

Response to the Holocaust by President Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt



This picture shows Jewish bodies awaiting cremation at one of Hitler's death camps. In July 1942, Jewish leaders began trying to bring to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's attention reports of German atrocities against the Jews. However, all such reports and telegrams were suppressed by the State Department and did not reach the president. On September 3, 1942, the Agudath Israel World Organization in New York received the following telegram from the group's representative in Switzerland:

According to numerous authentic information from Poland, German authorities have recently evacuated Warsaw ghetto and bestially murdered about one hundred thousand Jews. The mass murders are continuing. The corpses of the murdered victims are used for the manufacturing of sap and artificial fertilizers. Similar fate is awaiting the Jews deported to Poland from other occupied territories. Suppose that only energetical steps from America may stop these persecutions. Do whatever you can to cause an American reaction to halt these persecutions.

The Agudath Israel World Organization telegraphed this message to President Roosevelt, sending a special copy to Eleanor Roosevelt. However, the Roosevelts did not respond.

In November 1942 information proving that the Nazis were seeking to systematically exterminate European Jews was made public in the United States. Still, for 14 months, President Roosevelt took no action to help stop the mass murder. In early 1944, under pressure from his wife Eleanor and the wider American public, he finally created the War Refugee Board (WRB) to save Jews and other victims of the Nazis. However, Roosevelt gave the WRB little cooperation and almost no funding. Contributions from Jewish organizations covered 90 percent of the organization's costs. Through dedicated work by a relatively small number of people, the WRB helped save approximately 200,000 Jews and at least 20,000 non-Jews.

Response to the Holocaust by the American Public



This picture shows three American women, in the late 1940s, laughing in front of a New York exhibition that shows Jews in a German concentration camp. Their reaction to the exhibition suggests that anti-Semitism extended well beyond Europe. Many citizens of the United States were also prejudiced against Jews.

In April 1939, five months after *Kristallnacht*—the night the Nazis organized mob destruction of Jewish homes of worship, businesses, and

homes—a public opinion poll asked U.S. citizens their opinion about the Germans' hostile acts against the Jews. Responses to the poll indicated that 42.3 percent of Americans believed that the German violence against Jews was due to the Jews' "unfavorable characteristics." In a poll held seven months later, Americans ranked Jews second to Italians as the group considered to be the worst citizens.

American anti-Semitism may have been one reason the general public lacked interest in the plight of Europe's Jews. In January 1943, after the Allies issued a declaration condemning Nazi atrocities against Jews, more than half of the Americans polled did not believe the Nazis were deliberately killing Jews. A public opinion poll taken in December 1944 found that a majority of Americans were aware that Hitler had been cruel to the Jews, but few fathomed the extent of the killing: 12 percent believed the stories of mass murder of Jews to be totally untrue, 27 percent believed that it involved only 100,000 people, and only 4 percent believed that over 5,000,000 Jews had been put to death.

Response to the Holocaust by the U.S. Congress



This picture shows the children of a Jewish family being forced from their home in Germany as officials prepare to ship them abroad. Before the outbreak of World War II, Nazi anti-Semitic actions prompted many Jews to leave Germany and immigrate to other countries. But from 1933 to 1941, opponents of refugee immigration in the U.S. Congress blocked most efforts to allow the fleeing Jews to immigrate to the United States. During the years following the Great Depression, the United States had instituted tough immigration laws and deportations restricting immigration from around the world. Congress had adopted a quota system that set limits for how many immigrants could come from each country and created strict rules for qualification. Despite the atrocities in Germany, Congress did not increase the quotas for

German Jews during the 1930s. In fact, in 1939 it decreased them, and there were many proposals in Congress to eliminate all immigration from Europe.

In 1938, when the Nazis intensified persecution of Jews, four separate polls indicated that 71 to 85 percent of Americans opposed increasing quotas and 67 percent wanted all refugees kept out. In early 1939, 66 percent objected to a one-time exception for 10,000 Jewish orphans to enter the United States.

Five years later, in the middle of the war, attitudes had not changed. Asked in January 1943 whether “it would be a good idea or a bad idea to let more immigrants come into this country after the war,” 78 percent of Americans polled thought it would be a bad idea. At the end of 1945, when the terrible conditions facing European displaced persons were widely known, only 5 percent of the respondents thought the United States should “permit more persons from Europe to come to this country each year than we did before the war.” Reflecting the national mood, throughout the war years Congress repeatedly considered legislation that would have further limited the number of immigrants beyond what the quota system allowed.

