

Playing the Blame Game:  
American Jews Look Back at  
the Holocaust

The Jean & Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies

**DAVID W. BELIN LECTURE IN AMERICAN JEWISH AFFAIRS**

University of Michigan

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Playing the Blame Game:

American Jews Look Back at the Holocaust

Deborah E. Lipstadt

## FOREWORD

The David W. Belin Lectureship in American Jewish Affairs provides an academic forum for the discussion of contemporary Jewish life in the United States. Deborah E. Lipstadt would have appreciated meeting David W. Belin, who established the lectureship with a generous gift in 1991, because they share a love for American Jews and a passion for seeking the truth. A graduate of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, the Business School, and the Law School of the University of Michigan, Mr. Belin identified with both Des Moines and New York throughout his long and distinguished career in law and public service. Among its highlights: he served as counsel to the Warren Commission, which investigated President John F. Kennedy's assassination, and was executive director for the Rockefeller Commission, which investigated CIA activities within the United States. Mr. Belin did not confine his contributions to American public life but played a similar leadership role in Jewish public affairs. Among its highlights: He held the position of founding Chairman of Reform Judaism's Outreach Commission and was a founding member of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. His service and leadership of the American Jewish community reflected his commitment to the viability of Jewish life in the United States and concern for the future of American Jewry. These twin interests stimulated him to endow this annual lectureship to provide a forum for the analysis of Jewish life in the United States.

Deborah Lipstadt's presence here this evening to give the 21st annual Belin lecture continues a well-established tradition. Since the establishment of the lectureship, the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies has been fortunate to host an illustrious list of scholars. This year is no exception. As Doro Professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Deborah Lipstadt created the Tam Institute for Jewish Studies and served as its director for its first decade, from 1998-2008.

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Throughout her distinguished career, Deborah Lipstadt has blended a steadfast commitment to original scholarship with an equal dedication to public service, embracing the role of public intellectual with vigor and aplomb. Her scholarship examines perceptions of the Holocaust, beginning with *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust* (1986), one of the first books to explore what Americans knew about the mass murders as they unfolded in the context of World War II. She then turned to a postwar subject. Focusing on the press, historical writing, and popular political expression, she analyzed the rapidly escalating practice of Holocaust denial. Her book *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* appeared in 1993 and immediately became the subject of a libel charge that transformed her life. With the help of an impressive legal team, Lipstadt went to trial in London to defend her characterization of David Irving as a Holocaust denier. Irving had many admirers who considered him a good historian, but the judge ruled in Lipstadt's favor. She had not libeled Irving. He did, indeed, deny the Holocaust. In fact, the judge found Irving to be Holocaust denier, a falsifier of history, a racist, an anti-Semite, and a liar. *The Daily Telegraph* (London) claimed the trial had "done for the new century what the Nuremberg tribunals or the Eichmann trial did for earlier generations." In 2000, *The Forward* recognized Lipstadt's triumph and ranked her number two of the "Forward 50." Those many months of trial in London led Lipstadt to her next book, *History on Trial: My Day in Court with David Irving*, which appeared in 2005 and won the National Jewish Book Award the following year. In 2011, she published a thoughtful book on the Eichmann trial that uncovers aspects of his capture that have not been acknowledged (*The Eichmann Trial*).

Yet even as she researched and wrote on historical interpretation of the Holocaust, Deborah Lipstadt pursued a parallel career as a public intellectual. As an historical consultant, she helped design the section of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum dedicated to the American

Response to the Holocaust. Appointed by President Clinton to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, she served two terms, including chairing the Educational Committee and Academic Committee of the Holocaust Museum. The media frequently calls on Lipstadt and she has appeared *Good Morning America*, NPR's *Fresh Air*, the BBC, and *the Charlie Rose Show*. In addition, she contributes to diverse newspapers and journals, including *the Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *The Forward*. Lipstadt directs the website known as HDOT [Holocaust Denial on Trial/ [www.hdot.org](http://www.hdot.org)] which answers frequent claims made by deniers, an important public service.

Deborah Lipstadt's labors have not gone unrecognized. She has garnered honorary doctorates from across the religious spectrum of American Jewish life: The Jewish Theological Seminary, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and Yeshiva University—representing Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox Judaism—have all honored her achievements. In 2005, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs awarded her its highest honor, the Albert D. Chernin Award, presented annually to "an American Jew whose work best exemplifies the social justice imperatives of Judaism, Jewish history and the protection of the Bill of Rights, particularly the First Amendment."

Deborah Lipstadt is passionate and accessible, profoundly knowledgeable and deeply engaged with how the Holocaust is interpreted. Her Belin lecture entitled, "Playing the Blame Game: American Jews Look Back at the Holocaust" continues her tradition of probing scholarship. David Belin would have applauded.

*Deborah Dash Moore, Frederick G. L. Huetwell Professor of History  
Director of the Jean & Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies*

### ***Introduction:***

At a talk at a synagogue in Westchester, NY, on “America’s Response to the Holocaust,” the audience was thoughtful, well-read, and passionate about the topic. Few off those present were of an age to remember the war years; most were aging Baby Boomers and younger. The premise of my talk was that the United States could certainly have done far more to help—if not save—many Jews during the 1930s and 1940s. I acknowledged that there was a decided reluctance—if not outright opposition—in government circles to speak out forcefully about the situation of the Jews and, until Kristallnacht, to adjust immigration regulations to address their horrific conditions in the Third Reich. Jews found innumerable obstacles blocking their way into the United States. Some of the obstacles were “generic” in that any immigrant or refugee faced them. Others were rooted in a propensity by government officials to block Jews trying to win entry into the country. Simply put, many of those controlling entrance to this country did not want Jews coming here.

However, I proceeded to caution my audience, one must contextualize the response of the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt within the prevalent anti-immigrant, isolationist, xenophobic, and anti-Semitic sentiment of the 1930s. Most Americans had no desire to either become entangled in German affairs or see an influx of Jewish refugees land on these shores. Once America entered the war, its options for acting to help Jews were even more constrained, particularly during the early years when there was legitimate doubt as to whether the Allies would emerge victorious. In short, I argued that while there was certainly far more that the United States could have done to admit Jews before the war and to rescue them during the war, the extreme criticism directed specifically against the Roosevelt administration is somewhat unwarranted. It was doing precisely what most Americans wanted, keeping America out of war and refugees—particularly Jews—out of America. I noted that America sent Jews back to untenable and often horrific situations, e.g. the passengers on the SS *St. Louis*. Had these Jews been forced to return to Germany, many would surely have ended up in concentration camps. However, I cautioned my audience, the accusation that “America sent people back to a certain death,” as I was told that night in Westchester, is based on hindsight and on knowledge that did not exist at the time. [In fact, it was based on a decision that had not yet been made. The Third Reich did not put the plan to

murder European Jewry into effect until the early 1940s.]

After this analysis of the Roosevelt administration, I turned to the American Jewish community and its leadership. Some of the severe, if not passionate, criticism which is directed at them is well-deserved. They feared raising a persistent cry of outrage about American policy even when they knew that the situation was truly dire for European Jewry. Too often communal affairs proceeded in a “business as usual” mode even as the news from Europe was horrifying. Petty jealousies persisted while Jews were being murdered. At crucial moments, the American Jewish community invested more energy in fighting one another than in fighting for policy changes. However, I posited, today many critics of the American Jewish community fail to consider sufficiently the barriers that Jews faced at that time. American Jews feared stirring up anti-Semitism. They worried that if they protested too much they might give the broader American public reason to think that they were more loyal to their European co-religionists than to the United States. They wished to avoid attacks accusing them of having pushed America into a war, one in which hundreds of thousands of American lives would be lost.

