

# American Jewish Leadership Confronts the Holocaust: Revisiting Naomi Cohen's Thesis and the American Jewish Committee

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Nearly four decades ago I was a student in Naomi Cohen's graduate lecture course on American Jewish history at Columbia University. She had recently completed her history of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), and a student had queried her as to whether she thought she might have been overly charitable about AJC's activities in response to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. As I recall, she responded that AJC had done all that could have been done given the context and limitations of the period.

In *Not Free to Desist*, Cohen underscores how AJC took Nazism seriously as a challenge and a danger. However, as "children of the Enlightenment," AJC leaders did not fathom fully the radical evil embodied in Nazism. Rather, they utilized traditional models of combating antisemitism—harnessing research to refute Nazi racism, eliciting support from friendly non-Jews, and, above all, opting for private diplomacy while avoiding public demonstrations. Demonstrations, in AJC's view, would serve only to corroborate Hitler's lie of an international Jewish conspiracy. This tradition of "noiselessness," in turn, evoked the support of German Jewish leadership. Although some—both inside and outside AJC ranks—questioned the wisdom of the strategy, few offered concrete ideas for more effective action.

To be sure, Rabbi Stephen Wise and the American Jewish Congress advocated an alternative strategy of boycotting German goods. Cohen minimizes the boycott as "futile."<sup>1</sup> AJC opposed the boycott as a dangerous initiative that might corroborate the view that Nazism was a Jewish problem rather than a problem for western democracies. Moreover, Jewish leadership in Germany opposed the boycott as endangering German Jewry. Finally, AJC feared that the boycott might result in an antisemitic backlash within the United States. In this last regard, AJC opposed the public dimension of the boycott rather than its utilization in principle as a defense instrument.<sup>2</sup>

More generally, AJC tended to exonerate President Roosevelt himself while blaming the State Department as the villain on refugee issues. Moreover, in an America in which isolationist currents prevailed, AJC leaders feared that domestic anti-Nazi protests would spur antisemitism at home. AJC leaders pleaded quietly for more compassionate policies toward German Jewish refugees, yet publicly there was little challenge to America's restrictionist quotas sharply limiting the number of refugees to be admitted. AJC did oppose efforts to limit the quotas even further, but given the prevailing popularity of the quota

system, even—or perhaps especially—in circles considered friendly to Jews, AJC mounted no public challenge to the quota legislation. Again, to have done so not only risked incurring greater antisemitism but also undermined AJC’s approach of combating Nazism as a threat to American democracy rather than to the Jews as a people. In effect, AJC worked to contain nativist sentiment in America rather than work to open America’s doors to refugees.<sup>3</sup>

AJC’s approach by no means epitomized the communal consensus. Zionist leaders favored a more outspoken and public stance. Others advocated a more parochially Jewish stance rather than AJC’s penchant for proclaiming antisemitism to be un-American. Still others saw AJC as more concerned with “turning isolationists into anti-Semites than with the plight of European Jewry.” Cohen notes how on several occasions AJC did in fact cooperate with Zionist organizations and even entered into public demonstrations, but it did so only apologetically and with considerable ambivalence.<sup>4</sup>

Cohen’s portrait strives above all for historical fairness. AJC was hardly a “do nothing” organization in response to Nazism. It undertook a number of initiatives—even at times acting against its impulse to avoid cooperating with Zionist organizations. It perceived President Roosevelt as the primary friend of the Jews and wished to avoid any action that might undermine him or give credence to charges that he was waging a “Jewish war.”

Moreover, there were sharp limitations on what AJC could do. Jews had very little political leverage in the American society of the 1930s. Once America had entered into the war, all efforts were directed to attaining victory rather than specifically to rescuing Jews. Given the relatively insecure status of American Jewry in the interwar period, AJC perceived its primary task as one of combating antisemitism domestically rather than abroad.

Cohen acknowledges the limitations of these strategies. For one thing, AJC leaders never understood the uniqueness of Nazism and its “war against the Jews.” As a result, the rescue of Jews never attained as great a priority for America as the destruction of Jews did for Hitler. Moreover, she acknowledges that AJC contributed to the divisiveness of American Jewry by failing to create a united front around common strategies. Her conclusion, however, remains that alternative rescue policies were unlikely to have been any more effective than the ones AJC actually pursued.<sup>5</sup>

In Jewish historical memory, Cohen’s thesis has fared poorly. Jews today—even Jewish leaders—recall the 1930s as a period of excessive Jewish timidity. Elie Wiesel, for one, has argued that Jews ought to have chained themselves to the White House until such time as Roosevelt was willing to act.<sup>6</sup> Another Jewish leader claims that he became active in the Soviet Jewry movement in the 1960s so that his son would not pose the question he had posed to his own father of why he had been so inactive during the 1930s. Letters appear occasionally in the popular media to the effect that Jews mistakenly trusted Roosevelt and

unwisely avoided criticizing him. One correspondent went so far as to argue that if only Jewish leaders had protested then the way they do today, German Jewry would have been saved!

Nor have Jews treated the memory of FDR particularly favorably. Once revered as Jewry's greatest friend, Roosevelt today is often reviled as the president who failed to rescue. In this historical reconstruction, Jewish leaders placed "excessive trust in princes," engaging in an unrequited love affair with a president who was, at best, indifferent, and at worst cynical about the pleas of the Jews.

Understandably, the decades since the Holocaust have witnessed much soul-searching among Jews. Virtually everyone has his or her own "if only" scenario. "If only" the Jews had been more united, more Zionist, less trusting in Roosevelt, more supportive of rescue schemes, etc., then they believe the dimensions of the Holocaust might have been considerably mitigated. Cohen's research stands as a sharp corrective—reminding Jews that they enjoyed minimal influence and exercised little leverage over the course of public policy in 1930s America.

### FDR and Accommodationist Jewish Leadership

Among historians, Cohen's analysis of AJC in the Holocaust years has evoked a more diversified response. Fred Lazin was perhaps the first to criticize Cohen's view that AJC explored all possibilities of relief and rescue, save those that might in turn endanger American Jewry. Lazin argued that AJC simply did not exhaust all potential avenues of rescue—that AJC officers failed to utilize their administration contacts fully and, at times, even discouraged such overtures to administration officials. More generally, Lazin said, AJC consistently proved reluctant to engage in public criticism of Roosevelt and the State Department, arguing that public pressure would by no means enhance the welfare of German Jewry; as a result, AJC opposed the March 1933 Madison Square Garden rally sponsored by the American Jewish Congress together with Christian clergy. Last, Lazin argued, AJC opposed proposals to liberalize immigration quotas into the United States. Lazin concludes that, unfortunately, AJC leaders had failed to prioritize rescue while permitting more personal and professional concerns to take precedence.<sup>7</sup>

Most outspoken, and in many ways most prominent, has been David Wyman, emeritus professor of history and Judaic studies at the University of Massachusetts and founder of the Institute on Holocaust Studies that bears his name. In several books, Wyman has articulated a sharp critique of American policy during the Holocaust years, as well as a more oblique critique of Jewish communal leadership during the period. Wyman finds American policy to have been morally deficient. His first book on the subject, *Paper Walls*, a study of American immigration quota legislation, documents how the doors of America were closed to Jewish entry at the worst possible moment in Jewish history.<sup>8</sup> His subsequent book, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, solidified his reputation as

chief Roosevelt critic, indicting the administration for its failure to rescue in the face of the worst crime in recorded human history.<sup>9</sup>