Response to the Holocaust by American Youth



This picture shows Nazi youth marching in a rally. German youth were indoctrinated at an early age to distrust and hate Jews. These feelings were not, however, confined to German youth. Epidemics of serious anti-Semitic actions erupted in several parts of the United States as well, especially the urban Northeast. American youth gangs were the usual perpetrators. Jews were often easy targets for racism because their dress and culture set them apart from the cultural background of their youthful attackers. This intolerance often led to violence, continuing a history of anti-Semitism that lived on with white supremacy and skinhead groups throughout the twentieth century.

American youth gangs destroyed and brutalized Jews and Jewish belongings. Jewish cemeteries were vandalized, anti-Jewish markings were scrawled on sidewalks and

Jewish stores, anti-Semitic literature was widely distributed, and synagogues were damaged and defaced with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans. Most upsetting of all, bands of teenagers frequently severely beat Jewish schoolchildren, as when 3 Jewish boys in Boston were attacked by 20 of their classmates. In another incident in a Midwestern city, young hoodlums stripped a 12-year-old Jewish boy to the waist and painted a Star of David and the word *Jude* on his chest.

The worst outbreaks of violence occurred in New York City and Boston. An investigative report by the city of New York analyzed 31 cases of anti-Semitic violence and vandalism and examined the backgrounds of the 54 offenders. The report criticized the city police for laxity and inaction in 70 percent of the cases. The investigation found the perpetrators to be typically in their middle to late teens, from poor and troubled home situations, and with records of low achievement in school. All had been influenced by anti-Semitic propaganda and indoctrination, received mostly at home, at school, and through pamphlets.

Response to the Holocaust by American Jews



This picture shows German Nazis promoting a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses in Berlin by holding a sign that identifies the shop as Jewish-owned and tells Germans not to buy. By 1939 news of boycotts and growing atrocities against German Jews had reached the United States, and American Jews were aware of the gloomy prospects for German Jews. However, few Jewish leaders foresaw that the Nazi onslaught would threaten all European Jews. Leaders of Jewish

organizations in the United States disagreed about the degree of danger presented by the Nazis and what should be done about it. As the crisis in Germany deepened, so did divisions within the American Jewish community.

Despite their concern about German Jews, most Jewish organizations were reluctant to advocate bringing refugees to the United States. While a few groups, such as the left-wing Jewish Labor Council, believed Jews should be admitted into the United States, most feared that letting in more Jewish immigrants would only add to the anti-Semitism they faced. In addition, Jewish charity groups, their funds already depleted because of the Depression, were not equipped to handle large numbers of penniless refugees.

Some Jewish groups did take action to try to stop the mass murders in Germany. Militant sections of American Jews, spurred on by the American Jewish Congress, instigated numerous protest rallies to bring the plight of German Jews into the public eye. Protest demonstrations were held in local Jewish communities, and demonstrators tried to draw in non-Jewish organizations and personalities wherever possible. Jewish activists also fought on the economic front. In response to the Nazi regime's boycott of Jewish businesses in April 1933, militants organized a boycott of German goods.

However, the American Jewish Committee and the B'nai B'rith questioned the effectiveness of both the demonstrations and the boycott. Many Jews felt that the demonstrations were little more than useless emotional displays. They also shunned the boycott, citing reports from some German Jewish leaders that the boycott did more harm than good. Some felt that it was a subtle confirmation of the Nazi thesis of an international Jewish conspiracy. Lacking the support of major Jewish organizations, the boycott fizzled.

Response to the Holocaust by the American Media



This picture shows European Jews being evacuated from a ghetto and marched to their death. Despite awareness and evidence of Hitler's extermination program, the American mass media treated the systematic murder of millions of Jews as though it were minor news. Most Americans were unaware of the atrocities until well into or after 1944.

International news services, such as the Associated Press and the United Press, delivered extensive information about the Holocaust to American newspapers. However, most newspapers printed very little about the Holocaust, even when they received reports from their own correspondents. A few, such as the Jewish-owned *Post* in New York, reported on Holocaust news and rescue matters on a regular basis. Others, including the *New York Times*, the premier American newspaper of the era, printed a substantial amount of information on Holocaust-related events, but buried it on inner pages. For example, on July 2, 1944, the *Times* published "authoritative information" that 400,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported to their deaths and 350,000 more were to be killed in the following three weeks. This news was written in four column-inches on page 12. The placement of the news reflected the *Times* Jewish owners' desire not to be seen as Jewish-oriented in a time of rampant anti-Semitism. The Jewish-owned *Washington Post* printed a few editorials advocating rescue, but only infrequently carried reports on the European Jewish situation. Outside New York and Washington, press coverage was even thinner.

