

U.S Response to the Holocaust

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The Holocaust was one of the most brutal and devastating mass genocides in the entire history of the world. Adolf Hitler, and the Nazis of the Third Reich with their extreme anti-Semitic outlook, deemed the Jews as vermin. As phrased by Holocaust historians, A. Litchman and R. Breitman "During WWII, The Nazis and their collaborators shot, gassed, starved and worked to death some six million Jewish men, women and children in order to destroy the biological substance of the Jews. They perpetrated what remains to date the only systematic effort by a modern state to exterminate an entire people across all national frontiers."¹ Germans were supposedly the ancestors to the Aryan race, while Jews were considered "Untermensch" or Sub-human. After Germany's defeat in WWI, many Germans felt as though their country had failed them, and they sought to pin the blame on a specific minority. Thus was born the "stab in the back" myth, which blamed the "Jewish Communists" who betrayed Germany, and surrendered the war.² These were just a few of the reasons that Hitler outlined in "Mein Kempf" and what led the Nazis to kill more than 6 million Jews. This genocide was the result of the culmination of years of anti-Semitism present in

¹ Brietman, Richard and Litchman, Allan. "FDR and the Jews" The Belknap press of Harvard University Press. Introduction.

² Anne Frank House editors, AnneFrankHouse.com, Date accessed- 3/20/21

Germany. Yet beyond the horrors of the Holocaust, there is a related and important story, that of the brave American Jews who sought to uncover the truth. For Jews living within the United States, they could do very little to help their Jewish brothers and sisters being transported to death camps. One figure emerged, Rabbi Stephen Wise, who arguably was the most effective and determined Jewish leader during the Holocaust. The paper as a whole is a historical investigation of how countries such as Britain and the United States responded to the Holocaust, and attempted to save Jews. It also places focus on Rabbi Stephen Wise, who was a crucial figure in getting the first news of the Holocaust to the United States. Using both secondary and primary sources, newspapers, books and online databases, I will break down the significance of the role that Stephen Wise played as the focal Jewish leader within the United States during the Holocaust.

Rabbi Stephen Wise

Originally born in Budapest in 1874, Wise descended from a line of Rabbis. He was the grandson of the chief Rabbi of a town called Eger, Hungary, which lies about 60 miles northeast of Budapest.³ As a young child Wise immigrated to New York City. His father, Aaron Wise became the Rabbi of Congregation Baith Israel in Brooklyn. Wise grew up and went the way of his lineage, becoming a rabbi. In 1893 he was appointed Assistant Rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, a prominent synagogue on

³Feingold, Henry L. Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

the Upper west side of Manhattan. Later that year he became the senior Rabbi of the same congregation. ⁴

Eventually Wise found himself on the opposite side of the country, leading a Reform congregation in Portland, Oregon. Wise's entire lineage had been Orthodox Jewish, so transitioning into being Reform was a huge change for Wise. The traditions and customs amongst the Orthodox are much more strict and traditional, while Reform Judaism puts more of an emphasis on ethical aspects of Judaism, versus ceremonial ones. Reform Judaism "upholds freedom of conscience in belief and practice" while Orthodox Judaism "adheres to time-tested religious laws and doctrines". Oregon is where Wise began to preach progressive era ideas. Speaking up about the social and political issues of the United States, Wise fought for child labor laws, as well as demands for striking workers. This is also where Wise began to develop his public speaking skills, which would aid him through out his life. Wise also became an outspoken activist for civil rights, and was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people.

Uncharacteristic for most Reform rabbis at the time, Wise was a firm believer in Zionism. Reform Jews saw Judaism as a universal religion, and therefore opposed a return to Zion. Various resolutions were passed in the late 1800's by Reform Rabbinical Committees all rejecting a "restoration of a Jewish State", Being a Reform Jew as well as a Zionist did not go hand in hand at this point in history. Nonetheless, Wise had been involved in the creation of the New York Federation of Zionist Societies in 1897,

⁴"Stephen Samuel Wise". The Jewish Agency for Israel. <https://www.jewishagency.org>

which led to the formation of the national Federation of American Zionists. Wise was also a delegate for the English language at the second Zionist congress, this is where Wise met and interacted with Theodor Herzl, the “father” of modern Zionism. Wise attributed his strong belief in Zionism to his early interactions with Herzl, who fascinated him. As the honorary secretary of The Federation of American Zionists (FAZ), Wise and Herzl worked and communicated with each other until Herzl’s death in 1904.

