Accessory to Genocide? An Exploration of America's Response to the Holocaust

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Abstract

In considering America’s reaction to the Holocaust, scholars must address serious charges that America bears some culpability for what happened. A survey of prominent historical studies and contemporary documents such as newspaper articles, committee reports, and other government documents prove America had some knowledge of the Holocaust, but did little in response. Considering the United States’ knowledge of the situation in Germany, America’s restrictive immigration policy in the 1930s makes her at least partially responsible for some of the lives lost. Other measures to stop the Holocaust, such as rescue, ransom, or bombing attempts, would not have been feasible or effective.
Accessory to Genocide? An Exploration of America’s Response to the Holocaust

In his classic study of the Holocaust, David Wyman argues, “The Nazis were the murderers, but we [the United States] were the all too passive accomplices.”¹Wyman’s statement lies in sharp contrast to the views of William Rubenstein who claims, “... no Jews who perished during the Nazi Holocaust could have been saved by any action which the Allies could have taken at the time ... Hitler, the Nazis and their accomplices—and only they--bear full and total responsibility for the Holocaust.”² These contrasting statements concerning America’s responsibility and role during the Holocaust represent opposite extremes in historical analysis. Germany’s systematic murder of six million people during World War II evokes volatile and emotional reactions even from scholars who attempt to study it over sixty years later. Many express understandable feelings of shock, horror, and anger that such an atrocity occurred and that the beacon of democracy, the United States of America, allowed it.

When studying the Holocaust, most people rightly declare that no such atrocity should ever happen. At times such feelings of shock and anger translate into thoughts that the United States and other democracies should not have allowed it to happen and could have done something to prevent it. Much recent scholarship on the Holocaust agrees with David Wyman in accusing the United States of being a willing accomplice to the Holocaust because of its failure to ease its immigration policy, rescue Holocaust victims, or bomb the concentration camps. In reaction to this academic trend, historians such as William D. Rubenstein gravitate toward the opposite extreme and declare that no

change in U.S. policies at the time could have saved any lives. As with most historical and ethical questions, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. While both the American government and people had sufficient knowledge of German persecution of the Jews in the 1930s and the Holocaust during World War II to take action, the only effective measure within their power would have been liberalization of immigration policies in the late 1930s. Other actions such as rescue or bombing efforts would most likely have failed.

Before examining America’s response to the Holocaust, historians must consider how much knowledge the U.S. government and public had about the events occurring in Germany under Adolf Hitler’s regime. From the earliest persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany to the culmination of the Final Solution, both the U.S. government and the American public had access to information about the plight of German Jews, though such reports often received little attention. Furthermore, social attitudes and preoccupation with the war meant that the United States failed to recognize the fate of the Jews as unique and remained reluctant to take action on their behalf.

Even in the early years of Hitler’s regime, the American public had access to information regarding the treatment of the Jews. Historian Deborah Lipstadt argues, “There was practically no aspect of the Nazi horror which was not publicly known in some detail long before the camps were opened in 1945.”3 The American Jewish Committee published a pamphlet in 1933 entitled, *The Jews in Nazi Germany*, with the purpose of educating Americans about the sufferings of the Jews under Hitler. The pamphlet contained reports of German efforts to exclude Jewish culture and ideas from

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society by ridding libraries of Jewish works. Newspapers further testified that Jews faced discrimination as the Nazis sought to eliminate them from professions such as medicine and law and enforced boycotts of Jewish stores and businesses, even shutting them down in the name of “hygienic control.” The New York Times included stories of Americans who fled Germany soon after the Nazis took control. Other media outlets reported that Germany practiced censorship of all media and secretly persecuted the Jews, expelling many from the country, including “. . . some of the best brains in her financial world and many of the best in commerce, medicine, the law and arts.” As the situation for Jews in Germany became worse, Americans had access to information about it, but newspapers often ran short stories that were relegated to back pages. Further, most Americans remained preoccupied with the Depression; consequently, news of Nazi did not make much of an impression on the average casual newspaper reader.

In the late 1930s, several events highlighted the U.S. attitude regarding Nazi policies toward the Jews. In 1935 Germany passed the Nuremburg laws with much anti-Semitic pomp and rhetoric. The laws sought to further separate Jews from the rest of German society, denying them citizenship, access to public schools, and the right to marry Aryans. The move came the year before Berlin was scheduled to hold the 1936 Olympic Games. Germany’s new attacks on the Jews ignited a controversy over whether the United States should attend the Olympics or boycott them as a symbol of protest against Germany’s policies. Starting as early as 1934 the American Olympic Committee

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5 Berlino Tageblatt, May 14, 1933 America Views the Holocaust, 13.
7 Wyman, 20.
8 Newsweek, “Germany: Hitler Decrees Swastika Reich Flag; Bars Intermarriage; Relegates Jews to the Dark Ages,” September 21, 1935 in America Views the Holocaust, 55-58.
sought assurances from Berlin that non-Aryans would be treated fairly at the Olympic Games. While they received official promises of impartiality, reports of mistreatment belied German intentions and led Catholic and Jewish groups, labor unions, the New York Times, and some Protestant organizations to push for a boycott to condemn Germany’s cruelty.\(^9\) Ernest Lee Jahncke, a German-American member of the International Olympic Committee wrote, “... under the domination of the Nazi government the German sports authorities have violated and are continuing to violate every requirement of fair play in the conduct of sports in Germany ...”\(^10\) Even though the United States attended the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, the issue of race would not go away.\(^11\)

In November 1938 the Nazis carried out what Louis Lochner called “... the most terrible experience in all my life... the anti-Semitic orgy of November 10 and days following.”\(^12\) This event would later be known as Kristallnacht, or the “night of broken glass.” Nazi party members unleashed vicious violence against the Jews, destroying property and beating, raping, and killing those that crossed their path. More than 90 Jews lost their lives in the violence.\(^13\) After Kristallnacht many German Jews gave up their illusions about staying in their country and determined to emigrate, precipitating a refugee crisis for Europe and the United States.

