosevelt's undersecretary of state who appreciated the plight of Jews trapped in Germany and the occupied countries. Wells urged the State Department to take more direct action to save them.

WISE, STEPHEN A rabbi who was a friend of President Roosevelt and a respected leader of the American Jewish community. He spoke out against Hitler's atrocities, encouraged Jews to leave Germany, and pressured the American government to save as many lives as possible.

It was Winston Churchill's judgment that the Holocaust "was probably the greatest and most terrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world." The Holocaust, of course, was part of a colossal struggle in which fifty-three million people were killed, where nations were decimated, where democracy's survival was in the balance. In his campaign to exterminate the Jews of Europe, Hitler and his Nazi followers murdered six million men, women, and children for no other reason than that they were Jewish. This crime is of such profound proportions that it can never be fully understood; it must continue to be analyzed from every aspect as to how and why it happened, and its memory must unite all of us.

Nine million non-Jewish civilians were also murdered by the Nazis, as were three million Soviet prisoners of war, yet the Holocaust remains a uniquely horrible crime, and there can be no greater indictment than to allege complicity in it. Such an accusation was made against America in general and its leader, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in particular by a recent PBS documentary entitled "America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference." The show drew on a substantial and growing body of scholarship that has caused many young American Jews to criticize and even condemn their grandparents and parents for being so absorbed in the effort to become assimilated in American society that they chose silence rather than voice outrage at the Nazi crimes and gave their overwhelming support to a President who was indifferent to the fate of Europe's Jews. Why did not the United States let the *St. Louis*, a German ship carrying Jewish refugees to Cuba in 1939, land at an American port when Cuba refused them admission? Also, perhaps the most frequently asked question of the last decade, why did the Allies

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not bomb Auschwitz and the railways that fed it? The people who pose these questions believe they know the answers. As one eminent spokesman for this viewpoint has written, "The Nazis were the murderers but we"—here he includes the American government, its President, and its people, Christians and Jews alike—"were the all too passive accomplices."

How much truth is there in these painful assertions? As we ask ourselves what more might have been done to save the innocent, we must frame our response in the context of the realities of World War II and the events and values of the years that preceded it.

Five weeks after Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, in 1933, Franklin Roosevelt became President of the United States. Roosevelt's loathing for the whole Nazi regime was known the moment he took office; alone among the leaders of the world, he stood in opposition to Hitler from the very beginning. In a book published in 1937, Winston Churchill—to whom free humanity everywhere must be eternally indebted and without whose courage and strength the defeat of Nazi Germany could never have been achieved—described Hitler's treatment of the Jews, stating that "concentration camps pock-mark the German soil . . ." and concluding his essay by writing that "the world lives on hopes that the worst is over and that we may live to see Hitler a gentler figure in a happier age." Roosevelt had no such hopes. Thomas Mann, the most famous of the non-Jewish refugees from the Nazis, met with FDR at the White House in 1935 and confided that for the first time he believed the Nazis would be beaten because in Roosevelt he had met someone who truly grasped the evil of Adolf Hitler.

To comprehend the situation of European Jewry during those years, we must differentiate between the German Jews who were the immediate and constant subjects of Hitler's persecution and the Jews of Central Europe who were the principal victims of the Holocaust. The German Jews numbered about

525,000 in 1933. They were the yeast of Germany's great culture—leaders in literature, music, medicine, science, and financial and intellectual life. For the most part they wanted to be thought of as Germans. They had been a proud part of Germany's army in World War I. Anti-Semitism shadowed their lives, but they thought of Germany as *their* country and were deeply rooted in its existence. In the face of Nazi persecution, those who left Germany did so reluctantly, many seeking refuge in neighboring countries, from which they expected to return once the Hitler madness subsided. In the early years many, if not most, believed Hitler and his regime could not survive.

When, in 1933, Rabbi Stephen Wise, one of the most powerful and respected leaders of the American Jewish community during that era and a personal friend and close adviser of President Roosevelt, organized a New York rally to protest Nazi treatment of Jews, he received a message from leading German rabbis urging him to cut out such meetings and which, insultingly, indicated that American Jews were doing this for their own purposes and in the process were destroying the Germany that German Jews loved. Rabbi Wise never wavered in his belief that the only option for Jews was to leave Germany. As the Nazi persecution intensified, as the Nuremberg Laws further degraded the Jews as had nothing before, as Hitler strove to make them emigrate and confiscated their property, the prospect of escape and exile had to shadow every Jewish family. In 1933 thirty-seven thousand Jews fled Germany, but in the relative calm of the next year, sixteen thousand returned. Every Jewish group affirmed the right of Jews to be German, to live in and love their country; they affirmed the legal right, the moral necessity, and the religious imperative of not surrendering to their persecutors. As important as any barriers to immigration in Western countries was the desire not to leave Germany until absolutely necessary. It is crucial to our understanding of these years to remember that at