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As Wise’s passion for Zionism grew, He began to get fiercely involved in politics. Alongside Louis Brandeis, who had become head of the American Zionist movement, they attempted to convince President Woodrow Wilson to approve the Balfour Declaration. That declaration, was a commitment by the British government to facilitate the existence and creation of a Jewish home state in Palestine. Britain hoped that the declaration would sway Jews, specifically American Jews to the side of the Allied powers. The British also believed that having a pro-British Jewish state in Palestine would ensure protection of the Suez Canal in Egypt, which provided the fastest route from Europe to India and its surrounding land. In 1917, President Wilson approved the Balfour Declaration, and it was included in the British Mandate over Palestine. The declaration was the initial promise by the British government to create a “homeland” for the Jewish people, and was in place when Britain took military control of Palestine.

Wells, Leon Weliczker. *Who Speaks for the Vanquished?: American Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust*. New York: Peter Lang, 1987.

As Hitler and the Nazi's assumed power in 1933, Wise became one of the earliest outspoken enemies of the Third Reich. He attempted to sway American's opinion against the Nazis. The early years of the 1930s saw Wise organize various Anti-Nazi protests, most famously the one at Madison Square Garden, which was solely a call to end anti-Semitism within the Third Reich.⁶ An article from the "Jewish Telegraphic Agency" on December 24, 1935 entitled "Mrs. Wise Leads Picket Line in Front of Store selling Nazi Goods" shows how committed both Stephen Wise, and his wife Louise Wise were to boycotting and protesting anything related to Germany, in the early years of the war. In this particular case, Mrs. Wise marched back and forth in front of "B. Shackman Showroom" holding a picket sign which asked the public not to buy goods from Hitler. Wise's boycott attracted the attention of reporters, photographers and other members of the public. Six policemen attempted to disperse the crowd, but to no avail. Earlier that week, Stephen Wise made a 25 cent purchase at the showroom, to establish that German goods were indeed being sold at the toy store. Eventually, Mr. Shackman, the Jewish store owner admitted that roughly 30 percent of the stores products were manufactured in Germany. This was the first time that the American Jewish Congress attempted this type of direct boycott.⁷

⁶Wyman, D. S. (2007). *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945* (Complete Numbers Sta ed.). The New Press.

⁷Kamins, T. L., Friedman, G., Wineburg, R., & Wiener, J. (1935, December 24). *Mrs. Wise Leads Picket Line in Front of Store Selling Nazi Goods*. Jewish Telegraphic Agency. <https://www.jta.org/1935/12/24/archive/mrs-wise-leads-picket-line-in-front-of-store-selling-nazi-goods>.

An article two years later, in 1937, entitled “Dr. Wise sees Nazi Propaganda spreading in the U.S” details a press conference held by Stephen Wise and Dr. Joseph Tenenbaum, the chairman of the Joint Boycott Council (JBC).⁸The JBC was established in 1936, by the American Jewish Congress. The council was responsible for researching import of German products, reaching out to American companies to stop buying these products, publish a list of boycotted companies, and picketing those who would not comply with the boycotts. In this particular conference, Dr. Wise and Tenenbaum called for a national boost of the German boycott, stating that the Nazi regime poses a major threat to both the United States and the world. Many believed that the anti-semitic wave that hit the United States in the late 1930s would die down with the election of FDR, but that was not the case. Wise went on to say that within the United States alone, there were more than 200 pro Nazi and anti-Semitic organizations, and that Nazi propoganda was rampant. Dr Tenenbaum, upon reviewing the first four years of the German Boycott, stated that Nazi Germany was doomed economically, therefore the government would crumble. He concluded that ramping up the national boycott against Germany was important, specifically to drain the Nazi’s economy and budget, which was almost solely spent on the war effort.⁹

⁸Joint Boycott Council of the American Jewish Congress and Jewish Labor Committee records. <http://archives.nypl.org/mss/1581>.

⁹Kamins, T. L., Friedman, G., Wineburg, R., & Wiener, J. (1937, March 5). *Dr. Wise Sees Nazi Propaganda Spreading in U.S.* Jewish Telegraphic Agency. <https://www.jta.org/1937/03/05/archive/dr-wise-sees-nazi-propaganda-spreading-in-u-s>.