While the Nazis persecuted and at times murdered Jews in the late 1930s, the Holocaust, which is the German attempt to systematically eliminate the Jews as race, did not begin until at least 1939. Germany’s invasion of Poland in September 1939

\(^9\) Abzug, 61.
\(^11\) Abzug, 70.
\(^12\) Louis Lochner, “Letter to Betty and Bobby,” November 28, 1938 in America Views the Holocaust, 73.
\(^13\) Abzug, 54.
inaugurated new policies toward Jews and others who threatened German power that eventually led to the Holocaust. Historians debate whether Hitler planned to destroy the Jews from the beginning of his regime or whether those plans developed during the war. Christopher R. Browning argues that the Nazis had always been decisively committed to ending the 'Jewish problem,' but they searched for various solutions including forced emigration and expulsion before embarking on a course of mass murder which is known as the Holocaust.\(^{14}\) The tactics used in Poland were part of the Nazi search for such a solution and provided an early opportunity for the Nazis to experiment with various approaches to their war against 'inferior' races. In Poland, the Nazis defined their enemy in racial terms and used a new level of brutality to eliminate the Polish elite that could challenge German power.\(^{15}\) The Nazis used the *Einsatzgruppen* to kill Poland's upper classes and ordinary civilians in Operation TANNENBURG.\(^{16}\) The *Einsatzgruppen's* practice of shooting civilians in Poland set a precedent for the brutality against Jews that occurred on a larger scale when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union.\(^{17}\) While Nazi policy toward the Jews of Europe in 1939 remained focused on forced emigration and resettlement to places such as Madagascar, the tactics used in Poland intensified German animosity and violence toward the Jews that would become fully manifest in the Final Solution.\(^{18}\)

Despite the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Poland and the Soviet Union, the Nazis did not officially adopt the Final Solution until 1942. By this time, Germany had


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 228.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 234.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 233-235.
already declared war against the United States; thus, Germany had no diplomatic reason to curb its cruelty towards the Jews as a means of preserving American neutrality.\textsuperscript{19} The Einsatzgruppen tactics of shooting individuals proved ‘inefficient’ in the Soviet Union and psychologically harmful to the executioners and thus the Nazis believed they needed a more effective solution. At the Wannsee Conference in 1942, Nazis leaders officially adopted a policy of destroying the Jews as a race through mass murder.\textsuperscript{20} Conference attendees used such terms “liquidation” and “extermination” to describe their plans for the Jews. The only question remaining was the method of killing.\textsuperscript{21} The Nazis eventually decided on using tactics they had established in 1941 and began killing their victims in the gas chambers of the concentration camps.\textsuperscript{22} The Final Solution proved to be more efficient than previous approaches and quickly destroyed Jews en masse. If prisoners did not die on the marches to the concentration camps from disease, hunger, or exposure, the gas chambers that waited for them would carry out their grisly work.\textsuperscript{23} Most historians agree that U.S. intelligence officials were aware of some of the Nazi atrocities in the extermination camps, though the American public generally had only piecemeal information due to sporadic and scant media coverage.\textsuperscript{24}

While the American government had received reports of severe Nazi persecution of Jews based solely on their racial or religious background, it did not receive official confirmation that the Germans intended on eliminating the Jews as a group until late 1942. Initial reports reached the State Department by August, 1942, but skeptical

\textsuperscript{19} Browning, 410.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 413.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 413.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 424.
\textsuperscript{23} Abzurg, 109-111.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 111.
officials requested the information be kept secret until they could confirm it and thus the public did not receive the information until November.\textsuperscript{25} Confirmation of Nazi practices came from a prominent German industrialist whose contributions to the German war effort gave him access to confidential information regarding the Jews. The businessman contacted Dr. Gerhart Riegner, the representative of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, who informed the U.S. Consulate in Geneva in August.\textsuperscript{26} Howard Elting, Jr., the American Vice Consul in Geneva, sent a memorandum to the Secretary of State in Washington, reporting Riegner's information that the Nazis aimed at killing three to four million Jews in occupied territories.\textsuperscript{27} While Elting could not confirm the information, he stressed to his superiors his impression that Riegner was "... a serious and balanced individual and that he would never have come to the Consulate with the above report if he had not had confidence in his informant's reliability and if he did not seriously consider that the report might well contain an element of truth."\textsuperscript{28} Elting could not prove Riegner's report, but took it seriously enough to encourage his superiors to examine it closely.