While I was quite critical of American Jewish communal leaders, I simultaneously urged my listeners to contextualize the political situation at the time and not to fall prey to presentism, imposing contemporary standards for political action on an entirely different era. I argued that the political *modus operandi* of the American Jewish community of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the one that managed to make the freedom of Soviet Jews an American foreign policy agenda item or managed to galvanize a majority of the Congress to adopt a strong pro-Israel position, was not an option in the 1930s and even less so during the war years. They should not use a contemporary template to evaluate the actions of the American Jewish community of the pre-war and wartime years. In short, I urged them to think in nuanced rather than sweeping condemnatory terms. Needless to say, during a heated question-and-answer period many audience members challenged my position.

Within a few weeks of my speech, I received a scathing five-page letter—with a copy to the congregational rabbi—accusing me of whitewashing America’s wrongs, making light of the death of European Jewry, and being an apologist for American Jewry of the 1940s. While this letter was even more extreme than what I had encountered at the synagogue, it was not unique. It echoed a view that I have repeatedly encountered from

American Jews when I suggest that they contextualize Roosevelt's and the American Jewish community's behavior. No public presentation I give engenders more "push back" than one in which I fail to condemn President Roosevelt and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise in unqualified terms.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently I was invited to discuss *Killing Kasztner*, a documentary being shown at Atlanta's Jewish Film Festival. The film concerned Israel Kasztner's negotiations with Nazi leaders in 1944 regarding the ransoming of Hungarian Jews. (The ransom offer was, in all likelihood, a German attempt to cause a rift between the Soviets and the western Allies and not a genuine effort to release these Jews. While Jewish leaders recognized this possibility, they thought "negotiations" might buy them some time. Germany was clearly losing the war at that point, and any delay worked in the Jews' favor.) Despite having won the release of a train full of 1600 Hungarian Jews, Kasztner was branded a collaborator after the war—particularly by those whose families he failed to include on the train. In fact, he did not have the freedom to select who would be on the train. Nazi officials selected many of the passengers. Kasztner was accused by many Hungarian Jews of collaborating with Eichmann and other Nazi officials in order to enrich himself and of failing to alert them of the dire fate which awaited them at Auschwitz. Despite knowing that most of them would be murdered, he did not warn them. Many said that they would never have boarded the trains had he done so. (The movie contends that he did try to alert the Jews but that many rejected his warnings as the ranting of a madman.)

Kasztner settled in Israel after the war. After one particularly vituperative attack by a Hungarian Jew whose family had been murdered, Kasztner sued for libel. (In fact, he had no choice but to bring suit. Kasztner worked for the Israeli government. Officials told him that he either had to contest the charges or resign.) He lost the case, and the presiding judge damningly accused him of having "sold his soul to the devil." Kasztner's loss was precipitated in part by his having, rather inexplicably, denied to the court that he gave postwar testimony on behalf of a Nazi official who had been stationed in Hungary during the deportations. The defense team demonstrated that Kasztner had, in fact, testified and had signed his testimony in a way that suggested that he had been empowered by the Yishuv, the Jewish Agency, the pre-State of Israel governing body, to do so. (Based on research by respected Israeli historians, the movie shows that Yishuv leaders did send him to testify on this officer's behalf. They thought

he might have access to some of the wealth of the murdered Jews. Desperately in need of funds, Yishuv leaders hoped he would point them toward it.) When Kasztner asked Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and other government officials to acknowledge that he had testified at this Nazi war criminal's trial at their behest, they remained silent.<sup>2</sup> The documentary, painting a different portrait of Kasztner that is based on new research by respected Israeli historians, depicts him as a hero not a collaborator. This view of his behavior runs counter to the "popular" impression of him, particularly among Hungarian survivors and their offspring.

In the course of my discussion with the filmmaker, I compared the anger of survivors and their children toward Kasztner with the anger towards Stephen S. Wise and other American Jews. Both were, I suggested, *cris de coeur* motivated by deep emotional distress and were also, in some measure, historically unjustified. American Jews and Israel Kasztner could have done more. They could not, however, have stopped the destruction process, as some of their critics seem to assume.

After the discussion, a woman who appeared to be in her fifties accosted me and, in a rage, told me that I was rewriting history and denying the truth when I "defended" America and American Jewry. Instead of just letting her rant, which would have been the far more prudent thing to do, I challenged her and tried to explain the historical background for my statements, all while scores of people were milling about. Finally, her face red with anger, she said: "I have my facts and you have yours. I was born in a DP camp. I know what happened. Those Jews—like Wise—didn't want us here. They could have saved my parents from the camps if they had wanted to. But *we* were not their type."

### *A Teacup Ride*

Shortly after this incident—with the angry voice of the woman echoing in my consciousness—I began my research for this lecture. I immersed myself in an array of books, articles, and films which analyze the response of the Roosevelt administration and the American Jewish community to the Final Solution. During much of my research I felt as if I was on the "teacup ride," a Disney World feature in which riders sit in a teacup that spins in one direction even as the platform on which the teacup is perched spins in another. The preponderance of these works tell a by now familiar version of history.<sup>3</sup> The United States, with Roosevelt at the helm,

failed to act vigorously—if at all—to save Jews. The American government was riddled with either latent (or sometimes blatant) anti-Semites or self-effacing Jews. Neither group would extend itself to help European Jews. American officials erected paper (bureaucratic) walls to keep Jews out in the 1930s and abandoned them to their death in the 1940s. Had American Jews pushed President Roosevelt to act, many European Jews could have been saved. American Jews, fearful of provoking Anti-Semitism, had little empathy for their fellow Jews. They were more concerned about angering President Roosevelt than about their co-religionists' fate and, therefore, chose to stand idly by.

The established Jewish community, led by Reform Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, relied, in the main, on quiet diplomacy to try to convince the government to act. Mainstream American Jewish organizations, including the Wise-led American Jewish Congress, sponsored rallies and mass meetings. However, these rarely directly challenged American policy. Wise is often depicted as having failed to utilize his close working relationship with Roosevelt in order to ask for help for his fellow Jews.

Posed against both the Roosevelt administration and the established Jewish community was a group of young Palestinian Jews (as they were then known) who had come to America to work for the creation of a Jewish army, a project of Zev Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionists. Jabotinsky and his successor, Menachem Begin, were ideological and political opponents of the Labor Zionists and their long-term leader, David Ben-Gurion. When the State Department confirmed in late 1942 that the Germans were annihilating European Jewry, the leader of this group of Revisionists, Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook) and his colleagues set aside the goal of a Jewish army in order to devote themselves to pushing the American government to rescue European Jews.

In contrast to the established community, the Bergson group adopted a radically different *modus operandi*. They relied on rallies, political lobbying, and eye-catching advertisements designed to challenge—if not attack—FDR and his policies. They accused the United States of willfully turning its back on persecuted Jews. They also accused the organized Jewish community of failing to recognize that *every* issue other than rescue, including the creation of a Jewish state, had to be of secondary importance. In contrast, Wise, a committed Zionist, believed that the existence of a Jewish state would prevent such tragedies from recurring. The Bergson group's impact was enhanced by the support it successfully garnered from

many members of Congress, as well as Hollywood personalities, and some sectors of the American Jewish community.

At the other end of the historical spectrum can be found a newer (far smaller but equally passionate) body of literature.<sup>4</sup> Written in response to this array of critical works, it argues that, rather than excoriation, FDR deserves praise for his actions. He was the first president to surround himself with Jews. He spoke out against discrimination. Ultimately, he not only saved many Jews, but rescued every Jew who could have been saved. He led the Allies to victory thereby ensuring that millions of Jews did not fall into German hands.

It is not uncommon, when reading books that propose wildly contradictory arguments, for a reader to be persuaded by the point of view of the work in hand. Then, when she turns to a book that takes a diametrically opposed position, she is able to see flaws in the previous work. That is what some of you may have assumed I meant when I said I have been on the "teacup ride." Actually, my reaction was quite different. Each time I read something from either of the more extreme reaches of the spectrum, I responded: "This is wrong. This is an overstatement of the facts. This is a distortion." Rather than be persuaded by an author's extreme argument, his or her unbending stance raised doubts.

