15. The Holocaust: The Nazi Slaughter of European Jews

During the course of World War II, as the Allies fought the Axis powers on multiple continents, Adolf Hitler not only waged war by land, air, and sea, but also conducted a genocide of unprecedented calculation and scope. What began as an effort to expel Jews from Nazi territory evolved, around 1941, into a plan to imprison and eliminate them. Before putting a bullet in his own head on April 30, 1945, Hitler brought about the murder of some six million Jews, destroying Jewish communities that had existed in cities and hamlets across Europe for centuries.

In the face of such facts, to make the pledge "never again" is inevitably to ask the questions: What did America and its president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, do to stop the genocide? Could they have done more?

While taken up first with the crisis of the Great Depression and then with the demands of global war, FDR did respond to the plight of Jews under Hitler's power. He worked within the rigid U.S. immigration quotas established by Congress to admit more Germans and Austrians in the late 1930s, so America received significantly more Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany than any other country. He urged nations in Latin America and elsewhere to accept refugees, and he called an international conference attempting to promote an organized response to the refugee crisis. FDR repeatedly spoke out about the Nazis' wrongs, publicly promised retribution for them, and eventually established an American agency to work on the ground in Europe rescuing Jewish lives.

There can be little doubt that FDR was sympathetic to the victims of Nazism in general, and contemporaries saw him as friendly to Jewish concerns in particular. American Jews supported him overwhelmingly in all four of his elections and were well represented among his top advisors and friends. (Indeed, anti-Semites in America and even Hitler himself claimed that Jews exerted a nefarious influence on the president.)

Yet FDR did not choose to make Jewish refugees the subject of a confrontation with a U.S. Congress and public that, especially during the Depression years of high unemployment and poverty, supported very restrictive immigration laws that made no exceptions for refugees. Even after Kristallnacht, the violent riot against Jewish people that swept Nazi Germany in late 1938, a robust majority of Americans, while condemning the Nazi mobs, did not want to relax immigration quotas to admit more German Jews to America. In speaking against a 1939 bill...
to waive the quotas to admit twenty thousand refugee children, the leader of a coalition of “patriotic” organizations insisted America shouldn’t “play Santa Claus while our own people are starving.” In 1940 and 1941, as the Nazi conquest spread across much of Europe and America edged toward war, FDR’s State Department made it even harder for Jewish refugees to get U.S. visas, citing the fear that the refugees might include Nazi-sympathizing subversives and spies.

Other elements in FDR’s government, along with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, opposed the State Department’s obstructionist stance, especially after December 1942, when the Allies confirmed reports that the Nazis were carrying out a plan “to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe.” It was Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr., a longtime close associate of FDR and the highest-ranking Jewish member of his administration, who finally mounted a successful challenge to the policy in late 1943. In response, FDR established the War Refugee Board, whose explicit mission was to rescue civilians at imminent risk of being murdered by the Nazis.

“"We shall win this war”"
The January 1944 executive order creating the board pledged the U.S. government to doing all it could to rescue victims “consistent with the successful prosecution of the war.” Though the rescue agency would save many thousands of people (its directors regretted that it had not been created sooner), FDR’s main answer to the humanitarian disaster created by the Nazis was to engage and defeat them militarily.

In the months and years before the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor brought America into the fight against the Axis in December 1941, FDR waged a consuming campaign to ready the nation for that war—by building up its paltry military, overcoming American neutrality laws to supply allies for combat, and coaxing Americans to see Hitler as a threat to freedom everywhere. As late as the 1940 presidential election campaign, well over half of Americans, disillusioned by the bitter aftermath of World War I, said staying out of the war in Europe should be America’s first objective, and FDR was insisting he would try to satisfy them.

In July 1943, when America had been officially at war for a year and a half, a scout for the Polish government-in-exile named Jan Karski visited secretly with FDR, describing to the president the despoiled state of Nazi-occupied Poland, including the savagery he had seen unleashed against Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto and at a concentration camp in the Lublin area. Before he left, Karski recalled, the president had this to offer: “We shall win this war!” FDR believed that liberating the European continent—a massive project that would begin on D-day, June 6, 1944—was the best and perhaps the only way to save the lives of civilians suffering and dying behind enemy lines.

A bitter end
As the long-awaited Allied victory drew near, it became clear the Germans’ commitment to their genocidal “solution” would die out only with the last gasp of the Nazi regime itself. In the winter of 1944–45 and into the spring of 1945, the Nazis faced inevitable defeat as the Soviets and Western Allies closed in, pincerlike, on the heart of Germany. Yet the Nazis devoted their energies to moving imprisoned Jews en masse in torturous “death marches” rather than see them freed by the Allies.

The fact that the Nazis were systematically murdering Jews in vast numbers had been widely reported in America after 1942. Yet many Americans had suspected these reports contained a measure of hyperbole, rumor, or propaganda (as was the case in some reports of German atrocities during World War I). The true scope of this industrialized genocide did not sink in until Allied soldiers entered the concentration camps in 1944 and 1945. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of the Western Allies in their advance across Europe, wrote that his first visit to a “horror camp” on April 12, 1945, inspired a determination to “visit every nook and cranny” and record the details so that future generations would not be tempted to write off reports of the Nazi killing machine as propaganda. “Up to that time I had known about it only generally or through secondary sources,” he wrote. “I am certain, however that I have never at any other time experienced an equal sense of shock.”

From left to right: Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr., First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1935. The top-ranking Jewish member of FDR’s administration, Morgenthau would be instrumental in pushing the president to form a United States rescue agency for Hitler’s intended victims—the War Refugee Board—in January 1944. He would run the board in concert with Hull and Secretary of War Henry Stimson. LOC

Franklin D. Roosevelt with Sam Rosenman, sitting, 1930. Born in Texas to Russian-Jewish immigrants, Rosenman worked with the president as counselor, speech writer, and adviser from the time FDR was elected governor of New York in 1928 until his death in 1945. When FDR died, Rosenman was in England to persuade Winston Churchill that the American plan for transparent, fair trials of top Nazis—not summary executions—was the best way to establish for posterity the Nazis’ profound criminality. National Archives

IV. Statesman & Commander in Chief: FDR in World War II

15. The Holocaust: The Nazi Slaughter of European Jews
Refugees

In the years between Adolf Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 and when the Nazis barred Jewish emigration from the expanded German state in late 1941, more than two-thirds of German Jews fled the country, many, thanks to the regime’s seizure of Jewish assets and emigration tax, relinquishing their worldly belongings in the process. The Nazis had rendered them stateless, penniless refugees—a dreadfully vulnerable condition in any time, but especially in the 1930s, when economic depression and rising international tensions left potential “host” states disinclined to receive needy newcomers.

The first surge of Jewish emigration from Hitler’s Germany followed his seizure of absolute power and suppression of political rivals in 1933. Many of these initial emigrants went to neighboring countries, only to die by Nazi hands after those lands were swallowed up in Hitler’s advance. During the mid-1930s, Germany trampled the basic rights of Jews, but there remained room for doubt as to whether they could survive there. Though emigration was steady, many Jewish families elected to stay and defend their homes, their livelihoods, and the German citizenship to which they were entitled.

The mood changed in March 1938, when the Nazis annexed Austria (an event they called the Anschluss, or “union”), and, with the help of enthusiastic Austrians, imposed anti-Jewish policies swiftly and ruthlessly, visiting upon the Jews a wave of plundering, beatings, and arrests. Jews within Nazi territory now began to flood foreign consulates, increasingly desperate for a way out. In November 1938, Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass), a brutal anti-Jewish riot across Greater Germany led by Nazi storm troopers, drove home the point: the Jews were in terrible danger.

It was in 1938 and 1939 that the outflow of Jews fleeing Nazi Germany and Austria became a refugee crisis, and potential host countries—including the United States—were pressed to back up their expressions of sympathy by opening their doors.

The United States had particularly stringent immigration regulations. Based on a 1924 law, immigration was restricted to a total of just under 154,000 a year, with quotas for each country proportional to the number of people of that national origin already living in the United States (according to the 1890 U.S. census or, after 1927, the
1920 census). Under this system, which was implicitly discriminatory, immigration barriers were highest not for Germans but for eastern and southern Europeans; Asians were excluded completely as "unassimilable." But during the Depression, quotas weren’t the only restraint on immigration. In fact, German immigration did not approach the quota for that country—25,957—until 1938, largely because the U.S. State Department rigidly interpreted a 1930 regulation refusing visas to anyone who lacked a ready means of support and might become a "public charge."