Other State Department officials treated Riegner's claims about the Holocaust with much more skepticism than did Elting. A separate telegram from Bern emphasized that the Legation could not verify the accuracy of Riegner's report and warned, "The report has earmarks of war rumor inspired by fear and what is commonly understood to

\textsuperscript{25} Wyman, 42.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 43.
be the actually miserable condition of these refugees who face decimation as result [sic] physical maltreatment persecution and scarcely endurable privations malnutrition and disease."\(^{29}\) Mid-level State Department officials dismissed the reports as intelligence on the fact that the Germans used Jews for forced labor, not as a confirmation of genocide. The Department also attempted to limit news of related events coming from Switzerland in an inexcusable effort to avoid dealing with the issue.\(^{30}\)

It is impossible to tell how much longer it would have been before America’s confirmation of the Holocaust became public had it not been for another series of events. On September 2, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles received information regarding the Holocaust from British intelligence and passed it along to American Rabbi Stephen Wise, a prominent Jewish leader involved in both the American Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress. While Wise attempted to inform the government and provide some help for the Jews, the next months brought few results. Finally, in late November, 1942, Welles received confirmation of the Riegner report from the American Legation in Switzerland and granted Wise permission to publicize knowledge of the Final Solution.\(^{31}\) In his autobiography, Wise recorded Welles’ words to him, “For reasons you will understand, I cannot give these to the press, but there is no reason why you should not. It might even help if you did.”\(^{32}\) On November 24, 1942 Rabbi Wise held a press conference to reveal the news of the Holocaust to the people of the United States.

\(^{29}\) Telegram to the Secretary of State.

\(^{30}\) Wyman, 43-44.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 47-49.

David Wyman provides an accurate summary of the impact of Rabbi Wise's announcement when he writes, "From then on, the news of Hitler's plan to annihilate the Jews was available to everyone in the democratic world who cared to know. But those not especially concerned were hardly confronted with the problem, because the news media gave it little prominence." While major newspapers reported the story, only five of nineteen major papers featured it on the front page and two did not carry it at all. The *Chicago Daily Tribune*’s November 25, 1942 edition reported Wise’s announcement that 4 million Jews had been killed in the Nazis’ “extermination campaign.” The *Washington Post*’s entry consisted of two brief paragraphs and had a skeptical tone. The headline ran, “2 Million Jews Slain, Rabbi Wise Asserts” and the article emphasized the news as Dr. Wise’s claims, rather than confirmed U.S. intelligence. *The New York Times* gave more emphasis and sense of urgency to the news of the Holocaust than the other two papers. On November 25, 1942, it reported that 250,000 Polish Jews had been killed in a scheme to eliminate all the Jews and that Dr. Wise had confirmed the information. The article’s wording was unmistakable. It used terms such as “extermination” and “complete liquidation” in referring to the Nazis’ goals for the Jewish population in Poland. All three of these papers failed to put Dr. Wise’s announcement on the front page though. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported it on page 4, *The Washington Post*, on page 6, and the *New York Times*, on page 10. Such limited coverage was typical of American media during World War II. News of the Holocaust was

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33 Wyman, 61.
35 “2 Million Jews Slain by the Nazis, Dr. Wise Avers,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 25, 1942.
available, but one had to follow international affairs closely in order to glean the necessary information. Jewish newspapers and liberal papers featured news of the Holocaust, but the general public often did not read such periodicals.

Despite meager media coverage, knowledge of the Holocaust slowly trickled into the American consciousness and found varied responses. Ben Hecht, an American-Jewish writer, sought to reveal the atrocities committed against the Jews and impress their fate upon the memories of Americans. His piece published in the February 1943 edition of *Readers' Digest* recounted the massacre of two million Jews by the Nazis and called America to “Remember Us.”38 Such articles increased American awareness and help build the case against America’s inaction. Information about the Holocaust did provoke some response from Americans. In April 1943 the *Washington Post* reported on a pageant staged in Constitution Hall to commemorate the murders of the Jews and help push for increased immigration quotas at the upcoming Bermuda Conference.39 Some Americans reacted to news of the Holocaust with anger and calls for action. For example, Freda Kirchwey, editor of *Nation*, made special pleas for attention to the Holocaust using vigorous and impassioned language. She argued that the lack of U.S. action constituted complicity with Germany’s brutality. America was as guilty as Hitler. She wrote, “In this country, you and I and the President and the Congress and the State Department are accessories to the crime and share Hitler’s guilt.”40 Kirchwey demanded increased immigration quotas. The above authors illustrate that some Americans cared

38 Ben Hecht, “Remember Us,” *Readers’ Digest*, February 1943 in *America Views the Holocaust*, 146-149.
deeply about what the Nazis were doing to the Jews in Europe and advocated action against it. Unfortunately, their pleas produced few results.

Modern readers who benefit from hindsight may be tempted to hastily condemn Americans for their apathy when they had information available concerning the Holocaust. In order to understand the media’s limited coverage and the public’s insufficient interest, one must examine the historical context. When newspapers first reported limited news of the Final Solution, America was engaged in a total war with the Axis countries that dominated policymakers’ thinking and the public’s attention. Rabbi Stephen Wise noted to a colleague shortly after a rally in September 1942, “... in time of war it is very difficult to get people excited, generally speaking, about atrocities. All of war is basically such an atrocity that it is difficult to move people with respect to special atrocities...” Americans viewed German behavior holistically and recognized that the German government treated all of its citizens harshly, not just the Jews. Thus, news of Nazi cruelty did not surprise them. The news encountered initial skepticism as well because during World War I rumors of German barbarities had been widely circulated only to be discredited later. People were cautious about jumping to conclusions a second time. Further, during World War II, the term ‘genocide’ did not even exist in the English language. Most people had difficulty understanding that the German government planned to destroy an entire population simply because of their race. Most people

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recognized that persecution of the Jews occurred, but could not grasp its scale or intent.\(^{45}\)

While the Holocaust was a unique event, the American public and policymakers failed to distinguish it from the other atrocities of war and thus did not give it the attention it warranted.