News of the Holocaust reaches the United States via informants

As the Holocaust continued, information regarding gas chambers, concentration camps and other atrocities did not reach the United States until about 1942. In July of the same year, SS chief Heinrich Himmler inspected Auschwitz camp, and at this point some details of the mass murdering had began to trickle into the United States and other countries. Himmler was one of the main party members of the Nazi party and is credited with being one of the three main “architects” of the Holocaust, alongside Adolf Hitler and Reinhard Heydrich. Himmler was also credited with coming up with the gas chamber idea. After witnessing the death of 100 Jews by a firing squad, Himmler became worried that these tactics could negatively effect the members of the SS. He ordered that Gas chambers be added to the Auschwitz camp. This was the reason for Himmler’s inspection, he was being shown a demonstration of how the Gas chambers worked.

The details of Himmler’s inspection eventually reached the German managing director of Giesecke, Eduard Schulte. Schulte had secretly been anti-Nazi, and was a useful informant to both the Polish and the Swiss, and eventually the United States. On July 29, 1942 Schulte travelled to Switzerland to pass the information he had learned off to a representative of the Jewish community. He spoke with Isidor Koppelman, a Swiss Jewish investment banker, who went on to meet with Benjamin Sagalowitz, the head of the information bureau of the Association of Swiss Jewish communities. Sagalowitz then contacted Gerhart Riegner, a representative of the World Jewish

Congress in Switzerland. Riegner then attempted to report this information to the head of the WJC; Rabbi Stephen Wise, in August, 1942. This report would eventually be dubbed the “Riegner Telegram.” Riegner knew that the information had come from Eduard Schulte, within the Nazi regime, but vowed to keep Schulte’s identity a secret. It wasn’t until about 40 years later, in 1983 that historians confirmed that it was Schulte’s who originally leaked the extermination plan to Riegner. ¹⁰

Initially, the State Department’s officials attempted to block this report from reaching Wise, claiming the report of two million Jewish deaths was nothing more than a “war rumor.” Wise had sent Secretary of State Sumner Welles a copy of the telegram, but Welles told Wise not to go public with it until he could verify the legitimacy of the message. From early September to late November, 1942, Welles gathered testimonials and evidence from various sources within Switzerland, including American diplomatic personnel, the International Red Cross, and the Vatican.

Eventually, months into the State Departments investigation of the Riegner cable, they were able to confirm that the information relayed by Riegner’s telegram was accurate. The testimonials from various high ranking officials in both the Red Cross and the Vatican, were enough to convince Welles that Reigner’s cable was accurate. The cable explained the Nazis’ comprehensive plan to exterminate all the Jews of Europe. On November 24, 1942, Wise held a press conference in which he confirmed the accuracy of the cable, and broke the news of the Holocaust to the U.S media and

¹⁰ Penkower, Monty Noam. “The World Jewish Congress Confronts the International Red Cross during the Holocaust”Vol. 41, No. 3/4 (Summer - Autumn, 1979), pp. 229-256 (28 pages)
Published By: Indiana University Press

population, Wise also spoke directly to FDR, pleading with him to attempt to stop the German's treacherous plan.

As new information trickled in to the United States and out in to the public, the responses from U.S citizens, and specifically Jewish U.S citizens varied. While Jewish local newspapers had already been reporting news of what was occurring in Eastern Europe, larger presses also began to take notice. The U.S Jews were divided on how much pressure to place on the U.S government. One side worried, while it was important to rescue Jews, that pushing a plan to rescue Jews might result in backlash within the United States. While the other side insisted that the only way the United States would act, is if the public showed unrest and persistently put pressure on the government to rescue Jews. On one side you had the more passive and pensive Wise who thought the only way to convince the United States to fund rescue attempts was to slowly plead with FDR's administration. On the other side you had a rising number of Jewish radicals within the United States, such as Peter Bergson, that believed they would only achieve rescue attempts through protests and direct action.

Although Jews within the United States were divided on whether or not to apply pressure on FDR and the State Department, several American Jewish leaders emerged. Rabbi Stephen Wise was perhaps the most influential and powerful American Jewish leader at the time. Wise had been an outspoken foe to the Nazi regime, since Hitler took power in 1933. He was possibly the first figure that wanted the United States to oppose the Third Reich. He organized various anti-Nazi rallies that took place at

Madison Square Garden, in which he called for an end to anti-Semitism and the Third Reich. He also joined the movement to boycott German goods, as I discussed earlier. Wise was also connected to Washington, he was a friend and supporter of FDR, he tried to sway FDR into opposing Hitler, allowing Jewish refugees into Palestine, and upping the number of Jewish refugees the United States would allow entry to.¹¹

By 1943, Wise had become more and more isolated, he had placed his faith in Roosevelt, whom he was unable to persuade to launch more serious rescue efforts to save the Jews of Europe. Wise also did not tolerate any criticism of FDR's administration's handling of rescue efforts. Wise's inability to unite American Jews on a course of action in response to the Nazis' mass murder of Jews saw his leadership falter, and he was replaced by Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland as the new head of the American Zionist Movement. Silver was a major figure in the Zionist movement, and was asked in 1943 to join Wise as co-chair of the American Zionist Emergency Council.