### ***Historical Criticism or Another Agenda?***

In the spirit of full disclosure, I acknowledge that I do not come to this topic *tabula rasa*. I have been writing about it for many years. In my book *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945*, and in the portion of the exhibit which I researched and wrote for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, I was exceptionally critical of America's record.<sup>5</sup> I have not necessarily changed my opinion about the blatant failures of both the United States government and the American Jewish community. However, in recent years, I have become increasingly disturbed by the vituperative nature of the criticism leveled at them. It is not just the extremism and passion with which the critics express their views that has brought me to this topic, but the sense that some of them are using this issue to fight other, more contemporary battles.

But the critics are hardly alone in being "over the top." So, too, the accolades given to Roosevelt by his defenders are equally disquieting and historical. Their blanket praise also speaks to an

agenda other than an attempt to unpack the difficult history of this period.

I do not intend this paper to be part of the ongoing debate about American government policy and the actions of the Jewish community. (Though I recognize that to some degree that will impossible to avoid.) Rather I wish to ask: What are the various prisms through which the extreme critics' views are refracted? Is there something, other than just the historical debate, which motivates those at both ends of the spectrum to take a particular stance? I am particularly interested in the assessment of the Jewish community's behavior by current generations of American Jews. Might their conclusions be shaped by contemporary realities as much as by history? Are we being exposed to historical research that is rooted, at least in some measure, in a settling of old scores? Is this debate fueled, not just by history, but by widely varying perspectives on what it means to be an American Jew?<sup>6</sup> While I shall not be able to fully answer all these questions in this paper, I propose them as a research agenda for the future.

I begin with a brief historical survey of these two schools of "thought," which I shall call, simply as a means of expediting the conversation, the "critical" and the "defensive" schools.

### ***The Critical School***

Arthur Morse's *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* was among the first books to take the United States to task for its behavior during the war. The author argued that America had essentially looked the other way while Jews died in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Though many readers considered Morse's book an eye opener, he was, in fact, building on the very arguments that had been voiced by the President's critics during the war, chief among the Bergson group. Two more important scholarly historical books followed: David S. Wyman's *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* and Henry L. Feingold's *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and Holocaust, 1938-1945*.<sup>8</sup> They explicated how American consular officials used bureaucratic and administrative tools to keep Jews in Germany from entering the United States in the period prior to and during World War II. Both books were attuned to the political realities of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly American xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and isolationism, and were important benchmarks in the evolving attention to this field.

More stridently critical works by historians Monty Penkower and Saul Friedman appeared soon thereafter, both taking an exceptionally negative view of America's record.<sup>9</sup> In 1982, Laurence Jarvik's PBS documentary *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die?* adopted a similar tone and argued that, in addition to the Roosevelt administration, the American Jewish community carried a measure of responsibility for the fate of European Jewry. The film relied on extensive interviews with Bergson, who contended that American Jews were not only "unprepared for such an emergency" but did nothing to "shake" Roosevelt or "wake up the world." Jews, he argued, were not interested in bringing "these Jews" to America. If they had been willing to act, many of the Jews alive in 1942 could have been saved.

In 1984, David S. Wyman's second book on the subject, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-45*, galvanized the topic. Wyman's fierce criticism of America's inaction derives from extensive research. Even Wyman's critics could not help but be impressed by the scope of research he conducted.<sup>10</sup> Equally forceful criticism appeared in a second PBS [1994] documentary, *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference*, part of PBS's popular series *The American Experience*. Narrated by the historian David McCullough, it drew heavily on Wyman's work and constituted a severe indictment of both Roosevelt and American Jews. The premise of the film was clear from the first frame when the narrator intoned that during World War II "six million Jews were killed *as* America stood by." The film echoed a view often heard among the critics. America had *purposely* abandoned the Jews. In other words, this was not a matter of indifference or bureaucratic snafus, this was a deliberate policy.<sup>11</sup> The American Jewish historian Rafael Medoff charged that FDR's policies not only did not save European Jews, but "endangered" them.<sup>12</sup> Canadian journalist M.J. Nurenberger, who was a follower of Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin, has laid responsibility for the death of European Jewry directly at the feet of both FDR and American Jewry. "The Jews of Europe lost their war for survival because those who claimed to speak for them did not even mention their plight."<sup>13</sup> In recent years some contemporary Jewish commentators, most of whom are not historians, have taken matters a step further. They have described Roosevelt as "one of the most malicious antagonists of the Jewish people," who refused to allow the bombing of Auschwitz Birkenau and delayed freeing prison camps in the Netherlands because "he wanted more Jews to die." His policies did not just endanger Jews, they "*prevented*

rescue.” American Jews together with Roosevelt are “guilty” for what happened in Europe to the Jews.<sup>14</sup>

The critics take particular aim at Stephen S. Wise’s behavior in August 1942, when he received a copy of a telegram sent by the World Jewish Congress representative in Switzerland, Gerhard Riegner, to a member of the British Parliament. The telegram suggested that there was a strong possibility that the Germans intended to exterminate all European Jews. Wise turned to the State Department to ascertain whether they had any additional information. (Wise did not know that the State Department had intercepted a copy of the telegram that Riegner had dispatched directly to him. The State Department did not want Wise to have this information. They could not, however, intercept the copy that was sent by the MP because this would have violated diplomatic protocol. Hence, Wise received a copy of the telegram.) The State Department asked Wise to remain silent until it verified the information contained in the report. Critics severely castigated Wise for agreeing to the State Department’s request. David Morrison, an American psychiatrist who lives in Israel and describes himself as “devoting his time to research in to contemporary Jewish history,” asserts that Wise “sat on the report,” while Saul Friedman, the American Jewish historian, describes Wise as having “actively collaborated” with the administration to keep this news from American Jews.<sup>15</sup> Wise is also accused of failing to use his close personal relationship with President Roosevelt to get him to act on behalf of the Jews. In fact, Wise’s personal relationship with FDR was nowhere as close as many people assume. During the initial years of Roosevelt’s administration, he was estranged from the president over matters dating back to Roosevelt’s tenure as Governor of New York. Privately, Wise was more willing to criticize the president. In late 1933 he wrote to a colleague, “FDR has not lifted a finger on behalf of the Jews of Germany.” He complained about the “indifference and unconcern” he saw coming from the White House. The critics are right that, even in subsequent years, when he desperately wished for a more forceful response from Washington, he rarely complained about the President publicly.

An even more piercing accusation against Wise and his colleagues has emerged. It echoes what I heard at the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival. These Americanized Jewish leaders, it is charged, were reluctant to have “those kinds” of Jews coming here. Samuel Merlin, Peter Bergson’s associate, put it quite bluntly: They were not interested in “people who [were] behaving in embarrassing ways.”<sup>16</sup>

The strangest manifestation of the “anger” towards the wartime Jewish community occurred in 1984, when a group of communal leaders, academics and heads of Jewish communal organizations were invited to join a commission ostensibly led by former Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg. Its task was to explore the behavior of American Jewry during the Holocaust. Jack Eisner, a wealthy Holocaust survivor, funded the commission. Though it was announced as a balanced investigation, the commission’s bias was revealed in the very questions the group was supposed to answer: “Why were so many American Jews passive or relatively unconcerned about the plight of European Jews?”<sup>17</sup>

It is worth noting both the imbalance of the question—not “were American Jews passive” but “*why* were”—and the fact that the members of the commission were polled for their responses. Neither reflects an historian’s standard operating procedure.

