

The Greatest Moral Question: The United States & Jewish Refugees During the Holocaust

Amanda Morrison

International refugee crises--namely the Syrian refugee crisis--are currently at the forefront of international foreign policy discussion. News agencies and political leaders often raise questions regarding refugees' impact on foreign governments and their economies. This issue of immigration, however, is not unique to the present day. Refugee crises have plagued the planet for decades, especially during the First and Second World Wars. In one of the most crucial immigration dilemmas in history, the horrors of the Holocaust during World War Two posed significant foreign policy questions to the United States and the rest of the world. As European Jews became the scapegoats of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party, these Jews were desperate to find refuge in other countries, specifically the United States. Thus, an important moral question emerged during the Holocaust in Europe: would Americans let anti-Semitic views define their response to this moral crisis? It is integral to examine the way that anti-Semitism shaped U.S. policy towards immigration and refugees in order to understand the European Jews' plight in the 1930s and 1940s. In the words of Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."¹ Unfortunately, U.S. policy failed to proactively protect European Jews. Anti-semitism and inaction from the United States resulted in anti-Semitic World War

¹ Elie Wiesel. *Night* (New York: Hill And Wang, 2006).

Two era U.S. refugee and immigration policies, which worsened the effects of the Holocaust in Europe.

Anti-Semitic sentiments gained traction in the United States after World War One as economic forces strongly affected social and political realms during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. The stock market crash of 1929 ushered in a new era of distress and uncertainty in American society. Unfortunately,

The nation was woefully unprepared for the crash. For the most part, banks were unregulated and uninsured. The government offered no insurance or compensation for the unemployed, so when people stopped earning, they stopped spending. The consumer economy ground to a halt.²

The stock market crash gave way to the Great Depression as American government, businesses, and individuals suffered. In 1933, unemployment in the United States reached a new low--one quarter of Americans were without a job.³ These conditions instilled fear and resentment inside of many citizens in the U.S.; they worried that immigrants were plotting to take away their jobs. Not only this, but among the few jobs available, Americans felt that immigrants merely created more competition for labor. Additionally, anti-Semitic views also permeated politics. These feelings of resentment and fear caused Americans and Europeans alike to make a scapegoat

² "The 1930s." History.com, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://www.history.com/topics/1930s>.

³ Rafael Medoff. *Blowing the Whistle on Genocide: Josiah E. Dubois, Jr., and the Struggle for a U.S. Response to the Holocaust* (Purdue University Press, 2008), 2.

out of certain vulnerable groups in society. For example,

In heated foreign policy debates, many conservatives harped on the alleged link between Jews and communism, and on Jewish influence in the Roosevelt administration and in the American media. Republican William R. Castle Jr., former undersecretary of state, complained in his diary of “Jewish control everywhere.”⁴

This widespread fear of Jewish control during political and economic uncertainty is why anti-Semitism was on the rise during this time. Author Rafael Medoff is a historian and scholar of the Holocaust and the founding director of the David Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies in D.C. He noted, “the view that Jews constituted an undesirable race was widely accepted.”⁵ Contrary to popular belief, United States citizens and government officials often spewed the same anti-semitic rhetoric that emerged in Germany in the 1930s. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor and the start of U.S. involvement in World War Two, over one hundred anti-Semitic hate groups in the United States spewed rhetoric and propaganda against American Jews.⁶

Across the pond, economic and political instability was also affecting Germany. Germans were desperate to recover from the embarrassment of defeat after World War One and needed a scapegoat to blame for their economic

and nationalistic problems. Adolf Hitler quickly rose through the ranks of power in the German government and was eventually appointed chancellor on January 30, 1933. His National Socialist party, or the Nazis, was “guided by racist and authoritarian ideas” and “abolished basic freedoms” by streamlining education, the arts, culture, and the economy towards Nazi ideology.⁷ Much like the Americans, they found their scapegoat in the Jews as they blamed them for Germany’s political and economic failures following the first World War. These anti-Semitic sentiments were not necessarily new to Germans; Hitler mainly built his party off of decades-old racist views. Many Germans had long believed that Jews were plotting world domination and wanted to take over their government. Blaming the Jews seemed to be the perfect group for Nazis to blame for the international political embarrassment of Germany’s loss in World War One. It is important to note, however, that “Jews represented less than one percent of the total German population of about 67 million people.”⁸ Jews represented only a miniscule portion of the German population, but Nazi narratives still advocated for their elimination from an ‘ideal German society.’ Nazis were focused on the “consolidation of a racially pure state and elimination of the European Jews and other perceived

⁴ Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1935*, (Indiana University Press, 1987), 144.