Franklin D. Roosevelt takes action

In the wake of the Anschluss, Franklin D. Roosevelt moved to combine the German and smaller Austrian quotas to allow more fleeing Jews to come to America. That change—along with the administration’s signal to U.S. consulates to relax requirements that visa applicants prove they have ample assets or a committed American sponsor—resulted in the admission of many more Jewish refugees, filling the combined German-Austrian quota in 1939 and nearly filling it in 1940. Yet the demand far exceeded the quota; the waiting list for visas under the German quota had mounted to over three hundred thousand.

While making adjustments in U.S. policy, FDR also tried to stimulate a concerted international response to the refugee crisis by calling a conference of nations at Évian, France, to address the problem. The conference, announced in March 1938 just after the Anschluss, represented a statement of concern for the Jewish refugees, a rebuke to the Nazis, and a new kind of engagement by the United States in international affairs. In fact, no other leader stepped up in this way.

But in calling the conference, FDR’s White House made clear that it did not expect nations to admit more refugees than their countries’ regulations already allowed; the United States had rejiggered its own quotas but would not increase them (a proposal that would have met staunch resistance in Congress). Nations were leery of instituting generous policies toward refugees, fearing the flood would only increase as Poland, Romania, and Hungary turned on their Jewish populations. Some diplomats expressed concern that large numbers of Jewish refugees would provoke anti-Semitic unrest at home. In the end, only the Dominican Republic agreed to welcome a substantially increased number of Jewish refugees.

Between 1933 and 1940, while there remained the possibility of flight from Hitler’s Germany and before America’s wartime stance reduced immigration even further, America admitted some 127,000 refugees from Nazi Germany—significantly more than were welcomed by any other country.

After 1940, wartime conditions and Hitler’s 1941 ban on emigration from the expanded Reich made it much more difficult for Jews to reach escape routes through neutral countries such as Portugal or Turkey. Meanwhile the U.S. State Department, under the leadership of Breckinridge Long, appointed in 1940 as assistant secretary in charge of visas, threw up new barriers to would-be immigrants. In 1940 the department began a policy to reject visa applicants who had relatives still in German-occupied territory, with the rationale that the Nazis might be able to use family members to coerce the emigrants into collaborating. In June 1941 Congress passed and FDR signed a bill authorizing consulates to deny visas to anyone they suspected might "endanger public safety." Given all these circumstances, the refugee flow to America slowed to a trickle.
Many people of goodwill wanted to help the more than 900 German Jewish refugees aboard the ocean liner St. Louis as it plied the waters of the Western Hemisphere looking for safe harbor. That the ship was forced back to Europe, where more than a quarter of its passengers ultimately died by Nazi hands, stands as one of period’s signal cautionary tales.

The passenger ship sailed from Hamburg for Havana, Cuba, in May 1939. When it arrived, the Cuban government barred most of the passengers from coming ashore, as they had been sold tourist passes by a corrupt Cuban official profiting from the scheme. The government, partly inspired by rising anti-immigrant sentiment, had invalidated these passes and was now demanding each passenger pay the $500 bond required of refugees.

Desperate negotiations ensued. The U.S. ambassador to Cuba made inquiries. Members of a major Jewish aid group, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), traveled to Havana to intercede. They negotiated over a payment for the refugees with Cuban president Frederico Laredo Bru, even as Bru ordered the St. Louis to depart Cuban waters. The Cubans insisted on the full $500 for each refugee, or about a half a million dollars. JDC representatives hoped to negotiate a lower amount, but Bru abruptly cut off talks. The St. Louis steamed north near the coast of Florida.

FDR declined to intervene to bring the refugees ashore, which would have meant circumventing the long waiting list for visas under the American quota system; most of the passengers were on that list and had planned to wait in Cuba for their numbers to come up. In November of the previous year, FDR had taken steps to allow some twelve thousand to fifteen thousand German Jews visiting the United States to extend their visits by six months (and perhaps longer). He explained in a press conference that forcing the visitors to return to Nazi Germany, which had invalidated their passports, would plunge them into danger—"It is a question of concentration camps, etc.,” he said—and would be "cruel and inhuman.” But when reporters pressed FDR about whether this policy change signaled an intention to lower immigration barriers generally, he assured them it did not.

Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr., anguish over the situation of the St. Louis, asked Secretary of State Cordell Hull if perhaps the passengers could be issued tourist visas for the Virgin Islands but was told the law precluded it. He asked the U.S. Coast Guard to locate and keep an eye on the ship. He kept in touch with the JDC in New York. "Are they doing everything from New York, you think, that they should?” he asked Hull in a telephone conversation. "There’s nothing that I could do, or that they should do?” "Nothing I see right now,” was Hull’s response.

The ship was forced to return to Europe, landing in Belgium in June. The JDC, offering financial guarantees, managed to negotiate admittance for some passengers there, for others in Britain, France, and Holland. This was occasion for relief in 1938. World War II had not yet begun, and no one envisioned the horrors of the Holocaust. But very soon all the receiving countries except Britain would fall to the Nazis, and the harrowing journey of many St. Louis passengers would end in concentration camps.
On the Record: Statements about Nazi Crimes against Jews

During the war, Allied governments and the media often described the Nazis’ Jewish victims in terms of their national identities—as Germans, Poles, or Hungarians, for example—without differentiating them from the millions of non-Jewish Poles, Soviets, Gypsies (or Romani), political dissidents, mentally disabled people, and homosexuals also murdered by the Nazis.

This may have been partly an effort to maintain unity in the war effort in the face of widespread anti-Semitic attitudes in America and elsewhere. The Allied leaders certainly wanted to frame the war in a completely different way than the arch-anti-Semite Adolf Hitler, who depicted it as a racial battle pitting Germans against Jews of all nations.

But the bare facts of the Nazi obsession to terrorize, dispossess, and ultimately destroy Jews in particular—what the top prosecutor at the postwar Nuremberg trials would call “the most far-flung and terrible racial persecution of all time”—were reported in America. On a few occasions, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Allies addressed the public about this program in unmistakable terms.

Condemning an anti-Jewish riot

After Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass), a wave of mob violence against Jews instigated by Nazi storm troopers in November 1938, Franklin D. Roosevelt recalled his ambassador from Berlin and expressed outrage in a press statement. “The news of the past few days from Germany,” he said, “has deeply shocked public opinion in the United States... I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a twentieth century civilization.”

Announcing an extermination campaign in progress

In August 1942, Rabbi Stephen Wise, head of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) he had helped found in 1936, received a cable written by a representative of the WJC in Geneva. The Nazis, it said, had a plan to exterminate all Jews in German-occupied lands “at one fell swoop.” Wise, America’s most influential Jewish leader and a close friend of FDR’s, brought the news to the State Department, where officials asked him not to release it until they confirmed its accuracy. By November, the government had vetted the information, and Wise, who had led a boycott of German goods in 1933 and for years tried to sound the alarm about the Nazi persecution of Jews, held a press conference. He and other Jewish leaders urged FDR and the Allies to issue a statement warning the Nazis that they would be held accountable for their crimes. On December 17, 1942, the United States, Britain, and nine other nations arrayed against the Axis powers gave a statement describing all the basic components of what future generations would know as the Holocaust.

The German authorities, not content with denying to persons of Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler’s often repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe. From all the occupied countries Jews are being transported, in conditions of appalling horror and brutality, to Eastern Europe. In Poland, which has been made the principal Nazi slaughterhouse, the ghettos established by the Nazi invaders are being systematically emptied of all Jews except a few highly-skilled workers required for war industries. None of those taken away are ever heard of again. The able-bodied are
slowly worked to death in labour camps. The infirm are left to die of exposure and starvation or are deliberately massacred in mass executions.

The number of victims of these bloody cruelties is reckoned in many hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent men, women and children.

The governments of the United Nations (UN) condemned "this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination," declaring that it only strengthened their resolve to "ensure that those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution, and to press on with the necessary practical measures to this end."

Pressing on with "practical measures" meant waging war. The Soviets were at the time fiercely battling the Nazis for control of Stalingrad, while the Western Allies fought them in North Africa, America's first major offensive in the European war. The New York Times covered the UN statement about the slaughter of European Jews the next day on its front page—"11 Allies Condemn Nazi War on Jews"—but below bigger headlines on gas rationing in the United States and very detailed coverage of Allied bombing raids against Tunis and Bizerte, among other war news. On the murder of Jews, the newspaper editorialized, "The most tragic aspect of the situation is the world’s helplessness to stop the horror while the war is going on. The most it can do is to denounce the perpetrators and promise them individual and separate retribution."

One of the blackest crimes in all history—begun by the Nazis in the days of peace, and multiplied by them a hundred fold in time of war—the wholesale systematic murder of the Jews of Europe—goes on unabated every hour.

Hitler is committing these crimes against humanity in the name of the German people. I ask every German and every man everywhere to show the world by his actions that in his heart he does not share these insane criminal designs. Let him hide these pursued victims, help them to get over the borders, and do what he can to save them from the Nazi hangman. I ask him also to keep watch, and to record the evidence that will one day be used to convict the guilty.