The core of Wyman's criticism centers around the fourteen-month delay in establishing the War Refugee Board (WRB) as chief instrument of rescue. The news of the Holocaust had been verified by November 1942, yet the WRB was not created until January 1944. Wyman credits the WRB with rescuing 200,000 Jews—chiefly in Hungary—through the heroic actions of individuals such as Raoul Wallenberg. Wyman claims that hundreds of thousands more might have been rescued if not for the unconscionable delay in the creation of the WRB.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he argues that bombing the death camps was clearly feasible but that American policy makers—chiefly John McCloy—successfully opposed bombing of the death camps as a diversion from the war effort.<sup>11</sup>

In some respects, Wyman in *The Abandonment of the Jews* is far more condemnatory of American policy and critical of American Jewish leadership than he had been in the earlier *Paper Walls*, which remains arguably the leading analysis of American quota legislation limiting immigration into America. Given the popularity of the quota system—passed initially in 1921 and made further restrictive in 1924—Congress likely would have overturned any initiatives to liberalize Jewish immigration. Quotas, in other words, were “essentially what the American people wanted.”<sup>12</sup> Neither Roosevelt nor American Jewry was in any real position to overturn them.

In *The Abandonment of the Jews*, however, Wyman takes sharp aim at American bystanders—the Roosevelt administration and, to a lesser but still significant extent, American Jewish leadership. In the face of Roosevelt's indifference and the obstructionism of the State Department, American Jewry failed to mount an adequate campaign for rescue. Rabbi Stephen Wise, for one, was so closely tied to Roosevelt that he had become “unable to be critical of, or even objective about, the President.”<sup>13</sup> The Zionists, in Wyman's view, despaired of rescue prematurely, opting in favor of making the case for Jewish statehood after the war. Other Jewish organizations were plagued by institutional rivalries and disunity and therefore were insufficiently committed to rescue and to prioritizing collective Jewish interests above partisan bickering. This was particularly the case with respect to the treatment of the Bergson Boys, the group founded by Peter Bergson (born Hillel Kook), a Palestinian Jew who undertook radical action precisely to penetrate the communications barrier surrounding the Holocaust. Jewish organizational opposition to Bergson went so far as to dissuade Roosevelt from meeting with a delegation of four hundred rabbis who descended on Washington to petition for urgency in addressing the plight of the Jews. Sadly, some Jewish leaders, notably Samuel Rosenman, advisor to the president and longtime AJC member, initially sought to prevent the march of the rabbis and, failing that, urged Roosevelt to ignore it.<sup>14</sup>

In effect, Wyman argues his own “if only” scenarios. If only Jewish organizations had been more united, more forceful in pressing Roosevelt, and more committed to rescue, the WRB would have been established considerably earlier, and many more lives would have been saved. Similarly, if only the news of the Holocaust had been disseminated earlier, fewer Jews would have boarded the trains to Auschwitz. If only Auschwitz would have been bombed by American airplanes, the deportations would have ceased months earlier. Wyman does not by any means impute maliciousness to Jewish leaders. He pointedly exonerates the Zionists from postwar charges of potentially avoiding rescue efforts so as to strengthen the case for Jewish statehood.<sup>15</sup> He does maintain, however, that the disparity between Hitler’s commitment to the destruction of the Jews was not at all matched by an equal Jewish or American commitment to their rescue.

Coming two decades after the publication of Arthur Morse’s *While Six Million Died*, Wyman’s book has become authoritative in the popular mindset. The long-term love affair between Roosevelt and the Jews—initially challenged by Morse—was now set to rest as a figment of the Jewish imagination. Nor could one avoid the innuendo that the Jewish people had been poorly served by a well-intentioned but misguided and ineffective Jewish leadership.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Wyman’s widely heralded volume has inspired numerous offshoots. Within a year of the appearance of *The Abandonment of the Jews*, Rabbi Haskell Lookstein published *Were We Our Brothers’ Keeper?*, a study of American Jews’ public response to the Holocaust. Lookstein focused in particular on the Jewish media and its relative silence on the Holocaust, coupled with a “business as usual” response among Jewish organizations. Particularly noteworthy, in his view, was the prominence that Jewish organizations allocated to membership drives while only rarely awarding news of the Holocaust high-profile treatment. Reviewing organizational minutes, for example, during Kristallnacht, Lookstein comments acerbically that one could not resist the impression that Jewish leaders “may have been fiddling while German Jews were burning.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, he castigates the policy of silence prevalent among the defense organizations and the tendency of local Jewish communal newspapers to focus on local events rather than international developments. Of course, Jewish newspapers at the time were but fledgling organs with miniscule budgets and limited investigative resources. That local news overshadowed reports of Nazi atrocities only underscores the relatively narrow focus of these small-scale publications.

Last but hardly least, Lookstein repeatedly castigates the short-sightedness—if not blindness—of Jewish communal leaders’ love affair with President Roosevelt.<sup>18</sup> In his view, all were guilty: The Zionists, the Orthodox, and the national Jewish organizations.

Lookstein is somewhat more ambivalent on the question of what difference a more outspoken and confrontational posture by Jewish leaders might have achieved. Seemingly he skirts the question of how much leverage American Jewry

actually possessed in influencing American policy. At one point he notes that State Department obstructionism suggests that even “had American Jews done their best... not much in the way of rescue would have been accomplished.”<sup>19</sup> Yet in conclusion he argues, like Wyman, that a united Jewish community would have brought about the WRB and “its life saving work many months earlier.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly, however, he overstates the importance of the Jewish press and the capacity of American Jews to change the course of American public policy.

Yet Lookstein’s fundamental concerns were perhaps more moral than political. He concludes by noting, “The Final Solution may have been unstoppable by American Jewry, but it should have been unbearable. And it wasn’t.”<sup>21</sup> He cites approvingly Elie Wiesel’s severe criticism of Jewish leaders for the absence of hunger strikes, ongoing marches on the White House, and the failure to have “shaken heaven and earth, echoing the agony of their doomed brethren.”<sup>22</sup> Whether such 1960s-style protests were even imaginable in the 1930s, much less effective, remain questions critical to understanding Naomi Cohen’s earlier analysis.