Another reason for the limited response to the news of the Holocaust was anti-Semitism in the United States at the time, both among the public and government leaders. During the Great Depression, the U.S. government severely limited immigration so as to ensure that the limited number of available jobs went to American citizens, not foreigners. President Herbert Hoover further ordered the administration to be careful not to admit those who might become a ‘public charge.’\(^{46}\) This standard proved instrumental in preventing Jews from entering the United States during World War II. The quota system favored Nordic or Aryan peoples over Jews.\(^{47}\) Many Americans blamed the Jews for the Depression as well, contributing to stereotypes of Jews as linked with communism, Bolshevism or economic problems.\(^{48}\) Statistics demonstrate that during World War II, many Americans still maintained negative feelings toward Jews. Leonard Dinnerstein notes that at this time more than 40% of the American public would support or sympathize with a campaign against the Jews, over half would not be opposed to an anti-Semitic Congressional candidate, and almost 25% would be more inclined to support such a candidate.\(^{49}\) Anti-Semitic organizations existed in the United States, including one led by Catholic priest, Charles E. Coughlin, whose popular weekly radio show strongly

\(^{45}\) Rubenstein, 169.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 61.
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 6.
criticized Jews. Anti-semitic groups often distributed propaganda against the Jews, desecrated Jewish synagogues and cemeteries, and incited fights with Jewish youth in cities such as New York and Boston.\textsuperscript{50} Such hostile feelings made immigration to the United States difficult for those fleeing the Third Reich.

Anti-Semitism is significant to historians examining the U.S. response to the Holocaust for two main reasons. First, it helps to explain why Americans reacted to the news of the Holocaust the way they did. While anti-Semitism is taboo in today's society, the fact that people tolerated and even accepted it before and during World War II meant that many Americans felt little sympathy for or obligation to help the Jews. Thus, even if American media had been more attentive to the Holocaust, anti-Semitism meant that knowledge would not necessarily have created action.\textsuperscript{51} Second, anti-Semitism made rescue and relief efforts on behalf of Holocaust victims politically difficult if not impossible. While most people dislike the idea that government officials put political considerations over saving lives, historians must recognize the decision-making process of actors at this time. Some government officials refused to take action because of their prejudice toward the Jews. Other officials who were willing to help had to be careful not to give the appearance of special treatment for the Jews for fear of a public backlash that would pressure Congress to ban immigration entirely or a ban all assistance for the Jews. Thus some leaders concluded that a small trickle of help for the Jews was the best they could do and better than no aid at all.\textsuperscript{52} A balanced analysis of America's knowledge and response toward the Holocaust must consider political constraints on government action.

\textsuperscript{50} Wyman, 9-11.
\textsuperscript{51} Breitman and Kraut, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 63.
In addition to evaluating the information Americans had regarding the Holocaust, the historians must then examine what actions the American government and people took on behalf of the Jews compared to what was possible. Historians often point to three areas where different U.S. policies could have saved lives during the Holocaust: liberalizing immigration policies, initiating rescue and relief efforts, and bombing the death camps or rail lines leading to them. In evaluating each area, one must keep in mind important historical principles, especially considering the emotional and horrific nature of the Holocaust. Today, the Holocaust looms as the epitome of human cruelty and evil; thus, modern historians often conclude that the Allies should have taken any action possible to stop the deadly work of the extermination chambers. While that may be true, modern historians must be careful not to judge the actions of the past by current knowledge and values. An objective analysis must consider the political environment at the time, the focus on the war effort, and the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust. Also, before criticizing the United States for failure to take a specific action that could have helped victims of the Holocaust, historians must prove someone proposed such an action at the time and that it had a chance of success.\textsuperscript{53} Objective consideration of which policies were possible and potentially successful is necessary in order to determine whether the United States was a passive accomplice to the Final Solution, a guiltless bystander, or stood somewhere in between.

Henry Feingold echoes the sentiments of many historians when he claims, “The visa system [of the United States] became literally an adjunct to Berlin’s murderous plan for the Jews.”\textsuperscript{54} So wide is the consensus that the U.S. immigration policy unjustly

\textsuperscript{53} Breitman and Kraut, 2.
\textsuperscript{54} Feingold, \textit{The Politics of Rescue}, 296.
prevented Jews from fleeing Nazi Germany that William Rubenstein compares challenging this idea to challenging that the earth revolves around the sun.\(^{55}\) While U.S. immigration policy erected huge bureaucratic barriers to entry, such as waiting periods, cumbersome visa applications, background checks, and requirements that immigrants have sponsorship by an American citizen, it is far from certain that changes in immigration policy would have saved large numbers of Jews or changed the course of the Final Solution. Still, officials should have relaxed immigration policies to save as many lives as possible, especially in the late 1930s when Jews could have still left Germany. Before and during World War II, the United States had restrictive immigration laws, and the State Department interpreted the laws as narrowly as possible. A change in these policies would have saved some lives, but would not have altered the result of the Final Solution significantly.

Even before the Great Depression the United States severely restricted immigration through a quota system and obstructive policies. From the time Hitler first came to power, the U.S. government experienced internal struggles regarding what its immigration policy should be. In 1933, as Hitler’s persecution of the Jews increased, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt expressed willingness to admit prominent Jews into the United States as a ‘moral gesture.’\(^{56}\) He charged Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins with arranging for such events. Perkins was sympathetic toward immigrants and worked to fill the immigration quotas and admit more people to the United States, but she encountered resistance from other departments and officials. Commissioner of Immigration Colonel Daniel MacCormack resisted Perkins’ efforts because he did not see

\(^{55}\) Rubenstein, 16.
\(^{56}\) Breitman and Kraut, 12.
a physical threat to the Jews at the time and worried about employment rates in the United States. The State Department also wanted to limit immigration, using such rules as the ‘public liability’ charge and the requirement that immigrants have close relatives in the United States who could support them.  