In so far as the necessities of military operations permit, this Government will use all means at its command to aid the escape of all intended victims of the Nazi and Japanese executioner—regardless of race or religion or color. We call upon the free peoples of Europe and Asia temporarily to open their frontiers to all victims of oppression. We shall find havens of refuge for them, and we shall find the means for their maintenance and support until the tyrant is driven from their homelands and they may return.
The War Refugee Board

Over the course of 1942, sporadic reports of Nazi mass killings of Jews coalesced into evidence of an organized genocidal campaign. By the end of the year, the Allied nations had officially confirmed that the Germans were carrying out a program of extermination. During 1943 calls for America to launch a concerted rescue effort—not just fight the war—grew louder and more insistent.

Early in the year, a radical group led by Zionist Jews from Palestine working in the United States, the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews, launched a publicity campaign whose centerpiece was large advertisements in newspapers like the New York Times. Their taglines aimed straight for the American conscience: “ACTION—NOT PITY—CAN SAVE MILLIONS NOW!” “THIS IS STRICTLY A RACE AGAINST DEATH! Is There Something You Could Have Done to Save Millions of Innocent People—Men, Women, and Children—from Torture and Death?” “HOW WELL ARE YOU SLEEPING?”

In March the more mainstream American Jewish Congress, led by Rabbi Stephen Wise, held a “Stop Hitler Now!” rally at New York’s Madison Square Garden that attracted a throng of some seventy thousand people.

In the spring of 1943, members of Congress agitated for action as well, with many attending a pageant, “We Will Never Die,” that dramatized the destruction of Jews across Europe. Written and organized by famed screenwriter Ben Hecht (Scarface, Gone with the Wind, Spellbound) with support from the Committee for a Jewish Army, the pageant was shown first in Madison Square Garden and later in Washington, DC. Eleanor Roosevelt also attended, and she wrote about the unforgettable presentation in her My Day column. In the fall, a resolution to create a rescue agency began winding its way through Congress. As the Senate Foreign Relations Committee concluded in a report on the resolution, “We have talked; we have sympathized; we have expressed our horror; the time to act is long past due.”

But the most direct instigation for what would be known as the War Refugee Board came through Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Department of the Treasury under Henry Morgenthau Jr. In late 1943, a young assistant general counsel in the department, Josiah DuBois, penned a blistering report accusing the State Department of using its discretion to deny visas to fleeing Jews and to thwart private attempts to rescue them. The report assailed Breckenridge Long, the assistant secretary in charge of visas at the State Department, for clamping down on Jewish visas during wartime under the spurious pretext that the refugees might be Nazi spies. It accused the State Department of willfully delaying for months a plan to allow private funds in the United States to be sent abroad to aid and transport desperately imperiled Romanian Jews—even though the Treasury had quickly issued a license for the money transfer and FDR had approved it. The memorandum’s title: “Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of this Government in the Murder of the Jews.”

In January 1944, Morgenthau presented a synopsis of the report to FDR. A few days later, by executive order, the president established the War Refugee Board to “effectuate with all possible speed” the rescue and relief of “victims of enemy oppression who are in imminent danger of death.” The State, Treasury, and War Departments would run the board jointly.

The board’s work

The War Refugee Board cut through red tape, clearing the way, at last, for those ready and able to take nimble action to rescue Jewish people from Adolf Hitler’s grasp, sometimes just a few at a time. The work was funded by private groups such as the Joint Jewish Distribution Committee, coordinated by Treasury officials, and carried out by local operatives and War Refugee Board special representatives in Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Portugal, Italy, Great Britain, and North Africa.

The board urged neutral countries to open their borders and provide temporary safe havens and escape routes from Nazi-occupied territory to Palestine, Central and South America, or North Africa. It encouraged governments to issue and accept false documents when it meant thwarting Nazi killers. Through the International Red Cross, it helped provide food to prisoners in concentration camps.

The board dispatched the Bloomingdale’s executive Ira Hirschmann to neutral Turkey in February 1944. From there, Hirschmann offered a Romanian diplomat U.S. visas for his family if he would arrange for the release of prisoners from Romania’s Transnistria concentration camps. Afraid of the fate he would meet under the advancing Russians, the diplomat agreed. Hirschmann also managed to spirit some 6,500 Jews out of Romania by ship to Turkey and then via rail to Palestine. To do so, he had to not only overcome logistic difficulties, but also negotiate with the Romanians, the Turkish, and the British (who administered Palestine) to permit the refugees to make their journey.
The War Refugee Board’s representative in Sweden sent Raoul Wallenberg, co-owner of an import-export company, to Hungary in July 1944. The Nazis had invaded the country in March and deported most Jews from the countryside to Auschwitz. A large Jewish community in Budapest—indeed the last intact, major Jewish community in Europe—stood at risk of imminent deportation.

Wallenberg adopted bold, often extralegal tactics to pluck Hungarian Jews from harm’s way. He invented and designed a flashy document complete with Sweden’s national coat of arms that would give the holder Swedish protection, and he issued this “Schutz-Pass” indiscriminately, essentially daring the Nazis and their local collaborators to risk confrontation with the neutral Swedes. After pro-Nazi Hungarians took over the country in October and the Nazis began moving Jews in death marches toward the Austrian border, Wallenberg followed them by truck, pulling a few from the marches with the insistence that they were protected by the Swedish government, and distributing food and blankets to others. At the end of the year, hearing of a Nazi plan to destroy Jews remaining in Budapest’s central ghetto, Wallenberg told the German commander he could expect to be tried and hanged for war crimes. The attack did not go forward.

The War Refugee Board also set up a small center in Oswego, New York, the Fort Ontario Emergency Refugee Shelter, where some thousand Jewish refugees were transferred from an Italian refugee camp.

Though John Pehle, the board’s director, would deem its efforts “little and late,” the War Refugee Board is credited with saving as many as two hundred thousand lives.

Proposal to bomb Auschwitz
In the latter half of 1944, the War Refugee Board also passed along to the War Department requests by Jewish organizations to bomb Auschwitz or the rail lines leading to it. Whether the Allies should have attacked the notorious death camp has been the subject of intense controversy for decades.

The question first arose after two Slovakian Jews, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, escaped from Auschwitz in April 1944 and produced details of its layout and operations—including the mass killing going on there as the Nazis deported Jews from Hungary. Pehle, like some Jewish leaders, remained unconvinced that it was a good idea to bomb the camp—which might kill Jewish prisoners—until November, after he had read the full eyewitness report on the camps. He wrote Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy urging him to review the report and consider bombing the camp’s “elaborate murder installations.”

But McCloy informed him that bombing the camp would divert military resources from the Allies’ critical attack on German industrial targets and would be of dubious effectiveness anyway. “The positive solution to this problem is the earliest possible victory over Germany,” McCloy wrote, “to which we should exert our entire means.”

By November Auschwitz was shutting down; the Nazis were moving prisoners from the camp ahead of the Soviet advance and dismantling some of its equipment. On November 26, the War Refugee Board released the detailed report of the Auschwitz escapees, along with the report of another survivor. “The War Refugee Board,” said an accompanying press release, “is engaged in a desperate effort to save as many as possible of Hitler’s intended victims.”
AN ESSAY BY WILLIAM J. VANDEN HEUVEL

America and the Holocaust

Adapted from a speech delivered at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, on October 24, 1996, and an essay originally published in American Heritage, 1999.

It was Winston Churchill’s judgment, which I share, that the Holocaust “was probably the greatest and most terrible crime ever committed in the whole history of the world.” The Holocaust was part of a colossal military struggle known as World War II in which sixty-seven million people were killed, where nations were decimated, where democracy’s survival was in the balance. In his lunatic zeal to exterminate the Jews of Europe, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi followers murdered six million innocent 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 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 so that we can truly say in one voice, “never again.”

We remember also that nine million non-Jewish civilians were brutally murdered by the Nazis. They were Germans, Poles, Czechs, Serbs, Croats, Ukrainians, Russians, Gypsies. They were political dissidents, labor leaders, Catholic and Protestant clergy, journalists, doctors, lawyers, intellectuals, the mentally and physically disabled, and homosexuals. Most of these victims were killed because of who they were, not for what they did. The Slavs, like the Jews, were a particular target of Hitler’s hatred. He described them as Untermensch (subhuman). When the Nazis conquered their countries, the Slavs were terrorized and tortured, their property and land expropriated. Eyewitness accounts abound of examples of unspeakable brutality, such as women and children being herded into locked barns, which were then set afire. Many shared the fate of the Jews in the extermination camps. Most were hanged, shot, starved, or worked to death. Nine million human beings. In addition, the Nazis murdered over three million Soviet prisoners of war, approximately 57 percent of those in Nazi custody. Of the U.S. and British POWs, less than 4 percent lost their lives.

