

International response to the Holocaust

In the decades since the Holocaust, some national governments, international bodies and world leaders have been criticized for their failure to take appropriate action to save the millions of European Jews, Roma, and other victims of the Holocaust. Critics say that such intervention, particularly by the Allied governments, might have saved substantial numbers of people and could have been accomplished without the diversion of significant resources from the war effort.^[1]

Other researchers have challenged such criticism. Some have argued that the idea that the Allies took no action is a myth—that the Allies accepted as many German Jewish immigrants as the Nazis would allow—and that theoretical military action by the Allies, such as bombing the Auschwitz concentration camp, would have saved the lives of very few people.^[2] Others have said that the limited intelligence available to the Allies—who, as late as October 1944, did not know the locations of many of the Nazi death camps or the purposes of the various buildings within those camps they had identified—made precision bombing impossible.^[3]

In three cases, entire countries resisted the deportation of their Jewish population during the Holocaust. In other countries, notable individuals or communities created resistance during the Holocaust

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While the Polish government-in-exile managed to raise awareness of the Jewish genocide among the Allies by December 1942,^[4] this did not result in any on-the-ground action by Allied nations to either stop the ongoing slaughter of millions of Jews and other minorities, or to save and absorb refugees. Rather, the Allies focused their efforts exclusively on conducting a wholesale military campaign in order to defeat the Third Reich.

Britain

By 1939, about 304,000 of about 522,000 German Jews had fled Germany, including 60,000 to British Mandate Palestine (including over 50,000 who had taken advantage of the Haavara, or "Transfer" Agreement between German Zionists and the Nazis), but British immigration quotas prevented many from migrating.^[5] In March 1938, Hitler annexed Austria and made the 200,000 Jews of Austria stateless refugees. In September, Britain and France granted Hitler the right to occupy the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia, and in March 1939, Hitler occupied the remainder of the country making a further 200,000 Jews stateless.

In 1939, British policy as stated in its 1939 White Paper capped Jewish immigration to Palestine (then a British mandate) at 75,000 over the next five years, after which the country was to become an independent state. Britain had ~~ref~~ed homes for Jewish immigrant children and proposed Kenya as a haven for Jews, but refused to back a Jewish state or facilitate Jewish settlement, contravening the terms of the League of Nations Mandate over Palestine.

Before, during and after the war, the British government obstructed Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine so as to avoid a negative reaction from Palestinian Arabs. In the summer of 1941, however, Chaim Weizmann estimated that with the British ban on Jewish immigration, when the war was over, it would take two decades to get 1.5 million Jews to Palestine from Europe through clandestine immigration; David Ben-Gurion had originally believed 3 million could be brought in ten years. Thus Palestine it has been argued by at least one writer, once war had begun—could not have been the saviour of anything other than a small minority of those Jews murdered by the Nazis.^[6]

The British Government, along with all UN member nations, received credible evidence about the Nazi attempts to exterminate the European Jewry as early as 1942 from the Polish Government-in-exile. Titled "The Mass Extermination of the Jews in German Occupied Poland", the report provided a detailed account of the conditions in the ghettos and their liquidation.^[7] Additionally the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden met with Jan Karski, courier to the Polish resistance who, having been smuggled into the Warsaw ghetto by the Jewish underground, as well as having posed as an Estonian guard at Belzec transit camp, provided him with detailed eye witness accounts of Nazi atrocities against the Jews.^{[8][9][10]}

These lobbying efforts triggered the Joint Declaration by Members of the United Nations of 17 December 1942 which made public and condemned the mass extermination of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. The statement was read to British House of Commons in a floor speech by Foreign secretary Anthony Eden, and published on the front page of the New York Times and many other newspapers.^[11] BBC radio aired two broadcasts on the final solution during the war: the first at 9 am on 17 December 1942, on the UN Joint Declaration, read by Polish Foreign Minister in-exile Edward Raczyński, and the second during May 1943, Jan Karski's eye witness account of mass Jewish executions, read by Arthur Koestler.^[12] However, the political rhetoric and public reporting was not followed up with military action by the British Government- an omission that has been the source of significant historical debate. See also: Auschwitz bombing debate

Denmark

Denmark was the only Nazi-occupied country that managed to save 95% of its Jewish residents. Following a tip-off by a German diplomat, thousands of Jews were evacuated to neutral Sweden.^[13]

Netherlands

A general strike was organized on February 25, 1941, against the anti-Jewish measures and activities by the Nazis. By February 27, much of it had been suppressed by the German police. Although ultimately unsuccessful, it was still significant in that it was the first direct action against the Nazis' treatment of Jews.