MacCormack also shared a fear that was common among the bureaucracy that if they filled immigration quotas with Jews, Congress would respond negatively and limit immigration even further. Thus, many in the bureaucracy sought to prevent their policies from attracting attention in order to keep Congress and the public from becoming involved.

In the years immediately preceding World War II, President Roosevelt and the State Department relaxed immigration quotas. In the wake of Kristallnacht in 1938, President Roosevelt allowed nearly 15,000 people from Germany and Austria who were in the United States on visitor’s permits to remain even if their permits had expired. In a press conference on November 18, 1938 he told reporters, “... I cannot, in any decent humanity, throw them out.” The administration also increased the quotas to 40,000 people per year from Germany. While the change in policy was an improvement, the quota was still extremely small considering the number of Jews living in Germany. Complex visa procedures also meant that the quotas remained unfilled. Public opinion once again limited U.S. policies. A Gallup poll conducted shortly after Kristallnacht showed that most Americans opposed what the Germans did to the Jews, but 77% still opposed admitting more Jewish exiles. Still, March 1938-September 1939 was the

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57 Ibid., 12, 16-19.
58 Ibid., 27.
60 Wyman, 124.
61 Breitman and Kraut, 64.
most liberal phase of U.S. immigration as 20,000 people from Germany came to America.\(^2\)  

While outbreak of World War II brought many more refugees to the United States, it also increased the State Department’s caution concerning who should be admitted. Some of the restrictive practices included the ‘relatives rule’ which held that anyone with relatives in enemy territory had to undergo a special screening process that could take up to 9 months.\(^3\) The visa application form from July 1943 was four feet in length, front and back, and required each applicant to have two American sponsors.\(^4\) Additionally, the State Department required proof that the applicant was in ‘acute danger’ before he or she could enter the country. The danger requirement excluded those trying to enter from or through Spain, Portugal and North Africa.\(^5\) Otto Frank, father of Anne Frank whose diary is now famous, faced the frustrations of American visa policies. In 1941 he attempted to get himself and his family out of the Nazi-occupied Netherlands, but failed despite his connections in America. The fact that the Franks had relatives living in Nazi Germany made it nearly impossible to obtain visas because of strict American laws. The Franks were only some of the 300,000 people on the waiting list to immigrate to the United States.\(^6\) The tragic fate of the young girl, Anne Frank, and her family demonstrates the potentially dire consequences of America’s tight immigration policies.

\(^2\) Ibid., 74.
\(^3\) Wyman, 127.
\(^5\) Wyman, 127.
Additionally, Americans limited immigration out of fear that a ‘fifth column’ would enter the United States. Originally used during the Spanish Civil War, the ‘fifth column’ referred to people in Madrid who supported Francisco Franco against the Spanish Republic. U.S. officials feared that the Nazis might send spies to the United States as immigrants. Both State Department officials and the President expressed fears that spies might enter the nation as refugees. A 1940 Roper poll in Fortune magazine showed that 71% of the American people thought that Germany had started organizing a fifth column in the United States. Media and sensational books fanned public fears and contributed to even more restrictionist sentiment. Consequently, the administration adopted harsher policies to counter the threat such as fingerprinting for all refugees and wiretapping phones of those the Attorney General considered suspicious. While the government overstated the threat of a fifth column and law enforcement officials charged few refugees for spying, the fear such an idea created further intensified the already restrictionist atmosphere in Washington.

If American immigration laws were not already tight enough, enforcement of those laws by State Department and other officials kept even more people out of the United States and ensured that the government did not fill the small quotas. In particular, historians have sharply criticized Breckenridge Long, head of the Special War Problems Division of the State Department and assistant Secretary of State, who had jurisdiction over refugee matters. While historians continue to debate whether or not Long was anti-Semitic, he favored enforcing immigration restrictions as narrowly as possible out of

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67 Breitman and Kraut, 117.  
68 Ibid., 120-122.  
69 Ibid., 117.  
70 Ibid., 123.  
71 Ibid., 125.
fears of a fifth column or Congressional backlash to more liberal policies. Long’s efforts blocked 75% of immigration during the time he controlled policies and also prevented funding for organizations such as the Intergovernmental Committee of Refugees. Long’s own words demonstrate his and many other officials’ attitude toward immigration:

"We can delay and effectively stop for a temporary period of indefinite length the number of immigrants into the United States. We could do this by simply advising our consuls, to put every obstacle in the way and to require additional evidence and to resort to various administrative devices which would postpone and postpone and postpone the granting of the visas."  

Based on conversations he had with President Roosevelt, Long believed that the President supported his efforts to postpone the granting of visas for as long as possible. Long viewed himself as fulfilling a vital role in protecting the nation from spies and sought to apply the visa laws uniformly, if narrowly. Still, his personal biases against the Jews may have been a factor as he linked communism with Judaism and at one point praised Mein Kampf for its opposition to the Jews. The practices of bureaucrats such as Long often determined government policies as a whole. Even if Roosevelt wanted a more liberal policy, his preoccupation with the war and hands-off approach as president prevented direct intervention into such affairs. Thus, Long and other State Department

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72 Ibid., 137-138.
73 Ibid., 136.
75 Breitman and Kraut, 248-249.
76 Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 135.
77 Breitman and Kraut, 248-249.
officials could allow prejudice and fear to influence their application of visa policies and prevent immigration into the United States.