American mass-circulation magazines all but ignored the Holocaust. Aside from a few paragraphs touching on the subject, silence prevailed in the major news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*. With the exception of a few articles in *Collier's* and *American Mercury*, the major American magazines permitted one of the most horrific events of the modern era to pass without comment.

Radio coverage of news about the Holocaust was sparse. Those who wrote the newscasts and commentary programs seem hardly to have noticed the slaughter of the Jews. American filmmakers also avoided the subject of the Jewish catastrophe. During the war, Hollywood released numerous feature films on refugees and Nazi activities. None dealt with the Holocaust. Despite extensive Jewish influence in the movie industry, the American Jewish Congress was unable to persuade anyone to produce even a short film on the mass killing of the Jews.

Response to the Holocaust by the U.S. Military



This picture shows an American bomber pilot carrying out a raid over Germany in 1944. In that year, the U.S. War Department rejected several appeals to bomb the gas chambers at and the railroads leading to the Auschwitz death camp in Poland, claiming that such action would divert essential airpower from important military operations elsewhere. Yet in the very months that the War Department was turning down the pleas, numerous massive American bombing raids were taking place within 50 miles of Auschwitz. In explaining its decision not to bomb the railroads leading to Auschwitz, the War Department issued this memorandum:

The War Department is of the opinion that the suggested air operation is impracticable, for the reason that it could be executed only by diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations. The War Department fully appreciates the humanitarian importance of the suggested operation. However, after due consideration of the problem, it is considered that the most effective relief to victims of enemy persecution is the early defeat of the Axis, an undertaking to which we must devote every resource at our disposal.

Instead, the War Department created a plan for bombing the industrial areas surrounding Auschwitz. On August 20, 1944, 127 Flying Fortresses, escorted by 100 Mustang fighters, dropped 1,336 five-hundred-pound high-explosive bombs on the factory areas of Auschwitz, less than five miles east of the gas chambers. Again, on September 13, a force of heavy bombers rained destruction on the factory areas of Auschwitz. As before, no attempt was made to strike the killing installations. Two stray bombs did hit nearby, one of them damaging the rail spur leading to the gas chambers. On December 18 and 26, American bombers again pounded the Auschwitz industries. If the killing installations had been destroyed at this stage of the war, it would have been practically impossible for the hard-pressed Germans to rebuild them. Available figures indicate that 100,000 Jews were gassed at Auschwitz in the weeks after the August 20 air raid on the camp's industrial sector.

Response to the Holocaust by the U.S. State Department



This picture shows Jews, who are wearing tags, being rounded up by Nazis to be sent to a concentration camp. Though they were aware of the Germans' brutal treatment of the Jews, neither the American State Department nor the British Foreign Office had any intention of rescuing large numbers of European Jews. Rather, they continually feared that Germany or other Axis nations might release tens of thousands of Jews into Allied lands. This kind of exodus would have placed intense pressure on Britain to allow Jews to immigrate to Palestine, where there was already a great

deal of conflict over land. The United States was equally reluctant to take in more Jewish refugees. Consequently, both nations' policies aimed at obstructing rescue possibilities and dampening public pressures for government action.

In the United States, callousness prevailed in the State Department. Many of its officers, mostly conservative Protestants, shared the anti-Semitism that existed in wider American society. Just a decade earlier, these same officers had advocated stronger immigration laws to keep immigrants from southern and eastern Europe out of the United States, even as they welcomed more immigrants from northern European countries such as England, Germany, and Denmark. Many had little sympathy for southern or eastern Europeans, especially Jews.

Most officials in the State Department who might have helped Europe's Jews were indifferent to the tragedy at best. Randolph Paul of the Treasury Department described some State officials as an American "underground movement...to let the Jews be killed." Secretary of State Cordell Hull issued public statements decrying Nazi persecution of Jews, but otherwise showed minimal interest in the European Jewish tragedy. He abandoned refugee and rescue matters to Assistant Secretary of State Breckenridge Long, who in turn actively worked against rescue efforts. Long and his co-workers insisted that data on the death camps had not been proven. Any rescue plans that were submitted to the department were strangled by intentional delays. Under Long, the State Department sought to silence key American Jewish leaders and tightened immigration procedures, effectively closing the United States as an asylum. On the international front, the State Department tried to weaken the United Nation's attempts to save European Jews, and brushed aside a Rumanian offer to free 70,000 Jews.