

## American Jewry and the Holocaust

When the Nazis rose to power in Germany during the early 1930s, the Jews living in the United States were not prepared to confront the threat to the Jews of Europe. Most Jews in America at that time were either new immigrants themselves or first generation Americans, reluctant to stand up with confidence as citizens with a say in government policies. In addition, American Jewry was not united and lacked a central representative organization like those that existed in other countries. In fact, it could be said that in the 1930s and 1940s there was no one American Jewish community. Instead, there were small communities that were loosely linked together because they were all Jewish. Partly as a result of the fact that the Jews of America were not unified into one cohesive group with one voice, they were ineffective at rescuing their Jewish brethren in Europe during the Holocaust.

The first evidence of disunity within American Jewry with regard to the Nazi threat was in its failure to agree on how to evaluate that threat when it first reared its head in early 1933. Certain Jewish organizations, like the Jewish Labor Committee, refused to have any dealings with the Nazi government. The American Jewish Committee, which represented the wealthier, more Americanized German Jews, believed that the best way to deal with Hitler was diplomatically and quietly, with behind-the-scenes negotiations. On the other hand, the American Jewish Congress, which represented the less Americanized Eastern European Jewish immigrants, felt that holding protest rallies, demonstrations, and boycotts was a better way to affect the Nazis (see also Boycotts, Anti-Nazi). Some Jews were Zionists, who demanded a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Others were non-Zionists, who did not call for a Jewish state per se, but wanted Palestine to be opened up for Jewish immigration. Anti-Zionists strenuously opposed a Jewish state in Palestine. American Ultra-Orthodox Jews established their own rescue organization, the Va'ad ha-Hatsala (Rescue Committee of United States Orthodox Rabbis), which until 1944 concentrated on rescuing Orthodox Jews, mainly rabbis and rabbinical students. A group of Palestinian Jews active in the United States, called the Bergson Group, took its own particular route: as the group's militant members

did not feel that they owed allegiance to any one Jewish leader or group in the United States, they felt free to pursue unconventional methods of prodding President Franklin D. Roosevelt to rescue European Jews, such as mass demonstrations and public advertisements on the subject. This led to a grave rift between them and American Jewish leaders.

With such disparate ways of dealing with the issue, there was no single American Jewish voice to appeal to the American government for help. The president of the American Jewish Congress, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, did not have direct channels to President Roosevelt, and was forced to appeal to Jews close to the president. Many of those American Jews working in the government were often more American than Jewish, and did not want to take on the responsibility of representing all of American Jewry, nor did they want to risk their jobs on a purely Jewish issue. The only case of a Jew highly placed in the American government speaking out for his fellow Jews was Henry J. Morgenthau, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Treasury. In early January 1944, Morgenthau received written proof that the American State Department was actively sabotaging rescue efforts for Jewish refugees. Morgenthau brought this news to the president, who decided to avoid scandal and give in to Morgenthau's pressure, and establish a government agency that would work on rescuing refugees. Thus, the War Refugee Board (WRB) was born, but in the words of the WRB's director, John Pehle, their ability to make a difference came "too little, too late."

If they were not able to unite on a level of joint leadership, the American Jews were able to cooperate, if only in name, to raise funds for Jews in Europe and Palestine. The United Jewish Appeal, which was established just before the war in 1939, collected \$124 million during the war years. Even more important, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee was able to stay out of politics and do what it needed to do to fund the rescue and sheltering of thousands of Jews who had made their way to the neutral countries of Europe.

Another reason that American Jews were reluctant to take a stand regarding the Nazi threat in Europe was their numbing fear of the antisemitism that existed in the United States at that time. Many prominent Americans were

avowed antisemites, including Charles Lindbergh, America's aviation hero; Henry Ford, the automobile millionaire; and radio personalities Gerald L.K. Smith and Father Charles Coughlin, who broadcast their antisemitic tirades over the airwaves to millions of Americans. Some American Jews did not want to emphasize their Jewishness by speaking out against antisemitism abroad, for fear of losing their jobs or being shunned by their neighbors because of antisemitism close to home.

Nonetheless, after the US government confirmed reports of the "Final Solution" in the fall of 1942, the American Jewish community felt compelled to do something. An organization called the American Jewish Conference was created in August 1943 by the major American Jewish organizations for the purpose of planning their postwar policy. Despite its good intentions, however, the American Jewish community was too divided on the issues to be unified—the American Jewish Conference did not successfully coalesce American Jewry, nor did it gain the recognition of the US government as an authority.

Even if the Jews living in America during the 1930s and 1940s had been a cohesive, unified group with an effective leadership, it is unlikely that they themselves could have altered American war policies. No ethnic group in America possessed that sort of power. The US government wanted, first and foremost, to win the war against Germany, and no other issue was going to get in the way.