It was only in the 1960s that the name “holocaust” came into general use to describe the Nazi genocide of Europe’s Jews. Since then, much has been written regarding America’s role during those years of persecution and destruction. Accusing the United States not only of abandoning the Jews but of complicity in the Holocaust, historian David Wyman has written: “The Nazis were the murderers but we”—and here he includes the American government, its president and its people, Christians and Jews indiscriminately—“were the all too passive accomplices.” This terrible indictment deserves a response. Another area of scholarship has questioned whether knowledge about murder of the Jews was deliberately suppressed by Allied governments. In an outstanding contribution to this debate, scholar Richard Breitman argues that if Britain had released the decrypts about the Nazi massacres in the Soviet Union in 1941, it might have alerted Jews earlier to what was happening or about to happen, hopefully enabling more to escape. This is an important argument that deserves continuing concern. Some are critical of American Jews during that period for being “passive observers,” for not wanting to know what was happening in the genocide of Europe’s Jews, for being so absorbed in their effort to be accepted or assimilated in American society that they chose silence rather than public outrage at the Nazi crimes.

The corollary question to this line of argument is: Why did American Jews give their overwhelming support to Franklin D. Roosevelt when, as his critics allege, he was indifferent to the fate of Europe’s Jews despite his knowledge of what was happening to them? 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 admission? Perhaps the most frequent question in this decade asks why the Allies did not bomb Auschwitz and the railroad tracks leading to Auschwitz. Laced through the debate is the generally unspoken allegation that America’s leaders and Americans generally were uncaring anti-Semites. After all, if the bombing of Auschwitz was not ordered, then those who did not order the bombing must be—what? Traitors? Anti-Semitic supporters of Hitler’s efforts to kill the Jews? Military and civilian leaders without conscience or moral concerns?

As Pieter Geyl, the great Dutch historian, once wrote: “History is indeed an argument without end.” My effort is not a definitive answer to those criticisms and questions, but it does offer a point of view that tries to frame the discussion in the context of the realities of World War II, putting events, values, and attitudes in their time and place.

Before the Holocaust, 1933–41
Five weeks after Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, FDR became president of the United States. His loathing of 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, 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.” FDR had no such hopes. He never wavered in his belief that the malignancy of Hitler and his followers had to be destroyed. 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 FDR he had met someone who truly understood the evil of Hitler.

To understand 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 Jews of Germany numbered about 252,000 in 1933. They were the yeast of Germany’s great culture—leaders in literature, music, medicine, science, in its 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. “We are either Germans, or without a country,” said a leading Jewish writer. They witnessed Hitler’s coming to power with disbelief and saw Nazi dominance as a temporary phenomenon. 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 to Germany when the Hitler madness subsided. In the early years, many—if not most—believed Hitler and his regime could not survive.

In his autobiography, 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 advisor of President Roosevelt — tells how, in October 1932, he received a report from a scholar whom he had sent to Germany and who had interviewed thirty leading Jews, all of whom, with one exception, had declared that “Hitler would never come to power.” They sent a message to tell Wise “that he need not concern himself with Jewish affairs in Germany. If he insists upon dealing with Jewish affairs in Europe, let him occupy himself with Jewish problems in Poland and Romania.” When Wise organized a New York rally in March 1933 to protest Nazi treatment of Jews, he received a message from leading German rabbis urging him to cut out such meetings and in a most insulting way indicating that American Jews were doing this for their own purposes and in the process were destroying the Germany that the German Jews loved. Wise never wavered in his belief that the only option for the Jews was to leave Germany.

As the Nazi persecution intensified, as the Nuremberg Laws degraded the Jews as nothing before, as Hitler strove to cause their emigration and confiscated Jewish property and wealth, the prospect of escape and exile had to shadow every Jewish family. In 1934, thirty-seven thousand Jews fled Germany—but in the relative calm of the next year, sixteen thousand returned. The good and brave chief rabbi of Berlin, Leo Baeck, opposed mass emigration, setting a personal example of not abandoning his community, surviving even the horror of a wartime concentration camp. 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 attitude of not wanting to leave Germany until absolutely necessary. It is crucial to our understanding of these years to remember that at the time, no one inside or outside of Germany anticipated that the Nazi persecution would lead to the Holocaust. As military historian Gerhard Weinberg has cogently written, the actions of the German government were generally understood, by both the victims and the bystanders, as a return to the kinds of persecutions and restrictions imposed on Jews in prior centuries, not as steps on the road toward genocide.

The annexation of Austria, the appeasement of the Nazis represented by the Munich pact, and especially 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 an orgy 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.

The America that elected FDR its president in 1932 was a deeply troubled country. Twenty-five percent of its workforce was unemployed—and this at a time when practically every member of that workforce was the principal support of a family. The economy was paralyzed; despair hung heavy on the land. Disillusion with Europe after the sacrifices of the First World War encouraged profound isolationist sentiments.

The immigration laws of the United States had been established by legislation in 1921 and 1924 under Presidents Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge and by a Congress that had rejected the League of Nations and defined the new isolationism. The Congress controlled the immigration laws and carefully monitored their implementation. A formula assigned a specific quota to countries based on population origins of Americans resident in the United States in 1890. The law was aimed at eastern Europeans, particularly people from Russia and Poland, which were seen as seedbeds of Bolshevism. Italians were a target and Asians were practically excluded. The total number of immigrants who could be admitted annually was set at 153,774. The two countries with the highest quotas were Great Britain (65,721) and Germany (25,957). As the Depression took hold, President Herbert Hoover tightened regulations by mandating that no immigrant could be admitted who might
become a public charge. The Depression also encouraged an unusual coalition of liberal and conservative forces, labor unions and business leaders, who opposed any enlargement of the immigration quotas, an attitude that Congress adamantly supported. The overwhelming majority of Americans agreed with Congress, opposing the increased admission of immigrants, insisting that refugees be included in the quotas of countries from which they were fleeing. Jewish refugees from Germany, because of the relatively large German quota, had an easier time than anticommunist refugees from the Soviet Union, not to mention the Chinese who were victims of Japan’s aggression, or the Armenians, or the Spanish fleeing a civil war in which five hundred thousand were killed between 1936 and 1939. Spain’s annual quota, for example, was 252.

**FDR and the refugees**

The president and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt were leaders in the effort to help those fleeing Nazi persecution. In 1933 ER was a founder of the International Rescue Committee, which brought intellectuals, labor leaders, and political figures escaping Hitler to sanctuaries 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, FDR greatly modified Hoover’s ruling regarding financial sponsorship for refugees, thereby allowing a substantially greater number of visas to be issued. As a result, the United States accepted twice as many Jewish refugees than did the rest of the world put together. As Professor Weinberg has stated, FDR acted in the face of strong and politically damaging criticism for what was generally considered a pro-Jewish attitude by him personally and by his administration.

Hitler’s policy never wavered in trying to force the Jews to leave Germany. After the Anschluss in Austria, FDR, on March 25, 1938, called for an international conference on the refugee crisis. Austria’s 185,000 Jews were now also in jeopardy. The conference met in Évian, France. There was no political advantage for FDR in calling for a conference “to facilitate the emigration from Germany and Austria of political refugees.” No other major political leader in any country matched his concern and involvement. The Évian Conference tried to open new doors in the Western Hemisphere. The Dominican Republic, for example, offered sanctuary to one hundred thousand refugees. The devastating blow at Évian was the message from the Polish and Romanian governments 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.

The German emigration problem was manageable. Forced emigration from eastern Europe was not. The Nazi genocide was in the future—and unimaginable to the Jews and probably at the time unimaginable by the Nazis. National attitudes then were not very different than 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 international Évian Conference, convened by FDR in July 1938 to address the refugee problem, failed except to organize the Inter-Governmental Committee (IGC) that 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, DC, 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 impounded in a trust fund, which would serve as collateral on bonds to be issued by the German state. It was an effort by Schacht to resolve Germany’s foreign exchange crisis. Hitler abruptly ordered the end of the discussions. The negotiations, as all barter negotiations in the years ahead, failed because Hitler would never allow them to succeed.

By the end of 1938, Kristallnacht had happened. Its impact on the Jews of Germany and Austria was overwhelming. Munich was a tragic reality. Truncated Czechoslovakia would last six months before Hitler broke his promise and occupied the rest of the country. The German Jews at last understood the barbarism of the Nazis—and that Hitler was totally in power. America’s reaction to Kristallnacht was stronger than any of the other democracies’. FDR recalled his ambassador from Germany. It was the first time since the First World War that an American president had summoned home an ambassador to a major power under such circumstances. At his press conference then, FDR said: “I myself can scarcely believe that such things could occur in a 20th century civilization.” He extended the visitors’ visas of twenty thousand Germans and Austrians in the United States so they would not have to return. The reaction of Americans in opinion polls showed overwhelming anger and disgust with the Nazis and sympathy for the Jews.