Nazi troops turn their rifles on helpless women and children in Poland's Warsaw Ghetto. The victims were caught "in a vast prison from which there was no escape and no possible rescue." The young, elderly, weak, and disabled were of limited use to the

Germans in the cruel labor camps and were among the first to perish in the hideous gas chambers. (Yivo Institute for Jewish Research)

the time no one inside or outside Germany anticipated that the Nazi persecution would lead to the Holocaust. The actions of the German government were generally understood by both victims and bystanders as a return to the sorts of persecutions of prior centuries, not as steps on the road toward genocide.

Kristallnacht in November 1938 changed the situation dramatically. The assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a seventeen-year-old Jewish youth whose father had been among the thousands of Polish Jews expelled from Germany and dumped

across the Polish border just weeks before sparked a frenzy of arson and looting by Nazi thugs in almost every town and city. Huge, silent crowds looked on. The police did nothing to contain the violence. Many German Jews for the first time understood the hopelessness of their situation, and some looked west across the Atlantic.

The America that elected Franklin Delano Roosevelt its President in 1932 was a deeply troubled country. Twenty-five percent of its work force was unemployed—this at a time when practically every member of that work force was the principal support

of a family. The economy was paralyzed, while disillusion after the sacrifices of the First World War fomented profound isolationist sentiments.

The nation's immigration laws had been established by legislation in 1921 and 1924 under Presidents Harding and Coolidge and by a Congress that had rejected the League of Nations. A formula assigned a specific quota to countries based on the population origins of Americans living in the United States in 1890. The law was aimed at Eastern Europe, particularly Russia and Poland, which were seen as seedbeds of bolshevism. Italians were targeted, and Asians practically excluded. The total number of immigrants who could be admitted annually was set at 153,774; the two countries of origin given the highest quotas were Great Britain (65,721) and Germany (25,957). The deepening Depression encouraged an unusual coalition of liberal and conservative forces, labor unions and business leaders, to oppose any enlargement of the immigration quotas. Because of the relatively large German quota, Jewish refugees from Germany had an easier time than anticommunist refugees from the Soviet Union, not to mention Chinese victims of Japan's aggression, or Armenians. The Spanish who wanted to escape a civil war that between 1936 and 1939 killed half a million people faced an annual quota of 252.

The President and Mrs. Roosevelt were leaders in the effort to help those fleeing Nazi persecution. Eleanor Roosevelt was a founder, in 1933, of the International Rescue Committee, which brought intellectuals, labor leaders, and political figures to sanctuary in the United States. President Roosevelt made a public point of inviting many of them to the White House. In 1936, in response to the Nazi confiscation of personal assets as a precondition to Jewish emigration, Roosevelt greatly modified President Hoover's strict interpretation of the refugee laws, thereby allowing a greater number of visas to be issued. As a result the United States accepted twice as many Jewish refugees as did all other countries put

together. As the historian Gerhard L. Weinberg has shown, Roosevelt acted in the face of strong and politically damaging criticism for what was generally considered a pro-Jewish attitude.

When, in March 1938, the Anschluss put Austria's 185,000 Jews in jeopardy, Roosevelt called for an international conference "to facilitate the emigration from Germany and Austria of political refugees." There was no political advantage to FDR in this; no other major leader in any country matched his concern and involvement. The conference, which met in Evian, France, tried to open new doors in the Western Hemisphere. At first things went well; the Dominican Republic, for example, offered to give sanctuary to 100,000 refugees. Then came a devastating blow: The Polish and Romanian governments announced that they expected the same right as the Germans to expel their Jewish populations. There were fewer than 475,000 Jews left in Germany and Austria at this point—a number manageable in an emigration plan that the twenty-nine participating nations could prepare—but with the possibility of 3.5 million more from Eastern Europe, the concern now was that any offer of help would only encourage authoritarian governments to brutalize any unwanted portion of their populations, expecting their criminal acts against their own citizens to force the democracies to give them haven. National attitudes then were not very different from today's; no country allows any and every refugee to enter without limitations. Quotas are thought even now to deter unscrupulous and impoverished regimes from forcing their unwanted people on other countries.