In more recent years several studies have appeared on the Bergson Boys—the alternative Jewish leadership much praised by Wyman but frequently despised by the Jewish establishment. Perhaps the earliest treatment was a 1980 essay by Sarah Peck depicting the Bergsonites as a group of Palestinian Jews determined to force America into a pro-rescue policy. Although damaged by the same allegations of “fascism” often leveled against the followers of Vladimir Jabotinsky and Revisionist Zionism, as well as charges of financial irregularities (subsequently retracted), Bergson’s group, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, succeeded in attracting an impressive bipartisan roster of supporters for its pro-rescue campaign. Former President Herbert Hoover, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, former presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, New York Governor Thomas Dewey, Representatives Will Rogers and Guy Gillette, theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, among others, all loaned their names for public use in this campaign.<sup>23</sup>

Jewish leaders, by contrast, charged the Bergson Boys with divisiveness—disrupting the unity of American Jewry in its dire hour of need. According to a State Department memo, Rabbi Stephen Wise went so far as to denounce Bergson “as equally as great an enemy of the Jews as Hitler.”<sup>24</sup> If the citation was, in fact, accurate, clearly Wise had overstepped boundaries and had made an odious comparison. Nonetheless, it spoke to the depth of passion among Jewish leaders that Bergson had evoked. At AJC, Executive Director Morris Waldman joined hands with Nahum Goldmann in suggesting that Bergson be deported in order to curtail his activities.<sup>25</sup>

Peck’s own conclusions are far more charitable. Citing *The Washington Post*, the *New York Post*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*, she credits the Bergson

Boys with a “large role” in the creation of the WRB.<sup>26</sup> She claims wistfully that had American Jewry united behind Bergson’s confrontational approach, the verdict on Jewish rescue activity would have been much better than “too little and too late.”<sup>27</sup>

One year later, in 1981, Dr. Monty Penkower of Touro College published another study of the Bergsonites. Penkower traced their origins to a 1942 *Washington Post* story that had summarized the news of the Holocaust in two brief paragraphs. This paucity of treatment in turn inspired Bergson to undertake more dramatic action that would make the Holocaust part of general awareness. Together with Eri Jabotinsky (son of the founder of Revisionist Zionism), historian Ben-Tzion Netanyahu (father of the future prime minister of Israel), columnist Max Lerner, and playwright Ben Hecht, he advocated a program of an international Jewish armed force of 200,000 men to combat Hitler.<sup>28</sup> To accomplish these efforts, the Bergson Boys were determined to create a public relations strategy. Hecht produced a dramatic pageant, “We Will Never Die,” indicting America for its silence in the face of Nazi atrocities. The pageant played to impressive crowds in multiple cities. The Jewish establishment, particularly the Zionist leadership, staunchly opposed these efforts. AJC and B’nai B’rith urged that a poem by Hecht, “Ballad of the Doomed Jews of Europe,” not be published. The “ballad,” to be sure, was particularly inflammatory; it noted that this coming Christmas Christians could enjoy “peace on earth,” for there would be fewer Jews alive by then.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Penkower acknowledges that the Bergson Boys sorely divided American Jewry through their ill-advised efforts to distinguish between the real “Hebrews” and Americans of Jewish descent. Hoping to enable American Jews to support their version of Zionism without undermining their American identity, the Bergson Boys formulated this distinction between Jews and Hebrews suggesting a clear distinction between faith and nation. Most, however, found the distinction artificial at best and divisive at worst.<sup>30</sup> Penkower also notes how Bergson’s committee became more militant over time, as the situation became more desperate. For example, when Winston Churchill denounced the Stern gang assassination in 1944 of Lord Moyne as Jewish terrorism, the Bergsonites responded that Britain’s refusal to let Jews into Palestine more clearly approximated the actions of the Nazis than did those of the assassins.

Nonetheless, Penkower concludes on a relatively positive note. Like Peck, he credits the Bergsonites with a “major victory” in creation of the WRB and in their ability to “pierce the silence” concerning the Holocaust, bypassing Jewish leadership and the Zionist establishment by appealing to American Jewry generally and Orthodoxy in particular. However, he does criticize their policy of placing excessive trust in the capacity of public opinion to shape public policy and notes, like others, that whatever private criticisms they had of Roosevelt, they avoided any direct confrontation with the president himself.<sup>31</sup>

Since Penkower other historians, closer disciples of Wyman, have gone to great lengths to grant the Bergsonites a prominent place in the pantheon of Jewish rescuers. In pronounced contrast to Stephen Wise's contemporary dismissal of the Bergsonites, Rafael Medoff in particular, together with Wyman, has long advocated granting the Bergsonites recognition as Jewish rescuers. Beginning in 1973, Medoff and Wyman conducted a series of oral history interviews with Bergson in which the latter went to great lengths to charge that the opposition to him and his group fragmented Jewish unity and undermined rescue efforts.<sup>32</sup> He chided in particular Judge Joseph Proskauer and Sam Rosenman of AJC, who, he felt, could have done much more to prod the president but instead provided poor counsel even while posing as representative Jews. Retrospectively, he felt that Proskauer had acted to halt publicity of an admittedly inflammatory ad but had no real alternative rescue proposals.

The most recent and arguably most thorough treatment of the Bergson Boys is by Judith Baumel, *The Bergson "Boys" and the Origins of Contemporary Zionist Militancy*. Baumel traces carefully the efforts by more establishment groups to tar Bergson with financial irregularities and to cast them as Jewish fascists.<sup>33</sup> She argues effectively that Bergson focused primarily on propaganda and public relations rather than ideological considerations with respect to the partisan differences among various Zionist political parties and agendas. In other words, Bergson, in contrast to the established American Jewish leadership, understood the power of the media and was determined to make the Holocaust front page news.<sup>34</sup> In this respect, Stephen Wise's argument that Bergson and his group were a pro-Irgun front was quite irrelevant to their activities. Bergson was seeking to focus public attention on the Holocaust rather than to advance a particular Zionist position.

Establishment opposition to Bergson in turn limited the group's effectiveness and, more damagingly, enabled Roosevelt simply to ignore its protest. Roosevelt, whom Bergson derided as "more than half anti-Semitic," confronted a Jewish community so divided that in effect to heed the counsel of one Jewish group would only earn for him the enmity of numerous others.<sup>35</sup>

Baumel does not shy away from criticizing the group. Like Penkower, she notes that its divisive actions fragmented Jewish unity. Moreover, although the charges of financial irregularities were, in fact, withdrawn, she argues that more than 50 percent of the monies raised were used for securing additional publicity rather than, as the ads implied, direct rescue. The result, Baumel argues, is that the achievements of Bergson's group were, in fact, quite limited.<sup>36</sup>

A more recent indictment of Roosevelt and American Jewry emanates from Robert Beir, a lifelong student of Roosevelt and self-proclaimed admirer. Yet, as he considered the failure to rescue, Beir's doubts about the hero of his youth increased considerably. Part memoir, part history, Beir reconstructs the history of the period as one hardly conducive to protest and rescue.<sup>37</sup> He recalls the domes-



tic antisemitism of the times, spearheaded by highly regarded establishment figures such as Ambassador Joseph Kennedy and Olympics Chairman Avery Brundage.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, few, with the notable exception of Eleanor Roosevelt, took the time to protest the internment of Japanese Americans during the war, suggesting that it was not only animus against Jews that inhibited rescue efforts but rather a more general reluctance to protest governmental policy in the context of the period.<sup>39</sup> Beir does not exempt American Jewry; he faults AJC's lack of urgency surrounding the Holocaust. For example, meetings could not be convened on Sundays because too many members were in the country on weekend holidays.<sup>40</sup> Nor did the Jews in Roosevelt's corner, including AJC stalwart Sam Rosenman, make any effort to energize their boss. Beir echoes Bergson's assessment that Rosenman in fact was the most harmful of Roosevelt's Jews because "he functioned as a Jew"—meaning that because he was considered an active and representative Jew and he was not protesting, that suggested that American Jewry at large was not overly concerned and that whatever protests did occur could be safely disregarded.<sup>41</sup>