FDR remained the target of the hardcore anti-Semites in America. He welcomed them as enemies and, in brilliant maneuvering, he isolated them from mainstream America and essentially equated their anti-Semitism with treason and the destruction of both the national interest and national defense. Recognizing the inertia, frequent hostility, and sometime anti-Semitism in the State Department, he entrusted Sumner Welles, the undersecretary of state and a person totally sympathetic to Jewish needs, to be his instrument of action.

Immigration procedures were complicated and sometimes harshly administered. The immigration laws and quotas were jealously guarded by Congress, supported by a strong, broad cross section of Americans who were against all immigrants, not Jews alone. Of course, there were racists and anti-Semites
in the Congress and in the country—there are today, only now, after decades of government based on liberal values, they dare not speak their true attitudes. The State Department, which guarded its administrative authority in the granting of visas, was frequently more concerned with congressional attitudes and criticisms than in reflecting American decency and generosity in helping people in despair and panic. FDR undoubtedly made a mistake in appointing and continuing in office Breckinridge Long as assistant secretary of state. Many allege Long was an anti-Semite. Others argue that he was “in an impossible situation with an insurmountable task.” His presence at the State Department was an assurance to the 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 there were many sanctuaries available in the world besides the United States, so the department, controlled by a career, conservative elite in large part anti—New Deal and anti-FDR, was quite prepared to make congressional attitudes the guide for its administration of immigration procedures rather than the attitudes of the White House. Congress looked at the turmoil in Germany as a European problem in which it did not want America to be involved.

Nevertheless, between 1933 and 1941, 35 percent of all immigrants to America under quota guidelines were Jewish. After Kristallnacht, Jewish immigrants were more than one-half of all immigrants admitted to the United States. Of course, there were other countries of refuge, many of them preferred by German Jews who, like everyone else, did not foresee the Nazi madness of conquest and extermination and who wanted to stay in Europe. Public opinion everywhere in the democracies was repelled by the Nazi persecution. Great Britain, for example, after Kristallnacht granted immigration visas essentially without limit. In the first six months of 1939, 91,780 German and Austrian Jews were admitted to England, often as a temporary port en route to the Dominions or other parts of the empire.

FDR from the beginning saw the larger threat of the Nazis. Hitler wanted to present Germany as the champion of a universal struggle against the Jews and Bolshevism. FDR would not let him. The president understood that he had to explain the vital interest that all Americans had in stopping Hitler in terms of their own security. He pressured the Europeans to respond to Hitler. His speech in 1937 calling for the quarantine of the aggressors was met with political hostility at home and abroad. He was constantly seeking havens for the refugees in other countries, knowing that he did not have the power to change the quota system of our own country. His critics refuse to acknowledge limitations on presidential power, but clearly the president could not unilaterally command an increase in quotas.

In fact, the Democratic congressional leaders, including Representative Samuel Dickstein, who chaired the House subcommittee on immigration, warned him that reactionary forces in the Congress might well use any attempt to increase the quotas as an opportunity to reduce them. The New York Times of February 27, 1939, reports a speech by Congressman Emmanuel Celler of Brooklyn, an outspoken defender of Jewish interests, where 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 [Celler’s] bills to give asylum in the United States to refugees and to re-allot 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. The New York Times of March 2, 1939, reports a speech by the Reverend Joseph Ostermann, executive director of the Committee for Catholic Refugees from Germany, saying that there were five hundred thousand actual or potential Catholic refugees whom “Goebbels and Rosenberg in Germany have attempted to identify with communism.”

Seventy-two percent of all German Jews had emigrated before further emigration became impossible with the beginning of the war. Eighty-three percent of all German Jews under twenty-one emigrated. There are many reasons why the others did not get out—some were too old to leave, some believed it their religious duty to stay, some were in concentration camps and prisons, some just did not know what to do. Émigrés were plundered of virtually all of their assets, and not until Jews faced the reality of terrorism and imprisonment were many of them prepared to give up their family’s wealth and everything that they had worked for all of their lives.

In his painfully eloquent book, Bound Upon a Wheel of Fire, John Dipple writes:

Yes, there were tight restrictions on entering into the United States and other countries, but were Germany’s Jews really blocked by them before 1938? Most evidence suggests that the Jews could have circumvented these obstacles in greater numbers if they had wanted to escape Germany badly enough, if they had grasped the desperation of their plight earlier on. But they had not. Despite everything, Germany was still their home. And, despite almost everything they were prepared to stay there.

The perspective of hindsight
It is important to say, over and over again, that it was a time and a place when no one foresaw the events that became the Holocaust. Louis de Jong, an eminent Dutch historian and Holocaust survivor, in his Erasmus lectures at Harvard University in 1989 said:

[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 many countries—and certainly in America—can only wish that we had done more, that our immigration barriers had been less, that our government had had a broader worldview, that every public servant had reflected the attitudes of FDR and ER. If anyone had foreseen the Holocaust, perhaps—possibly—maybe—but no one did. Nevertheless, the United States, a nation remote from the world in a way our children can hardly understand—the United States accepted twice as many Jewish refugees than did the rest of the world put together.

Among the anguishing events we read about is the fate of the ship SS St. Louis of the Hamburg-America line, which left Germany and arrived in Cuba on May 27, 1939, with some 930 Jewish refugees aboard. 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 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. The new regulations requiring $500 bonds from each approved immigrant had been transmitted to the shipping line, but only twenty-two passengers of the St. Louis had fulfilled the requirements before leaving Hamburg on May 13. The twenty-two were allowed to land, but 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 by the 1974 book Voyage of the Damned and movie of the same title. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr., and others, including ER, worked to avoid the harsh reality of the immigration laws, for example, by attempting to land the passengers as “tourists” in the Virgin Islands. Despite the legal inability of the United States to accept the passengers of the St. Louis as immigrants, our diplomats were significantly helpful in resettling them. None—not one—of the passengers of the SS St. Louis were returned to Nazi Germany. They were all resettled in democratic countries—288 in the United Kingdom, the rest in France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark. I interviewed a survivor of the St. Louis, a retired professor of human genetics at the University of Washington in Seattle. His father had arrived in Cuba in early 1939. He described Captain Shroeder of the St. Louis as a compassionate man who ordered decent treatment for his Jewish passengers and who told them that he would run his ship aground of off of England to assure their sanctuary rather than return them to Germany if Cuba refused admission. The Motulsky family disembarked in Belgium. After an extraordinary saga, all of them eventually reached the United States. Their story gives a very different perspective on the voyage of the St. Louis than that of America’s critics who prepare museum exhibits about it sixty years later.

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 knew that they had never had a better friend, a more sympathetic leader in the White House. FDR opened the offices of government as never before to Jews. Morgenthau, Samuel Rosenman, Felix Frankfurter, Benjamin Cohen, David Niles, Anna Rosenberg, Sidney Hillman, and David Dubinsky were among his closest advisors in politics and government. Wise, the preeminent spokesman for American Zionism, and his daughter, Justine Polier, were personal friends of FDR and ER with as much access to the White House as anyone. Wise described FDR by saying, “No one was more genuinely free from religious prejudice and racial bigotry.” He recalled how in March 1933, “Roosevelt’s soul rebelled at the Nazi doctrine of superior and inferior races” and how in March 1945, days before his death, FDR spoke movingly of his determination to establish “a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.”

The Holocaust, 1941–45
The persecution of the Jews and their emigration from Germany were the prelude to the Holocaust. Nazi policy changed radically after the outbreak of war. The possibility of emigration ended. Germany’s Jews were now prisoners. The Holocaust—the systematic killing of six million Jews—took place between 1941 and 1945.

The likelihood is that Hitler did not expect Britain and France to go to war over Poland. The Hitler-Stalin pact announced on August 24, 1939, stunned the world. The Soviets had been enemies of Hitler, the rallying point for millions around the world who saw in them the only military force that might confront the Nazis. Suddenly, the Soviets and Germans ended their threats to each other and divided Poland, Hitler gaining lebensraum and Stalin gaining a buffer zone from the Nazi armies he never trusted. Also in the package were more than three million Polish Jews, caught between Nazi brutality and Soviet degradation. Seemingly at peace on his eastern flank, where he occupied Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Western Poland, essentially dominant in central Europe through satellite fascist movements, Hitler moved to the west, occupying Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands—and again stunning the world by conquering France in a six-week blitzkrieg. France surrendered in June 1940. Benito Mussolini’s Italy became Hitler’s active ally.
Francisco Franco in a Spain prostrated by devastating civil war owed his victory to Hitler's support. England stood alone. Its new prime minister, Churchill, expressed the defiance of Britain and its empire, but Britain—facing invasion, desperately in need of arms, shaken by devastating Nazi bombings—looked to America for help and hope. Our debt to the British can never be adequately expressed. It was their “finest hour”—they salvaged the fate of freedom.