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Abba Hillel Silver wasn't the only one to question Wise's leadership. Wise was also confronted by radical Peter Bergson, who headed a group known as "The Revisionist Zionists." Bergson was on the other side of the argument. He and his radical group favored mass protests within the United States, despite the war. They also favored violence towards the British, in relation to their occupation of Palestine.

Feingold, Henry. *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust 1938-1945*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970. (D 810 .R4 F45 1970)

¹² David S Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews, Page 173*, The New Press, 1984

Interestingly, Wise had been considered a radical earlier in his career, but at this point people viewed him as part of the establishment, too moderate, and not critical enough of his close friend FDR. Bergson was known for his more radical views on rescue efforts and Zionism. He often demanded the creation of a Jewish Army, to combat the Nazis and save the Jews of Europe, by any means necessary. He also called for the creation of a Jewish State.

Peter Bergson was a pseudonym. Bergson's original name was Hillel Kook. Originally born in Lithuania in 1915, he and his family moved to Palestine in 1925. Eventually, Kook becomes a radical Zionist, and adopts the pseudonym, Peter Bergson, so he doesn't bring shame to his family, that includes an important rabbi. His father, Rabbi Dov Kook became the first chief rabbi of Afula, Israel. In the early 1930's, Bergson joins the revisionist Zionist movement, known as National Military Organization. Their main goal was to force Britain to grant Jews citizenship on both banks of the Jordan river, thus allowing unlimited Jewish Immigration into Palestine. The IZL, more commonly known as the Irgun, was considered to be a terrorist organization by the British government, they orchestrated attacks on British officials in Palestine. The British government actually warned the U.S state department of Peter Bergson, claiming he was a "Bomb-thrower." In the late 1930's, Bergson still worked for the IZL, smuggling Polish Jews out of German occupied areas, into Palestine. Eventually, Bergson came to the United States in 1940, in order to gather support for

the IZL, mobilize a Jewish army to combat the Nazis, and garner support for a Jewish state in Palestine.¹³

The Nazis knew that keeping their plans secret from the rest of the world was the only way to finish what they had started. To avoid the information being leaked to other opposing countries, Nazi Germany used various code words, and never told Jews where they would truly end up. “Final Solution” and “Special Treatment” were both code terms used to refer to the extermination of the Jews, and the gas chambers. Language was manipulated for propaganda purposes, as well as to disguise acts of terror and destruction. The term “Final Solution” originated from the Wannsee conference, a meeting between fifteen high ranking Nazi officials and German government officials. This is where they coordinated the “Final Solution”, Hitler envisioned that about 11 million Jews, some of them not even living in German controlled areas, would be exterminated. They told Jews they were going to labor camps in the east, while they really ended up in death factories in Poland. They even went as far as forcing Jews at death camps to write postcards to friends and family assuring them they were living and working under fair conditions. This was all meticulously planned, so it makes sense that the news of Jewish extermination did not reach the rest of the world until late 1942.¹⁴

¹³ Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman, *FDR And The Jews*, Page 217, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014

Laqueur, Walter. *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's "Final Solution."* New York: H. Holt, 1998. (D 810 .J4 L278 1998)

At first, reports of Jewish extermination were few and far between, but eventually these reports became more prevalent. Local Jewish newspapers within the United States were the first to focus their reporting and bulk of pages on the extermination of the Jews, while more major newspapers were less quick to report on the mass killings. The *Jewish Independent*, a local Jewish paper in Cleveland, Ohio included an article proclaiming that Hitler had stated “my prediction will find its fulfillment, that by the end of this war not the Aryans, but the Jews will be exterminated.” A New York Yiddish newspaper, *Der Tog*, reported that hundreds of Jewish civilians had been targeted within the first thrust of the German attack on Russia. The same newspaper reported a summary from the exiled Polish government, that thousands of Jews were machine-gunned in eastern Poland and Ukraine. Later that year, in October of 1941, *The New York Times* reported a similar story, an eyewitness report from a Hungarian Officer that estimated around 10 to 15 thousand Jews were executed in Galicia. *The New York Times* and other news outlets also used information from an “extremely trustworthy source”, a press conference held by S. Bertrand Jacobson in mid-march, 1942. Jacobson had been in Budapest for two years prior, serving as chief representative in Eastern Europe for the relief activities of American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. In the conference, he estimated that about 240,000 Jews had been killed in Ukraine. One of the most disturbing and earliest accounts of the Holocaust was described by a Hungarian soldier, who had seen a vast burial site near Kiev. The soldier recalls seeing thousands of bodies in the ground, some even alive, lightly covered in dirt. ¹⁵