One of the most dramatic examples of the deadly effects of America’s restrictive immigration quotas was the fate of the passenger ship the St. Louis. In June 1939 the St. Louis sailed from Germany to Havana, carrying refugees that all had landing permits for which they had paid. The Cubans declared the permits invalid on May 5 and did not allow the passengers to disembark in Havana. The passengers met the same response in Miami. After days of waiting and rejection from stubborn immigration officers, the St. Louis returned to Europe.\(^78\) The captain found refuge for the passengers in France and other European countries. His success proved short-lived though because within a few years the Nazis overran these countries and deported many of the passengers to Auschwitz and other concentration camps.\(^79\) For the 937 passengers on the St. Louis, nearly all of whom were fleeing the Third Reich, U.S. and Cuban immigration policy proved fatal.

While the St. Louis provides a dramatic illustration of the lives lost as a result of restrictive immigration policies, changes in U.S. policies would not have saved massive numbers of people or altered the course of the Final Solution. In the early years of Hitler’s regime when Jews could have fled, few were willing to go. Many of them resisted leaving their homes and country to live in nations that they considered their enemies less then twenty years ago.\(^80\) German Jews had experienced persecution before and thought that Hitler’s policies were only temporary and their lives would soon return

\(^{79}\) Abzug, 85.
\(^{80}\) Rubenstein, 23.
to normal.\textsuperscript{81} Even when the Nazis put them in ghettos, many Jews did not believe they would die, but thought that working with their captors would best ensure their survival.\textsuperscript{82} Also, more liberal immigration policies would not have saved Jews living outside of Germany in areas the Nazis would eventually conquer. These Jews had no way of knowing the danger they were in and would not have left their homes.\textsuperscript{83} Also, the Holocaust did not begin until at least 1939, so there was no way the United States could have predicted the dire need for more immigration in the 1930s. Once the Holocaust began, liberalization would have helped few if any Jews because Hitler would not have released them. Hitler viewed himself and his nation as fighting a race war where only one side could emerge victorious. Once Germany had officially adopted the Final Solution, nothing would convince Hitler to release his captives to the United States or any other neutral nation.\textsuperscript{84} As Lucy Dawidowitz commented, “So long as he commanded the European continent from the Atlantic wall to the gates to Moscow and Leningrad, the fate of the Jews in his grip depended on his, Hitler’s, will.”\textsuperscript{85} A key flaw with much analysis on immigration and rescue efforts is the failure to consider Hitler’s reaction to Allied policies. Ultimately, the United States did not control the fate of the Jews; Hitler did. Thus, while U.S. immigration policies were overly restrictive and changing them could have saved some lives, it is impossible to know for sure how many Jews could have been saved or whether different U.S. policies would have altered or prevented the Holocaust. The number would have been limited.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{82} Feingold, Bearing Witness, 47.
\textsuperscript{83} Rubenstein, 17.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{85} Lucy Dawidowitz, What is the Use of Jewish History? (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 166.
A second general area in which historians claim the United States could have helped the Jews is rescue or relief efforts. Historians argue that the United States should have attempted to get Jews out of Axis territory or provide relief for those under Nazi control. The most prominent proposals include the Transnistria rescue plan, an increased role for the War Refugee Board, and sending supplies to the concentration camps. Most rescue plans failed to account for the war effort and Hitler’s resistance to any interference with the Final Solution.

In the fall of 1942, the Allies encountered one of their first and biggest opportunities to rescue European Jews. "Transnistria" was an area in southeastern Ukraine where the Germans deported more than 150,000 Jews and placed them in concentration camps. The conditions were terrible as the prisoners had little food or shelter and suffered from disease, unsanitary conditions, and violence from the Romanian soldiers who guarded them. An opportunity arose to aid the suffering Jews when Jewish leaders in Romania received an offer to help move 70,000 refugees to neutral areas if the Allies provided the funding (approximately $130 per person). Henry Feingold argues that Hitler would have allowed the scheme as he was anxious to placate the Romanians after the loss of a large part of their army in Russia. While the Transnistria plan seemed like a golden opportunity, there were several problems that would have made it unworkable. For one, the Romanians never made a clear offer. The negotiations that did take place were not between U.S. officials and Romanians leaders, but between the underground Jewish leadership in Romania and several men who

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87 Wyman, 82.
88 Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 182.
claimed to own the Romanian branch of a German shipping company and wanted to help
the Jews. There were several different proposed immigration schemes and Jewish leaders
could never fully verify their genuineness. The negotiations may have been part of a
Nazi scheme to extort money from Jewish organizations or create struggles within these
groups. Such an operation would also have hampered the war efforts on two levels.
First, the Romanians had been fighting with Hitler’s armies at Stalingrad so making an
agreement with them would have potentially angered America’s ally, the Soviet Union.
Also the price for releasing the refugees would have been large and logistics difficult
while there was no guarantee that the Romanians were sincere and the money would not
have gone to them or the Axis. The biggest hurdle would have been getting Hitler’s
approval for such an operation. By 1942 the Final Solution was in full operation and
Hitler was committed to destroying the Jews entirely. Considering Hitler’s obsession
with the Holocaust, Feingold’s optimism that Hitler would agree is unwarranted.