Like Lookstein, Beir's concerns are more moral than they are historical. He perceives considerable continuity between the 1930s and the present day with respect to antisemitism and urges that American Jews avoid mistakes of a bygone past.<sup>42</sup>

Laurel Leff extends the criticism of American Jewry to the owners of *The New York Times*. Publisher Arthur Sulzberger, who was sensitive to being the Jewish owner of the country's preeminent newspaper, defined his Jewishness in exclusively religious terms. Ties of peoplehood or special obligations to fellow Jews held no claims on him. Although far more openly Jewish than the famed columnist Walter Lippman, Sulzberger in fact refused to join AJC on the grounds that as an organization it presupposed an ethnic identity of one's Jewishness, and he went so far as to oppose Felix Frankfurter's nomination to the Supreme Court on the grounds that there should be no such thing as a "Jewish seat."<sup>43</sup>

Sulzberger insisted that the *Times* avoid any type of special pleading for Jews. Thus he opposed liberalization of immigration quotas, insisting that there could be only an international solution to the refugee crisis rather than a specifically American one.<sup>44</sup> Most important, Sulzberger advocated Jewish disunity, claiming that a "split is necessary in what is called Jewish opinion in this country."<sup>45</sup> These sensitivities did not mean that the *Times* would not cover the Nazis' war against the Jews. It did connote that the *Times* would rarely go into depth in its coverage of any Jewish issue. The very idea of a Jewish news service such as the JTA offended Sulzberger, and he halted the *Times*'s subscription to it.<sup>46</sup> In effect, Sulzberger, as a high-profile Jew active in several Jewish institutions, contributed to the communications barrier surrounding the Holocaust. Although Leff's book

is not explicitly pro-Bergson, she implies that the times required the militancy of Bergson and his group to penetrate that communications barrier.

Similarly, Gulie Arad faults the timidity of Jewish leaders in failing to confront Roosevelt lest they give credence to Hitler's charges of an international Jewish people. Jews internalized the "liberal fantasy" that good behavior would be rewarded by access to power.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, they underestimated the evil of Nazism, maintaining that it was "manageable."<sup>48</sup> This timidity extended especially to the Jews in Roosevelt's corner—Rosenman, Brandeis, Frankfurter, and speechwriter Ben Cohen—all of whom served as a buffer preventing FDR from even listening to, let alone confronting, more aggressive and outspoken Jewish leaders.<sup>49</sup> Arad argues that greater efforts should have been made to publicize the news of the Final Solution much earlier. However, she concludes that virtually all Jews placed their trust in Roosevelt as the "greatest friend we have" and that, in any case, only relatively few additional numbers of Jews might have been rescued.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, she notes that German immigration quotas remained consistently underfilled in the years prior to American entry into the war in December 1941.

Last, Aaron Berman, a historian of American Zionism, embraces the pro-Bergson perspective; he in turn castigates Wise and the Zionists. According to Berman, the latter focused far too much anger at Bergson, particularly over his use of the term "refugees" to refer to Jews fleeing to Palestine—i.e., only people without a homeland may rightly be termed refugees.<sup>51</sup> More generally, in Berman's view, the Zionists failed to understand Hitler's uniqueness, regarding him primarily as just one more in a long line of antisemites. Berman also argues that the Zionists' inability to distinguish between the goals of statehood and rescue meant the politicization of the rescue campaign.<sup>52</sup>

All of these authors are united by their criticisms of Roosevelt's failure to rescue and of the excessive trust placed in Roosevelt by American Jewish leadership. In that sense, they share a common moral imperative that more should have been done, that Roosevelt was guilty of indifference (in pronounced contrast to Eleanor Roosevelt), and that the Jewish people were poorly served by an American Jewish leadership overly enamored of the president. Contrary to Naomi Cohen's relatively favorable portrait of the accommodationist AJC, these authors prefer the more confrontational and outspoken Peter Bergson, who was indeed willing to risk fraying the close relationship between Roosevelt and the Jews. In turn, this school of historians gives voice to Jewish public memory of an unrequited love affair with FDR and a Jewish leadership too timid to challenge the administration.

### Contextualizing the History

Yet a second school of historians has constructed a considerably more nuanced view of Roosevelt and American Jewish leadership. Henry Feingold

is perhaps preeminent in this school, eschewing Roosevelt-bashing in favor of contextualizing his failure to rescue. Feingold credits Bergson with breaking the communications barrier concerning the Holocaust and with distinguishing between the goals of rescue and of attaining statehood for Jews. Moreover, he maintains that resettlement schemes might actually have proven successful were they pursued with the same dedication and passion as the Nazi goal of Jewish destruction. The failure to engage in bombing of the railway lines leading to Auschwitz, according to Feingold, was particularly tragic for Hungarian Jewry. At a minimum, such bombing would have exposed the Final Solution to public scrutiny. In his view, bombing at least deserved a trial, even if the result may have been the escalation of German terror.<sup>53</sup> Last, Feingold believes that the Jews in Roosevelt's corner could have been more effective as rescue advocates and bemoans the failure to attempt to influence and energize them to pick up the cudgels of rescue.<sup>54</sup>

Yet Feingold objects to the tendency of many of the earlier authors to read history backward through the lens of Jewish expectations that were normative by the 1980s but singularly inapplicable to the 1930s and 1940s. In particular, he maintains that Jews lacked influence in the 1930s, a decade that constituted perhaps the major period in American history of organized antisemitism. Jewish unity was sadly lacking as well, therefore mitigating the effectiveness of Jewish pressure and protest. In this respect it was not that American Jews were indifferent to the Holocaust; rather, the problem was they lacked adequate leverage to influence the course of events that culminated in the loss of six million.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, Feingold objects to the tendency to demonize Roosevelt. Roosevelt, to be sure, made political calculations in light of the realities surrounding him—domestic antisemitism and nativism, American isolationism, an obstructionist State Department, and charges that he was maneuvering to have America enter the war because of Jewish influence. Although Feingold does believe that Roosevelt might have done much more, he finds strangely absent from the pro-Bergson historiography efforts to understand Roosevelt's actions or inactions within the context of the era over which Roosevelt presided and which he was laboring so arduously to transform. As a master politician, Roosevelt was motivated far more by political calculations—whether justified or unjustified—than “by indifference and deceit.”<sup>56</sup>

Nor is Feingold particularly enamored of the Bergson Boys. Although Bergson succeeded in his communication strategies, he paid the price of aggravating Jewish disunity and strife. Feingold concludes, unlike most, that there may well be no clear pro- or anti-Bergson judgment. In rejecting communal discipline, Bergson attained certain goals but at the expense of fragmenting an already divided Jewish community.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, unlike David Wyman and the pro-Bergson historians, Feingold is not at all certain about the actual possibilities for rescue. He argues that

American Jewry was so marginal a factor that it made at most 5 percent of the difference in addressing the Final Solution. Although rescue opportunities persisted throughout the war, Feingold expresses considerable skepticism as to how successful they might actually have been.<sup>58</sup>

In short, Feingold is by no means easily classifiable. Clearly he diverges from the unequivocal endorsement of Bergson that Wyman, Medoff, and other historians expressed. Conversely, he does believe that more should and could have been accomplished if only America had been so motivated. This argument parts ways with Naomi Cohen's assessment that nothing more could have been achieved in any case. Rather, Feingold eschews clear historical judgment. For him, the task of the historian is to contextualize, exploring the complex set of considerations affecting political decisions. Whether these do or do not justify particular actions or decisions Feingold prefers to leave to the discerning reader.