The Evian Conference failed to accomplish anything except organization of the Inter-Governmental Committee (IGC), which was to pressure the Germans to allow Jewish refugees to leave with enough resources to begin their new lives. It led to direct negotiations between Hjalmar Schacht, head of the Reichsbank, and George Rublee, a distinguished Washington lawyer personally designated by FDR. Schacht proposed that 150,000 Jews be allowed to

emigrate, taking 25 percent of their assets with them, the rest to be impounded in a trust fund that would serve as collateral on bonds to be issued by the German state. Schacht was trying to resolve Germany's foreign exchange crisis, but Hitler ordered an end to the discussions. The negotiations, like all barter negotiations in the years ahead, failed because the Führer never allowed them to succeed.

America's reaction to *Kristallnacht* was stronger than that of any of the other democracies. Roosevelt recalled his ambassador from Germany and at his next press conference said, "I myself can scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth-century civilization." He extended the visitors' visas of twenty thousand Germans and Austrians in the United States so they would not have to return. Americans in opinion polls showed anger and disgust with the Nazis and sympathy for the Jews; nevertheless, Roosevelt remained the target of the hard-core anti-Semites in America. He fought them shrewdly and effectively, managing to isolate them from mainstream America and essentially equating their anti-Semitism with treason destructive to both the national interest and national defense. Recognizing the inertia at the State Department, he entrusted Sumner Welles, the Undersecretary of State and a man wholly sympathetic to Jewish needs, to be his instrument of action.

Immigration procedures were complicated and sometimes harshly administered. The laws and quotas were jealously guarded by Congress, supported by a strong, broad cross section of Americans who were against all immigrants, not just Jews. Of course, there were racists and anti-Semites in the Congress and in the country, as there are today, only now they dare not speak their true attitudes. The State Department, deeply protective of its administrative authority in the granting of visas, was frequently more concerned with congressional attitudes and criticisms than with reflecting American decency and generosity in helping people in despair and panic. Roosevelt undoubtedly

made a mistake in appointing as Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long, who many allege was an anti-Semite. His presence at State was an assurance to Congress that the immigration laws would be strictly enforced. On the other hand there were countless Foreign Service officers who did everything possible to help persecuted, innocent people, just as they would today. There was an attitude that many sanctuaries besides the United States existed in the world, so the department, controlled by a career elite, conservative and in large part anti-New Deal and anti-FDR, was quite prepared to make congressional attitudes rather than those of the White House the guide for their administration of immigration procedures. Yet, between 1933 and 1941, 35 percent of all immigrants to America under quota guidelines were Jewish. After *Kristallnacht*, Jewish immigrants were more than half of all immigrants admitted to the United States. . . .

For his part, Roosevelt, knowing that he did not have the power to change the quota system of his own country, was constantly seeking havens for the refugees in other countries. His critics severely underestimate limitations on presidential power; clearly, the President could not unilaterally command an increase in quotas. In fact, the Democratic congressional leaders, including Rep. Samuel Dickstein, who chaired the House subcommittee on immigration, warned him that reactionary forces in Congress might well use any attempt to increase the quotas as an opportunity to reduce them. In 1939 Congressman Emanuel Celler of Brooklyn, an outspoken defender of Jewish interests, gave a speech in which he warned that "it would be dangerous at this time because of public opinion in the South and West to press for the passage in Congress of [his own] bills to give asylum in the United States to refugees and to reallocate for refugees the unused quotas of various countries." Congressman Celler said he had been warned by representatives from other parts of the country that if he pressed his proposals, other bills "to cut the quotas in half or to stop all immigration would be introduced and probably passed." Nor were the Jews the only refugees

Congress was determined to bar. A few days later the Reverend Joseph Ostermann, executive director of the Committee for Catholic Refugees from Germany, said that there were five hundred thousand actual or potential Catholic refugees whom "Goebbels and Rosenberg in Germany have attempted to identify with communism."

