

United States Asylum Policy

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."
—Inscription on the Statue of Liberty, New York Harbor

During **World War II**, the United States expended the lives of several hundred thousand young men and women and billions of dollars to defeat **Nazi** tyranny in Europe. Only after the war was the full horror of **Hitler's** rule revealed. Six million **Jews** died during the **Holocaust**. Also slaughtered were other groups the Nazis branded as undesirable: **gypsies**, **homosexuals**, communists, and other political enemies. The legacy of this era remains with us today and still raises many troubling questions.

Refugees Not Wanted

When **Franklin D. Roosevelt** became president in 1933, Americans were struggling to survive the greatest economic **depression** the country had ever seen. Many Americans feared that needy immigrants would take precious jobs or place an added strain on an already burdened economy.

America's immigration laws have always placed **quotas** on the number of people allowed to enter the United States from other countries. For example, in 1939 the quota allowed for 27,370 German citizens to immigrate to the United States. In 1938, more than 300,000 Germans —mostly Jewish refugees —had applied for U.S. **visas** (entry permits). A little over 20,000 applications were approved. Beyond the strict national quotas, the United States openly denied visas to any immigrant "likely to become a public charge." This ruling proved to be a serious problem for many Jewish refugees who had lost everything when the Nazis took power and might be in need of government assistance after they immigrated to the United States.

Shortly after she was appointed to the cabinet, **Frances Perkins**, President Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, proposed an **executive order** regarding refugees and immigration. Perkins suggested that the State Department should give priority to immigrants seeking refuge from racial or religious persecution. The State Department objected to this order because it would antagonize relations with Germany and alienate jobless American citizens. FDR never issued the order and State Department officials in Europe continued to reject many visa applications from Jewish refugees.

In September 1935, Nazi Germany passed laws that deprived German Jews of their citizenship. Without citizenship, Jews were legally defenseless; many lost their jobs and property. Simultaneously, countless thousands of Hitler's political opponents —gypsies, Catholics, homosexuals, even the physically and mentally impaired —became targets of Nazi violence and persecution. With so many Germans fleeing their homeland, the State Department temporarily eased immigration quotas. In 1936, the State Department approved visas for about

7,000 German refugees. By 1938, that number had increased to more than 20,000, but an opinion poll revealed that 82 percent of Americans still opposed admitting large numbers of Jewish refugees into the United States. Despite pleas by American human rights organizations, the U.S. State Department refused to increase the German quota any further.

On the Eve of War

In May 1939, only a few months before war began in Europe, a passenger ship called the ***St. Louis*** left Germany carrying nearly a thousand refugees, most of whom were Jews. Many of these people had already qualified for, but had not yet received, American visas. They arranged for temporary Cuban tourist visas that would enable them to wait outside of Germany for U.S. visas. By the time the *St. Louis* reached Havana, however, the Cuban government had changed its visa regulations. It refused to allow most of the refugees to land.

Forced to leave Cuban waters, the *St. Louis* sailed up the Florida coast. The U.S. Coast Guard followed close behind to prevent any passengers from swimming ashore. The State Department refused to allow the refugees to land without special legislation by Congress or an executive order from the president. Efforts by American Jewish organizations to work out a compromise failed. The desperate passengers aboard the *St. Louis* sent President Roosevelt a telegram pleading their case; he never replied.

Political realities may have influenced Roosevelt's decision to remain silent. Most Americans were anxious to stay out of the approaching European war. Many felt that America's best interest lay in avoiding foreign conflicts. Others were disillusioned by the experience of the U.S. intervention in **World War I** and wanted to avoid the loss of American lives. These views had strong support in Congress. In addition, President Roosevelt knew that the United States was not yet prepared for war and was reluctant to antagonize the Nazi regime.

Finally, the *St. Louis* returned to Europe and several nations granted asylum to the refugees. But when Hitler's troops marched through Europe, most of the *St. Louis'* ill-fated passengers were eventually caught by the Nazis and sent to **concentration camps**.

On the eve of World War II, a bill that would have admitted Jewish refugee children above the regular quota limits was introduced in Congress. President Roosevelt took no position on the bill, and it died in committee in the summer of 1939. Polls at the time indicated that two-thirds of Americans opposed taking in Jewish refugee children.