In 1939 FDR received a letter from Albert Einstein and understood that new scientific discoveries would allow the development of atomic power, threatening a force that could destroy the world—or at least win the war for whichever nation first became its master. FDR’s decision to launch the Manhattan Project, giving it whatever resources it needed for success, began the nuclear age. It was as fateful a decision as any president has ever made. Hitler had the same option. German scientists were certainly capable of producing atomic weapons. Hitler had all of the necessary resources, but he failed to pursue his option, not comprehending as FDR did that the future of the world was at stake.

As FDR won an unprecedented third term as president, he—better than any American—understood what lay ahead. He had confronted the economic collapse of the United States—but recovery was slow and painful. Now he faced the political collapse of Europe, the military collapse of China—and totalitarian governments in Germany and Japan that threatened America as never before. Nazi Germany, possessed of the most modern, best trained, best equipped military force in recorded history, occupied western and central Europe, confident that Hitler’s dream of conquest would soon include Great Britain, the Soviet Union—and ultimately the United States itself.

FDR’s priority was to repeal the Neutrality Act so that he could provide help to Britain. In 1940—with Europe under Hitler’s boot—U.S. military strength ranked as seventeenth in the world, behind Portugal. We led the world in the production of automobiles but had practically no munitions industry. Whereas Hitler had invaded Belgium and the Netherlands supported by 136 fully equipped divisions, America could barely muster five divisions. Nevertheless, isolationist sentiment remained powerful, fully reflected in the Congress. Three months before Pearl Harbor, in September 1941, the continuation of the Selective Service program was sustained by a single vote in the House of Representatives. FDR undid the public image that the isolationists had projected of themselves as peace-loving patriots. His persistent attacks on them turned the tide of public opinion. At great political risk in the midst of the presidential campaign, FDR engineered the deal that sent fifty desperately needed overage destroyers to Britain, a deed that helped save its lifeline from the unremitting attacks of German submarines. Hitler called it a belligerent act. It was. FDR proposed Lend-Lease—and built a bipartisan coalition to gain its congressional approval.

He announced the Four Freedoms as the goal that would justify the terrible sacrifices that lay ahead. He met with Churchill. They announced the Atlantic Charter, the blueprint for the survival of democracy, and together they created the partnership that we hail today as the most important alliance of this troubled twentieth century.

All this—and America was not yet at war. Nor had the genocide of Europe’s Jews yet begun. America’s isolationists continued to believe that the United States was protected from harm by the two vast oceans that separated it from Hitler’s Europe and Japan’s militarism. President Roosevelt believed otherwise. Pearl Harbor would prove FDR’s judgment correct—and give him a united country to mobilize for victory.

A vast prison, Hitler its warden
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 became prohibited. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of German Jews escaped across borders into Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland. But by June 1940, with the fall of France, Europe became a prison for the Jews. Unoccupied France was still an escape route. Despite intense criticism from the political left, FDR continued to maintain diplomatic relations with Vichy, France—which allowed the escape route to remain open. The International Rescue Committee—a group in which ER 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. With the invasion of Russia on June 22, 1941, the lock was put on the most terrible dungeon in history. Special squads of the German SS—the Einsatzgruppen—began the slaughter of 1,500,000 Jews behind the German lines in Russia. The Wannsee Conference, which structured “the Final Solution,” was held in the suburbs of Berlin 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 either before or after 1939. They were prisoners in a vast prison from which there was no escape and no possible rescue. They were not subject to Nazi rule or persecution prior to the war, and few imagined that they ever would be, let alone that they would be murdered in history’s greatest genocide. Just as German Jews imagined that Hitler and the Nazi rule would pass quickly, Jews outside of Germany did not imagine themselves in mortal danger. Zionism was not a dominant force in their communities. In the 1936 Jewish community elections in Poland—the most highly organized Jewish community in Europe—the Social Democratic Bund won a sweeping victory on a pledge of “unyielding hostility to Zionism.” The party’s leaders wanted Polish Jews to remain in Poland. The policies of the Soviet Union forbade emigration. In the Netherlands—a country whose Jewish population suffered a greater percentage loss in the extermination camps than any other in western Europe—not more than 679 individuals, Jews and Gentiles, migrated in any one year before 1940, far fewer than the Dutch quota would have allowed. The assumption was
that Hitler would respect Dutch neutrality just as the Kaiser had in the First World War. Once Hitler’s armies marched, the Jews of Nazi-occupied Europe no longer had the possibility of being refugees. Individuals could and did attempt escape, and, through their bravery and the extraordinary courage of those who helped them, some made it to freedom, often at great cost to those left behind. For the overwhelming number, it was now too late. They were prisoners. And only the physical liberation of their prisons—the extermination camps of central Europe—could save their lives.

The doors had been closed, not by the United States or its allies, but by Hitler. Jews were now trapped by a psychopath who was also the absolute dictator of Europe. 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 allowed himself no contact with them. He was the most determined ideologue of racial superiority and racial conflict who ever led a country—and Germany in 1940 was the most powerful country on earth. He was more extreme than anyone around him. His central obsession, the life’s mission of this deranged, monomaniacal psychopath, was to kill as many Jews as he could. Nothing diminished this mission—not the defeat of his armies, not the destruction of his country. As Germany lay in ruins, as the demented dictator prepared to end his life in his bunker in Berlin, his Nazi acolytes continued his mission above all else, diverting even urgently needed reinforcements for his retreating armies to complete the assignment of the Final Solution. The extermination camps were the efficient mechanisms of these disciplined lunatics—but two million Jews were murdered before Auschwitz was opened, and after it was closed in November 1944, hundreds of thousands more were shot, strangled, or starved to death.

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 of the resources, human and material, of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

No secret: news of the Nazi extermination campaign

Some critics of America and President Roosevelt say the news of the annihilation of Europe’s Jews was deliberately kept secret so that our people would not know about it—and if Americans had been aware of the Final Solution, they would have insisted on doing more than what was done. They suggest that anti-Semitism in the State Department—or elsewhere or everywhere in our government and in our country—determined that the news of the extermination process be kept secret. The facts are otherwise. President Roosevelt, Churchill, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, General George C. Marshall, the intelligence services of the Allied nations, every Jewish leader, the Jewish communities in America, in Britain, and 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 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 that a death camp later to become known as Auschwitz, with its gas chambers and ghastly crematoria, had been built—but Auschwitz, like every extermination camp, was treated as a top-secret project by the Nazis. We publicized what we knew, but the Nazis tried to keep as much information as possible away from everybody. As Martin Gilbert points out, 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. The names, locations, and procedures of the death camps may not have been known—some not until the end of the war—but the fact of the genocide and the Nazi determination to carry it out were not in doubt.

When Wise was given the Riegner telegram, 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 from Bosnia. There were no enterprising reporters who could photograph the butchery of the Nazis or report the workings of their brutality as we had in Rwanda. Of course, everyone with any sense of decency was incredulous—and many remained so as fragments of what was happening trickled across Nazi borders carried by brave messengers who frequently were not eyewitnesses but rather reporting what they had heard. The experience of the First World War, in which atrocities attributed to the Germans turned out to be wrong—or Allied propaganda—caused many to wonder whether the incredible reports coming from the continent of Europe would ultimately prove false as well. Tragically, the reports beginning in 1941 were true. Even the men, women, and children being loaded into the boxcars that would take them to certain death in uncertain places generally described as “locations in eastern Europe” did not know Auschwitz or Dachau or Maidanek by name or purpose.

When Welles confirmed the truth of the Riegner telegram to Wise, the rabbi wept—as countless Jews and non-Jews would do in those terrible years when the Nazis were beyond the reach of the armies that would defeat them. Encouraged by Welles to hold a press conference to announce the terrible news, Wise did so on November 28, 1942. His announcement of the Nazi plan to annihilate Europe’s Jews was widely reported. Wise and his colleagues met with the president. They asked the president to warn Hitler and the Germans that they would be held individually responsible for what they were doing to the Jews. FDR agreed immediately. An announcement to that effect in the name of the United Nations was made in the Congress and in Britain’s Parliament on December 17, 1942. It was repeated many times throughout the war. The Parliament for the first
time in its history stood in silence to mourn what was happening to the Jews, to pray for the strength needed to destroy the Nazi barbarians. In America, the labor unions led the nation in a ten-minute period of mourning for the Jews of Europe.