By the time the war made further emigration impossible, 72 percent of all German Jews had left the country—and 83 percent of all those under twenty-one. There are many reasons why the others did not get out: Some were too old to leave; some, like the brave chief rabbi of Berlin, Leo Baeck, believed it their religious duty to stay; some were in concentration camps and prisons; some just did not know what to do. Even after *Kristallnacht* nobody could foresee the events that became the Holocaust. Louis de Jong, an eminent Dutch historian and Holocaust survivor, said in his Erasmus lectures at Harvard University in 1989: "[There is] an aspect of the Holocaust which is of cardinal importance and which can never be sufficiently underlined: that the Holocaust, when it took place, was beyond the belief and the comprehension of almost all people living at the time, Jews included. Everyone knew that human history had been scarred by endless cruelties. But that thousands, nay millions, of human beings—men, women and children, the old and the young, the healthy and the infirm—would be killed, finished off, mechanically, industrially so to speak, would be exterminated like vermin—that was a notion so alien to the human mind, an event so gruesome, so *new*, that the instinctive, indeed the natural, reaction of most people was: it can't be true."

Given the reality of the Holocaust, all of us in every country—and certainly in America—can only wish that we had done more, that our immigration barriers had been lower, that our Congress had had a broader world view, that every public servant had shared the beliefs of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. If anyone had foreseen the Holocaust, perhaps, pos-

sibly, maybe . . . but no one did. Nevertheless, the United States, a nation remote from Europe in a way our children can hardly understand, took in double the number of Jewish refugees accepted by the rest of the world.

Among the anguishing events we read about is the fate of the ship *St. Louis* of the Hamburg-America Line, which left Germany and arrived in Cuba with 936 passengers, all but 6 of them Jewish refugees, on May 27, 1939. This was three months before the outbreak of the war and three years before the establishment of the death camps. Other ships had made the same journey, and their passengers had disembarked successfully, but on May 5 the Cuban government had issued a decree curtailing the power of the corrupt director general of immigration to issue landing certificates. New regulations requiring five-hundred-dollar bonds from each approved immigrant had been transmitted to the shipping line, but only 22 passengers of the *St. Louis* had fulfilled the requirements before leaving Hamburg on May 13. Those 22 were allowed to land; intense negotiations with the Cuban government regarding the other passengers—negotiations in which American Jewish agencies participated—broke down despite pressure from our government. It was not an unreported event. Tremendous international attention focused on the *St. Louis*, later made famous as the "Voyage of the Damned." Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., and others, including Eleanor Roosevelt, worked to evade the immigration laws—for example, by attempting to land the passengers as "tourists" in the Virgin Islands. One survivor of the *St. Louis* whom I interviewed—a retired professor of human genetics at the University of Washington in Seattle—described its commander, Capt. Gustav Schroeder, as a compassionate man who ordered decent treatment for his Jewish passengers and who told them that he would run his ship aground off England rather than return them to Germany if Cuba refused admission. In the end, despite the legal inability of the United

States to accept the passengers as immigrants, our diplomats were significantly helpful in resettling them. Not one was returned to Nazi Germany. They all went to democratic countries—288 in the United Kingdom, the rest in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark. And who, in that spring of 1939, was prescient enough to foretell that in little more than a year all but one of those countries would be held by Nazi troops?

What were FDR's own attitudes toward Hitler and the Jews? Did he reflect the social anti-Semitism that was endemic in the America of that era? Contemporary Jews certainly didn't think so. Roosevelt opened the offices of government as never before to Jews. Henry Morgenthau, Jr., Samuel Rosenman, Felix Frankfurter, Benjamin Cohen, David Niles, Anna Rosenberg, Sidney Hillman, and David Dubinsky were among his closest advisers in politics and government. Rabbi Stephen Wise, the pre-eminent spokesman for American Zionism, said, "No one was more genuinely free from religious prejudice and racial bigotry."

Nazi policy changed radically after the outbreak of war. The Holocaust took place between 1941 and 1945. Hitler's conquest of the European continent let loose the full force of his psychopathic obsession about Jews. With the start of the war, on September 1, 1939, emigration from Germany was prohibited. Nevertheless, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of German Jews managed to escape across borders into Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland. But by June 1940, with the fall of France, Europe became a prison for Jews. Unoccupied France still offered an escape route, and despite intense criticism from the political left, FDR maintained diplomatic relations with Vichy, France, allowing that route to remain open. The International Rescue Committee, a group of which Eleanor Roosevelt remained very supportive, sent a team headed by Varian Fry that helped countless refugees find sanctuary in Spain and Portugal. But the vise was tightening. The invasion

of Russia in June 1941 put the lock on the most terrible dungeon in history. Special squads of the German SS—the *Einsatzgruppen*—began the slaughter of 1.5 million Jews behind the German lines in Russia. The Wannsee Conference, which structured the "Final Solution," was held in a Berlin suburb in January 1942.