The Transnistria rescue plan shared problems common to all proposals for rescue
during the Holocaust. Most Allied leaders and Jewish Americans believed that winning
the war was the fastest and best way to end the Nazi extermination program. Eleanor
Roosevelt was known for her humanitarian efforts, and she expressed concern for the
plight of the Jews, but even she agreed that winning the war provided the best help for
victims of the Nazis. In an overseas broadcast for the Office of War Information she
stated, “We hope that ways may be found to save as many people as possible, but the best

89 Omir, 1, 5-6. See also, Dawidowitz, 167.
90 Omir, 7.
91 Ibid., 168.
92 Ophir, 11.
way to do that is to win the war as rapidly as possible. . .”93 The nations had mobilized completely for total war against the Germans and a major effort to rescue the Jews could have compromised the war effort, especially since the Allies felt they were in a race against time to prevent the German development of a superweapon.94 Moreover, the Allies had nowhere to move large numbers of Jewish refugees as few nations were willing to accept them.95 Shipping was tight as well, and until mid-1943 Allied commanders considered shipping to be the largest restraint on military actions;96 thus, diverting ships to rescue efforts could have been problematic. As previously mentioned, any rescue attempts to save the victims of the Final Solution ultimately relied on Hitler’s permission, which he would not give. Finally, even if the United States had been completely committed to rescue efforts, she would have failed without the help of other Allies, neutral countries, governments-in-exiles and people in occupied countries. U.S. leadership in rescue efforts would not necessarily have forced others to follow.97 Factors beyond the control of the United States severely limited the prospects for successful rescue efforts.

Efforts at rescue became part of official government policy with the creation of the War Refugee Board in 1944. After several years of inaction on behalf of European Jews, pressure from Congress and the public finally built to the point where Roosevelt had to take some action. The result was that on January 22, 1944 Executive Order 9417 created the War Refugee Board to help aid and rescue victims of the Holocaust. Its

93 Wyman, 148-149.
95 Dinnerstein, 3.
96 Brecher, 430.
97 Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 305.
efforts centered on evacuating Jews from Axis territories, using psychological threats to convince neutrals or Axis allies to stop cooperating with Hitler, and providing relief supplies to the concentration camps. While the War Refugee Board did its best, it lacked sufficient funds to make a difference and often received little cooperation from other departments with the exception of the Treasury Department. U.S. delegations abroad worked with the Board as much as possible, with the exception of Spain. No doubt the War Refugee Board did some good and saved some lives, but it had little power, funding, or time. Historians such as David Wyman argue that had Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board earlier, more lives would have been saved. While that may be true, such a move would have been politically impossible as improved Allied prospects in the war effort partially account for the creation of the War Refugee Board. The War Refugee Board made what changes it could to American policies, but an earlier or increased role for it was not politically or militarily possible.

Another possible way in which the Allies could have aided the Jews was through providing supplies to the prisoners in the concentration camps. Since rescue policies failed or were infeasible, the Allies might have been able to buy time for the victims of the Nazis by providing them with enough food and supplies to last until the Allied armies could liberate them. Beginning in 1943, the International Red Cross sent aid to the concentration camps, and after the creation of the War Refugee Board; the United States expanded efforts to help prisoners, especially Jews. Sending aid to the camps may

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98 Wyman, 214-215.
99 Ibid., 210, 213.
100 Feingold, The Politics of Rescue, 246-247.
101 Dawidowitz, 167.
have been a worthy humanitarian goal, but its effects were limited. For one thing, the Nazis alone determined how much food the Allies could send and who would receive it. When the Red Cross first sent in supplies, it could only address specific inmates by name. Also, the camps prevented the Red Cross from helping those most in need--Jews and ‘unassimilated’ prisoners. Also, the Allies worried that food aid would help the Axis militarily. The Germans could have used the aid to provide for their own populations and armies, thus directly helping their war effort or they may have been relieved of the burden of providing for the Jews, thereby freeing resources for military use. The United States and other organizations did attempt to send relief to the camps, but their efforts were limited by logistics and the Nazi policies.

The final area in which historians generally agree the United States showed complicity with the Holocaust is the failure to bomb the death camps or the rail lines leading to them. The first request to bomb the camps came in mid-1944 from Orthodox Rabbi, Dov Weissmandel and reached the War Refugee Board on June 18. Subsequent requests came from Jacob Rosenheim of the Agudas Israel World Organization, who claimed that bombing would slow deportations to Auschwitz and save lives by enabling the prisoners to hold out until the Allies could free them. The War Refugee Board also requested bombings, saying that though the operation might not be entirely successful, it would signal Allied anger over the camps and possibly save some lives in the future.  

103 Ibid., 830.  
The War Department consistently rejected such requests on the basis that they could not spare air power from the war effort and that the fastest way to stop the death camps was through defeating Hitler.\textsuperscript{107} Since then, historians have condemned the United States by using many of the original arguments for bombing: the bombing would have sent a signal that the Allies disapproved of Germany's actions, saved some lives, and perhaps discouraged Axis countries from cooperating with the Nazis.\textsuperscript{108} The Allies made the correct decision in declining to bomb the camps because such an operation faced military, logistical, and moral barriers while offering dubious chance of success at best.

From a military standpoint, bombing would have diverted key resources from the war effort, while risking valuable aircraft and personnel. In the total war struggle with Germany, the Allies had to muster every resource possible to defeat the Axis. Air power was vital to this strategy.\textsuperscript{109} While bombing was proposed in mid-1944, the Allies did not control the skies of Europe until August 1944,\textsuperscript{110} so bombing could have diverted resources from critical battles. Wyman suggests that using Mosquito fighter-bombers would have provided the ideal weapons for bombing, but the Mosquitos were not stationed anywhere close to Auschwitz at the time, and their crews were highly trained and few in number.\textsuperscript{111} The military could not risk such precious human and military assets.


