

### FDR and the Holocaust

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was inaugurated as President of the United States in 1933, Adolf Hitler was simultaneously implementing anti-Semitic sanctions that dramatically increased over the next decade. The expansion of Nazi Germany posed an immediate threat to Europe, but not necessarily to the United States. FDR had Jewish cabinet members and advisors; there were numerous times that he wanted to intervene in the horrors occurring across the Atlantic. He was a seasoned politician who worked tirelessly to do right by the American people, but prejudice in the State Department and anti-immigrant attitudes of the American public made it difficult for FDR to intervene on the atrocities in Nazi Germany. There has been debate for decades about whether or not FDR did enough to aid the Jews during the Holocaust. The handling of the *St. Louis* ship, of immigration bills, and increased number of visas were key ways in which FDR attempted to help Jews, but was unable to do so due to domestic hesitation and fear of joining another catastrophic world war. This paper will address the economic, social, and political obstacles that hindered the president from taking further action and prevented the United States from being a “beacon on the hill” for Jews who were experiencing persecution.

Following World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was left in a state of embarrassment and inferiority as they were facing major reparations and inflation. The United States was prospering during the Roaring 20s, but everything halted in 1929 with the Great Depression. People around the world struggled to find jobs to provide for their families. President Herbert Hoover did little to pull the United States out of the Depression during his presidential term. In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented the New Deal: a series of public works programs that would create jobs and improve domestic infrastructure. Americans were able to get work through the government, but the general public was still struggling. During this

time, many Europeans wanted to leave their countries in order to prosper in the United States. Prior to the Great Depression, the concept of America – the melting pot – was not as widely accepted as many people may think it was. In fact, a percentage of Americans believed that allowing immigrants would deface the white, Protestant America that they believed was superior.

The United States became a refuge for millions of people in search of a better future in the early 1900s, but with so many people attempting to immigrate, a strict quota system was implemented. The American government allowed for a higher number of immigrants from North and West Europe because they were Anglo-Saxons. People from Southern and Eastern Europe were considered inferior, hence a lesser number being permitted to enter. The racial superiority complex ingrained in American culture is seen through Jim Crow laws that permeated the American South. Racial prejudice and discrimination were a part of every aspect of life for Black Americans – what bathrooms, water fountains, buses, and businesses they were allowed to use were all based on skin color. In Germany, the concept of a superior race would inspire Adolf Hitler as he climbed the political ladder and won votes in the Reichstag, resulting in the Nazi Party being in power.<sup>1</sup>

German politicians believed that they could grant Hitler some power, but would not allow him to enact his racist beliefs that targeted Jews; however, Hitler managed to garner support following the Reichstag fire and declared himself Chancellor of Germany with all the power to control the government. Slowly, Hitler tested the waters of breaking the Treaty of Versailles by remilitarizing, taking over the Sudetenland and Rhineland, and expanding *lebensraum* through the Anschluss and invasion of Poland. No country attempted to stop Germany from these actions,

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Ross, “How American Racism Influenced Hitler,” *The New Yorker*, April 28, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/30/how-american-racism-influenced-hitler>.

even though it was a direct violation of the treaty. Many other countries were consumed with domestic issues as the Great Depression clouded the planet. This was the perfect time for Hitler to build Germany back up through treaty violations, in addition to slowly enforcing laws discriminating against Jews. Following the invasion of Poland, the country with the greatest number of Jews in Europe, anti-Semitism rapidly worsened. News of *Kristallnacht* reached the United States, but the horror fled away as the headlines changed with different daily news.<sup>2</sup> Jews living under newly expanded Nazi territory experienced job loss, public humiliation, assault, a general inability to partake in society as normal citizens, and eventually, being forced into ghettos. Still, no other country intervened. As hostility in Europe began to increase, people began to look for a way out.

Many Americans did not want more immigrants to come to the United States during the Great Depression because jobs were already sparse. Additionally, World War I was devastating worldwide, so avoiding another war and loss of American lives was a priority. Prior to the First World War, most people were divided by the concept of war and believed it to be a glorious way to honor themselves and their country; however, trench warfare and mass casualties clarified the horrors of war.

Due to these hesitations and objections from the American public and the State Department, FDR had to carefully navigate his options in order to do what was morally correct while maintaining a degree of public and political support. Even though the New Deal was a program to assist all Americans, some people believed FDR was enforcing the “Jew Deal.” He had more Jewish cabinet members than previous presidents and some of his closest advisors

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<sup>2</sup> Erin Blakemore, “Americans Were Shocked by Kristallnacht—But Their Outrage Soon Faded,” 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/kristallnacht-response-in-united-states-fdr>.

were Jewish.<sup>3</sup> According to author Leonard Dinnerstein, “Despite intense anti-Semitism in the United States in the 1930s... Roosevelt neither supported nor encouraged prejudice... he empathetically associated himself with Jews and showed a sensitivity to those with strong ethnic ties and religious beliefs.”<sup>4</sup> This was a major concern for some people as they believed Jews to be the responsible for events they could not have conducted. The Jewish cabinet members were qualified and well-versed, so it was racism that the opposition’s concerns were rooted in. Similarly, conspiracies and prejudice fueled a fire that Hitler would use to his advantage with the eventual genocide against Jews and other people deemed inferior, like the Roma (gypsies), the disabled, and political dissenters.