¹⁵S.D. (1942, March 6). “Jews Will Be Exterminated,” Yells Hitler From Eastern Front. *The Jewish Independent*. <https://newspapers.ushmm.org/article/14785#>

Perhaps one of the most famous early witnesses to the Holocaust, Jan Karski was a Soldier in the Polish Armed forces. In 1939, Soviet forces took Karski as a prisoner, and sent him to a detention camp in modern-day Ukraine. Karski was able to escape the camp, and joined the Polish underground resistance. Since Karski had great geographical, language and memory skills, he could be a useful informant. He was a courier between the resistance and the Polish government, relaying messages between the two. In 1940, Karski was captured by the Gestapo while on a mission. They tortured him, but he revealed no secrets. In late 1942, Karski was smuggled in and out of both the Warsaw Ghetto and a transit camp at Izbica. This is where he saw the horrors that Jews experienced under Nazi occupation. Mass starvation, and the deportation of Jews to the Belzec Killing center. He travelled to London to relay the information to the Polish government (now in exile) as well as the U.K foreign minister, Anthony Eden. After that, he travelled to Washington. Karski was actually able to meet with President Roosevelt on July 28, 1943. Karski informed the president on the atrocities he had witnessed, and called for the United States to attempt rescue efforts to try and save the remaining Jews of Europe. Karski recalls FDR assuring him that the Allies will win the war, but did not mention anything in relation to rescue efforts. ¹⁶

U.S Response

Although the United States was known to be “The Land of the Free”, and a supposed safe-haven for Immigrants seeking refuge in the late 19th and early 20th century, its doors were less open to immigrants beginning in the early 1920s. The

¹⁶Jankowski, Stanislaw and Wood, Thomas “Karski : How One Man Tried to Stop the Holocaust”

United States open Immigration policy ended when Congress began restricting the amount of immigrants that were allowed to move to the U.S in 1921. This new restriction limited the number of German Immigrants to roughly 26,000. Once the Great Depression began in 1929, pressure was placed on President Hoover to enact heavier immigration restrictions. In 1932, The U.S issued a total number of 35,576 immigration visas. While the U.S was experiencing the depression, the Nazi party was assuming power in Germany, and began to implement laws that would change the destiny of the Jews. ¹⁷

The early years of the Third Reich saw German Jews lose many rights, with the Nuremberg Laws being implemented in 1935. These laws took away Reich citizenship from German Jews and prevented marriage between Jews and German citizens. Thousands of Jews were already attempting to flee Germany, but the issue was that very few countries were willing to accept them as immigrants. Although several thousand refugees escaped to Palestine or other Western countries, and roughly 14,000 were allowed into Shanghai, the majority of Jews were forced to stay in Germany. The United States had welcomed immigrants for years with open arms, but the Great Depression severely limited the number of visas that the U.S would issue.¹⁸

Not only was there a serious lack of jobs through out the U.S, there was also an anti-Semitic wave that ran through many American's minds. Anti Semitism actually

¹⁷ Zucker, Bat-Ami. *In Search of Refuge: Jews and US Consuls in Nazi Germany, 1933-1941*. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2001. (JV 6483 .Z93 2001)

¹⁸ Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman, *FDR And The Jews, Page 6*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014

reached very high levels within the U.S in the 1930s. Hundreds of anti-Semitic organizations filled the U.S with hate propaganda. Anti-Semitic acts such as vandalizing graveyards and synagogues, as well as attacks on young Jews were common, especially in cities such as New York and Boston. Public polls taken in 1938 reported that 60 percent of respondents held a low opinion of Jews, and 41 percent believed that Jews held too much power within the United States. ¹⁹