The Jews of Central Europe, the Jews from the occupied nations of Western Europe, the Jews of the Soviet Union—the principal victims of the Holocaust—were not refugees; they were prisoners in a vast prison from which there was no escape and no possible rescue. . . .

The doors had been closed not by the United States or its allies but by Hitler. On January 30, 1942, Hitler, speaking to the Reichstag, said, "This war can end in two ways—either the extermination of the Aryan peoples or the disappearance of Jewry from Europe." Since the mid-1920s Hitler had never voluntarily spoken to a Jew. He was the most determined ideologue of racial superiority and racial conflict who ever led a country. Nothing diminished his mission—not the defeat of his armies, not the destruction of his country. As Germany lay in ruins, as its dictator prepared to end his life in his bunker in Berlin, his Nazi acolytes continued his campaign, diverting even urgently needed reinforcements for his retreating armies in order to complete the Final Solution.

The prisoners of Hitler could be saved only by the total, unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany, and that was a task that required four years and the unprecedented mobilization of all the resources, human and material, of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

Some critics of American policy during these years maintain that the news of the annihilation of Europe's Jews was deliberately kept secret so that our people would not know about it and that if Americans had been aware of the Final Solution, they would have insisted on doing more than was done. The facts are otherwise. President Roosevelt, Winston Churchill,

General Eisenhower, General Marshall, the intelligence services of the Allied nations, every Jewish leader, the Jewish communities in America, in Britain, in Palestine, and yes, anyone who had a radio or newspaper in 1942 knew that Jews in colossal numbers were being murdered. They may have received the news with disbelief; there was, after all, no precedent for it in human history. But the general information of the genocide was broadly available to anyone who would read or listen. The famous telegram from Gerhart Riegner, a representative of the World Jewish Congress, in Switzerland in August 1942, was not even the first knowledge of a death camp later to become known as Auschwitz when its gas chambers and crematoria had been built. Auschwitz, like every extermination camp, was treated as a top-secret project by the Nazis. The details and even the name of Auschwitz were not confirmed until the escape of two prisoners in April 1944, two years after its murderous processes had begun. But though the names, locations, and procedures of the death camps may not have been known—some not until the end of the war—the fact of the genocide and the Nazi determination to carry it out were not in doubt.

When Rabbi Wise was given the Riegner telegram, Sumner Welles asked him not to publicize it until its information could be confirmed by sources available to the Czech and Polish governments-in-exile. There was no video of this original version of "ethnic cleansing" such as we had available to us in Bosnia; there were no enterprising reporters who could photograph the Nazi butchery as there were in Rwanda. The experience of the First World War, in which atrocities attributed to the Germans turned out to be grossly inflated or Allied propaganda, caused many to wonder if the incredible reports coming from the continent of Europe would ultimately prove false as well.

When Sumner Welles confirmed the truth of the Riegner telegram to Rabbi Wise, the rabbi wept, as countless Jews and non-Jews would do in those terrible years when the Nazis lay beyond the reach of

the armies that would defeat them. Encouraged by Welles to hold a press conference to announce the news, Rabbi Wise did so, on November 28, 1942. Then he and his colleagues met with FDR and asked the President to warn Hitler and the Germans that they would be held individually responsible for what they were doing to the Jews. Roosevelt agreed immediately. An announcement to that effect in the name of the United Nations was made in Congress and in Britain's Parliament on December 17, 1942. It was repeated many times throughout the war. Parliament stood in silence for the first time in its history to mourn what was happening to the Jews and to pray for the strength needed to destroy their persecutors. In America the labor unions led the nation in a ten-minute period of mourning for the Jews of Europe. It is difficult to argue that there was a conspiracy of silence regarding the fate of Europe's Jews when the American broadcaster Edward R. Murrow, listened to throughout the nation, reported on December 13, 1942: "Millions of human beings, most of them Jews, are being gathered up with ruthless efficiency and murdered. . . . It is a picture of mass murder and moral depravity unequalled in the history of the world. It is a horror beyond what imagination can grasp. . . . The Jews are being systematically exterminated throughout all Poland. . . . There are no longer 'concentration camps'—we must speak now only of 'extermination camps.'"

American Jewry was no passive observer of these events. Despite issues that bitterly divided them, primarily relating to Palestine, the Jewish community in America spoke the same words in pleading to do whatever was possible for Europe's Jews. Jewish leaders lobbied Congress. Mass rallies were held across the country with overflow crowds throughout those years, praying, pleading for action to stop the genocide. The unremitting massacre continued because no one, no nation, no alliance of nations could do anything to close down the death camps—save, as

Roosevelt said over and over again, by winning the war.

