

War Refugee Board (WRB)

United States government agency dedicated to rescuing and assisting World War II victims. The WRB was established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in January 1944, and ultimately helped to save about 200,000 Jews.

At the end of 1942 the American State Department confirmed reports of the systematic mass murder of European Jewry. Roosevelt was put under pressure by certain government officials to issue a rescue proclamation; in November 1943 Congress debated passing an official resolution. Also at that time the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, was informed of attempts by the State Department to obstruct the rescue process and discourage the absorption of refugees into the United States. Due to the possibility of imminent scandal, Morgenthau's urgent demands, and because Roosevelt did not want Congress to get the credit instead of him, he quickly established the WRB.

Roosevelt made the WRB responsible for carrying out the United States' new government policy of taking all measures within its power to rescue the victims of enemy oppression in imminent danger of death. The agency, run by executive director John Pehle and a staff of 30, made plans to evacuate Jews and other endangered people from enemy territory, find safe havens for them, send relief supplies to Concentration Camps, and use psychological threats such as war crimes trials against the Germans to stop deportations. The rescue programs were put into effect by a small number of WRB workers stationed in Europe.

Officially, the WRB was given much authority. All US government agencies were supposed to cooperate with it, most importantly the State, Treasury, and War departments. However, only the Treasury Department, led by Morgenthau, did its part. In addition, the WRB was strapped for money: Roosevelt only allocated \$1 million for organizational costs. The board had to collect money from private Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to fund the actual rescue programs. American Jews contributed almost \$17 million to the WRB.

In 1944 the WRB set out to rescue Hungarian Jewry. By attracting international attention to the Hungarian government and putting pressure on them, the WRB was able to stop the deportations before all 230,000 Jews of BUDAPEST were swallowed up by the Nazi regime. The board also sent the Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg, and others to protect the Jews of Budapest. The WRB funded Wallenberg's rescue work there.

In August 1944 the WRB brought 982 Jewish refugees from ITALY to a safe haven in Oswego, New York. The board intended to create other such places of asylum, and thus also influence other countries to provide sanctuary for World War II victims. Roosevelt, however, disabled one of the board's most important rescue programs by refusing to establish any other havens besides Oswego.

The board lobbied Roosevelt to publicly condemn the mass murder of Jews by the Nazis. Members also argued that the US army should bomb Auschwitz. This, however, was never done.

By the end of the war in 1945 almost 200,000 Jews had been rescued by the War Refugee Board. About 15,000 Jews and more than 20,000 non-Jews had been evacuated from Nazi domain. At the very least, about 10,000 Jews were protected within Nazi-controlled territory by underground programs funded by the WRB. The board removed the 48,000 Jews in Transnistria to safe areas of Romania. About 120,000 Jews from Budapest also survived due in part to the WRB's activities.

Despite its best intentions, the War Refugee Board was never able to accomplish what it was charged with doing because of the lack of cooperation extended by the United States government and even President Roosevelt. WRB director Pehle described their work as too little, too late. (see also Auschwitz, Bombing of.)