The composition of the commission also pointed to the fact that this investigation was not to be driven solely by history. Among its members were Brooklyn District Attorney Elizabeth Holtzman and New York City Comptroller Harrison Goldin. The commission included heads of various Jewish organizations on the assumption that, since their record would be “investigated,” they should be there. Present were Philip Klutznick of B’nai B’rith and Charlotte Jacobson of Hadassah. Also included was Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, whose record as a child psychologist was then still intact, but whose qualifications as an historian were non-existent. Given the makeup of the commission, it can hardly be described as a group primed to conduct solid and thoughtful historical research.

The academic “investigation” was carried out by a team headed by Seymour Finger, a senior fellow at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies of the City University of New York. He, in turn, commissioned Samuel Merlin, a Bergson associate, to do “much of the research and prepare a preliminary draft.”<sup>18</sup> Merlin’s preliminary comments held the established American Jewish community responsible, at least in some measure, for the murder of European Jewry. He argued that “the question of their *responsibility* for the catastrophe is a legitimate one for historical inquiry.”<sup>19</sup> [Emphasis added.] When disagreements within the Commission became public and the various organizations around the table refused to accept the burden of responsibility, Eisner charged that commission members were being “victimized by their egoistic-sensitive defense mechanism rather than by a deep wish to find the truth.” When the

organizational representatives pushed back against accepting “blame,” Eisner accused them of trying to “whitewash the truth.” He contended that American Jewry was unable “to face the terrible truth.”<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, it is the investigatory and juridical tone of this enterprise that is remarkable. The contemporary community essentially put World War II era American Jewry in the docket.<sup>21</sup>

By the 1990s, the critical approach became so normative that in his talk at the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, President Bill Clinton spoke of America’s failure to respond. This perception of America’s failure was bipartisan in nature. In January 2008, while visiting Yad Vashem, President George W. Bush stopped in front of a photograph of the railroad tracks leading to Auschwitz, turned to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and said the United States should have “bombed it.”<sup>22</sup>

### ***The Defensive School***

As the critical approach increasingly became the normative historical version of what happened during the war, the “other side” struck back with a “polemical backlash.”<sup>23</sup> Historians and former politicians closely associated with FDR and his policies initiated the counterattack, foremost among them Arthur J. Schlesinger, Jr., and William vanden Heuvel. They argue that a terrible historiographic wrong has been done to “one of the more liberal, generous” presidents who conducted one of the most “successful attempts to rescue oppressed refugees in modern history.” Not only did these voices contend that FDR did all that was possible to do to aid the Jews but, they also argued, any additional American efforts at rescue during the Holocaust were *ipso facto* “impossible.”<sup>24</sup>

Writing in response to the PBS documentary, Schlesinger posited that the “attack on FDR shows a striking disregard of historical context.” He reiterated the argument made by the Roosevelt administration during the war. “[T]he best way to save the people in the death camps was to bring the war to its quickest ends.”<sup>25</sup> Vanden Heuvel attacked Wyman for attributing allied failure to bomb death camps to “callousness, insensitivity, and even anti-Semitic prejudice” and described Wyman’s position as an “unsubstantiated calumny against men as least as honorable, humane, and honest as Professor Wyman.”<sup>26</sup> The defenders were assisted by the Franklin

and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute and were joined by other historians, including Lucy Dawidowicz and William Rubenstein and a lawyer, Robert Rosen.

### ***The Critical School: The Flaws in the Arguments***

What then can we say about the arguments produced by these “schools of thought”? Both sides simultaneously speak some truth while overstating their case. The critical school correctly contends that visa policies *were* designed to keep Jews out of the United States. Consular officers made refugees run a gamut of obstacles to prevent them from entering this country. Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long acknowledged as much in 1940.<sup>27</sup> Despite the absence of any proof, the State Department promulgated the notion that spies abounded within the refugee ranks.<sup>28</sup> Roosevelt, convinced that one of the reasons France had fallen to the Germans so quickly was because of a Fifth Column in its midst, did not want the same thing to happen in the United States. He was, therefore, amenable to this argument.

When speaking publicly about persecution in Europe, FDR barely mentioned Jews or used some generic nomenclature, e.g. “unfortunate people.” In the course of the 82 press conferences Roosevelt held in 1933, “the subject of the persecution of the Jews arose just once, and not at Roosevelt’s initiative.”<sup>29</sup> Over subsequent years, even as the Nazi treatment of the Jews intensified in severity, Roosevelt kept up this practice. Though FDR may not have intended it this way, this silence about the fate of the Jews was interpreted by the Third Reich as a sign that America was indifferent to the Jews’ fate.

What about the behavior of the American Jewish community? Did it fail really to care about the fate of its fellow Jews? Did its steadfast loyalty to President Roosevelt compromise any political clout it might have had? Was the leadership of the established community more focused on fighting Bergson and his allies than on changing government policy? The critical school’s complaints about the internecine warfare of the Jewish community bear some validity. If ever there was a time to put aside the various matters which divided the community, this was the time.<sup>30</sup> However, these fights often concerned real issues, not simply matters of power and pride. (Though they were certainly that, too.) Zionists fervently believed that only a Jewish state could prevent such a tragedy as the extermination of European Jews from happening again, and any goal that set a Jewish state aside jeopardized

Jewish well being. The Bergson group was absolutely convinced that all communal efforts must be concentrated on rescue. Non-Zionists feared that introducing Zionism into any conversation on rescuing refugees would alienate many Jews, further fracture the Jewish community, and prevent Jews from speaking with one voice. While today it seems incomprehensible that these issues took precedence over saving lives, at that moment these Jews were convinced that their solution would result in saving lives. Historians Richard Breitman and Alan Kraut, in their *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945*, make the compelling argument that one of the reasons American Jews fought so vigorously among themselves was that they lacked any real power to compel the Washington establishment to respond to their pleas. Their infighting, in short, was a reflection of their powerlessness.<sup>31</sup>

Saul Friedman, in an attempt to prove that Jews were not powerless and could have gotten the government to act, points to rallies organized by Stephen Wise in March 1933 that convinced the Germans to postpone the boycott of Jewish stores. Wise had been successful then; why, Friedman wonders, did he not replicate this success later in the decade? American Jews were able, he also notes, to gather 500,000 signatures on petitions opposing American participation in the Olympics and were responsible for the introduction of special legislation permitting the admission of 20,000 German refugee children. These actions belie the notion that they had no political clout. They could, he contends, have used the same tactics to push for rescue. Friedman's examples may seem compelling at first blush but are, in fact, rather problematic. They all date from before the war. More importantly, none of them succeeded: The Nazis did curtail the boycott of Jewish stores to one day. However, the anti-Nazi boycotts had little long-term impact, as German Jews were ultimately pushed out of ownership of their businesses and pauperized. Though many American Jews boycotted German goods, there was nothing they could do to prevent Nazi Germany from excluding Jews and taking away their livelihoods. The United States participated in the Olympics despite the half-million signatures. Moreover, many Jews sought non-Jews to spearhead the fight against American participation in the Olympics. They knew that, given the current climate in America, a Jewish led anti-Olympics effort would not bode well for Jews or for the effort. Finally, even with a great outpouring of support for the special children's legislation, Congress failed to pass it in a form that would have truly helped Jewish refugee children.<sup>32</sup>

The critics complain about American Jews' propensity for

continuing to vote for Roosevelt despite his failings on the refugee/rescue issue. For example, in PBS's *Deceit and Indifference*, McCullough observed: "During the presidential campaign of 1940, Roosevelt never promised help for refugees. Still, he received 90 percent of the Jewish vote." What, however, was the alternative? Wendell Willkie, the Republican nominee, offered nothing for Jewish refugees either. Given the choice between the Republicans and the Democrats, Jews were likely to choose the latter, not just because of their love for the New Deal, but because of Roosevelt's more interventionist foreign policy. [Indicative of how deep-seated isolationism had become in the United States was the fact that during the 1940 campaign, in the face of Willkie's strong opposition to any American intervention abroad, President Roosevelt felt compelled to promise never to send American soldiers into a foreign war.] If anyone was going to stand up to stop the Nazis, Jews, among many others, believed it would be Roosevelt and the Democrats.