The War Years

At the beginning of World War II, the U.S. government did not believe reports that Hitler was carrying out a plan to murder millions of European Jews. But by

November 1942, the evidence was overwhelming. Once again, American Jewish leaders appealed to Roosevelt: If the president would ask Congress to change the immigration laws, more refugees could escape the Holocaust. Again, FDR refused. Instead, he joined the British in condemning the Nazi **genocide** (mass killing) of Jews.

Wartime brought on a sharp decline in immigration when the government imposed even stricter visa regulations. Officials feared that enemy spies and saboteurs might enter the country in the guise of refugees. But as the American public became aware of the enormity of the Nazi atrocities, people began to demand that the United States do something to rescue the remaining Jewish people of Europe. In November 1943, the **Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe** introduced a rescue resolution in Congress.

Once again, the State Department objected. This angered Secretary of the Treasury **Henry Morgenthau Jr.**, a Jew who was appalled by the Nazi mass killings. Since 1933, the State Department had opposed nearly every attempt to help Jewish refugees. On January 16, 1944, Morgenthau met with FDR and summarized a **report** prepared by his department. The report documented the long history of State Department obstructionism in refugee matters. (This report was originally titled, "Report to the Secretary on the Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of the Jews.")

To protect his State Department from scandal, Roosevelt signed an executive order instructing Congress to implement most of the provisions of the rescue resolution. The order created a **War Refugee Board** "to take all measures within its policy to rescue victims of enemy oppression in imminent danger of death."

The War Refugee Board

Soon after its creation, the War Refugee Board (WRB) aggressively mobilized rescue activities. It issued war-crimes warnings and sent food parcels into concentration camps. In the summer of 1944, it launched a dramatic operation.

With the cooperation of the Swedish government, the WRB sent a Swedish businessman, **Raoul Wallenberg**, to Hungary to work as an embassy official. Wallenberg was to implement a plan to rescue 200,000 Hungarian Jews who were about to be deported to the **Auschwitz death camp**. He rented buildings and placed them under Swedish diplomatic protection. This enabled Wallenberg to offer safe haven to thousands of Jews. He issued special protective passports to many others. With WRB support, Wallenberg's efforts saved more than 20,000 lives. Wallenberg disappeared when the Soviet Army occupied Hungary at the end of the war. His fate is unknown, although in 1956, the Soviets claimed that they had discovered a report of Wallenberg's death in 1947 in a Soviet prison.

The WRB also established sanctuary outside of Europe for rescued refugees. Fighting opposition from the State Department, Congress, and the public, the WRB convinced FDR to allow one group of Jewish Italian refugees to occupy an old army camp near Oswego, New York. To avoid violating the immigration laws, the WRB brought these victims of Nazi persecution into the country as prisoners of war.

By May 1944, American bombers could reach the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz. The precise location of these facilities was well-known. The WRB and Jewish leaders pleaded with the U.S. War Department to bomb the gas chambers and the railroads that transported the Nazis' human cargo into Auschwitz. After a brief study, the War Department rejected the idea because "it could be executed only by diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations."

Many experts have disputed the War Department's argument. In the fall of 1944 and again in December, American aircraft bombed industrial targets less than five miles from Auschwitz's gas chambers. No bombs ever fell on the gas chambers and ovens or on the railroad tracks leading to the camps. An estimated 100,000 Jews died at Auschwitz in the time following the American raids. Some say that if the bombing raids had been directed at Auschwitz, these lives would have been saved. Others disagree. They argue that the inaccurate bombing techniques of that era may not have been effective. Instead, they say, the bombing might have caused the deaths of thousands of Jews in Auschwitz or on the trains leading there.

The gassing continued until the Russians captured the camp in January 1945.

The War Refugee Board has been credited with saving perhaps 200,000 Jews during the final months of the war. "What we did was little enough," said WRB director **John Pehle**. "It was late. Late and little, I would say."

Could the United States have done more to save the Jews from Hitler's Holocaust? Many believe that, under the circumstances of the pre-war period, and during the war itself, the Roosevelt administration cannot be blamed for failure to rescue more victims of the Holocaust. Others disagree. The question may never be settled. It continues to haunt us today.