Poland

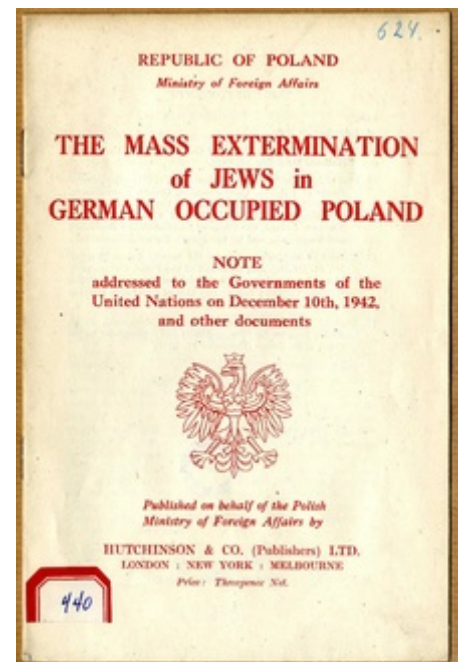
The Nazis built the majority of their death camps in occupied Poland which had a Jewish population of 3.3 million. From 1942 on, the Polish government-in-exile provided the Allies with some of the earliest and most accurate accounts of the ongoing Holocaust of European Jews.^{[14][15]} Titled "The Mass Extermination of the Jews in German Occupied Poland", the report provided a detailed account of the conditions in the ghettos and their liquidation.^[16] Though its representatives, like the Foreign Minister Count Edward Raczynski and the courier of the Polish Underground movement, Jan Karski, called for action to stop it, they were unsuccessful. Most notably, Jan Karski met with British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden as well as US President Franklin D. Roosevelt, providing the earliest eye witness accounts of the Holocaust.^{[17][18]} Roosevelt heard him out however seemed disinterested, asking about the condition of Polish horses but not one question about the Jews.^[19]

The report that the Polish Foreign Minister in-exile, Count Edward Raczynski sent on 10 December 1942, to all the Governments of the United Nations was the first official denunciation by any Government of the mass extermination and of the Nazi aim of total annihilation of the Jewish population. It was also the first official document singling out the sufferings of European Jews as Jews and not only as citizens of their respective countries of origin.^[20] The report of 10 December 1942 and the Polish Government's lobbying efforts triggered the Joint Declaration by Members of the United Nations of 17 December 1942 which made public and condemned the mass extermination of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. The statement was read to British House of Commons in a floor speech by Foreign secretary Anthony Eden, and published on the front page of the *New York Times* and many other newspapers.^[21] Additionally BBC radio aired two broadcasts on the final solution during the war which were prepared by the Polish government-in-exile.^[22] This rhetoric, however, was not followed up by military action by Allied nations. During an interview with Hannah Rosen in 1995, Karski said about the failure to rescue most of the Jews from mass murder, "The Allies considered it impossible and too costly to rescue the Jews, because they didn't do it. The Jews were abandoned by all governments, church hierarchies and societies, but thousands of Jews survived because thousands of individuals in Poland, France, Belgium, Denmark, Holland helped to save Jews."^[23]