Had FDR followed the national will, Japan would have been our military priority, but understanding the Nazi threat to civilization, he ordered Germany to be the focus of our efforts. Had Roosevelt listened to General Marshall and his other military advisers, he would not have sent the few tanks we had in 1942 to help General Montgomery win at El Alamein, thereby probably saving Palestine from the same fate as Poland. Roosevelt gave frequent audience to Jewish leaders; he sent messages to rallies of Jews across the country; he listened to every plea and proposal for rescue that came to him. But he knew that the diversion of resources from the purpose of defeating the Nazi armies might palliate the anguish felt by so many, would rescue no one, and in all likelihood would kill the would-be rescuers. As Richard Lichtheim, a representative of the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland and a hero in informing the world of the genocide, said in December 1942, "You cannot divert a tiger from devouring his prey by adopting resolutions or sending cables. You have to take your gun and shoot him."

The historian Gerhard Weinberg answers those who question America's policy by suggesting that they consider how many more Jews would have survived had the war ended even a week or ten days earlier—and how many more would have died had it lasted an additional week or ten days. Given that the slaughter of the Jews went on into the final moments of the Third Reich, that every day until the surrender there were thousands of deaths by murder, starvation, and disease, the number of Jews saved by winning the war as quickly as possible was vastly greater than the total number who could have been saved by any rescue efforts proposed by anyone between 1941 and 1945. . . .

The proposal to bomb Auschwitz in 1944 has become the symbol for those who argue American indifference and complicity in the Holocaust. Some would have us believe that many American Jewish groups

petitioned our government to bomb Auschwitz; in fact, there was considerable Jewish opposition in both the United States and Palestine. The focal center of the Holocaust Museum's exhibit on bombing Auschwitz is a letter from Leon Kubowitzki, head of the Rescue Department of the World Jewish Congress, in which he forwarded, without endorsement, a request from the Czech State Council (in exile in London) to the War Department, in August 1944, to bomb the camp. Much is made of the Assistant Secretary John McCloy's response to Kubowitzki explaining the War Department's decision not to undertake such a mission. What is not on display and rarely mentioned is a letter dated July 1, 1944, from the same Leon Kubowitzki to the executive director of the War Refugee Board, arguing *against* bombing Auschwitz because "the first victims would be the Jews" and because the Allied air assault would serve as "a welcome pretext for the Germans to assert that their Jewish victims have been massacred not by their killers, but by Allied bombing."

Mainstream Jewish opinion was against the whole idea. The very thought of the Allied forces' deliberately killing Jews—to open the gates of Auschwitz so the survivors could run where?—was as abhorrent then as it is now. The Rescue Committee, of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem voted, at a meeting with the future Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion presiding, against even making the bombing request. Although only President Roosevelt or General Eisenhower could have ordered the bombing of Auschwitz, there is no record of any kind that indicates that either one ever heard of the proposal—even though Jewish leaders of all persuasions had clear access to both men.

A seemingly more reasonable proposal to bomb the railways to Auschwitz was made to Anthony Eden, the foreign minister of Great Britain, on July 6, 1944. Eden, with Churchill's immediate support, asked the RAF to examine the feasibility of doing so. The secretary of state for air, Sir Archibald Sin-

