

FDR AND THE HOLOCAUST

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945), the 32nd president of the United States (1933–1945), was born in New York City into a patrician family. Inspired by the career of his fifth cousin, former US President Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt entered politics after graduating from Harvard University and Columbia Law School. He was elected as a Democrat to the New York State Senate in 1910. President Wilson appointed him Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1913; in 1920 he was the nominee for Vice President on the losing Democratic Party ticket with James M. Cox.

In 1921, Roosevelt was stricken with poliomyelitis, which caused the loss of the use of his legs. Despite this disability, Roosevelt re-entered politics later in the decade and was elected Governor of New York State in 1928. In November 1932, he was elected president. He was re-elected three more times in 1936, 1940, and 1944, and died in office on April 12, 1945.

ROOSEVELT AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS

When the Nazis seized power in Germany in January 1933, Roosevelt, less than two weeks into his administration, was preoccupied with the Great Depression and its consequences for the United States and the world. He was also concerned with setting up his cabinet and completing the transition into the new Democratic administration. Nevertheless, the new president was extremely well-informed about the Hitler regime and its anti-Jewish policies, and early on perceived Nazi Germany as a threat to vital US interests. As persecution of Jews in Germany intensified during the 1930s, however, Roosevelt did not include among his priorities an effort to respond to the growing refugee problem that Nazi policies created.

Establishing a haven in the United States for German Jewish refugees was extremely difficult for a variety of reasons. Among these were general questions regarding immigration to the United States. The new quota system of the 1924 US Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) imposed severe restrictions on immigration based on nationality. Moreover, in 1930, Roosevelt's predecessor, President Herbert Hoover, announced that, given acute unemployment during the Depression, US

immigration authorities would henceforth interpret a 1917 ban on immigration of persons “likely to become a public charge” to include persons who were otherwise able to work, but in the conditions of the Depression, were unlikely to find a job.

Given continued economic hardship in the US during the 1930s, the Roosevelt administration upheld this highly restrictive Hoover interpretation, effectively excluding Jewish refugees trained in the professions and, potentially, anyone who did not have a guaranteed job upon arrival in the United States. Finally, the State Department established additional bureaucratic impediments, such as the need to provide certificates of good conduct from the German police.

The net effect of these legal and administrative obstacles was to drastically reduce immigration from Germany to 10% of the allocated quota during the early and middle 1930s. While clearly sympathetic to the plight of German Jews, Roosevelt, acutely aware of opposition in Congress and antipathy among the general public to large-scale immigration, did not seriously interfere with the bureaucratic process until 1938. As Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis wrote to Felix Frankfurter, at that time a professor at Harvard Law School, on April 29, 1933: “F.D. [Franklin Delano] has shown amply that he has no anti-Semitism...But this action, or rather determination that there shall be none [i.e., no change in the Hoover immigration policy] is a disgrace to America and to F.D.s administration.”

The number of Jewish immigrants admitted into the United States increased gradually during the 1930s, however, through the efforts of Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, among others. The Labor Department (which controlled the Immigration & Naturalization Service until 1940) negotiated with the State Department to limit the number of documents that visa applicants had to produce, and introduced the practice of allowing sponsors to post bonds to guarantee that an applicant for immigration would not become a public charge. President Roosevelt took no position on these issues.

After the German annexation of Austria in March 1938 spawned a new flood of refugees from the Reich, the White House became more involved in the refugee question. Roosevelt combined the German and Austrian quotas and sounded out his cabinet on the possibility of passing legislation to increase the US quota, only to be

told that Congress would not approve any such legislation. On July 6, 1938, he summoned a conference on refugees in Évian-les-Bains, France. The US president had hoped that the participating countries would pledge to take in some refugees, although his larger goal was to create an intergovernmental organization that would settle Reich Jews in large numbers in remote areas of Africa, South America, and elsewhere. Roosevelt expended some time and effort, and was willing to spend some money, on these mass resettlement schemes during 1938 and 1939. Despite achieving little overall success, his increased involvement in the refugee issue helped to fill the combined German and Austrian quotas for the first and only time: 27,300 Germans and Austrians, mostly Jewish refugees, entered the United States in 1939.