Who can possibly argue that there was a conspiracy of silence regarding the fate of Europe’s Jews when America’s most popular broadcaster, Edward R. Murrow, listened to by millions, on December 13, 1942, reported: “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 unequaled 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.’” Six months earlier, on June 30, 1942, the New York Times had already carried a report from the World Jewish Congress that the Germans had by that date already massacred one million Jews, that the Nazis had established a “vast slaughterhouse for Jews” in eastern Europe.

American Jewry was not a passive observer of these events, cowering in silence for fear of letting loose waves of anti-Semitism in America. 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 to reach out to Europe’s Jews. Plans after plan was produced to rescue the Jews of Europe. Jewish leaders lobbied the Congress. Mass rallies were held across the country with overflow crowds throughout those years, praying, pleading for action to stop the genocide we now know as the Holocaust. The unremitting, remorseless massacre of the Jews—carefully concealed by top-secret arrangements of the Nazi murderers—continued because no one, no nation, no alliance of nations could do anything meaningful to close down the death camps—except, as FDR said over and over again, by winning the war and destroying the Nazis with absolute determination as soon as possible.

If FDR had followed the national will, Japan would have been our military priority, but understanding the Nazi threat to civilization, he ordered Nazi Germany to be the focus of our efforts. If FDR had listened to General Marshall and his military advisors, he would not have sent the few tanks we had in 1942 to help General Bernard Montgomery win at El Alamein, thereby probably saving Palestine from the same fate as Poland. FDR 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 unyielding purpose of defeating the Nazi armies might satisfy the desperate anguish felt by so many but that no one would be rescued and the rescuers in all likelihood would themselves be killed.

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.” FDR understood that, and he mobilized in America an arsenal of such strength that the world would still marvel fifty years later at how the miracle was accomplished.

The only meaningful way to save the intended victims of Hitler’s murder machine was to win the war as quickly as possible. Professor Weinberg answers the cynics who question America’s policy by suggesting to them that they consider how many more Jews would have survived had the war ended even a week or ten days earlier—and conversely, how many more would have died had the war lasted an additional week or ten days. Given the determination of the Germans to fight on to the bitter end, and knowing what FDR understood then and what all of us should know now—that Hitler would never let the Jews go, that until his dying day his obsession was their destruction, that the slaughter of the Jews went on into the final moments of the Third Reich, that every day until the final surrender there were thousands of deaths by murder, starvation, and disease—we should know with certainty that the number saved by winning the war as quickly as possible was vastly greater than the total number of Jews who could be saved by any rescue efforts proposed by anyone from 1941 to 1945.

Proposals for rescue and the question of bombing Auschwitz

Serious proposals for rescue and response were not disregarded. For example, on September 16, 1944, the Hebrew Committee on National Liberation (HCNL) proposed to the State Department that a warning be issued “stating that unless the practice of using poison gas against the Hebrew people ceases forthwith, retaliation in kind will be immediately ordered against Germany.” The State Department forwarded the recommendation to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) of the armed forces. A detailed senior JCS staff memorandum responded that such a warning would be disastrous, that the Nazis would continue their genocidal program and the proposed retaliation would unleash unrestricted gas warfare resulting in heavy civilian and military losses. The “poison gas” proposal is worth mentioning here if only for the insight that it gives into the profound schism among Jewish organizations as they responded to the genocide in Europe. Attitudes toward Zionism and the future of Palestine were at the core of the conflict. As Wise and Rabbi Silver and Joseph Proskauer spoke for the mainstream Jewish organizations, so did Peter Bergson emerge as their enemy. When Bergson announced the creation of HCNL on May 18, 1944, it was immediately denounced in a statement by a coordinated group of major Jewish organizations as a “colossal hoax” promulgated by “half a dozen adventurers from Palestine with no standing, no credentials, no mandate from anyone unless from the Irgun Zevai Leumi in Palestine, an insignificantly small, pistol-packing group of extremists who are claiming credit for the recent terror outrages.” HCNL was seen as supported by the Irgun, the extremist underground army that had declared war on the British Mandate in Palestine and regarded Great Britain and David Ben-Gurion as enemies, as well as Nazi Germany. Chaim Weizmann and Ben-Gurion were pioneer Zionists who
were prepared to negotiate the creation of a Jewish state. They were sensitive to British responsibilities and Arab rights while believing that the Nazi assault on Europe’s Jews made the need for a Jewish state ever more urgent. The Bergson/Begin/Irgun movement accepted war on the British and the Arabs even in the context of World War II as legitimate means to accomplish the need for a Jewish state. The confrontation of the Zionist organizations during World War II finds dramatic resonance in contemporary discussions of the world’s response to the Holocaust. Much remains to be written on this conflict’s impact on American and British policy.

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 both in 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 Auschwitz. Much is made of 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 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 of bombing Auschwitz. The very thought of the Allied forces deliberately killing Jews—to open the gates of Auschwitz so the survivors could run where?—was abhorrent then as it is now. The Rescue Committee of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem voted against even making the bombing request at a meeting with Ben-Gurion presiding. 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 was ever asked or even heard of the proposal—even though Jewish leaders of all persuasions had clear access to them both.

Every study of the military problems related to bombing Auschwitz makes one wonder what its proponents are talking about. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, an ULTRA intelligence officer in World War II, when asked in 1985 about the judgment of Allied military commanders that innocent Jews should not be deliberate victims of American attacks, was incredulous that anyone would even suggest that Allied forces bomb Auschwitz. “I am perfectly confident,” he responded, “that General Spaatz would have resisted any proposal that we kill the Jewish inmates in order to temporarily put Auschwitz out of operation. It is not easy to think that a rational person would have made such a recommendation.”

We are talking about the summer of 1944. American forces were fully engaged with Japanese aggression across the total expanse of the Pacific Ocean. In Europe the invasion of Normandy began on June 6. Despite the fact that two-thirds of the Nazi armies were on the Russian front, D-day and an Allied success were by no means assured. The German armies were holding our forces at bay in Italy, causing heavy casualties, making us fight for every road and hill—just ask former senators Bob Dole or Daniel Inouye, both of whom were grievously wounded in battle, what was happening on the Italian front. The Allies were planning the invasion of southern France for August 15. America and our allies were stretched dangerously across western and southern Europe. The Allied bombing strategy was totally directed toward destroying Nazi fuel supplies, their synthetic oil industries, the oil fields of Romania, and their communication and transport lines wherever possible.

A seemingly more reasonable proposal to bomb the railways to Auschwitz was made to Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary of Great Britain, on July 6, 1944. Eden, with Churchill’s immediate support, requested the Royal Air Force to examine the feasibility of doing so. The secretary of state for air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, replied several days later: “I entirely agree that it is our duty to consider every possible plan [to stop the murder of the Jews in Hungary] 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.” 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 took 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: “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. The allusion by America’s critics is that this shows 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. Air Force available for the destruction of German fuel supplies, the primary mission as
defined by General 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. The aerial photographs of Auschwitz on display were not developed until 1978—and their details were only readable then 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 totally 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 FDR or Eisenhower could have ordered it. No one proposed it to them.

If we had bombed Auschwitz with the inevitable consequence of killing hundreds, perhaps thousands of Jewish prisoners, I have no doubt that those who defame America for inaction would denounce us today for being accomplices in the Nazi genocide. Certainly Hitler and Joseph Goebbels would have justified their madness by claiming that the Allies, by their deliberate bombing of Auschwitz, had shown their own disdain for the value of Jewish lives.

The War Refugee Board was created in January 1944, by President Roosevelt immediately upon presentation of the case for doing so by Morgenthau. There were thousands of refugees stranded on the outer peripheries of Nazi Europe. With the invasion of Italy in 1943, thousands more sought safety in camps in the south. Josip Broz Tito’s success in Yugoslavia enabled many to escape from Croat fascism and Serb hatred. But these were refugees who were already saved. These were not escapees from the death camps. Under pressure from FDR 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 refugees, many of them Jewish, found safe sanctuary in Spain. Miaschetra transit camps in Spain, Portugal, Italy, and North Africa housed them in abysmal conditions. Those who fought for these refugees to come to America were right to do so. Refugees then as now 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. Perhaps not. In remembering what we did not do, perhaps we can measure our response to today’s tragedies and ask whether we—now the richest, most powerful nation in history—have responded adequately to the “ethnic cleansing” of Bosnia, to the genocide in Rwanda, to the killing field of Cambodia. We might question the adequacy of our response to the catalog of horrors visible to all of us in Sierra Leone, where thousands of children as young as seven years old are forced to become soldiers, human shields, sex slaves, and instruments of torture and killing—having already witnessed the slaughter of their parents and the hacking off of the hands and feet of countless innocent civilians.

