



American Response to the Holocaust

The systematic persecution of German Jewry began with Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933. Facing economic, social, and political oppression, thousands of German Jews wanted to flee the Third Reich but found few countries willing to accept them. Eventually, under Hitler's leadership, some 6 million Jews were murdered during World War II.

Contents

- American Restrictions on Immigration
- First News of the Holocaust
- American Jewish Community Responds
- War Refugee Board

American Restrictions on Immigration

America's traditional policy of open immigration had ended when Congress enacted restrictive immigration quotas in 1921 and 1924. The quota system allowed only 25,957 Germans to enter the country every year. After the stock market crash of 1929, rising unemployment caused restrictionist sentiment to grow, and President Herbert Hoover ordered vigorous enforcement of visa regulations. The new policy significantly reduced immigration; in 1932 the United States issued only 35,576 immigration visas.

State Department officials continued their restrictive measures after Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration in March 1933. Although some Americans sincerely believed that the country lacked the resources to accommodate newcomers, the nativism of many others reflected the growing problem of anti-Semitism.

Of course, American anti-Semitism never approached the intensity of Jew-hatred in Nazi Germany, but pollsters found that many Americans looked upon Jews unfavorably. A much more threatening sign was the presence of anti-Semitic leaders and movements on the fringes of American politics, including Father Charles E. Coughlin, the charismatic radio priest, and William Dudley Pelley's Silver Shirts.

Although the quota walls seemed unassailable, some Americans took steps to alleviate the suffering of German Jews. American Jewish leaders organized a boycott of German goods, hoping that economic pressure might force Hitler to end his anti-Semitic policies, and prominent American Jews, including Louis D. Brandeis, interceded with the Roosevelt administration on the refugees' behalf. In response, the Roosevelt administration agreed to ease visa regulations, and in 1939, following the Nazi annexation of

Austria, State Department officials issued all the visas available under the combined German-Austrian quota.

Responding to the increasingly difficult situation of German Jewry, Roosevelt organized the international Evian Conference on the refugee crisis in 1938. Although thirty-two nations attended, very little was accomplished because no country was willing to accept a large number of Jewish refugees. The conference did establish an Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, but it failed to devise any practical solutions.

First News of the Holocaust

The extermination of European Jewry began when the German army invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. The Nazis attempted to keep the Holocaust a secret, but in August 1942, Dr. Gerhart Riegner, the representative of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, Switzerland, learned what was going on from a German source. Riegner asked American diplomats in Switzerland to inform Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, one of America's most prominent Jewish leaders, of the mass murder plan. But the State Department, characteristically insensitive and influenced by anti-Semitism, decided not to inform Wise.

The rabbi nevertheless learned of Riegner's terrible message from Jewish leaders in Great Britain. He immediately approached Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles, who asked Wise to keep the information confidential until the government had time to verify it. Wise agreed and it was not until November 1942 that Welles authorized the release of Riegner's message.

Wise held a press conference on the evening of November 24, 1942. The next day's *New York Times* reported his news on its tenth page. Throughout the rest of the war, the *Times* and most other newspapers failed to give prominent and extensive coverage to the Holocaust. During World War I, the American press had published reports of German atrocities that subsequently turned out to be false. As a result, journalists during World War II tended to approach atrocity reports with caution.

American Jewish Community Responds

Although most Americans, preoccupied with the war itself, remained unaware of the terrible plight of European Jewry, the American Jewish community responded with alarm to Wise's news. American and British Jewish organizations pressured their governments to take action. As a result, Great Britain and the United States announced that they would hold an emergency conference in Bermuda to develop a plan to rescue the victims of Nazi atrocities.

Ironically, the Bermuda Conference opened in April 1943, the same month the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto were staging their revolt. The American and British delegates at Bermuda proved to be far less heroic than the Jews of Warsaw. Rather than discussing strategies, they worried about what to do with any Jews they successfully rescued. Britain refused to consider admitting more Jews into Palestine, which it administered at the time, and the United States was equally determined not to alter its immigration quotas. The conference produced no practical plan to aid European Jewry, although the press was informed that "significant progress" had been made.

Following the futile Bermuda Conference, American Jewish leaders became increasingly involved in a debate over Zionism. But the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, led by Peter

Bergson and a small group of emissaries from the Irgun, a right-wing Palestinian Jewish resistance group, turned to pageants, rallies, and newspaper advertisements to force Roosevelt to create a government agency to devise ways to rescue European Jewry. The Emergency Committee and its supporters in Congress helped publicize the Holocaust and the need for the United States to react.

War Refugee Board

President Roosevelt also found himself under pressure from another source. Treasury Department officials, working on projects to provide aid to European Jews, discovered that their colleagues in the State Department were actually undermining rescue efforts. They brought their concerns to Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., who was Jewish and a long-time supporter of Roosevelt. Under Morgenthau's direction, Treasury officials prepared a "Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of the Jews." Morgenthau presented the report to Roosevelt and requested that he establish a rescue agency. Finally, on January 22, 1944, the president issued Executive Order 9417, creating the War Refugee Board (*WRB*). John Pehle of the Treasury Department served as the board's first executive director.

The establishment of the board did not resolve all the problems blocking American rescue efforts. For example, the War Department repeatedly refused to bomb Nazi concentration camps or the railroads leading to them. But the *WRB* did successfully develop a number of rescue projects. Estimates indicate that the *WRB* may have saved as many as 200,000 Jews. One *WRB* operative, Raoul Wallenberg, technically a Swedish diplomat in Budapest, provided at least 20,000 Jews with Swedish passports and protection. One can only speculate how many more might have been saved had the *WRB* been established in August 1942, when Gerhart Riegner's message reached the United States.

The American public discovered the full extent of the Holocaust only when the Allied armies liberated the extermination and concentration camps at the end of World War II. And as historians struggled to understand what had happened, attention increasingly focused on the inadequate American response and what lay behind it. It remains today the subject of great debate.

Aaron Berman, *Nazism, the Jews and American Zionism, 1933-1948* (1990); David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* (1968) and *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (1984).

How to Cite this Page:

American Response to the Holocaust

APA Style

American Response to the Holocaust. (2013). *The History Channel website*. Retrieved 6:12, March 5, 2013, from <http://www.history.com/topics/american-response-to-the-holocaust>.

Harvard Style