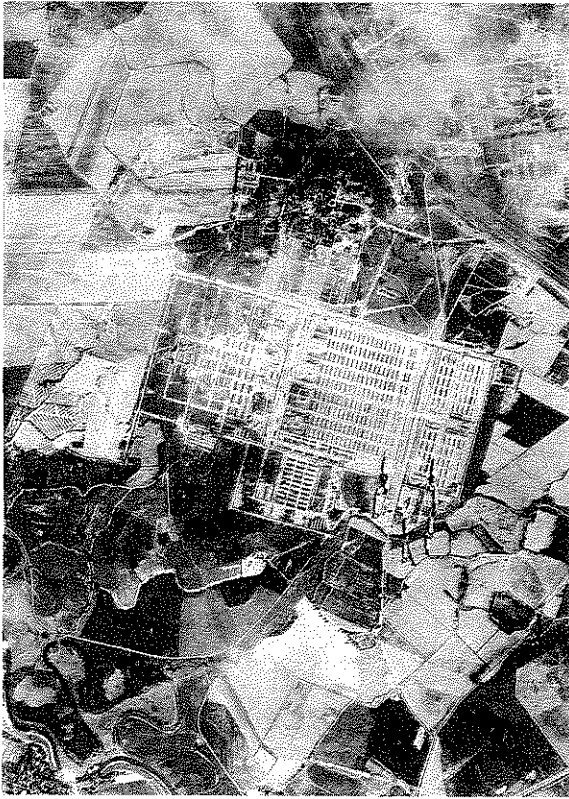
clair, replied several days later: "I entirely agree that it is our duty to consider every possible plan [to stop the murder of the Jews] but I am advised that interrupting the railways is out of our power. It is only by an enormous concentration of bomber forces that we have been able to interrupt communications in Normandy; the distance of Silesia from our bases entirely rules out doing anything of the kind." John McCloy had replied to a similar suggestion weeks earlier: "The War Department is of the opinion that the suggested air operation is impracticable for the reason that it could be executed only with the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations." Even the severest critics of America's response to the Nazi murder of the Jews acknowledge that successful interruption of railways required close observation of the severed lines and frequent rebombing, since repairs would take only a few days. Even bridges, which were costly to hit, were often back in operation in three or four days. Postwar studies of railway bombing totally vindicated the conclusion of the military authorities. Professor Istvan Deak of Columbia University asks in a recent article: "And if the rail lines had been bombed? The inmates of the cattle cars and those at the departure points would have been allowed to die of thirst, or of the heat, or of the cold, while the lines were being repaired."

It is often noted that American bombers were carrying out raids in the summer of 1944 on industrial targets only a few miles away from Auschwitz, suggesting how easy it would have been to bomb the gas chambers. They do not mention that preparation for the D-day invasion left only 12 percent of the U.S. Army Air Force available for the destruction of German fuel supplies, the primary mission as defined by Gen. Carl Spaatz. They point to the huge blowups of reconnaissance photographs at the Holocaust Museum that show not only the Farben synthetic-fuel plant, the target of the raids, but the outlines of Auschwitz and columns of prisoners. Yet the aerial

photographs of Auschwitz on display were not developed until 1978, and their details were readable then only because advanced technology, developed by the CIA more than twenty years after the end of World War II, made it possible. *All* such strategic raids on military-industrial bases proceeded only after months of preparatory intelligence work, entailing the creation of a target folder with specific information about the size, hardness, structure placement, and defenses of the target and detailed aerial photography. These were costly, dangerous raids against heavily protected, frequently remote targets; the losses in men and planes were tragically heavy. The Allied air forces simply lacked the intelligence base necessary to plan and execute a bombing raid against the Auschwitz extermination camp. It would have been a nonmilitary mission. Only Roosevelt or Eisenhower could have ordered it, and as we have seen, no one proposed it to them.

Yet many insist that anti-Semitism alone spared Auschwitz the wrath of the Army Air Force. With this in mind, it is worth considering the plight of northern Holland, where during the last seven months of the war more than eighty thousand citizens starved to death because the German occupiers wanted to punish the Dutch for insurrection and strikes following the failed assault on Arnhem. The Allies knew what was happening. Allied armies were everywhere around this occupied segment of the Netherlands; air rescue, or at least the capacity for organizing food drops, was minutes away. Still, eighty thousand men, women, and children died while the forces that could have saved them remained intent on their objective of a military engagement with the Germans that would lead to victory in the shortest possible time. Perhaps these military decisions were wrong, but they were not made because of any bias against the Dutch—or, regarding Auschwitz, because of anti-Semitism.

And what of those who managed to escape the Nazis once the war had started? President Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board in January 1944, im-



This blowup of a reconnaissance photograph, taken in September 1944, shows Auschwitz and columns of condemned prisoners. The Holocaust Museum displays similar pictures with captions that read "thousands were gassed daily in this industrial killing center, but the Allies decided to ignore it." Vanden Heuvel maintains that it was not until 1978 that the CIA developed the technology to decipher the details in these arial photographs. (National Archives)

mediately upon Henry Morgenthau's presenting the case for doing so. There were thousands of refugees stranded on the outer peripheries of Nazi Europe. With the invasion of Italy in 1943, thousands more had sought safety in camps in the south. Tito's success in Yugoslavia had enabled many to escape from Croat fascism and Serb hatred. But those were refugees who were already saved. They were not escapees from the

death camps. Under pressure from Roosevelt and Churchill, Spain kept open its frontiers, stating as its policy that "all refugees without exception would be allowed to enter and remain." Probably more than forty thousand, many of them Jewish, found safe sanctuary in Spain. Makeshift transit camps there and in Portugal, Italy, and North Africa housed them in abysmal conditions. Those who fought for these people to come to America were right to do so; then, as now, refugees are generally powerless and voiceless. Governments have to be reminded constantly of their humanitarian responsibilities. But perhaps the Allied nations can be forgiven, in the midst of a war for survival, for not doing more for refugees whose lives had already been saved. . . .