Similar to Feingold is the more recent work by Theodore Hamerow, *Why We Watched*. Hamerow too invokes domestic considerations as limiting the possibilities of rescue. American Jews feared inciting domestic antisemitism and damaging Roosevelt, whom they regarded as their primary friend and ally. Most important, they feared that an American protest would corroborate the charges that Roosevelt had intervened on behalf of a "Jewish war."<sup>59</sup> Yet Hamerow does take to task a number of Jewish leaders—particularly those in Roosevelt's corner—for excessive timidity. He notes how Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes urged Brandeis to act like an organized minority in pressing the case for rescue as would, for example, the Catholics.<sup>60</sup> He contrasts Sam Rosenman's initiative on universalizing American declarations on war crimes with his non-Jewish colleague John Pehle's willingness to single out Jews as victims. He faults Rabbi Stephen Wise for apologizing for Roosevelt's inaction. He even notes how Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, who became the most Jewishly energized of Roosevelt's brain trust, claimed that the militancy of Orthodox Jews in protest would result in greater domestic antisemitism.<sup>61</sup> More generally, he argues that American Jewry—guided more by emotion than by reason—lacked recommendations for actions that were both practical and sensible.<sup>62</sup>

Yet Hamerow's final assessment about American rescue is actually more benign than Feingold's, to say nothing of the pro-Bergson historians. That the United States admitted 200,000 refugees in the years prior to American entry into the war was, for him, "neither worthless nor shameful."<sup>63</sup> More important, he maintains that Roosevelt's policy of pursuing rescue through quick victory was "essentially correct." Little in fact could have been accomplished through rescue schemes other than diverting America from its goal of complete victory. Contrary to Feingold, he argues that even bombing would have been futile. After all, the Nazi death marches continued well after the liberation of the death camps.<sup>64</sup>

Both Feingold and Hamerow ask what might have been done constructively given the times. Rather than engage in a moralistic assault on the failure to rescue, they offer more nuanced assessments in identifying problems with Jewish leadership. In this sense they should be distinguished both from Wyman and the pro-Bergson historians and from Cohen's defense of AJC.

### In Defense of FDR and American Jewish Leadership

Two historians have sought to embrace Stephen Wise as an effective leader of American Jewry during this period. Moshe Gottlieb extols Wise's leadership in promoting the boycott of German goods, a boycott that, in his view, hurt Germany economically and might have actually effected change in German policy had it been more broadly supported.<sup>65</sup> Yet, unfortunately, Wise was undermined by AJC, B'nai B'rith, and the London Board of Deputies, each of whom followed the lead of German Jewry, which opposed the boycott for fear of reprisals.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the boycott was further undermined by the transfer agreement between the Nazis and the Zionist Organization to transport German Jews to Palestine in exchange for the sale of German goods in the country.<sup>67</sup> Although Wise's differences with AJC appear to have been more tactical than strategic, in Gottlieb's view the absence of unity between leading Jewish organizations thwarted a serious initiative of American Jewry to engage in rescue.

In a full-length biography of Wise, Melvin Urofsky probes these themes further, in effect blaming the "sha-still" approach of AJC and B'nai B'rith as the critical obstacle to Wise's rescue efforts. Wise failed to persuade AJC leadership of the seriousness of the Nazi threat. More generally, AJC opposed any public airing of Jewish issues.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Urofsky concedes that a more unified approach probably would have made little difference in the long run. American Jewry lacked sufficient leverage to alter the course of events in Europe.<sup>69</sup> The critical obstacle, according to Urofsky, was Roosevelt himself. Wise erred in failing to press Roosevelt, whom he regarded as the primary friend of the Jews. Roosevelt's response in any event lacked sufficient moral clarity to elevate rescue into an American priority.<sup>70</sup>

In taking up the cudgels of Wise and AJC, Gottlieb and Urofsky also have parted ways with Naomi Cohen. Cohen argued that AJC had done all that could have been done in the way of rescue. By contrast, Gottlieb and Urofsky maintained that the absence of Jewish unity in support of Wise's initiatives enabled Roosevelt and others to dismiss his efforts.

A further school of historians appears indebted to Cohen's defense of AJC—primarily on the grounds that little else could have been achieved under any circumstances. Unsurprisingly, Marianne Sanua, who was commissioned by AJC to do an institutional history of its second fifty years for its 2006 centennial, opened her volume by acknowledging her indebtedness to Cohen's earlier work. Sanua notes that Breckenridge Long, Roosevelt's refugee officer

frequently accused of antisemitism, was dismissed from his job at least in part because of the pressure exerted by AJC leadership.<sup>71</sup> Sanua acknowledges that AJC absorbed highly unfavorable publicity because of its wartime decision to pull out of the American Jewish Conference after the latter's acceptance of Palestinian statehood as a goal. To this day, in fact, AJC occasionally receives criticism of that decision. Sanua, however, contextualizes it by pointing to Judge Proskauer's reversal of AJC's decision in 1948 and endorsement of Jewish statehood, a move that effectively pulled the rug out from under the anti-Zionist American Council for Judaism.<sup>72</sup>

Yet the most important member of this group of historians is Lucy Dawidowicz, whose widely acclaimed volume, *The War Against the Jews*, became the standard history of the Holocaust for American readers. In an essay on rescue activity written some years subsequently, Dawidowicz argued that only American military power could have averted the Holocaust. She doubts whether bombing the camps would have been successful and notes that had bombing occurred, the most likely result would have been Hitler's speeding up the destruction process.<sup>73</sup> In turn, Dawidowicz credits Roosevelt with marginalizing American isolationists by tarring them with the brush of antisemitism. By withdrawing after Kristallnacht the American ambassador to Germany, Roosevelt initiated a process designed to transform America from isolationism to interventionism and signaled the bankruptcy of Munich and the policies of appeasement toward Germany.<sup>74</sup>

Nor does Dawidowicz place much stock in the pro-Bergson historians. To be sure, she credits Bergson with raising American consciousness with the fate of the Jews. Nonetheless, she pithily answers Bergson's query (in later years, articulated by Elie Wiesel), "What would have happened if [American Jews] had stormed the White House?" by stating that such activity would have only "brought out the army."<sup>75</sup>

The critical lesson for American Jewry, according to Dawidowicz, lies in the consequences of powerlessness. American Jewry lacked the leverage to alter the course of U.S. policy.<sup>76</sup> The indictments of Jewish leadership articulated by pro-Bergson historians failed to contextualize and ascribed to American Jews influence that they in fact lacked. The lesson for Jews today is perhaps less "never again" so much as "never again should the Jews be so powerless."<sup>77</sup>

Sanua and Dawidowicz, as noted, follow Cohen's footsteps in declaring Jewish leadership innocent of the crime of "business as usual" or indifference to the fate of European Jewry. The British historian, Tony Kushner, expands on Cohen's claim that Jewish leadership simply could not fathom the radical evil of Nazism. For Kushner, the "liberal imagination"—a mindset inviting comparison with Cohen's description of AJC leaders as "children of the Enlightenment"—weakened the response to the Holocaust because of its refusal to consider the Jews as a collective entity. The liberal imagination connoted

that Jews be taken strictly as individuals. For Kushner, this meant a failure to recognize that rescue during the Holocaust mandated that liberal assimilationism needed to give way to cultural pluralism.<sup>78</sup>

To be sure, differences exist between Kushner and Cohen. Kushner credits the War Refugee Board with rescue of 100,000 Jewish lives and ascribes its creation to Jewish assertiveness. He longs for a more forceful stance on the part of British Jewry, clearly believing that many more lives might have been saved, had there only been a more vocal advocate for rescue.<sup>79</sup> Yet he shares Cohen's view of Jewish leadership as liberal children of the Enlightenment. For Cohen, that meant a failure to confront the reality of a Final Solution and the evil of Nazism. Kushner amends this to mean also an inability to define Jews as a collective entity requiring rescue measures that targeted them specifically as a people.