Anti-Semitism was also present in some facets of FDR's administration, specifically within the State Department. Perhaps most notable of the department, was Samuel Breckinridge Long, the assistant Secretary of State from 1940 to 1944. Long was in charge of "visa Division", basically deciding the amount of visas that would be granted to each foreign country. In late 1938, Between November 9 and 10, 1938, Nazi officers conducted a violent pogrom upon Jews in Germany. The event was dubbed "Kristallnacht" or "Night of Crystal" due to all the broken glass on the streets of German cities, from the windows of Jewish homes, Synagogues, and Businesses. ²⁰The violence was mostly carried out by Nazi party officials, and Nazi Youth. after the horrific events of Kristallnacht, over 300,000 Germans, mostly Jewish, added their names to the American visa wait list. This technically meant the wait list would be over ten years long, given the U.S only issued Germany roughly 27,000 visas per year. As Long assumed control of visa Division, he did practically everything in his power to limit and postpone the issuing of visas to German Jews in peril. In June of 1941, Long told

¹⁹ David S Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews, Pages 9-15*, The New Press, 1984

²⁰ "Kristallnacht" United States Holocaust Memorial [museum.com https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kristallnacht](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kristallnacht)

consulate officials in Europe to deny visas to anyone who had close relatives living in Nazi territory. A month later, Long made it so each and every visa application needed to be reviewed by an “Interdepartmental visa Review Committee.” Long claimed the new process was introduced from a national defense viewpoint, but it just further lengthened an already prolonged process. ²¹

Many Americans believed that an influx of immigrants would bring even more competition for jobs, as well as more people entering the social welfare system. FDR was inaugurated just five weeks after Hitler’s appointment to Chancellor of Germany. Although there were many anti-Semites spread across the nation, thousands of Americans did protest and march against the Nazi’s new policies, they wanted FDR to at-least publicly denounce the Nazi party. Yet, FDR was very reluctant to do this, mostly because Germany still owed American investors billions of dollars in war reparations, and so FDR did not want to involve the US in another country’s “internal affairs.” Apparently, Roosevelt instructed William Dodd, the new ambassador to Berlin, not to officially protest Nazi persecution of Jews.

Breitman and Litchman’s book *FDR and the Jews* does an exceptional job of summing up FDR’s efforts to aid European Jews, dividing FDR’s presidency into four phases. According to the authors, In the early portion of the 1930s, FDR is seen as somewhat of a bystander when it comes to the Jews. As it was his first term in office, Roosevelt was very ambivalent about leaning too far in one direction regarding anti-

²¹ US Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Breckenridge Long*, Date accessed- March 11, 2021

Semitism. The United States was still recovering from the worst economic crash in its history, and so FDR put his political future ahead of criticizing the Nazis and admitting more Jewish refugees into the United States. Perhaps FDR did not want to risk his political future, especially as a first term president. FDR refused to meet with Jewish leaders until 1936. Eventually, after FDR had been re-elected, there was less political pressure on him. This, coupled with the fact that Hitler was becoming bolder with his cruelty, led FDR to become more sympathetic to the plight of the Jews.²²

FDR and Wise had a long, but complicated relationship. It began when FDR was running for New York state Senator, in 1910. At this point Wise was living in New York City, and supported FDR and his political aspirations. “Hennessy-Roosevelt People... represent all that is best in the make-up of the Democratic Party in this state” Wise stated when asked his opinion on FDR’s campaign. According to Breitman and Litchman, “Wise would become the most important advocate for Jewish causes during FDR’s four terms in the white house”

With the increasing mistreatment and segregation of Jews in Europe, FDR decided to organize an international conference on the refugee conflict. In 1938, the Evian conference occurred. Over 32 different nations attended the conference, yet not one single country was willing to accept a large number of Jewish immigrants. Perhaps the one positive that came of the conference was the establishment of the

²²Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman, *FDR And The Jews*, Pages 3, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014

Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, which would continue to work on the refugee issue after the conclusion of the Evian Conference.²³

Even with the limitations in immigration due to various factors, Jews within the United States took steps to try and help German Jews. The Boycotts of German goods organized by Stephen Wise and the American Jewish congress were an attempt to apply economic pressure upon Hitler, which may have pressured him to lift his sanctions and anti-Semitic policies. This was one of several tactics that Stephen Wise deployed, in his attempts to at least slow down the Nazi's "Final Solution". American Jewish organizations and leaders such as Wise and Louis D. Brandeis also heavily applied pressure on FDR and his administration. Finally, in 1939, following the annexation of Austria, the State Department issued 27,370 visas (per year, over 5 years), filling the annual German-Austrian immigration quota, and allowing 140,000 immigrants into the United States over the 5 year period.