What about Wise specifically? He has been severely criticized for acceding to the State Department's request to remain silent when he received Riegner's cable regarding the annihilation of European Jews. How, critics ask, could he keep quiet about the destruction—mass murder—of Jews? However, the message did not unequivocally state that an extermination program was underway. In fact, Riegner emphatically cautioned that he was not sure the information was factual. It would have been foolhardy for Wise to have publicized the information in the midst of war when the State Department asked him not to. He needed its cooperation—limited as it was—and to have crossed it would not have been a strategic act. Moreover, had the information turned out to be false—which Riegner cautioned it might be—publicizing it would have set back the attempt to aid European Jews and revitalized charges of "atrocities stories" from World War I. In fact, when Wise did publicize the information, *after* receiving verification from the State Department, the press covered it as *his* story—headlines read "Dr. Wise Asserts" or some variation thereof—and did not cite his information as having been authorized by the State Department. The *Christian Century* condemned him for spreading ugly atrocities stories. One can only imagine the media reaction had he publicized 14 weeks earlier, when the State Department had specifically asked him to refrain from doing so.<sup>33</sup>

When Wise learned of the persecution—viz. persecution, not destruction—of Bulgarian Jewry, he was deeply distressed and told Felix Frankfurter of his wish that the "Skipper," which is how he often referred to

Roosevelt, “might see this, but I know he cannot be burdened with all this material.” Critics of Wise, who often point to this letter as indicative of his failure to be truly distressed by events in Europe and his overly deferential attitude towards FDR, sometimes fail to note that this letter was written in 1941 prior to the mass murder of the Jews. In other words, one can absolutely marvel that Wise did not feel this news of horrendous Jewish suffering could be passed on to the President and rightfully castigate Wise for his reticence. However, one cannot accuse him of suppressing news of mass murder.<sup>34</sup>

Ultimately, the charge that American Jewry simply did not care about their fellow Jews during the Final Solution seems oddly in contrast to the manner in which they had consistently responded to previous acts of persecution. As Henry Feingold observes, it makes little sense to charge that a community which reacted forcefully and energetically to the Damascus blood libel (1840), the Moratara case in Italy (1858), the Kishinev pogroms (1903), and France’s Dreyfus affair (1896-1906) would simply have turned its back on European Jewry. This was a community that fought before and after World War I to keep immigration doors open even as much of American opinion was swinging in the other direction. Furthermore, but two years after the Final Solution, the same leaders play a pivotal role in the establishment of Israel, going so far as to facilitate the smuggling of arms in direct contradiction of American law.<sup>35</sup> How, then, can one accuse them of simply not caring about their fellow Jews during this terrible time? If it was not a matter of lack of concern, how might we explain their behavior?

First of all, this was an unprecedented situation. Never before had a so-called enlightened nation so brutalized its entire Jewish population. This was not a matter of the inhabitants of one city, e.g. Kishinev, being persecuted. This entailed the citizens of an entire nation and, after 1938, an ever increasing number of nations. This was not a matter of protesting an isolated action by papal authorities, as had been the situation in the Mortara case. This was broader, bigger, and unprecedented. The geographic scope and the number of those being persecuted beggared American Jews’ imagination and previous experience.

Secondly, never before had the policy actions the Jews wanted been so closely intertwined with larger American interests. Whatever America said or did regarding the treatment of German Jewry could directly affect the larger issue of America’s relationship with Germany. The protests conducted by the American Jews demanded what the American public wished strongly to eschew: getting entangled in European affairs. The Jewish

community wanted the administration to act by speaking out about the treatment of the Jews. Isolationist Americans wanted it to maintain far more than an arm’s distance. This situation was clearly illustrated by what happened when America’s newly appointed ambassador, William E. Dodd, arrived in Berlin in 1933. A German Jewish newspaper erroneously reported that he planned to try to rectify the situation faced by Jews. This was clearly not the new ambassador’s mission. Dodd, upset and worried by the impact such a report might have on Nazi officials, issued a disavowal. Dodd, who initially thought that Hitler’s grievances towards the Jews were somewhat justified, eventually came to understand the degree to which the Nazi regime intended not only to persecute Jews, but also to wage an international war. His superiors in the State Department, appalled by his overt hostility to Hitler and his cohorts, ultimately arranged for his recall. They did so despite his wish to remain longer as well as his personal friendship with the President. With such entrenched sentiments in Washington, sentiments that even a personal friend of the President could not overcome, is it reasonable to assume that the Jewish community could have changed American policy?<sup>36</sup>

Even after the United States entered the war, what Jews needed often seemed to be in direct conflict with what America needed. Well into 1943, there was a general perception that the Allies were losing the war. This fear of an Allied loss constrained American Jews from pushing the administration hard on the refugee issue.

Finally, many of the critics fail to recognize what human rights scholar Samantha Powers shows so definitively in her book *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. American policy makers have always been slow to muster the imagination to deal with issues of genocide. [Especially when American officials harbor no small degree of antipathy towards the victims.] Neither before nor after the Final Solution did the United States take steps to deter genocide. American officials often paint the conflict as inevitable—“these peoples have always been at each other’s throats”—and argue that intervention will do more harm than good. Long after the Holocaust, the United States stood by when millions were being murdered in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. The Holocaust beggared the imagination. People could sooth their conscience by contending that it was beyond belief. In the generations since, there has been no such excuse. Yet the official response has not differed. Is it unreasonable to imagine that America would have acted any other way—irrespective of how much or how little American Jews did?<sup>37</sup>

### *The Defensive School: The Flaws in Its Arguments*

While the “defensive” or “pro-FDR” school correctly critiques the “critical” school for ignoring contemporary realities, it draws conclusions that cannot stand up to historical scrutiny. Every action that the United States could have taken to rescue Jews was not taken. For the Roosevelt administration, rescuing Jews was not a priority, winning the war was. While a debate could be had over whether or not this was the correct priority for a President sworn to protect the United States to pursue, to argue that everything that could be done was done is to engage in fanciful reasoning.

For the “defensive” school to ignore the fact that Jews might have been saved and instead were left to languish and die is more than silly. It raises questions about their other conclusions. During the 1930s, the State Department erected “paper walls,” which successfully prevented many otherwise eligible Jews from coming to the United States. Immigration quotas consistently remained unfilled, not because of a dearth of applicants but because of bureaucratic obstacles. Both William Rubenstein and Robert Rosen’s vigorous defenses of Roosevelt’s actions are flawed. For example, Rubenstein, addressing the fact that there were close to 200,000 unallocated places on the quota lists that could have been assigned to Jews trying to flee Germany absolves American immigration officials from any responsibility. He attributes the reason for the unallocated visas to the German Jews’ conviction that they faced a temporary problem in Nazi Germany. Rubenstein claims that they were uninterested in emigrating and coming to the United States because they thought this was a temporary problem that would eventually blow over. The fault lay with them and not American consular officials.