The most sweeping and unqualified defense of Roosevelt, coupled with a dismissal of the claims of pro-Bergson historians, is Robert Rosen in his work, *Saving the Jews*. Rosen notes how Roosevelt's New Deal opened up America to Jewish participation, commenting that the Jews formed 15 percent of Roosevelt's high-level appointees.<sup>80</sup> More important, Rosen credits Roosevelt with maneuvering America into a military confrontation with Nazi Germany. Roosevelt bucked the tides of isolationism in sending planes to England even against the advice of so revered a figure as George Marshall.<sup>81</sup> By the fall of 1939, America was already engaged in an undeclared shooting war with Nazi Germany. After Pearl Harbor, it was Germany rather than Japan that became America's major military theater—a fact that, as late as 1943, former U.S. Ambassador to France William Bulliet ascribed to "Jewish influence."<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, Rosen dismisses the claims of Bergson's defenders. He cites even a Bergson supporter such as Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver's reference to the Bergson Boys as "charlatans and racketeers."<sup>83</sup> In turn, he defends Roosevelt's decision to decline to meet with a group of four hundred Orthodox rabbis because more established American Jewish leaders had described the rabbis as "un-American," and therefore not at all representative of American Jewry, let alone its more educated classes.<sup>84</sup>

Last, Rosen exonerates Roosevelt on the question of bombing and on the 1939 affair of the *St. Louis*. He repeats the well-rehearsed arguments that precision bombing was impossible<sup>85</sup> but goes further, arguing that the sole evidence that Roosevelt even knew about the bombing request came only as late as 1986, when then-ninety-one-year-old John J. McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War during World War II, who until that point had denied that the request had ever reached Roosevelt's desk, reported that Roosevelt had rejected bombing as fruitless.<sup>86</sup> As for the *St. Louis*, Rosen argues that only an act of Congress—not a presidential directive—could have aided the ill-fated refugee ship.<sup>87</sup>

Rosen's argument frequently resembles a lawyer's brief. He ignores the fact that the German immigration quotas remained consistently underfilled right up through 1941. Moreover, Roosevelt unfortunately kept Breckenridge Long in charge of the refugee desk for far too long. As for the *St. Louis*, Roosevelt failed to undertake a public campaign for admitting the nine hundred passengers aboard the ship and to overcome bureaucratic regulations in the face of humanitarian rescue needs. In effect, Rosen replaces the predominant pattern of Roosevelt-bashing with a one-sided defense of Roosevelt's leadership.

Yet the most controversial defense of Roosevelt and American Jewry comes from the pen of yet another British historian, William Rubinstein. In a work dedicated to the memory of Lucy Dawidowicz, Rubinstein argues that rescue was impossible and that the various rescue proposals, had they been implemented, would have meant only a "minor difference."<sup>88</sup> More specifically, he chides David Wyman for simultaneously conceding the unlikelihood of rescue proposals yet insisting they should have been tried in any case.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, he notes that no Jewish group, including AJC, recommended bombing Auschwitz in the months leading up to the Hungarian deportations.<sup>90</sup> Most important, however, Rubinstein argues that rescue was impossible because Jews were prisoners, not refugees, in Nazi-occupied Europe. Hitler's determination to eliminate the Jews constituted the primary obstacle to rescue—not indifference on the part of would-be rescuers. Only the Nazis were guilty—not the bystanders. Jewish disunity was quite real in the 1930s but ultimately irrelevant to the cause of rescue.<sup>91</sup>

Rubinstein's work, standing in pronounced contrast to the indictments of Roosevelt and American Jewry others articulated, understates rescue possibilities. To be sure, Hitler himself probably was quite unmovable on the question of Jews. International protests, however, might have given others within the Nazi hierarchy reason for pause and thereby might have served as a brake on the Final Solution. In other words, international protest may have strengthened the hands of individuals—on both elite and grassroots levels—to resist Hitler's demands for the elimination of Jews. Rubinstein does address contemporary implications. He compares the pro-rescue movement to the Soviet Jewry movement of the 1970s—a protest movement that, he argues, possessed few achievements prior to Gorbachev's glasnost in the 1980s.<sup>92</sup> However, to press the analogy with the Soviet Jewry movement, it may be argued that American Jewry's assertive stance served both to keep the cause of Soviet Jewry alive until glasnost and signaled to Soviet Jews that there was international Jewish solidarity with their plight. The Jackson Amendment tying trade policy to freedom of emigration signaled both solidarity with Soviet Jews and the willingness of American Jewry to attempt to influence American foreign policy on behalf of Soviet Jews. Moral victories such as these remain part of the historical record.



## Historiographical Conclusions

What then may we conclude from this review of the historical literature? What may be said about America's actions and inactions and of American Jewry's love affair with Roosevelt? How do we assess American Jewry and its leadership during the period? Last, how has Naomi Cohen's analysis of the American Jewish Committee stood the test of time across four decades? First, American failure to rescue needs to be ascribed to a multiplicity of factors, rather than to a single cause. In this sense, Henry Feingold is correct to underscore the political context in which rescue was considered. As key State Department officer with responsibility for refugee matters, Breckenridge Long clearly posed a major hurdle for rescue advocates. To this must be added, however, the overwhelmingly popular appeal of restrictionist quotas for immigrants, to which the U.S. Congress was sensitive. Even as strong a critic of administration policy as David Wyman noted that overturning quota legislation meant flying in the face of overwhelming public opinion that was clearly reflected by U.S. congressmen and senators. Nor was intellectual opinion outspoken on behalf of rescue. Deborah Lipstadt has demonstrated that aside from small-circulation periodicals such as *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, few organs of public opinion placed any emphasis on the news of the Holocaust.<sup>93</sup> Add to this the divisions within American Jewry and the perceptions of Nazi intransigence as so great that little might have been achieved in any case, and one begins to understand why rescue initiatives failed to garner adequate support to provide a counterweight to the Final Solution.

Yet one must ask whether a policy that was more committed to rescue would have made any difference. Here a distinction needs to be drawn between the prewar period and the war period. Karl Schleuness has described Nazi policies and programs as constituting a "twisted road to Auschwitz."<sup>94</sup> Prior to 1939 the Nazis were quite sensitive to world opinion and might very well have moderated their policies in response to western protests. As mentioned earlier, German immigration quotas to the United States remained consistently underfilled even as late as 1941. Yet, as the *St. Louis* affair demonstrated, the possibilities of rescue were there, but, because of complex interlocking factors, the willingness to elevate rescue into a national priority was not.