⁵ Medoff, *Blowing the Whistle on Genocide: Josiah E. Dubois, Jr., and the Struggle for a U.S. Response to the Holocaust*, 2.

⁶ History.com, “The 1930s.”

⁷ “Nazi Rule.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007669>.

⁸ “Jews in Prewar Germany,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed December 4, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007687>.

enemies of Germany.”⁹ This hatred for the Jewish people throughout Europe became the inspiration for various rhetoric, propaganda, and violence from the Nazi party. Although many Nazi ideas were overtly extremist and racist, they were able to recruit more Germans for their cause by “downplaying more extreme Nazi goals [and offering] simple solutions to Germany’s problems, exploiting people’s fears, frustrations, and hopes.”¹⁰ They sometimes masked their outright racism towards the Jews by simply advocating for a racially pure, or Aryan, Germany. Other propaganda sought to demonize Jews specifically:

The goal of Nazi propaganda was to demonize Jews and encourage Germans to see Jews as dangerous outsiders in their midst. After 1935, everyday anti-Semitism was a regular part of carnival parades and floats. Public displays of anti-Semitism reinforced a climate of hostility toward Jews in Germany, or at the least, indifference to their treatment.¹¹

These public parades of anti-Semitism gave way to public violence towards the European Jewish community as shops and homes were destroyed and Jews were outcast from society. As Hitler’s rule continued, discrimination was not only widely accepted, but was also encouraged by the state.

Stages of discrimination and violence against the German Jews progressed throughout the 1930s. On April 1, 1933,

⁹ *The Path to Nazi Genocide*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Documentary.

¹⁰ *The Path to Nazi Genocide*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

¹¹ *The Path to Nazi Genocide*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

German Stormtroopers and the SS--the guards of the Nazi state--staged a boycott of Jewish-run businesses throughout all of Germany. This began an economic revolt against Jews that continued locally through most of the 1930s.¹² Next, the Nazis announced the introduction of the Nuremberg laws on September 15, 1935. These laws declared Jews as second class citizens, revoked the majority of their political rights, and forced them to wear visible markers to let others know they were Jewish.¹³ Public humiliation also served to stifle any opponents of these discriminatory acts; non-Jewish Germans did not want to be viewed as sympathizers to the ethnic enemies of Germany. In one of the final discriminatory actions before the Final Solution, German Nazi party members incited public violence against Jews throughout Germany and Austria on November 9, 1938. Jewish businesses were ransacked, pillaged, and destroyed; the Nazis left few salvageable items. This event came to be known as *kristallnacht*, or the “night of broken glass.”¹⁴ Even though these acts of discrimination and violence were immoral and dehumanizing, other countries did little to intervene. Unfortunately, “these actions caused the Nazi regime little trouble abroad, in large part because anti-Semitism was ingrained in European and American society during the 1930s.”¹⁵ A Gallup poll of Americans almost

¹² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Jews in Prewar Germany.”

¹³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Jews in Prewar Germany.”

¹⁴ *Confronting the Holocaust: American Responses*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2014), Documentary.

¹⁵ Diane Kunz. “Remembering the Unexplainable: The Holocaust, Memory, and Public Policy.” *World Policy Journal*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1997): 45.

immediately after news broke of *kristallnacht* showed that 77 percent of respondents still “opposed the idea of admitting a larger number of Jewish refugees.”¹⁶ This public sentiment shows that violence was sometimes ignored as anti-Semitic views overshadowed humanitarianism, even when governments found out that Nazis were systematically killing Jews. For example, “British officials ignored evidence of the *Einsatzgruppen* (killing squad) murder of Jews in 1941.”¹⁷ In the U.S., War Department official John J. McCloy “refused pleas to bomb the railroad lines to Auschwitz.”¹⁸ And perhaps worst of all,

The revelation of the concentration camps in all their horrors did not affect the prevailing American anti-Semitism. Many in the U.S. shared the opinion of General George Patton who believed that the “[Jewish type of DP [displaced person] is, in the majority of cases, a sub-human species without any of the cultural or social refinements of our time.”...Survivors often found that American army officers treated them worse than the Germans. Postwar American immigration legislation made it easier in many cases for East European concentration camp guards than

for Jewish survivors to get into the United States.¹⁹

This U.S. mistreatment of European Jews scars America’s moral history and proves that anti-Semitism played a damning role in the U.S. response to the Holocaust.