Rubenstein’s arguments that German Jews did not wish to emigrate until after Kristallnacht cannot be sustained. While it is true that many German Jews initially believed that the situation would be resolved, their attitudes changed by 1935 and the promulgation of the Nuremberg Law. He bases his conclusion on “conversations” he has had with German Jews, a less than fully reliable source. To attribute the unfilled quota slots to the optimism of German Jews ignores the well-documented obstacles erected by the State Department.<sup>38</sup>

Rubenstein also makes the surprising charge that until Kristallnacht many Jews remained unmolested.<sup>39</sup> He ignores the laws that prevented Jews from living their pre-Third Reich life. For a powerful counter-narrative,

based on far more than just conversations with German Jews, readers would be well-advised to read Marion Kaplan’s *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* and Saul Friedlander’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997). Kaplan pays particular heed to the degree to which the lives of women and children were radically changed by the Third Reich. Both authors give the lie to Rubenstein’s rather breezy portrayal of Jewish life in German during the 1930s.<sup>40</sup>

Well before the Nuremberg Laws, waves of legislation slowly but steadily limited Jews’ participation in society. In April 1933, Jewish civil servants and employees were fired. That same month quotas were applied at German schools and universities limiting Jewish students. Subsequently, Jewish lawyers were prevented from fully participating in legal activities. Eventually they were disbarred. Initially, Jewish doctors could not be reimbursed by public health insurance funds. Eventually they were forbidden from treating non-Jews altogether. Jewish tax consultants’ licenses were revoked. Jewish actors were forbidden from appearing on the stage. Kosher slaughter was prohibited. The Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their citizenship. Judges were forbidden from citing decisions rendered by Jewish judges. Graduate students who were studying for their Ph.D. were denied the right to finish their exams. Over the course of the first five years of the Third Reich, Jews were fired from their jobs and stripped of their businesses. A few supremely wealthy Jews may have managed to maintain a modicum of their pre-Nazi lifestyle. Rubenstein argues that “frontline war veterans” remained unmolested. Victor Klemperer’s diary attests to the incorrectness of Rubenstein’s assertions. Long before Kristallnacht, his daily existence had been severely constricted.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to attributing the empty places on American quota lists to a lack of desire on the part of German Jews to leave, the FDR defenders explain away pervasive American anti-Semitism. Cherry picking or simply ignoring contradictory evidence, Rubenstein contends that there is “little evidence to support” the existence in America of “endemic anti-Semitism or pro-Nazism.” In fact, there *is* tremendous evidence demonstrating the existence of American anti-Semitism. Rubenstein correctly argues that Nazi Germany was decidedly unpopular in the United States. However, hostility towards Nazi Germany did not, *ipso facto*, translate into support for Nazi Germany’s enemies. American distaste for the Third Reich did not result in a decrease in anti-Semitism. One simply does not follow from the other. During these years, American anti-Semitic attitudes increased notably.<sup>42</sup>

The “defenders” also refuse, by and large, to credit the Bergson group with having played a role in the creation of the War Refugee Board. Established in 1944, it rescued between 100,000 and 200,000 Jews. Two factors led to its creation: congressional pressure stimulated in great measure by the Bergsons and their allies, as well as internal Roosevelt administration pressure by Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau and his aides.

### ***Historical Analysis or Moral Judgments?***

How might we explain some of the conclusions offered by both sides, particularly those that seem to go beyond what the historical material supports? Why has this argument become for so many a kind of litmus test? The “other” side is not just mistaken; it is perverse. Rubenstein brands the critics’ views as “illogical,” “misleading,” “ahistorical,” and “inauthentic.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Robert N. Rosen, a staunch defender of Roosevelt, contends that the respected and careful historian Henry Feingold “detests” FDR. He brands those who criticize FDR as “myopic historians,” “fool[s]” or “knave[s].”<sup>44</sup> Similar blanket condemnations issue from the critics. Rafael Medoff charges that American Jewish leaders were either “lunching” or “on vacation.”<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Haskell Lookstein described the American Jew as being “subservient, obsequious in requests and fawning in gratitude for small favors.” They were “accomplices to his [Roosevelt’s] inaction.” Saul Friedman characterized Rabbi Stephen S. Wise as “docile” and “silent.” Elie Wiesel wonders why Wise did not engage in acts of civil disobedience in front of the White House. (Friedman, a severe critic of Wise’s, does acknowledge that acts of civil disobedience, such as those Elie Wiesel believed American Jews should have conducted, would have been regarded by Americans as “seditious behavior designed to immobilize the government and thereby jeopardize the lives of American fighting men abroad.” Bergson affiliate Samuel Merlin contended that American Jewish leaders “knew enough” about what was going on in Europe “to act or rather counteract, had there been enough compassion and will.”<sup>46</sup> At times both sides seem to be engaged in a moral rather than a historical analysis, one that morphs into judgment.<sup>47</sup>

There are emotional, political, ideological, and generational factors at play here. First the emotional: For the critical school this was and is, as I have previously noted, a *cri de coeur*, a cry of the deepest anguish at this terrible tragedy. This anguish is rightfully enhanced by what they perceive as failure of anyone to stop it or even be terribly distressed by wholesale

murder. For the defense school it is similarly a cry of anger, but one directed at the other side. Schlesinger and vanden Heuvel seemed shocked at the wide swing in Jews’ attitude towards FDR. In the space of a generation, he has been transformed from hero to villain. The defenders perceive the critics as less than grateful to FDR for what he did *for* Jews: appointing them to high-ranking Federal positions, choosing Jewish advisers, nominating a Jew to the Supreme Court [while there already was another Jew on the court] and, above all, being willing to take an interventionist stance when a substantial portion of the American public doubted—if not opposed—the wisdom of this approach.

An emotional, if not moral, factor animates the response of David Wyman, whose historical work has shaped so much of the critical school since the 1980s. The grandson of two Protestant ministers, he emerges from what can be described as a tradition of Protestant Moralism, a pacifist school, which feels no compunctions about “speaking truth to power” and which believes that America must be held to a higher standard. While his work is a *tour de force* that has been aptly described by Feingold as a unique example of “superb historical craftsmanship,” it is also premised on the notion that “Christian love” should shape our national policies.<sup>48</sup>

Other critics come from a somewhat different perspective. “New Left” historians such as Gabriel Kolko and Blanche Wiesen Cook criticize FDR on the basis of a premise and perspective that differs from Wyman’s. They look at FDR’s New Deal and see, not a hero, but someone who revitalized capitalism and helped the banks and industry. Their critical analysis of Roosevelt’s economic policy spills over onto their scrutiny of his response to the Holocaust. Echoing Wyman, they expect a level of morality and humanitarian concern. Their critique continues a long-standing debate about FDR’s domestic and foreign policies, one which started at the time of the New Deal. It is not a split between those who supported the New Deal and those who did not. It is between those who feel the New Deal saved the nation and those who believed it revitalized capitalism and saved the banks and industry at the expense of the “working (wo)man.”<sup>49</sup>

Among critics who come from within the Jewish community and who write *as* Jews, other factors shape their arguments. In many respects this fight can be traced back to long-standing, wildly varying ideological notions of what it means to be an American Jew. Rosen, Rubenstein, and their Jewish cohorts in the defensive school condemn the critics for thinking as Jews first and Americans second. They accuse those critics of reviling “traditional American and Jewish emancipationist values of Jewish

acculturation.” Consider, for example, Robert Rosen’s description of the critics as “anti-FDR, pro-Irgun, [with an] anti-American version of history.” Rosen chides the critics for failing to understand that: American Jews “are and always have been Americans first and Jews second.”<sup>50</sup>

The critical school reciprocates condemning the other side for being too American. Among them are many from the Orthodox community, including those who assess Wise’s actions on theological grounds. Such was the case when Rabbi Morris Sherer of the virulently anti-Zionist Agudath Israel, decried Zionist leaders as “ridiculous and heartless” for concentrating on a Jewish homeland when their people were “being slaughtered like sheep” and posits that had they “view[ed] events from a Torah perspective” they would have been imbued with a special sense of “responsibility” for their fellow Jews.<sup>51</sup> The more extreme voices absolve Roosevelt and shift the blame completely onto Wise. Rabbi Isaac Lewin, leader of *Agudas Yisrael*, a fervently Orthodox group, typified this approach when he castigated Wise and his colleagues for their “business as usual” behavior. Where, he wondered, was “the storm of protest from Jewish leadership over atrocities which had no parallel in our history?”<sup>52</sup>

In April 2010, Rabbi Ephraim Kestenbaum, the son of the fervently Orthodox rabbi David Kestenbaum, who was trying to rescue Jews during the Holocaust, claimed that Stephen S. Wise had given the son a message for his father: “Tell your father that he has to be an American and not to fight hard for Jews in Europe. You have to be an American first.” Kestenbaum opined that but for Wise, Roosevelt would have “done more to save Jews from the gas chambers.” The Orthodox website which reported this story described it as evidence of Wise’s “treacherous” behavior.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly David Kranzler, historian of Orthodox efforts during the Holocaust, castigates Wise for translating his Judaism “into the faith of secular liberalism’s primary goal of social and economic equality.” He accuses the American Jewish community of having its loyalties skewed. The “assimilationists” primary loyalty was “to government policy and the greater war effort” and the Zionists’ primary loyalty was to “the goal of a postwar Jewish state.” In contrast, the Orthodox community’s loyalties were “to the imperative of Torah law for immediate rescue.”<sup>54</sup> The inherent fallacy in this argument is that the leaders of the active protesters were committed secularists, among them Ira Hirschmann, Ben Hecht, and even Peter Bergson. None were motivated by a “Torah perspective.”<sup>55</sup> In fact, Stephen Wise was probably far more “religious” than they.