After American entry into the war, however, rescue possibilities became fewer. William Rubinstein perhaps is far too categorical in dismissing rescue possibilities, but, as he does note, European Jews were largely prisoners in Nazi-occupied Europe rather than refugees. Heroic narratives of key rescuers such as Raoul Wallenberg constitute shining moral examples of the potential of human altruism. Sadly, however, these stories pale in the larger context of Hitler's war against the Jews. Moreover, so long as the war's outcome remained in doubt, rescue activity necessarily was relegated to a subsidiary position within Allied considerations. David Wyman faults the U.S. government for failing to create

a War Refugee Board as early as November 1942, when the news of a Final Solution became verified. Morally, his position is correct. However, he fails to ascribe adequate weight to the wartime context in which the board came into existence only once Allied victory had become a virtual certainty.

What about Roosevelt himself? Clearly he was oversensitive to the charge of “Jew Deal” and therefore less willing to undertake a public education effort on behalf of rescue. Eleanor Roosevelt’s efforts in this regard stand in pronounced contrast to those of her husband. Moreover, Roosevelt’s duplicity regarding Palestine—telling Jewish and Arab advocates mostly what they wished to hear about a postwar settlement of the Palestine problem, even if what he told them was mutually contradictory—has failed to attract nearly as much attention in the historical literature as his failure to bomb the death camps.<sup>95</sup> For these reasons, the relationship between Roosevelt and the Jews merits historical revision. The love affair seen in retrospect was simply far too one-sided.

Yet the alternative model of “Roosevelt-bashing” serves only to replace one simplistic position with another. Specifically, this latter position fails to acknowledge what Roosevelt actually achieved and why he indeed merits favorable assessments from Jews to this day. First, the New Deal did open America to Jewish participation. In this sense, Roosevelt initiated a process that continues to this day of Jews serving in high governmental positions beyond all proportion to their numbers within American society. The ethos of inclusivity embodied in the New Deal, which enabled Jews to be recognized on the basis of their merits and achievements, meant in effect that no society in Diaspora Jewish history would prove as welcoming of Jewish participation as has the United States. To be sure, including Jews in American society does not equate morally with rescue of Jewish lives. However, the New Deal clearly did alter the course and trajectory of American Jewish history in highly positive ways.

Second, what cannot be overlooked but is all too often lost in Jewish historical memory is Roosevelt’s success in transforming the American mindset from isolationism to internationalism. Beginning with Munich and Kristallnacht, Roosevelt moved to marginalize the isolationists—including those such as Senators Borah and Johnson, who were otherwise central to his New Deal coalition—and prepared America for intervention into World War II. Like Winston Churchill, Roosevelt recognized that the democracies could not coexist with the evils of Nazism. Even after Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt acted on a “Europe first” policy at a time when most Americans focused their most intense anger at the Japanese. Roosevelt’s actions in rearming America, securing Lend-Lease for Britain, and even engaging in an undeclared shooting war with German submarines in the fall of 1939 constituted an enormous reversal of prevailing American currents of neutralism and isolationism. He demonstrated leadership not by following the polls but by shaping and transforming public opinion. In this context, one can view Roosevelt’s policy of “rescue through victory” more

charitably, even if one wishes that alternate rescue proposals had merited more serious consideration.

Moreover, to accomplish this transformation of America, Roosevelt paid a heavy price in the enemies he made. Charles Lindbergh, an American hero and icon, warned that American Jews were a critical force pushing the United States into an unnecessary war. Ambassador Joseph Kennedy believed that Britain was virtually defeated but that America had no reason for armed conflict with Hitler, although he recognized that the Jews surely did have such a reason. Roosevelt's political opponents, who enjoyed great esteem within American public opinion, argued that he in effect was being manipulated by Jewish advisors and leaders eager for a military confrontation with Nazi Germany. Progressive Senator Hiram Johnson gave voice to these sentiments in a letter to his son:

Jews on one side, wildly enthusiastic for the President, and willing to fight to the last American.... I hate the persecutions to which the Jews have been put, and I will go to any fair lengths, save the ruin of my country to aid them, but I will not go to the length of fighting citizens of other nations.... [FDR] will do anything for applause and it is this very group at present which applaud him to the echo.

Little wonder that Roosevelt would soft-pedal rescue activity during the pre-Pearl-Harbor days, lest he give credence to charges that would undermine his larger strategy to secure American interventionism.<sup>96</sup>

What about American Jewry and its leadership? American Jewry in the 1930s remained quite unsure of itself. It was a relatively new community that feared for its own political and economic security in what remained a depressed American economy in a society that had proved hospitable to a wide range of antisemitic groupings. The notorious Father Coughlin each Sunday broadcast over the radio and blamed American social ills on the evil machinations of a Jewish conspiracy. Moreover, American Jews remained keenly sensitive about the popularity of pro-restriction sentiment. Even after the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938, when Roosevelt recalled the U.S. Ambassador to Germany for consultations and sympathy with the Jewish plight had increased greatly, the polls reported further increases in opposition to more liberalized immigration policies.

Last, as noted, American Jewry of the 1930s was a fragmented community at odds with itself. The absence of a united front weakened Jewish presence and made it easier to ignore Jewish representations. Satisfying one set of requests by Jewish leaders only guaranteed evoking the wrath of still others. The Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, which was created in the postwar period, to some extent represented an attempt to learn from the mistakes of the past by presenting a united front in support of Israel before the circles of power in 1950s Washington.

Yet criticism of American Jewish leadership generally fails to ask how much leverage American Jewry actually enjoyed, even had the community been more united. Sadly, as noted above, the answer was very little. It remains doubtful that an American society already severely weakened by the Depression and concerned about the looming storm clouds in Europe and Asia would in fact have been receptive to increased Jewish protest. More likely, a more confrontational approach would have evoked charges of Jewish particularism and selfishness at a time when Americans faced far greater challenges. For example, the Bonus Army in 1932 consisted of American veterans of World War I who demanded that their promised bonus checks be awarded to them sooner than intended, given their current economic needs. Members of the Bonus Army pitched their tents in Washington only to find themselves rudely evicted by General Douglas MacArthur.<sup>97</sup> If such was the treatment accorded American veterans of war asking only that they receive what was due them earlier than promised, one can hardly imagine more receptive treatment to Jews chaining themselves to the White House on behalf of co-religionists abroad. Nor did the State Department in the 1930s exert itself on behalf of American citizens residing in the Soviet Union, who had in effect become prisoners of Stalinist tyranny.<sup>98</sup> In short, the mindset of 1930s Washington was distinctly unreceptive to requests for interventions on behalf of special interest groups, whether domestic or abroad.

And finally, how does Naomi Cohen's analysis of AJC read today? Contemporary AJC leaders generally perceive themselves as presiding over an agency much transformed from the AJC of the 1930s and 1940s. Retrospectively, Jewish leadership at the time is often seen as "not ready for primetime," fearing the specter of domestic antisemitism rather than rising to the challenges of global responsibilities. In this context, some aspects of Cohen's analysis need to be underscored as particularly compelling: First, as noted, she provided an appropriate corrective to "Roosevelt bashing." Second, she correctly perceived AJC leadership of the 1930s as "children of the Enlightenment" who failed to fathom the evil reality of Nazism and placed excessive trust in education and social scientific research as antidotes to antisemitism. Last, she appropriately reminded us that American Jewry in the 1930s lacked sufficient leverage and power during these darkest moments of Jewish history.