By the time Hitler and the Nazi's invaded Poland in September of 1939, provoking all-out war in Europe, FDR's activism had diminished. Roosevelt prioritized "internal security, foreign policy, and military concerns well above Jewish issues." FDR wanted to aid other countries resisting Hitler's wrath, instead of actually entering the United States in the war. As The United States entered the war, there was a tremendous amount of pressure placed on the military. This sidelined rescue efforts even further, and FDR's new rescue strategy was to just win the war.

²³Richard Breitman and Allan Lichtman, *FDR And The Jews, Pages 106-110*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014

Although Riegner had asked American diplomats to directly forward the cable to Rabbi Wise, the State department actually attempted to keep it a secret from Wise. Regardless, Wise was informed of the news by Jewish leaders in Great Britain. On November 12, 1942, Wise held a press conference outlining the Riegner report to the entire country. Although news had reached the United States, major news outlets were very cautious to report these horrors. In the first World War, many news outlets had published that the Germans had surrendered, but this news was pre-mature, and was actually false. Therefore, most publications approached with caution, some of the most prominent such the *New York Times* neglected to provide substantial coverage on the topic. For instance, one edition of the New York Times had sizable coverage of the Madison Squad Garden rally right on the front page. Yet, nothing on that page pointed to the fact that hundreds of thousands of Jews were being killed, yet the event was framed as a retaliation to Hitler's atrocities. ²⁴

As the war continued, public awareness of the Holocaust was more present and wide spread in England, versus in the United States. This was closely related to the British Mandate on Palestine. The mandate system was implemented by the League of Nations, basically to "administer non-self governing territories." In 1922, the League of Nations decided to grant Britain the Mandate for Palestine. The Middle East was basically cut into two spheres of influence, the French part, and the British part. While this was occurring, in 1917, Britain also signed the Balfour Declaration, which committed the British to create a "National Home" for the Jewish people. Basically, the

Leff, Laurel. *Buried by The Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. (D 804.7 .P73 L44 2005)

British had a dual obligation, to both the Jews and the Arabs. Britain eventually decided that the establishment of a Jewish homeland would not extend to the area east of the Jordan river, which made up 75 percent of the land included in the mandate. In 1937, the British established a board of inquiry, headed by Lord Peel, basically in an effort to assess the performance of the mandate. The board recommended that the land be partitioned in a way that there could be a Jewish state established, alongside the already existing Arab state. Peel also recommended that the two states exchange both population, land, and culture. Yet, the Arabs rejected the plan, and in 1938 Britain declared the plan would cease to be implemented. ²⁵

In late 1942, pressure had already begin to mount against the British government for several years prior. In January of 1943, various Archbishops across England called for the government to “immediately move to save Jews and provide sanctuary for all who could get out of Nazi Europe.” In response, the British government sent a memorandum to the U.S State Department, proposing an informal United Nations conference to discuss the issue of saving Jewish immigrant lives. Initially the State Department wanted to work the issue out through the already existing “Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees” The countries agreed on Bermuda to hold the conference, a setting that would protect them from public scrutiny and the press. In terms of objectives for the conference, the United States had three they were focused on. Firstly, they needed to formulate steps to encourage neutral European Nations to accept more refugees. Second, to find temporary safe havens for these refugees to transport to. Thirdly, to call an early meeting between the ICR to implement decisions

²⁵ Gelber, Marvin. “The Palestine Mandate: Story of a fumble” Pages 302-316.

brought forth in the Bermuda conference.²⁶ Although immigration had been limited in Britain, and the United States, there was a special program in 1939 that eased the limitations of immigration. “The term “Kindertransport” refers to an operation under which nearly 10,000 Jewish and non-Jewish children were rescued from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia and brought to Great Britain”.²⁷ Although Britain would allow these children to enter the country with temporary travel visas, private citizens or organizations had to guarantee they would pay for each and every child’s healthcare, education and eventual departure of Britain. It was understood that after this time of crisis, each child would eventually return to their family of origin. Unfortunately, most of, if not all the children in the Kindertransport program, had families who were all murdered during the Holocaust, so most of them would end up as orphans.