In the absence of international intervention, it fell upon individual Poles and local underground organisations to assist Jewish escapees. This was challenging as the Nazis issued the death penalty for anybody 'hiding a Jew, feeding a Jew or selling food to a Jew,' which frightened many people out of helping Jewish escapees as well as created a fertile ground for blackmailers.^[24] Additionally the Nazis incentivised denunciations by rewarding the reporting of Jewish escapees with additional food rations. Nonetheless, many individuals did risk their lives to feed and house the over 300,000 survivors within Nazi occupied Poland.^[25] Most effective, was the underground organisation Żegota, the Council to Aid Jews, which although founded by Catholics, became a successful joint Catholic-Jewish operation with around 100 cells.^{[26][27]} Polish sociologist Tadeusz Piotrowski estimates that about 50,000 Jews who survived the war in Nazi-occupied Poland were aided by Żegota in various ways – food, supplies, smuggling, shelter, financial, legal, medical, child care, and help against blackmailers.^[28]

Nonetheless, the Nazis decimated the Polish Jewry by 90%, killing 3 million people, half of all Jewish Holocaust deaths.^[29] Additionally the Nazis ethnically cleansed another 1.8-2 million Poles, bringing Poland's Holocaust death toll to around 4.8-5 million people.^{[30][31]}

After the war Poland defied both Britain and Stalin, allowing Jewish emigration to British Mandate Palestine. Around 200,000 Jews availed themselves of this opportunity leaving only around 100,000 Jews in Poland.



"The Mass Extermination of Jews in German Occupied Poland", by the Polish government-in-exile addressed to the wartime allies of the then-United Nations, 1942

Scandinavia

Norway and Denmark had a Jewish population of 10,000 between them. Acting on a Swedish offer of refuge, Denmark saved almost all its Jewish citizens, while Norway managed to save about half.^[32] After the liberation of the concentration camps, Sweden accepted thousands of survivors for medical treatment.^[33]

Switzerland

Of the five neutral countries of continental Europe, Switzerland has the distinction of being the only one to have promulgated a German antisemitic law.^[35] The country closed its French border to refugees for a period from 13 August 1942, and did not allow unfettered access to Jews seeking refuge until 12 July 1944.^[36] In 1942 the President of the Swiss Confederation, Philipp Etter as a member of the Geneva-based ICRC even persuaded the committee not to issue a condemnatory proclamation concerning German "attacks" against "certain categories of nationalities".^{[37][38]}

Jews who were about to emigrate [... from Germany] had to obtain passports. At first, nothing in a passport indicated whether the bearer was a Jew. Apparently, no one thought of making any changes in passports issued to Jews or held by Jews until action was initiated by officials of a foreign country. That country was Switzerland.^[34]

—Raul Hilberg

United States

According to Peter Novick, "Americans, including many American Jews, were largely unaware of what we now call the Holocaust while it was going on; the nation was preoccupied with defeating the Axis."^[39] Some awareness of Germany's harsh treatment of Jews in Europe, especially Poland, existed.H. R. Knickerbocker wrote in 1941, "Poland must come in a separate category since there Hitler has apparently set out to exterminate the 3,000,000 Jews without the restraint he seems to have put on himself elsewhere ... the obvious intent of the Germans in Poland is to wipe out the Jews altogether, and the wonder is that any at all are living today."^[40] By the end of 1942 the US government had adequate evidence to conclude that a campaign to annihilate the Jews of Europe was underway.^[41] Like the other Allies, the United States decided not to bomb the Auschwitz extermination camp out of commission, even as American heavy bombers staged several attacks nearby.^[42] (See Auschwitz bombing debate)

The United States also refused to grant temporary refuge to Jews fleeing Europe. In the wake of the Great Depression, the United States had a highly restrictive immigration quota system, but even the limited quota spots were not filled.^[43] The Department of State refused to fill 90% of the quota spots that might have been available for European Jews.^{[44][45]}

In 998 press conferences, during more than a decade in office served wholly within the Nazi era, President Roosevelt never delivered the "appeal to the German people" regarding the Reich's treatment of Jews that he said he would.^[46] It was Treasury official Josiah DuBois who, risking his career, authored his celebrated "Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of this Government in the Murder of the Jews" that documented State Department efforts to thwart Jewish immigration from Europe.^[47] It was DuBois's report that furnished Treasury Secretary Morgenthau with the ammunition he needed to force Roosevelt into creating the War Refugee Board.^[48]