To be sure, contemporary AJC leaders generally acknowledge that alternate rescue avenues should have been explored. For example, as noted earlier, Henry Feingold argued that more should have been done in efforts to energize the secular Jews in Roosevelt's corner—theoretically a constituency within AJC's reach.<sup>99</sup> Even Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr., whose intervention with Roosevelt resulted in the creation of the War Refugee Board, came under greater pressure from his Jewish secretary than he did from Jewish leaders or from Roosevelt's Jewish advisors. As Morgenthau's son reminisced

in subsequent decades, the Jews in Roosevelt's corner "avoided or downplayed the significance of Jewish questions." They had no wish to stand out as active Jews.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps more tellingly, AJC leadership failed to join a united Jewish front on behalf of statehood in 1943—an error subsequently rectified by Judge Proskauer's decision in 1948 not to oppose a Jewish state because its creation represented the collective will of the Jewish people. Proskauer's decision effectively spelled the death knell of the American Council for Judaism.<sup>101</sup> Put more broadly, AJC today prides itself on its unswerving support for Israel, meeting its global responsibilities, and representing the collective interests and welfare of the Jewish people.

In its core components, however, Naomi Cohen's writing has withstood much, if not all, of the test of time. She identified correctly the context in which Jewish leadership operated, the limitations upon Jewish political activity, and the limitations of AJC leaders in their own vision and understanding. For a Jewish community that often leaps too quickly to judgments, Naomi Cohen reminds us that the fair-minded historian first must reconstruct the context of the times and draw a comprehensive portrait before historical judgments may be reached.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Naomi Cohen, *Not Free to Desist* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1972), 162.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 163–166.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 170–173, 185–186.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 240–242.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>6</sup>Melvin Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke For Justice* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982), 319–320.

<sup>7</sup>Frederick Lazin, "The Response of the American Jewish Committee to the Crisis of German Jewry, 1933–1939," *American Jewish History* 68, no. 3 (March 1979): 283–304, esp. 284–285, 289–291, 296–298, and 304.

<sup>8</sup>David Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938–1941* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968), *passim*.

<sup>9</sup>David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), *passim*.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 295–297.

<sup>12</sup>Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 213. See also, *loc. cit.*, 141, 209–212.

<sup>13</sup>Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 69.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 152–153.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.

- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., 328–329. See also Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died* (New York: Random House, 1967), passim.
- <sup>17</sup>Haskell Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers' Keeper?* (New York: Hawthorne House, 1985), 58.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., 33, 211.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid., 138.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., 183.
- <sup>21</sup>Ibid., 216.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid., 211.
- <sup>23</sup>Sarah Peck, "The Campaign for an American Response to the Nazi Holocaust," *Journal of Contemporary History* 15 (1980): 367–398, esp. 377, 385 for non-Jewish support.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid., 393.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid., 380–381.
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid., 387.
- <sup>27</sup>Ibid., 393.
- <sup>28</sup>Monty Penkower, "In Dramatic Dissent: The Bergson Boys," *American Jewish History* 70, no. 3 (March 1981): 281–383.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid., 289.
- <sup>30</sup>On the attempted distinction between Jews and Hebrews see Judith Baumel, *The Bergson "Boys" and the Origins of Contemporary Zionist Militancy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 202–205.
- <sup>31</sup>Penkower, op. cit., 306–309.
- <sup>32</sup>David Wyman and Rafael Medoff, *A Race Against Death* (New York: The New Press, 2002), passim, esp. 65–69, 136–137.
- <sup>33</sup>Baumel, 74–75.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., 139–140.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid., 145.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., 257.
- <sup>37</sup>Robert Beir, *Roosevelt and The Holocaust* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2006), 19–21.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid., 26–27, 95–97.
- <sup>39</sup>Ibid., 25–27.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., 140.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid., 231–232.
- <sup>42</sup>Ibid., 274–277.
- <sup>43</sup>Laurel Leff, *Buried by the Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 23–27. On Lippman and his insensitivity to the Holocaust, see Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippman and the American Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1980), 330–333.
- <sup>44</sup>Leff, 34.
- <sup>45</sup>Ibid., 203.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid., 46–47.
- <sup>47</sup>Gulie Arad, *America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 93.
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid., 123.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid., 138.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid., 202.

- <sup>51</sup>Aaron Berman, *Nazism, the Jews, and American Zionism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 121–122.
- <sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 183.
- <sup>53</sup>Henry Feingold, *Bearing Witness: How America and its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 150–151, 266.
- <sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 236.
- <sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 270–271.
- <sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.
- <sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 195.
- <sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 257.
- <sup>59</sup>Theodore Hamerow, *Why We Watched* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2008), 321.
- <sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 244.
- <sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 344–348.
- <sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 334–343.
- <sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 255.
- <sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 382, 399, 418.
- <sup>65</sup>Moshe Gottlieb, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance 1933–1941* (New York: Ktav, 1982), 345.
- <sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 36–37, 51.
- <sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.
- <sup>68</sup>Urofsky, 301.
- <sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 322–323, 330.
- <sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 324–325, 321.
- <sup>71</sup>Marianne Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2007), 16.
- <sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 23–24. On the American Council for Judaism, see Thomas Kolsky, *Jews Against Zionism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 103–104, 146–147.
- <sup>73</sup>Lucy Dawidowicz, *What is The Use of Jewish History?* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 171–173.
- <sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 164–165. On the recall of Ambassador Hugh Wilson, see also Sander Diamond, “The Kristallnacht and the Reaction in America,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 14 (1969): 204–208.
- <sup>75</sup>Dawidowicz, 195.
- <sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 174.
- <sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.
- <sup>78</sup>Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and The Liberal Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 32–37, 59–60, 132.
- <sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 189–199.
- <sup>80</sup>Robert Rosen, *Saving The Jews* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2006), 4.
- <sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 139.
- <sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 232.
- <sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 318.
- <sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 329–331.
- <sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 469.
- <sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 405–406.
- <sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 447.

- <sup>88</sup>William D. Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 113.
- <sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.
- <sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 114, 163.
- <sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 116–119.
- <sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>93</sup>Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 31 and *passim*.
- <sup>94</sup>Karl Schleuness, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970), *passim*.
- <sup>95</sup>Peter Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983), 150–157.
- <sup>96</sup>Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 308. See also 444–445 and *passim*.
- <sup>97</sup>Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen, *The Bonus Army* (New York: Walker and Co., 2004), 170–180.
- <sup>98</sup>Tim Tzouliadis, *The Forsaken* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 64.
- <sup>99</sup>Feingold, *Bearing Witness*, 241–242.
- <sup>100</sup>Henry Morgenthau III, *Mostly Morgenthau* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1991), 322–323.
- <sup>101</sup>Sanua, 56–58, 91. On Proskauer’s reasoning, even as early as 1942, see Menahem Kaufman, *An Ambiguous Partnership* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 99–100.