Roosevelt's intervention with the government of Hungary, which by then understood that Nazi defeat was inevitable; the actions of the War Refugee Board, such as retaining the heroic Raoul Wallenberg; the bombing of the Budapest area—all played a role in the rescue of half the Jewish community in Hungary. President Roosevelt was deeply and personally involved in this effort. Here is his statement to the nation on March 24, 1944: "In one of the blackest crimes of all history—begun by the Nazis in the day of peace and multiplied by them a hundred times in time of war—the wholesale systematic murder of the Jews of Europe goes on unabated every hour. As a result of the events of the last few days hundreds of thousands of Jews who, while living under persecution, have at least found a haven from death in Hungary and the Balkans, are now threatened with annihilation as Hitler's forces descend more heavily upon these lands. That these innocent people, who have already survived a decade of Hitler's fury, should perish on the very eve of triumph over the barbarism which their persecution symbolizes, would be a major tragedy. It is therefore fitting that we should again proclaim our determination that none who participate in these acts of savagery shall go unpunished. The United Nations have made it clear that they will pursue the guilty and de-

liver them up in order that justice be done. That warning applies not only to the leaders but also to their functionaries and subordinates in Germany and in the satellite countries. All who knowingly take part in the deportation of Jews to their death in Poland or Norwegians and French to their death in Germany are equally guilty with the executioner. All who share the guilt shall share the punishment." . . .

In December 1944 Anne O'Hare McCormick, a renowned foreign affairs reporter for *The New York Times*, wrote of a visit by a congressional delegation to the front in Italy. The congressmen expressed shock at the rigors of the campaign; they complained that this was one of the toughest battles of the war—and Americans were not being told about it. McCormick wrote: "The stories have been written and have been printed. They have even been overwritten and printed so many times that readers don't see the mud or blood anymore. They don't hear the screams of the shells or the thunder of the rockets. Congress either didn't read the accounts of the war in Italy or they couldn't take in the meaning of what they read. They had to see it. It is not their fault. It is because the thing is indescribable." How much more true is this insight regarding the death camps.

On April 12, 1945, General Eisenhower visited Ohrdruf Nord, the first concentration camp liberated by the American Army. "The things I saw beggar description," he wrote General Marshall. According to his biographer Stephen Ambrose, "Eisenhower had heard ominous rumors about the camps, of course, but never in his worst nightmares had he dreamed they could be so bad." He sent immediately for a delegation of congressional leaders and newspaper editors; he wanted to make sure Americans would never forget this. Five months later he dismissed his close friend and brilliant army commander Gen. George Patton for using former Nazi officials in his occupation structure and publicly likening "the Nazi thing" to differences between the Republicans and Democrats. (Patton had visited the Ohrdruf camp with

Eisenhower and become physically ill from what he saw.)

Eisenhower got his first glimpse into the worst horrors at the heart of the Third Reich on the day death claimed the American who had done more than any other to bring them to an end. How ironic that Franklin Roosevelt—the man Hitler hated most, the leader constantly attacked by the isolationist press and derided by the anti-Semites, vilified by Goebbels as a "mentally ill cripple" and as "that Jew Rosenfeld"—should be faulted for being indifferent to the genocide. For all of us the shadow of doubt that enough was not done will always remain, even if there was little more that could have been done. But to say that "we are all guilty" allows the truly guilty to avoid that responsibility. It was Hitler who imagined the Holocaust and the Nazis who carried it out. We were not their accomplices. We destroyed them.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Would you agree with Winston Churchill that the Holocaust "was probably the greatest and most terrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world"? After reading this selection, do you believe that the American government did all within its power to prevent it?
- 2 Why does vanden Heuvel argue that most German Jews, in spite of the anti-Semitism that they faced in their daily lives, were reluctant to abandon their homeland? When did emigration from Germany become virtually impossible?
- 3 Explain how immigration laws dictated the number of refugees who could enter the United States. Why did labor organizers, business leaders, and many members of Congress want to maintain those quotas? After *Kristallnacht*, about what percentage of immigrants who came to the United States were Jewish?