FDR’s outlook shifted again in 1943, the final phase of FDR’s presidency, as outlined in *FDR and the Jews*. Even if it came late, FDR’s establishment of the War Refugee Board was one of the biggest direct efforts at rescuing the remaining European Jews from the Nazi’s fury. FDR also pursued plans for post-war re-settlement of refugees. Roosevelt showed his commitment to this cause, he was gravely sick and still met with the king of Saudi Arabia, Ibn Sa’ud to ensure the secure establishment of a Jewish homeland. Up until this point, FDR had denounced anti-Semitism, but now he truly condoned any American who was “playing Hitler’s games. There is no place in the lives or thoughts of true Americans for anti-Semitism” Historians argue that if FDR had

²⁶ David S Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews, Pages 104-120*, The New Press, 1984

²⁷Rebekka Göpfert, Andrea Hamme *Kindertransport: History and Memory: In memoriam Erna Nelki. Shofar Volume 23. Purdue University Press.*

been this out spoken and acted decisively over his full presidency, he would have left a more heroic and brave legacy in regard to the Holocaust. ²⁸

Conclusion

All in all, I wanted this paper to discuss the response of the United States to the Holocaust. Examining several aspects of the U.S response, including attempts to save Jewish lives, immigration policy, and the Jewish domestic response. Determining how exactly the first news of the Holocaust reached the United States was also a key point. Looking at the chain of informants who became aware of the Nazis' plans, quickly spread the information through out Eastern Europe, and eventually to the United States. Those informants were Eduard Schulte and Gerhart Riegner, who were directly responsible for reaching the news of the "Final Solution" to the United States.

Reviewing and understanding ideas brought forth by great Jewish historians such as David S. Wyman, Allan Litchman and Richard Breitman helped better my understanding of the FDR administration's actions (or lack of action) in regard to the Holocaust. Focus then shifted to perhaps the most important American Jew of the era, Rabbi Stephen Wise. Wise was a key figure in delivering the news of the Holocaust to the United States, he led the first press conferences within the United States confirming the Reigner cable. Once Hitler assumed power, Rabbi Wise very quickly began preaching to Americans that the Third Reich was evil. Wise and his wife, Louise, led a major boycott on German goods in the 1930's. Wise was also one of FDR's closest Jewish aides, and was constantly attempting to sway FDR in the direction of

Mendelsohn, John, editor. "Relief and Rescue of Jews from Nazi Oppression 1943-1945." *The Holocaust: Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes*, Volume 14. New York: Garland, 1982. (Reference D 810 .J4 H645 1982 v.14

rescuing European Jews. In contrast, the radical leftist Jews were also present at the time. Led by Hilel Kook, AKA “Peter Bergson”, these radicals believed direct protest and even gathering a Jewish army within the U.S would prove to be more effective than just boycotting and appeasing FDR to make rescue efforts.

It was also interesting to understand the complex issue of immigration within the U.S at the time, and how the visa quotas limited how many Jews were able to flee Germany, and take refuge within the United States. Many historians point to the evident anti-Semitism that was present in the State Department at the time, as a possible reason for limitations on Jewish rescue attempts. Besides the United States, I also analyzed how Britain responded to the Holocaust, and how their rescue attempts differed from the U.S rescue attempts. In 1920, following the Ottoman Empire’s concession of Palestine, the League of Nations signed a mandate for Britain to take control of Palestine and Transjordan. With this mandate, Britain also issued a public statement known as the Balfour Declaration, that announced Britain’s support for a “national home for the Jewish people” that would be established in Palestine. This was one of the roots of the current Israeli-Palestine conflict that appears like it will never be resolved. In the years following WW2, Britain severely restricted Jewish Immigration to Palestine, but many Jews still illegally migrated to Palestine in overcrowded Vessels. The program was known as “Aliyah Bet”. Although Britain limited Jewish immigration post-WW2, they did engage in one of the more effective means of rescuing Jews; Kindertransport. In the nine months leading up to WW2, the United Kingdom took in roughly 10,000 children, predominantly Jewish. These children were dispersed

amongst British families, foster homes, farms, and schools. Often, these children were the last surviving members of their family. Interestingly, the United States had a similar bill that was proposed. The “Wagner-Rogers” Bill proposed that the Quota be increased to allow a total of 20,000 Jewish children into the United States from Nazi Germany. However, the bill was blocked by Senator Robert Rice Reynolds, who was known to be an Anti-Semite.

While the American response to the Holocaust was, in many respects, “too little, too late”, the efforts of Stephen Wise and other Jewish leaders of the period went far in exposing the Nazi’s secret “Final Solution” to the American Press, public and government. Without these focal leaders, and the pressure they applied on the government, an adequate response may never have occurred. I wanted to dig deeper into the story of the United States and the Holocaust, and pinpoint exactly what major events and figures dictated the course of history.