There is also an historical context for the debate about American

Jews’ (in)action during this period. In the mid-1970s, a political upheaval occurred in Israel. Menachem Begin, the heir to Jabotinsky’s mantle, was elected Prime Minister of Israel. For the first time since long before the establishment of the State, Labour was not in a position to make policy. While I do not contend that the critics spoke out simply because of the election, it would be interesting to consider whether the election and the cataclysmic rejection it presented of David Ben-Gurion’s legacy did not embolden the critics. They may have felt, consciously or unconsciously so, that now was the time to settle historical scores. FDR defenders certainly saw it as such. Lucy Dawidowicz branded the critics as engaged “in a retrospective alliance with the Irgun whose commander was none other than Menachem Begin.”<sup>56</sup>

A generational divide sparks some of the controversy. Here I write from an autobiographical perspective. Among the critics’ ranks are deeply committed Jews who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnam era. This age cohort effected tremendous changes in American cultural and political life. One of its hallmarks was the freedom it felt to publicly criticize voices of authority. It excoriated both the Johnson and Nixon White House administrations for their foreign policy. In their ranks were young Jews, many of them products of the Jewish community’s leading educational institutions. In addition to assessing America’s leadership, they also critiqued the established Jewish community. Young Jews staged a protest at a Council of Jewish Federations General Assembly calling for increased commitment to Jewish education. They pressured the organized Jewish community to ramp up its campaign on behalf of Soviet Jewry and organized protests, rallies, and sit-ins, until those became the tactics of the mainstream community.<sup>57</sup> These young, American-born, well-educated Jews, completely comfortable within their American “skins,” felt free to fully express themselves as Jews.

A basic theme of their protests was that, unlike their parents’ generation, they would not sit idly by. They painted the previous generation as far too accommodating to American demands and too constrained to act freely as Jews. They contrasted their generation with that of their parents’ and proclaimed that they would respond to the call of their fellow Jews who were facing anti-Semitism.<sup>58</sup>

While there is so very much that is valid about the critics’ arguments, ultimately the more extreme among them suffer from a lack of “historicity.” They evaluate the behavior of the Roosevelt administration and American Jewry, based not on what they did and who they were, but on the

basis of what they *should* have done and what they *should* have been. As Michael Marrus put it, they “failed to live up to our standards.”<sup>59</sup> As I noted at the outset, the critical school falls prey to presentism, i.e. standards that have been shaped by contemporary American political life. Projecting backwards from the present into the past, the critics expect of American Jews tactics more fitting of the 1970s and 1980s than of the 1940s. Seventy years ago, it was hardly the norm for an ethnic group to make claims on public compassion or demand political—much less military—action on behalf of its overseas members. It is a-historic, if not facile, to expect from the wartime American Jewish community a level of organization, political clout, and impact characteristic of political behavior of the Baby Boom/Vietnam-era protest generation. (At the same time, as historian Tony Kushner observes, there is the very real danger that instead of giving “contemporaries a fair hearing,” we edge towards apologia.<sup>60</sup>) (It is this that my Westchester-based letter writing critic may have heard in my attempt to present a balanced picture.) Many who voice these criticisms came from that activist cohort. They managed to turn the cause of Soviet Jews into an effort supported by American politicians of every stripe and wonder why their parents could not have done the same thing when the stakes were far higher.

This generation came of age at a time when ethnic groups felt comfortable celebrating their distinctiveness. It was also a time when it became acceptable for groups which had long down-played their history of victimization by the American “system”—gays, African-Americans, Hispanics, women, and Jews—to step forward and demand redress. While no redress could change the past, at the very least, the critics seemed to be saying, America should acknowledge its past wrongs.<sup>61</sup> They demanded that university administrators expand their curricula. They openly supported candidates based on their stance on ethnic issues. They no longer felt that their primary objective was to model themselves on the WASP majority in America.

### ***Conclusion:***

I close with a brief mention of one element for which I have no definitive proof, only a “gut feeling.” In the past decades, sectors of the American Jewish community have become increasingly conservative or, more properly put, less reliably Democratic. It seems that in those circles where this is most evident, e.g. Orthodox Jews, there is a particularly virulent strain of criticism of both FDR and the established Jewish community. This attitude seems to serve as a justification for making the

political switch. Political pundit Dennis Prager told the Republican Jewish Coalition that “They’d still be gassing Jews” if liberals and peace activists had their way.... “The left does not understand that Auschwitz was not liberated by peace activists,” Prager said during a reception honoring GOP governors at the Republican National Convention. “Gandhi did a lot of great work in India. You know why? Because when you advocate peaceful resistance against the British, it works. Peaceful resistance against evil does not work.”<sup>62</sup> It seems possible—resolving this matter calls for yet more research—that some, though certainly not all, of the attacks on FDR, Stephen S. Wise, and the faithful support by American Jews of the Democratic Party during the 1930s and 1940s may be a means of trying to pry Jews loose from their contemporary support of the Democratic Party. The underlying message often seems to be: “They (read liberals and Democrats) failed us at a crucial moment for our people. They failed us despite Jews’ support of them. Will they not fail us again in the future (when Israel needs America’s support)? When will contemporary American Jews wake up and see the light?”

We are dealing here with a debate which not only concerns the greatest tragedy in Jewish life, but strikes at the heart of American Jews’ perception of their own identity. It may well be that despite the passage of over seven decades, this debate will only be resolved by the next generation of historians of the American Jewish community, some of whom are being trained at this august institution.