Post-revisionist historians argue that the United States had little power to stop the systematic killing of Jews during the Holocaust. Regardless of what the U.S. could have accomplished in Europe, however, Americans had a golden opportunity to aid European Jews by providing them with asylum in the U.S. Unfortunately for Jews, anti-Semitism not only permeated U.S. society in the twentieth century, but it also permeated government policies. Prior to World War Two and any knowledge of the existence of Hitler’s Final Solution, the United States immigration policy already regulated the number of Jewish immigrants allowed per year. Immigration quotas served to limit the number of immigrants from different racial and ethnic populations in order to maintain the “racial status quo of the United States.”²⁰ New immigration policies introduced in 1924 restricted immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe to only 15.3% of quota slots; a drastic change from 1921 when these European areas were allotted 46% of the quota.²¹ Not only were the quotas restricting for Jewish immigration, but their full capacity was often not even met, because U.S. officials “issued

¹⁶ Saul S. Friedman. *No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1938-1945* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 31.

¹⁷ Kunz, “Remembering the Unexplainable: The Holocaust, Memory, and Public Policy,” 45.

¹⁸ Kunz, “Remembering the Unexplainable: The Holocaust, Memory, and Public Policy,” 46.

¹⁹ Kunz, “Remembering the Unexplainable: The Holocaust, Memory, and Public Policy,” 46.

²⁰ Kevin MacDonald, “Jewish Involvement in Shaping American Immigration Policy, 1881-1965: A Historical Review.” *Population and Environment* vol. 19, no. 4 (1998): 314.

²¹ MacDonald, “Jewish Involvement in Shaping American Immigration Policy, 1881-1965: A Historical Review,” 314.

approximately 75,000 visas out of approximately 300,000 German Jewish applicants...only 25% of German Jewish applicants received visas.”²² Thus, anti-Semitism not only influenced policy, but it also influenced how policies were actually implemented. As early as 1921, American lawmakers brought to light the influence of anti-Semitism on policy. One Congressperson, cited anonymously, stated, “Today, with race triumphant over ideal, anti-Semitism uncovers its fangs, and to the heartless refusal of the most elementary human right, the right of asylum, is added cowardly insult.”²³ Additionally, Democratic Senator James Reed of Missouri noted, “Attacks have likewise been made upon the Jewish people who have crowded to our shores. The spirit of intolerance has been especially active as to them.”²⁴ Although these quotes highlight the moral arguments of allowing Jewish immigrants, the majority of lawmakers and government officials believed anti-Semitic rhetoric. Perhaps these officials’ beliefs were reinforced because of the electorate. Indeed, “The most common arguments advanced by these officials...closely paralleled those expressed by many Americans.”²⁵ This means that anti-Semitism was not only pervasive in U.S.

policy; it was also prevalent among the American public. In fact,

A 1939 poll in *Fortune* magazine showed that 83% [of Americans] answered “no” to the following question: “If you were a member of Congress would you vote yes or no on a bill to open the doors of the United States to a larger number of European refugees than now admitted under our immigration quotas?” Less than 9% replied “yes” and the remainder had no opinion.²⁶

This evidence shows that the majority of Americans were unwilling to reform immigration policies to extend a hand to the European Jews affected by the Holocaust. The rest of the world was not blind to the inaction from the United States. Adolf Hitler himself noted,

They complain in these democracies about the unfathomable cruelty that Germany uses in trying to get rid of their Jews... But it does not mean that these democratic countries have now become ready to replace their hypocritical remarks with acts of help; on the contrary, they affirm with complete coolness that over there, evidently, there is no room!²⁷

This eerie statement from Hitler shows that silence and inaction often does encourage the tormentor, just as Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel stated. This quote makes evident the Nazi opinion on the U.S.’s reaction to their treatment of the Jews. The Nazis knew

²² Barbara Bailin, “The Influence of Anti-Semitism on United States Immigration Policy with Respect to German Jews During 1933-1939.” *CUNY Academic Works* (2011): 2.

²³ MacDonald, “Jewish Involvement in Shaping American Immigration Policy, 1881-1965: A Historical Review,” 300.

²⁴ MacDonald, “Jewish Involvement in Shaping American Immigration Policy, 1881-1965: A Historical Review,” 315.

²⁵ Bailin, “The Influence of Anti-Semitism on United States Immigration Policy with Respect to German Jews During 1933-1939,” 3.