Before, during and after World War II, The New York Times maintained a general policy to minimize reporting on the Holocaust.^[49] To this end, it placed such reportage deep inside its daily editions, while obscuring in those stories the special impact of the Nazis' crimes on Jews in particular.^[50] The New York Times did however publish the Joint Declaration by Members of the United Nations of 17 December 1942 on its front page which was a joint declaration by eleven Allied nations publicly condemning the mass extermination of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland.^[51]

Évian Conference

The Évian Conference was convened at the initiative of Franklin D. Roosevelt in July 1938 to discuss the problem of Jewish refugees. For ten days, from July 6 to July 15, delegates from thirty-two countries met at Évian-les-Bains, France. However, most western countries were reluctant to accept Jewish refugees, and the question was not resolved. The Dominican Republic was the only country willing to accept Jewish refugees—up to 100,000.^[52]

Bermuda Conference

The UK and the US met in Bermuda in April 1943 to discuss the issue of Jewish refugees who had been liberated by Allied forces and the Jews who remained in Nazi-occupied Europe. The Bermuda Conference led to no change in policy; the Americans would not change their immigration quotas to accept the refugees, and the British would not alter its immigration policy to permit them to enter Palestine.^{[53][54]}

The failure of the Bermuda Conference prompted U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, the only Jewish member of Franklin D. Roosevelt's cabinet, to publish a white paper entitled Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of this Government to the Murder of the Jews^[55] This led to the creation of a new agency the War Refugee Board

The Ickes plan for Alaska

In November 1938, two weeks after Kristallnacht, United States Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes proposed the use of Alaska as a "haven for Jewish refugees from Germany and other areas in Europe where the Jews are subjected to oppressive restrictions." Resettlement in Alaska would allow the refugees to bypass normal immigration quotas, because Alaska was a territory and not a state. That summer Ickes had toured Alaska and met with local officials to discuss improving the local economy and bolstering security in a territory viewed as vulnerable to Japanese attack. Ickes thought European Jews might be the solution.^{[56][57]}

In his proposal, Ickes pointed out that 200 families from the dustbowl had settled in Alaska's Matanuska Valley. The plan was introduced as a bill by Senator William King (Utah) and Representative Franck Havenner (California), both Democrats. The Alaska proposal won the support of theologian Paul Tillich, the Federal Council of Churches and the American Friends Service Committee

But the plan won little support from American Jews, with the exception of the Labor Zionists of America. Most Jews agreed with Rabbi Stephen Wise, president of the American Jewish Congress, that adoption of the Alaska proposal would deliver "a wrong and hurtful impression...that Jews are taking over some part of the country for settlement." The plan was dealt a severe blow when Roosevelt told Ickes that he insisted on limiting the number of refugees to 10,000 a year for five years, and with a further restriction that Jews not make up more than 10% of the refugees. Roosevelt never mentioned the Alaska proposal in public, and without his support the plan died.

International Committee of the Red Cross

The International Committee of the Red Cross did relatively little to save Jews during the Holocaust and discounted reports of the organized Nazi genocide, such as of the murder of Polish Jewish prisoners that took place at Lublin. At the time, the Red Cross justified its inaction by suggesting that aiding Jewish prisoners would harm its ability to help other Allied POWs. In addition, the Red Cross claimed that if it would take a major stance to improve the situation of those European Jews, the neutrality of Switzerland, where the International Red Cross was based, would be jeopardized. Today, the Red Cross acknowledges its passivity during the Holocaust and has apologized for this.^[58]

Japanese response during Holocaust

In 1936, German-Japanese Pact was concluded between Nazi Germany and the Japan.^[59] However, on December 6, 1938, the Japanese government made a decision of prohibiting the expulsion of the Jews in Japan, Manchukuo, and the rest of Japanese-occupied China.^[60] On December 31, Foreign Minister Yosuke Matsuoka told the Japanese Army and Navy to receive Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Diplomat Chiune Sugihara granted more than 2,000 transit visas and saved 6,000 Jewish refugees from Lithuania.^{[61][62]}