\textsuperscript{108} Breitman and Kraut, 221. See also, Feingold, \textit{The Politics of Rescue}, 292 and Wyman, 301.

\textsuperscript{109} Kitchens, 241.

\textsuperscript{110} Brecher, 429.

\textsuperscript{111} Kitchens, 261.
From a technical and logistical standpoint, bombing Auschwitz would have been impossible. The Allies lacked sufficient intelligence to plan a bombing raid such as the location and dimension of the targets, their construction, and potential low-flying hazards. Planning such an operation would have taken a considerable amount of time that the Allies did not have. The location of Auschwitz also presented difficulties as it was nearly beyond the range of the closest Allied bases and would require flying through the unpredictably dangerous weather of the Alps. German air defenses in the area could have effectively repulsed a low-level attack and destroyed the Allied planes. Properly targeting the camps would have required perfect visibility and weather which was unlikely. In their insistence that the Allies take action against the Holocaust, some historians often ignore the military factors involved in planning a bombing operation against the camps.

In addition to the military and logistical problems with bombing Auschwitz, the Allied commanders faced a moral dilemma as well. Even under ideal conditions, there was a strong probability that the bombs would fall outside the target area and destroy inmate housing or other locations and thus kill the people they were supposedly saving. Previous bombing raids supported the fear of civilian casualties. An attack on the Amiens jail in February 1944 killed or maimed over 200 prisoners, while guards quickly recaptured those who escaped. In an attack on Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen on March 21, 1945, the Allies lost four out of eighteen Mosquito bombers, two out of

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112 Ibid., 247-248.
113 Ibid., 249.
114 Ibid., 250.
115 Ibid., 251.
116 Ibid., 252.
117 Ibid., 253.
twenty-eight Mustang fighters, and ten airmen. One bomber crashed into a school, killing eighty-three children, ten nuns, and six resistance prisoners in the Gestapo building. Advocates of bombing often point out that the inmates were going to die anyway, but that was far from certain as many survived the Holocaust. Even if the prisoners were going to die, that is hardly a justification for Allied action that would have directly caused their deaths. Even the most extreme circumstances do not justify intentional killing of civilians and non-combatants to send a signal to the enemy.

The final consideration regarding the bombing of Auschwitz is the potential effectiveness of such a plan. Logistically, Allied bombing would have had little impact on the operation of the death camps. Had the Allies bombed rail lines to Auschwitz, the Germans could have used other lines to deport prisoners. Attempts to bomb the railroad lines leading to Rome proved that the Germans had ‘redundant capacity’ and could use alternate routes and quickly rebuild.\(^{119}\) Even if the Allies succeeded in destroying the gas chambers at one death camp, the Germans could have sent prisoners to another.

Bombing the death camps would also have failed to deter the killings. Accusations that the United States had killed inmates at the camp as a result of a bombing raid would have corrupted any signal or moral high ground bombing may have created. Bombing also would not have helped the inmates significantly. There was a good chance that some of them might die directly from the bombing and the experience at the Amiens prison proved that the Germans could quickly recapture the weak and exhausted prisoners.\(^{120}\) Given Hitler’s fanatical commitment to destroying the Jews, it is unlikely that one campaign would have deterred him from continuing the Holocaust. The United

\(^{119}\) Foregger, 412.
\(^{120}\) Dawidowitz, 175.
States had already put diplomatic pressure on Hitler by passing a resolution condemning Nazi war crimes and threatening U.S. retribution. Death of German civilians or soldiers made little difference to Hitler. The British had bombed German cities in retaliation, but Hitler still launched V-2 rockets at London in 1944.\textsuperscript{121} Hitler had already demonstrated his irrational and calloused behavior. Bombing the gas chambers probably would not have changed his attitude or approach toward the Jews. Considering the slim chance of success and the likelihood of causing more deaths, the Allied refusal to bomb Auschwitz should not be considered a failure, but a wise decision.

The Holocaust has generated significant academic study and debate. Because the Holocaust was so horrible and beyond anything previously experienced by western civilization, scholars react strongly to it and have difficulty maintaining their objectivity, thus producing polarizing opinions. Assigning responsibility for the Holocaust plays an important role in attempts to fully deal with it. With regard to the United States, the American government and public knew the Nazis were brutally killing the Jews, though American media failed to give it sufficient attention. The war consumed most of the public focus, and widespread anti-Semitism dampened concern for the Jews of Europe. The American public’s mindset partially determined which policies were politically viable in seeking to help the Jews. American immigration policy proved unnecessarily restrictive, and liberalization certainly would have saved lives as the \textit{St. Louis} example demonstrates. Still, modification of one aspect of American policy could not alter the course of the Final Solution. The United States made some attempts at rescue and relief of the death camps, especially late in the war with the creation of the War Refugee Board, but the success of her efforts was determined more by Nazi policies than American

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 175.
efforts. Finally, bombing the death camps would have proven infeasible, ineffective, and potentially harmful to the inmates without significantly hampering the deadly work of the camps. Only by over-simplifying the facts can one clearly assign blame for the Holocaust, but careful analysis concludes that while the United States should have modified her immigration policies, there was little else she could do to halt the killing. Thus responsibility for the Holocaust lies primarily with its Nazi perpetrators.
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