## NOTES

- 1 In October 2009, I encountered a similar experience at a major New York City-based Jewish museum. I appeared on a panel with another scholar. Both of us urged nuanced approaches to the topic. The audience's reaction was less than affirming.
- 2 The Jewish Agency apparently thought that the official would know where Jewish monies and other treasures might be hidden.
- 3 [http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205738.pdf](http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205738.pdf); Jeffrey S. Gurock, editor. *America, American Jews, and the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 1998); <http://blogs.jpost.com/content/fdr-american-anti-Semitism-and-silence-jews-holocaust-1944-1>.
- 4 William D. Rubenstein, *The Myth of Rescue* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Lucy Dawidowicz, *What's the Use of Jewish History?* (New York: Schocken, 1992), pp. 157-179ff; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Did FDR Betray the Jews? Or Did He Do More Than Anyone Else to Save Them?" *Newsweek*, April 18, 1994, p. 14; Verne W. Newton, *FDR and the Holocaust* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); William J. vanden Heuvel, "An Amplification," *Newton*, p. 164; Joseph J. Plaud, "Historical Perspectives on Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Foreign Policy, and the Holocaust," <http://www.fdrheritage.org/fdr&holocaust.htm>.
- 5 Lipstadt, Deborah *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (New York: Free Press, 1986).
- 6 I wish to acknowledge the incisive and invaluable treatment of this topic in Henry Feingold's "American Jewry and the Holocaust," *Bearing Witness* (Syracuse: University of Syracuse Press, 1995), pp. 205-271.
- 7 Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died* (New York: Overlook Press, 1968).
- 8 David Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968); Henry Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970).
- 9 Monty Penkower, *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Saul Friedman, *No Haven for the Oppressed* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973). In contrast to some of the other critics, Friedman rejects the assertion that the State Department acted out of an anti-Semitic impulse. He dismisses this as an "oversimplification of the problem" and also an "insult" to many of those officials who engaged in the issue. Friedman, pp. 137, 139ff.
- 10 David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).
- 11 David McCullough, *Deceit and In-difference* (PBS, 1993).
- 12 Rafael Medoff, *The Deafening Silence: American Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust* (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1987), p. 181.
- 13 M. J. Nurenberger, *The Sacred and the Doomed* (New York: Mosaic Press, 1985), p. 167.
- 14 Herbert Druks, *The Failure to Rescue* (New York: Robert Speller, 1978), p. 98; Dr Gerhard Falk, [www.jbuff.com](http://www.jbuff.com); <http://blogs.jpost.com/content/fdr-american-anti-Semitism-and-silence-jews-holocaust-1944-1>.
- 15 David Morrison, *Heroes, Antiheroes, and the Holocaust: American Jewish and Historical Choice* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 1999), pp. 178,181; Friedman, pp. 137, 139ff.
- 16 Laurence Jarvik, *Who Shall Live and Who Shall Die?* (1982).
- 17 Lucy Dawidowicz, "Indicting American Jews," *Commentary*, June 1983 [www.commentarymagazine.com/article/indicting-american-jews/](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/indicting-american-jews/).
- 18 Seymour Finger, "American Jews and the Holocaust," *Commentary*, September 1983.
- 19 Samuel Merlin, "Letters to the Editor," *Commentary*, September, 1983, [www.commentarymagazine.com/article/indicting-american-jews/](http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/indicting-american-jews/).
- 20 Gad Nahshon, "Holocaust: The American Jewish Conspiracy of Silence," *Jewish Post*, n.d. [www.jewishpost.com](http://www.jewishpost.com).
- 21 For an example of the controversy this commission aroused, see: <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/american-jews-and-the-holocaust/>. For a devastating critique of this report, see Yehuda Bauer, "The Goldberg Report," *Bystanders to the Holocaust*, Michael Marrus ed. (Westport, Connecticut: Meckler, 1989), pp. 942-949.
- 22 "For those of us here today representing the nations of the West, we must live forever with this knowledge, even as our fragmentary awareness of crimes grew into indisputable facts, far too little was done. Before the war even started, doors to liberty were shut. And even after the United States and the Allies attacked Germany, rail lines to the camps within miles of military significant target were left undisturbed." <http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/faq/languages/en/06/01/ceremony/?content=clinton>; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22616187/page/2/>.
- 23 Tony Kushner, "Why We Watched: Europe, America, and the Holocaust," *The Times Higher Education*, December 20, 2010.
- 24 Rubenstein, *The Myth of Rescue*, pp. 10, 11, 14.
- 25 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., p. 14; *Newton*, pp. 159-61.
- 26 William J. vanden Heuvel, "An Amplification," *Newton*, p. 164.
- 27 Feingold, *Bearing Witness*, p. 260.
- 28 *Ibid*, p. 191.
- 29 Rafael Medoff and David Golinkin, *The Student Struggle Against the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, 2010), p. 5.
- 30 Morrison, p. 181. Of course they were not the only Jewish leaders embroiled in such fights. David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann were also engaged in fights that at times promised to explode into civil war.
- 31 Richard Breitman and Alan M.
- Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- 32 The way in which the legislation emerged from the committee would have made the immigration barriers more, not less, difficult. The children would have been counted as part of the total quota allocation. Twenty thousand places would have been set aside for them instead of twenty thousand additional places being allocated for them. Saul S. Friedman, "The Power and/or Powerlessness of American Jews, 1939-1945," in Seymour Maxwell Finger volume, *American Jewry During the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984), Appendix B, p. 13.
- 33 Lipstadt, pp. 181-82.
- 34 Wise to Frankfurter, March 5, 1941, CZA, Wise Papers, Reel 109. It is interesting to see how the letter is not contextualized in Morrison, p. 181.
- 35 Feingold, pp. 243-44.
- 36 William E. Dodd, *Ambassador Dodd's Diary*, William E. Dodd Jr. and Martha Dodd, eds. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1941), p. 13. For Dodd's somewhat slow awakening to the situation in Germany and his difficulties in altering his Washington colleagues' to the danger posed by Hitler see Robert Dallek, *Democrat and Diplomat: The Life of William E. Dodd* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). For a highly readable and well-referenced book on Dodd's experience and the situation during the early years of the Nazi regime, see Erik Lawson, *In the Garden of the Beast*, (New York: Crown, 2011).
- 37 Samantha Powers, *A Problem from Hell* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), pp. xv-xviii.
- 38 Rubenstein, pp. 20, 24, 36.
- 39 Rubenstein, p. 23.
- 40 Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Live in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford, 1988) and Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

- 41 Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1941 and 1942-1945* (New York: Modern Library, 1999).
- 42 Rubenstein, pp. 45-46.
- 43 Rubenstein, pp. 61-63.
- 44 Rosen, pp. 482, 496, 548.
- 45 Medoff, p. 154.
- 46 Haskel Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers' Keepers?* (Bridgeport, Ct.: Hartmore House, 1985), pp. 211-12; Friedman, p. 153; Elie Wiesel, "Telling the Tale," *Dimensions in American Judaism*, 2 (Spring 1968), p. 11; Samuel Merlin, "American Jews and the Holocaust: Letters to the Editor," *Commentary*, September 1983, <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/american-jews-and-the-holocaust/>.
- 47 Frank W. Brecher, "David Wyman and the Historiography of America's Response to the Holocaust: Counter-Considerations," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 1990, Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 425.
- 48 Brecher, pp. 423-446, 1990.
- 49 Feingold, pp. 243-44. Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 1: 1884-1933* (New York: Penguin, 1992); *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 2: 1932-1939* (New York: Viking, 1999). I wish to thank Deborah Dash Moore for making this cogent distinction among the different segments of Roosevelt's critics.
- 50 Rosen pp. 332, 497.
- 51 Rabbi Morris Sherer, "Comments," *Finger*, Appendix 3, pp. 16-17.
- 52 Lookstein, p. 109.
- 53 <http://matzav.com/rabbi-kestenbaum-speaks-of-astounding-misdeeds-of-reform-rabbi-stephen-wise-during-holocaust>.
- 54 David Kranzler, *Thy Brother's Blood*, p. 1.
- 55 Morrison, p. 309.
- 56 Lucy Dawidowicz, XXXX, *Commentary*, 198. She had already expressed this

view in 1962 when she described Bergson's efforts at rescue as a "series of Irgun fronts to raise money for arms to fight the British." *Commentary*, March 1962, Vol. 3 #33, p. 262.

57 <http://www.thenation.com/article/156375/wild-desire-leave-soviet-jewry?page=full>.

58 In a speech at a Soviet Jewry rally in Faneuil Hall in Boston in 1972, I drew that direct analogy. For an analysis of the role the Soviet Jewry movement in America played in revitalizing American Jewish identity in the 1970s and 1980s see Gal Beckerman, *When they Come for Us We Will Be Gone* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010).

59 Henry Feingold, *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 184; Michael Marrus, *Bystanders to the Holocaust* (Review of Monty Penkower's *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust* and David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*), Newton, p. 152.

60 Tony Kushner, "The Rules of the Game: Britain, America and the Holocaust in 1944," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 1990, Vol. 5, No. 4, p. 396.

61 <http://www.americandaily.com/article/3982>.

62 <http://adamholland.blogspot.com/2008/09/republican-pundit-denis-prager-theyd.html>.