

United States of America

Long considered to be a country that could be counted on as a place of refuge for the "tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free," the United States did not live up to those expectations during the Holocaust. The US government would not change its immigration quotas to allow in more Jewish refugees from Europe, nor did it embark on extensive rescue operations. Despite relatively early knowledge of the true meaning of the "Final Solution," the Americans refused to bomb the railroad tracks leading to the Auschwitz extermination camp. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, long supported by most American Jews, would not allow the war with the Germans to be depicted as a battle to save European Jewry.

The United States' ambivalent policy regarding Nazi Antisemitism can be viewed as a result of several factors. The country was slowly recovering from the crippling Great Depression, which had left many Americans in poverty. Public opinion condemned the notion of allowing in European refugees who were liable to take away jobs from Americans who really needed them. Many Americans also called for isolationism, with an emphasis on America first. They did not want the government to adopt a policy of intervention in the affairs of other countries. Furthermore, there were strong antisemitic elements within the American government. Right-wing politicians criticized both Roosevelt's New Deal programs and American Jews, whom they associated with the liberal president. Laws calling for rescue operations were not passed because those politicians refused to support them. In addition, the State Department itself was responsible for the prevention of the rescue of European Jews from the Nazis.

During the 1930s, American immigration quotas were very low, and even those were prevented from being filled. In July 1938 President Roosevelt convened the Evian Conference with delegates from 32 countries to discuss the growing European refugee problem. However, not one country, including the United States, was willing to selflessly take in any refugees. All the American delegate would commit to was making the previously unfilled quota for Germans and Austrians available to the new refugees. The American-

initiated conference did nothing to help those refugees desperately trying to get out of Europe before it was too late.

After the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 1938, the American ambassador to Germany was recalled in a gesture of disapproval. However, the United States continued to ignore the refugee problem by refusing to take in or even intercede on behalf of the 937 Jewish refugees sailing on the *St. Louis*, a ship that had left Germany in May 1939. Those Jews were subsequently turned back to Europe, where most perished in the Holocaust. In 1939 and 1940, a bill to allow 10,000 Jewish children into the United States was never even put to discussion in Congress.

The United States entered World War II in December 1941. From then on, the government's main priority was winning the war, not saving Europe's Jews. The anti-refugee activists in the government also began spreading the fear that if refugees would be allowed to enter the country, the Germans would plant spies among them. Thus, they felt that no refugees should be admitted. Roosevelt did not want to alienate those elements of the government by making it look like the war was about the Jews. Thus, at the Allies' war conferences, the mass annihilation of European Jewry was not even mentioned –despite the fact that the United States had received reliable reports about the dire situation in Europe.

As further reports of Nazi atrocities reached the West by the end of 1942, the British government was put under pressure to do something to help the Jews. They decided to make a small gesture in order to assuage the British public. On December 17, 1942 the United States joined Great Britain, Norway, the Soviet Union, and various governments-in-exile in loudly condemning the Nazis' "bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination." Nevertheless, this was just a gesture.

Another meaningless gesture was made in April 1943, at the Bermuda Conference, convened by the United States and Great Britain. Ostensibly, the conference was called to deal with the refugee problem again, now that the world knew what was really happening in Europe. However, the organizers designed the conference to be as unsuccessful as possible. The venue of Bermuda itself was remote and hard to reach, almost no reporters were

admitted in, and no Jewish representatives were invited. The Jewish aspect of the issue was forbidden to be discussed, along with the words "Final Solution." In the end, the conference was called to shush the growing public outcries for the rescue of European Jewry without actually having to find any solutions to the problem.

During the winter of 1942–1943, the opposite ends of the spectrum in the American government were revealed: certain government officials began pressuring President Roosevelt to issue a rescue proclamation, while the State Department continued to sabotage rescue efforts. When Henry Morgenthau, the Jewish Secretary of the Treasury, found out about the State Department's activities, he immediately reported them to the president. Fearing a scandal, the president decided to establish an agency for the rescue of Jewish refugees. This was called the War Refugee Board (WRB).

Fighting America's previous policy on Jewish refugees, the WRB tried to do its best to rescue Jews. It sponsored the activities of diplomats like Raoul Wallenberg, who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews, and it pushed for the establishment of a safe haven for refugees in Fort Ontario, New York. However, Roosevelt would not support the institution of other such havens, nor would he agree to the board's recommendations to publicly condemn the mass murder of Jews by the Nazis and bomb Auschwitz. Thus, the success of the WRB proved to be too little, too late. Only after the war did President Harry S. Truman enlarge America's immigrant quotas to allow in Holocaust Survivors and support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. (see also Auschwitz, Bombing of.)