By this time, however, with hundreds of thousands of Reich Jews desperately clamoring for a US visa, the quota was not nearly adequate to meet the demand. Nor was Roosevelt willing to push for any relaxation of the quota restrictions, even when presented with exceptional circumstances. In June 1939, the president refused to permit the entry of the passengers of the *St. Louis* into the United States; this would have required an executive order or an act of Congress. Roosevelt similarly took no action on the Wagner-Rogers Bill, introduced in February 1939, which would have admitted 20,000 Jewish refugee children into the United States outside the quota. The president's passivity towards these appeals was due in part to fierce political opposition; Roosevelt's opponents in the Congress threatened to introduce legislation that would *reduce*, rather than increase, the quota.

After Nazi Germany initiated World War II by invading Poland, Roosevelt, like many government officials and ordinary Americans, suspected that refugees from German-controlled Europe were potential Axis spies, who would provide intelligence to the enemy and who, if permitted to settle freely in the United States, would serve as a "fifth column" in the event of a German or Japanese invasion. Jewish refugees were particularly vulnerable to this perception because they were presumed to (and often did) have relatives under German control whose lives could be used as incentive for them to spy.

At a press conference on June 5, 1940, Roosevelt stated: "Now, of course, the refugee has got to be checked because, unfortunately, among the refugees there are some spies, as has been found in other countries. And not all of them are voluntary spies—it is rather a horrible story but in some of the other countries that refugees out of Germany have gone to, especially Jewish refugees, they found a number of definitely proven spies." While Roosevelt lent his support to James G. McDonald, his advisor on refugees, to facilitate the admission of a few thousand European scholars, artists, politicians, and rabbis above the quota in 1940, the State Department and the supporters of a restrictive immigration policy in Congress prevailed on the larger refugee issue. As a result the flow of refugees slowed to a trickle between 1941 and 1945.

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Assessment of Roosevelt's role during the Holocaust is made difficult by the relative lack of documentation about his thinking. After the entry of the United States into the war in December 1941, Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill determined that the number one Allied priority was to win the war, and that this was the best method to rescue Jews and other victims of the Axis powers. In the face of Nazi propaganda, which portrayed the Allied involvement in the war as being on behalf of "the Jews," Roosevelt and Churchill chose not to single out German mistreatment and mass murder of the European Jews as a key focus of the conflict, preferring to refer in general to the aim of ending the mistreatment and murder of civilians under Axis rule. Moreover, wartime rescue of civilians behind enemy lines remained a low priority for the Allies.

After State Department confirmation in November 1942 that the Germans were attempting to annihilate the European Jews, US and British authorities, on the initiative of Great Britain, held a conference on refugees in Bermuda in April 1943. Although the revelation of German actions stimulated public pressure for action, the Bermuda Conference did not generate new initiatives; its meager results increased the anger and frustration of American Jews who were determined to rescue their remaining coreligionists.

In January, 1944, Roosevelt came under pressure from his Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau, Jr. and the American Jewish community to take some form of action to rescue the surviving Jews. Morgenthau presented Roosevelt with evidence of the systematic sabotage of modest rescue efforts in Romania by the State Department. Roosevelt thereupon issued an executive order establishing the War Refugee Board (WRB), an independent agency of the United States government subordinate directly to the president. Although Roosevelt's intentions cannot be documented, most historians agree that the appointments of Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Undersecretary of State Edward Stettinius to the Board had the effect of keeping the new agency under constraint and permitting State Department officials to interfere with the Board's plans and actions. For instance, in neutral Spain, the US ambassador Carlton Hayes, seeking to avoid conflict with the pro-Axis dictatorship of Francisco Franco, attempted to stop the flow of refugees, some of whom had received assistance from the WRB, from German-occupied France to Spain. Despite the late date of its creation, the WRB facilitated the rescue of perhaps 200,000 Jews, raising painful and intriguing questions about what might have happened had such an effort been launched earlier.

A balanced assessment of Roosevelt's policies with regard to Jewish refugees and the Holocaust must also take into account the overall historical context. Roosevelt was preoccupied by severe economic depression and war, and aware of isolationist, antisemitic, and xenophobic sentiments in Congress and among the American public. His own government bureaucracy was, on balance, an impediment to immigration on any large scale; this opposition reflected general popular sentiment. Though Roosevelt had real sympathies for the Jews and for others subject to Axis-sponsored murder and terror, his involvement in refugee issues and rescue efforts remained low. This reluctance to take political risks in refugee policy contrasts sharply with his boldness as a politician and leader in other spheres.

Excerpted from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website:
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007411>