Manchukuo

General Hideki Tojo and Kiichiro Higuchi observed Japanese national policy as headquarters of the Kwantung Army against German oppositions.^[63]

Vatican

The pontificate of Pius XII coincided with the Second World War and the Nazi Holocaust, which saw the industrialized mass murder of millions of Jews and others by Adolf Hitler's Germany. Pius employed diplomacy to aid the victims of the Nazis during the war and, through directing his Church to provide discreet aid to Jews, saved thousands of lives.^[64] Pius maintained links to the German Resistance, and shared intelligence with the Allies. His strongest public condemnation of genocide was, however, considered inadequate by the Allied Powers, while the Nazis viewed him as an Allied sympathizer who had dishonoured his policy of Vatican neutrality.^[65] In Rome action was taken to save many Jews in Italy from deportation, including sheltering several hundred Jews in the catacombs of St. Peter's Basilica. In his Christmas addresses of 1941 and 1942, the pontiff was forceful on the topic but did not mention the Nazis by name. The Pope encouraged the bishops to speak out against the Nazi regime and to open the religious houses in their dioceses to hide Jews. At Christmas 1942, once evidence of the industrial slaughter of the Jews had emerged, he voiced concern at the murder of "hundreds of thousands" of "faultless" people because of their "nationality or race". Pius intervened to attempt to block Nazi deportations of Jews in various countries from 1942–1944.

When 60,000 German soldiers and the Gestapo occupied Rome in 1943, thousands of Jews were hiding in churches, convents, rectories, the Vatican and the papal summer residence. According to Joseph Lichten, the Vatican was called upon by the Jewish Community Council in Rome to help fill a Nazi demand of one hundred pounds of gold. The Council had been able to muster seven pounds, but unless the entire amount was produced within thirty-six hours had been told three hundred Jews would be imprisoned. The Pope granted the request, according to Chief Rabbi Zolli of Rome.^[66] Despite the payment of the ransom 2,091 Jews were deported on October 16, 1943, and most of them died in Germany

Upon his death in 1958, Pius was praised emphatically by the Israeli Foreign Minister and other world leaders. But his insistence on Vatican neutrality and avoidance of naming the Nazis as the evildoers of the conflict became the foundation for contemporary and later criticisms from some quarters. Studies of the Vatican archives and international diplomatic correspondence continue.

Response after the Holocaust

Nuremberg Trials

The international response to the war crimes of World War II and the Holocaust was to establish the Nuremberg international tribunal. Three major wartime powers, the US, USSR and Great Britain, agreed to punish those responsible. The trials brought human rights into the domain of global politics, redefined morality at the global level, and gave political currency to the concept of crimes against humanity, where individuals rather than governments were held accountable for war crimes.^[67]

Genocide

Towards the end of World War II, Raphael Lemkin, a lawyer of Polish-Jewish descent, aggressively pursued within the halls of the United Nations and the United States government the recognition of genocide as a crime. Largely due to his efforts and the support of his lobby, the United Nations was propelled into action. In response to Lemkin's arguments, the United Nations adopted the term in 1948 when it passed the "Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide".^[68]

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Many believe that the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust inspired the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. This view has been challenged by recent historical scholarship. One study has shown that the Nazi slaughter of Jews went entirely unmentioned during the drafting of the Universal Declaration at the United Nations, though those involved in the negotiations did not hesitate to name many other examples of Nazi human rights violations.^[69] Other historians have countered that the human rights activism of the delegate René Cassin of France, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968 for his work on the Universal Declaration, was motivated in part by the death of many Jewish relatives in the Holocaust and his involvement in Jewish organisations providing aid to Holocaust survivors.^[70]

See also

- Kindertransport
- Auschwitz bombing debate
- Responsibility for the Holocaust
- Riegner Telegram
- Righteous Among the Nations
- Role of the international community in the Rwandan Genocide
- Secondary antisemitism
- Szumł Zygielbojm
- World War II

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