The most protected of the Jewish populations in central Europe were those of Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, all nations that were Hitler's allies. Their governments, although decidedly fascist, protected their indigenous populations as long as possible. Relentless Nazi pressure to deport their Jewish citizens to the extermination camps was resisted with some success until the last year of the war. In an extraordinary book, Beyond Hitler’s Grasp, Michael Bar-Zohar describes the actions of King Boris III and the heroic courage of Jewish leaders, Bulgarian politicians, and the Metropolitan Stefan, leader of Bulgaria’s church, so that not one Bulgarian Jew was sent to the death camps. The author notes: “The Bulgarian Jews became the only Jewish community in the Nazi sphere of influence whose number increased during World War II.”

FDR’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 services of Raoul Wallenberg; and the bombing of the Budapest area all played roles undoubtedly in the rescue of one-half of the Jewish community in Hungary. President Roosevelt was deeply and personally involved in the effort to save the Jews of Hungary. This 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 deliver 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 the meantime, and until the victory that is now assured is won, the United States will persevere in its efforts to rescue the victims of brutality of the Nazis and the Japanese. In so far as the necessity of military operations permit, this Government will use all means at its command to aid the escape of all intended victims of the Nazi and Japanese executioner—regardless of race or religion or color. We call upon the free peoples of Europe and Asia temporarily to open their frontiers to all victims of oppression. We shall find havens of refuge for them, and we shall find the means for their maintenance and support until the tyrant is driven from their homelands and they may return.

“The thing is indescribable.”

Although people had read about the Final Solution and heard witnesses who had seen the camps and read the accounts of the War Refugee Board of three eyewitnesses to Auschwitz published in November 1944, no one understood what really had happened until they could see it for themselves.

On the day FDR died, 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 be sure that Americans would never forget the depths of the Nazi horror. Five months later, he dismissed his close friend and brilliant army commander, General 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 had become physically ill from what he had seen.

Anne O’Hare McCormick, the renowned foreign affairs reporter of the New York Times, wrote in December 1944 of a visit by a congressional delegation to the war front in Italy. The congressmen expressed shock at the rigors of the Italian campaign, at its inhuman conditions. They were quoted as saying 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?

In the last seven months of the war, more than eighty thousand Dutch citizens starved to death because the German occupiers of northern Holland wanted to punish the Dutch for insurrection and strikes following the failed assault on Arnhem, the fabled Bridge Too Far. 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—for the most part non-Jews—starved to death, and the forces that could have saved them remained intent on their objective of 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 hatred or bias against the Dutch—nor, regarding Auschwitz, because of anti-Semitism.

The killers bear responsibility

None of us, including scholars and historians, can review the bestial crimes of Hitler and his Nazi thugs and all those who carried out their orders to kill innocent men, women, and children without hanging our heads in sorrow. But we must never forget that it was the Nazis who committed this most terrible crime, led by a psychopath, Hitler. America—this wonderful and generous country—was a reluctant participant in the world of the ‘30s. Our parents and grandparents were not fools. It was their courage and strength that made America the leader of the Free World. We should be so brave and strong—we should do so well—in our own time, with our own problems. Had Israel existed in 1939 with the military strength that it has today, the terrible story of the Holocaust might never have happened.

How ironic that our greatest president of the twentieth century—the man Hitler hated most, the leader constantly derided by the anti-Semites, vilified by Goebbels as a “mentally ill cripple” and as “that Jew Rosenfeld,” violently attacked by the isolationist press—how ironic that he should be faulted for being indifferent to the genocide. For all of us, the shadow of doubt will always remain that enough was not done, even if there was little more that could have been done. But it is the killers who bear the responsibility for their deeds. To say that “we are all guilty” allows the truly guilty to avoid that responsibility. We must remember for all the days of our lives that it was Hitler who imagined the Holocaust and the Nazis who carried it out. We were not their accomplices. We destroyed them.

Churchill once said that FDR was the greatest man he had ever known. President Roosevelt’s life, he said, “must be regarded as one of the commanding events of human destiny.” FDR, more than any other American, is entitled to the historical credit for mobilizing and leading the forces that destroyed the Nazi barbarians and so saved Western civilization. In the years of his leadership, he gave Jews dignity and self-respect as did no one before in American history. He understood and shared the anguish of the Holocaust as it unfolded.

FDR was the voice of the people of the United States during the most difficult crises of the century. He led America out of the despair of the Great Depression. He led us to victory in the Great War. Four times he was elected president of the United States. By temperament and talent, by energy and instinct, FDR...
IV. Statesman & Commander in Chief: FDR in World War II

...he was stricken with infantile paralysis. He would never walk or stand again unassisted. The pain of his struggle is almost unimaginable—learning to move again, to stand, to rely upon the physical support of others—never giving in to despair, to self-pity, to discouragement. Just twelve years after he was stricken, he was elected president of the United States and took command of a paralyzed nation. He lifted America from its knees and led us to our fateful rendezvous with history. He embraced a desperately troubled world and gave it hope.

He transformed our government into an active instrument of social justice. He made America the arsenal of democracy. He was commander in chief of the greatest military force in history. He crafted the victorious alliance that won the war. He was the father of the nuclear age. He inspired and guided the blueprint for the world that was to follow. The vision of the United Nations, the commitment to collective security, the determination to end colonialism, the economic plan for a prosperous world with access to resources and trade assured to all nations—such was the legacy of FDR and "the greatest generation," which he led to its rendezvous with destiny.

(Endnotes)

1 For comparison purposes, it may be helpful to note that U.S. law in FY 1998 allowed seventy-five thousand refugee admissions. President Clinton has proposed raising this ceiling to eighty thousand.


4 Adam Hochschild tells of alleged atrocities by the Germans in Belgium during the first World War: "Newspaper stories, cartoons, posters, and patriotic speeches luridly denounced mass rapes of Belgian women by German soldiers. The Germans, it was said, crucified Belgian babies on the doors of houses... the press reported that German soldiers were cutting off the hands and feet of Belgian children. ... In the end, the mass rape, mutilation, and crucifixion charged turned out to be false," Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 296.


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William J. vanden Heuvel, a principal force in the founding of Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park, is also founder and chair emeritus of the Four Freedoms Park Conservancy and of the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute. Throughout his career as an international lawyer, diplomat, businessman, and scholar, Ambassador vanden Heuvel has worked to honor the legacy of Franklin D. and Eleanor Roosevelt and to uphold FDR’s vision of four fundamental human freedoms.

Born in Rochester, New York, of immigrant parents, vanden Heuvel attended public schools and worked his way through university, graduating from Deep Springs College, Cornell University, and Cornell Law School, where he was editor in chief of the *Cornell Law Review*. He began his career in public service as executive assistant to William J., “Wild Bill” Donovan during General Donovan’s ambassadorship to Thailand, and subsequently served as counsel to New York State governor Averell Harriman.

In 1964, as assistant to U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, vanden Heuvel led the efforts to defeat local resistance to school desegregation in Prince Edward County, Virginia, establishing the Prince Edward County Free Schools system and participating in arguments before the Supreme Court that resulted in a landmark decision relating to Prince Edward County that secured the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*. As chairman of the New York City Board of Corrections in the early 1970s, he led a campaign to investigate and ameliorate conditions in the city’s overcrowded prison system and has had a lifelong involvement in the reform of the criminal justice system.


Ambassador vanden Heuvel has served since 1985 as a director of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a nonprofit agency assisting refugees from political persecution and violent conflict. In 1956 he traveled to Hungary and Austria to aid refugees of the Hungarian Revolution. As president of IRC, he later organized efforts on behalf of Cuban, Chinese, Angolan, and Eastern European refugees.

Ambassador vanden Heuvel was a senior partner at the law firm of Stroock & Stroock & Lavan, where he practiced international and corporate law. Since 1984 he has been a senior advisor to the investment banking firm Allen & Company. Ambassador vanden Heuvel has presided over a range of academic conferences and initiatives relating to the Roosevelt era, and helped to establish the institute’s Roosevelt Study Centers in the Netherlands, Russia, and South Korea. With Anne Roosevelt, Ambassador vanden Heuvel has participated annually in the presentation of the prestigious FDR Four Freedoms Medals to outstanding individuals and organizations whose work embodies a commitment to the ideals that President Roosevelt expounded in his historic Four Freedoms address of 1941.

Ambassador vanden Heuvel has coauthored a biography of Robert F. Kennedy and has written frequently on international affairs and the FDR legacy. In 2000 he edited a widely acclaimed book of essays examining current prospects for Russian political and democratic reforms, and he was coeditor, with historians Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Douglas Brinkley, of the St. Martin’s Press Series on Diplomatic and Economic History.

Ambassador vanden Heuvel currently lives in New York City with his wife, the former Melinda Fuller of Boston. He has four children: Katrina and Wendy vanden Heuvel, Ashley von Perfall, and John vanden Heuvel Pierce.