It may seem that FDR did not do enough to combat anti-Semitism and the Nazi regime, but he was limited in his actions because he had to maintain a balance between many different groups. The denial of the *St. Louis* ship in 1939 was one of the events that bolsters the argument that FDR did not do enough; however, this is untrue.<sup>5</sup> FDR attempted on multiple occasions to acquire visas for Jewish refugees and immigrants. By attempting different loopholes to override the quota system, FDR exhausted every option within reason to assist those who needed help the most. The ship originally sailed from Germany to Cuba, where it was denied entry. It then sailed near Florida but was also turned away by the American government because no one onboard had undergone security screening, and none held immigration visas for the U.S. It was not FDR alone who rejected the ship, but the State Department and the general atmosphere of the American

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, “Jews and the New Deal,” *American Jewish History* 72, no. 4 (1983): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23882507>, 475.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Voyage of the St. Louis.” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/voyage-of-the-st-louis>.”

population that fueled anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic ideals during this time. FDR had pushed to allow for more visas for Jews, especially from eastern European countries, but this was vetoed during the early stages of World War II. The *St. Louis* eventually returned to Europe and FDR made sure that the voyagers landed safely in Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Many were then able to gain immigration visas and escape to the U.S. ahead of the Nazi invasion, but 254 of the 937 passengers from the ship were killed in the holocaust.<sup>6</sup>

Proposed in 1938, the Wagner-Rogers bill was one way some American politicians push to assist during the Holocaust where 20,000 German children would be allowed entry in the United States, regardless of quotas. The bill was never passed or even voted upon.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, a letter to Hitler was sent from FDR requested peace in Europe in the same year. In his letter, Roosevelt writes, “The Government of the United States has no political involvements in Europe, and will assume no obligations in the conduct of the present negotiations. Yet in our own right we recognize our responsibilities as a part of a world of neighbors.”<sup>8</sup> Though he does not mention Jews specifically, FDR acknowledges the mistreatment of certain groups, and he wants to avoid another potential world war. FDR was adept at observing the nuances of the political atmosphere. According to *FDR and the Jews*, the president was, “...quite apprehensive of the growing anti-Semitic and Nazi sentiment in the United States...This scapegoat for the ills and suffering of the depression, may result in very serious clashes, the President seems to fear.”<sup>9</sup> FDR was aware of the anti-Semitism present and how Jews for years were used as scapegoats for

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Letter to Adolf Hitler Seeking Peace,” Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.  
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209205>.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 80.

every inconvenience. Because of this, Roosevelt had to balance his priorities and feelings to do what was right in the current moment.

FDR faced criticism for ample issues on his treatment of minority groups, such as Jews, Japanese Americans, and African Americans. The New Deal and Jim Crow laws sufficiently hurt African Americans and kept them at a disadvantage for years to come. These race laws inspired Hitler as his regime, "...expressed admiration for American race law, but they have tended to see this as a public-relations strategy—an 'everybody does it' justification for Nazi policies."<sup>10</sup> Writing off the issue of racism was one of the core reasons so many politicians were against aiding Jews in Europe, it makes sense that racism again would prevail within the United States's own borders towards African Americans and Japanese American citizens as well. Executive Order 9066 passed after the attack on Pearl Harbor, sending Japanese Americans to internment camps on the racist suspicion of being spies for Imperial Japan. The domino effects of Jim Crow laws, concentration camps, and internment camps are often glossed over because America struggles to admit its faults. FDR was not an infallible president, and while he did what he could to help the Jews, his efforts were not always reflected within the United States to help this minority.

Some ways in which FDR successfully navigated the war in order to help Jews were the rearrangement of the quota system, international conferences about the refugee and humanitarian crises, and the establishment of the War Refugee Board, which was established through an executive order in January 1944.<sup>11</sup> FDR's thought process may not be in everyone's favor in the

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<sup>10</sup> Ross, *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Franklin D. Roosevelt." Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/franklin-delano-roosevelt>.

current day, but he did the best he could with the circumstances and his actions would help save thousands of lives. He pushed for the formation of Israel to create a land for Jews where they would not face persecution and discrimination.<sup>12</sup> One man cannot stop the actions of many in madness, but through exposure and understanding, the international community banded together in order to fight the Nazi regime.

Though Roosevelt did not live to see the end of World War II with the liberation of the concentration camps, it was through his precision that the United States moved through the war as it did. FDR carefully maneuvered through millions of opinions and his own morality to do what was best for the people of his country as well as those who were indiscriminately targeted and killed based on their personal identity. Analyzing the different aspects of warfare and the moments leading up to it in order to prevent other atrocities in addition to emulating what was done right makes more of a difference than replication of the mistakes. The steps that Roosevelt took were justified and admirable – it is because of his actions and the joint Allied power that World War II in the European theatre ended as it did, with many lives saved.

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<sup>12</sup> Breitman, 299.

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