²⁶ MacDonald, “Jewish Involvement in Shaping American Immigration Policy, 1881-1965: A Historical Review,” 327-328

²⁷ Kunz, “Remembering the Unexplainable: The Holocaust, Memory, and Public Policy,” 45.

that the U.S. was going to do little, if anything, to stop their oppression--especially their oppression in Europe. To make matters worse, high-ranking government officials knew about Hitler's Final Solution almost immediately after the plan was devised, but originally kept the information from President Roosevelt. By 1941, "The news of the Final Solution had already come from a trustworthy source...to the American capital, but it had been rejected [by a State Department official] and the president had not even been told."²⁸ Even though some officials in the U.S. government knew of these unspeakable evils, it was evident to the international community that American immigration policies for Jews would be left unchanged. What good they did do, however, was less evident than their failure to act on immigration.

There is still intense debate today as far as how much good the American government did for European Jews during the Holocaust. On one hand, many "historians agree that the most sustained and effective rescue effort to save Europe's Jews was mounted by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee."²⁹ This committee was "instrumental in assisting at least 190,000 Jews to leave Germany between 1933 and 1939; 80,000 were able to leave Europe altogether with JDC assistance."³⁰

²⁸ Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1935*. (Indiana University Press, 1987), 150.

²⁹ Laurence Zuckerman, "FDR's Jewish Problem." *The Nation*, accessed October 23, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/fdrs-jewish-problem/>.

³⁰ "American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Refugee Aid," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed December 11, 2017,

Additionally, "It funded orphanages, children's centers, schools, hospitals, housing committees, public kitchens, and various cultural institutions."³¹ Thus, the Joint Distribution Committee fulfilled the large humanitarian gap while the U.S. lagged behind.

The U.S. President at the time, Franklin D. Roosevelt, also played a role in responding to the Jewish question. However, "The subject of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's relationship with the Jewish community is complicated, multidimensional, and contentious."³² FDR's responses to the Nazi regime and the Holocaust are clouded with political and economic motivations. According to Richard Breitman's description in *FDR and the Jews*,

The first term Roosevelt did little to assist Jews in Germany. He failed to speak out against Nazi persecution of Jews, to try to put public pressure on Adolf Hitler, or to rally the world's democracies against Hitler's anti-Semitic policies. During the worst economic crisis in U.S. history, this Roosevelt put recovery, reform, and party-building well ahead of other priorities.³³

Breitman and Lichtman also assert that President Roosevelt was different from

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005367>.

³¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Refugee Aid."

³² NPR Staff, "FDR and the Jews' Puts a President's Compromises in Context," National Public Radio, accessed December 11, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2013/03/18/174125891/fdr-and-the-jews-puts-roosevelts-compromises-in-context>.

³³ Breitman and Lichtman, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1935*, 315.

many of the people in his cabinet in an important way: he was not anti-Semitic. They note,

FDR's father raised him to not be anti-Semitic at a time when anti-Semitism was common to their class. During his presidency, however, Roosevelt feared that expressions of his concern for the Jews of Europe would [further] inflame anti-Semitism in the U.S. According to Lichtman, that fear affected how FDR and other leaders of the era dealt with the Jewish question.³⁴

Regardless of his early inaction, President Roosevelt is still cited as having “reacted more decisively to Nazi crimes against Jews than any other world leader of his time.”³⁵ Additionally, “We tend, today, to look back and say he didn't do this or he didn't do that. The people who lived in his world saw him against the context of who else was there. And they appreciated the fact that he was better than his predecessors and his rivals.”³⁶ In some ways, FDR did indeed encourage action, but mainly as the war was nearing its end. FDR perhaps later regretted his inaction at the beginning of the war, because he took steps to protect European Jews, specifically in January 1944:

Roosevelt signed an executive order establishing the War Refugee Board (WRB) to facilitate the rescue of imperiled refugees. With the assistance of the

American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the World Jewish Congress, as well as many other relief groups in the United States, the WRB helped to rescue or protect tens of thousands of Jews in Hungary, Romania, and elsewhere in Europe.³⁷

Contrary to Roosevelt's end-of-war actions, other evidence points to the anti-Semitic attitudes embodied by the U.S. government officials directing immigration policy during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Medoff claims, “Officials in our State Department...have been guilty not only of gross procrastination and willful failure to act, but even of willful attempts to prevent action from being taken to rescue Jews from Hitler.”³⁸ Author Barbara Bailin commented on the State Department officials' willful attempts to prevent action:

In the United States, the four government officials who controlled American immigration policy with respect to Germany were themselves anti-Semitic. These officials, primarily senior management within the State Department and Foreign Service Officers (FSOs), manipulated the criteria governing the issuance of visas to restrict the entry of German Jewish refugees were under the authority of restrictive immigration legislation that had existed for years. State Department officials used a variety

³⁴ NPR Staff, “FDR and the Jews' Puts a President's Compromises in Context,” <https://www.npr.org/2013/03/18/174125891/fdr-and-the-jews-puts-roosevelts-compromises-in-context>

³⁵ Breitman and Lichtman, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1935*, 315.

³⁶ NPR Staff, “FDR and the Jews' Puts a President's Compromises in Context.”

³⁷ “United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1941-1952,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed October 23, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007094>.

³⁸ Medoff, *Blowing the Whistle on Genocide: Josiah E. Dubois, Jr., and the Struggle for a U.S. Response to the Holocaust*, 40.

of techniques to restrict German Jewish immigration to the United States.³⁹

One of the various techniques used to restrict immigration included the tightening of “visa policies for immigrants and nonimmigrants.”⁴⁰ This decision was made “out of fear that the Nazis could smuggle spies and saboteurs in with refugees.”⁴¹ Another restriction method included a “more intensive examination of aliens required for security reasons.”⁴² These justifications are often criticized, however, because “under the pretext of security reasons so many difficulties have been placed in the way of refugees obtaining visas that it is no wonder that the admission of refugees [to the U.S.] does not come anywhere near the quota.”⁴³

As an Italian Jew entered the Auschwitz concentration camp during the war, a guard said to them, “There is no why here.”⁴⁴ This statement encapsulates the unexplainable evils that occurred during the Holocaust in Europe. The systematic violence, oppression, and murder of the European Jews affected the moral compass of every global citizen and

still does today. Unfortunately, the U.S. response to the horrors of the Holocaust tainted our country’s moral record. The evidence provided shows that anti-Semitism did indeed shape U.S. immigration policy towards Jewish refugees during the Holocaust. Although President Roosevelt attempted to steer the U.S. towards a more inclusive society, the anti-Semitic attitudes of other government officials as well as the American electorate made it hard to do so. Thankfully, the creation of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Roosevelt’s executive order establishing the War Refugee Board improved the U.S. standing with regards to the Jewish question. Even with these efforts made to assist Jews fleeing the Nazis towards the end of the war, however, the U.S. could have done more to help. One author noted, “For every refugee who came to this country, many more who could have been saved died in Hitler’s extermination chambers.”⁴⁵ The government’s tightening of security examinations for immigration during the Holocaust prevented many Jews from being able to enter the U.S. This historical example is not unlike what is currently happening with our country’s policy on Syrian refugees. In fact, “The number of people forcibly displaced from their homes is the highest since [Jews during] World War II...12 million Syrians — more than half the country’s population — have been forced from their homes.”⁴⁶ The

³⁹ Bailin, “The Influence of Anti-Semitism on United States Immigration Policy with Respect to German Jews During 1933-1939,” 1.

⁴⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1941-1952.”

⁴¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1941-1952.”

⁴² Medoff, *Blowing the Whistle on Genocide: Josiah E. Dubois, Jr., and the Struggle for a U.S. Response to the Holocaust*, 44.

⁴³ Medoff, *Blowing the Whistle on Genocide: Josiah E. Dubois, Jr., and the Struggle for a U.S. Response to the Holocaust*, 44.

⁴⁴ Kunz, “Remembering the Unexplainable: The Holocaust, Memory, and Public Policy,” 45.

⁴⁵ Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed: United States Policy Toward Jewish Refugees, 1938-1945*, 36.

⁴⁶ Jason Beaubien, “5 Surprising Facts About the Refugee Crisis,” National Public Radio, accessed December 11, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/06/20/533634405/five-surprising-facts-about-the-refugee-crisis>.

current anti-Muslim sentiments among constituents and government officials alike led to policy changes on immigration quotas from the Middle East, such as the travel ban on Muslims emigrating to the U.S proposed earlier this year. Just as the Holocaust was a moral question, many Americans see the Syrian refugee crisis as the moral question of our era. As one journalist noted, “America was founded on the ideal of refuge. Indifference is a betrayal of its founding mission.”⁴⁷ As the U.S. faces current and future moral questions of immigration, the lessons of the harm of indifference during the Holocaust should guide our country’s policy as we take sides and refuse to stay silent.

⁴⁷ David Wolpe, “The U.S. Has a Moral Obligation to Help Syrian Refugees,” *Time Magazine*, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://time.com/4024901/the-u-s-has-a-moral-obligation-to-help-syrian-refugees/>.

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