

## A War to Save the Jews ?

by Howard Zinn

Did the United States enter the war because of its indignation at Hitler's treatment of the Jews? Hitler had been in power a year, and his campaign against the Jews had already begun when, in January 1934, a resolution was introduced into the Senate expressing "surprise and pain" at what the Germans were doing and asking for a restoration of Jewish rights. The State Department used its influence to get the resolution buried in committee.

Even after we were in the war against Germany (it should be noted that after Pearl Harbor Germany declared war on the United States, not vice versa) and reports began to arrive that Hitler was planning the annihilation of the Jews, Roosevelt's administration failed to take steps that might have saved thousands of lives.

Goebbels, minister of propaganda for Hitler's Germany, wrote in his diary on December 13, 1942: "At bottom, however, I believe both the English and the Americans are happy we are exterminating the Jewish riffraff." Goebbels was undoubtedly engaging in wishful thinking, but in fact, the English and American governments had not shown by their actions that they were terribly concerned about the Jews. As for Roosevelt, he shunted the problem to the State Department, where it did not become a matter of high priority.

As an example of this failure to treat the situation as an emergency, Raul Hilberg, a leading scholar of the Holocaust, points to an event that took place in 1942. Early in August of that year, with 1,500,000 Jews already dead, the Jewish leader Stephen Wise was informed indirectly through a German industrialist that there was a plan in Hitler's headquarters for the extermination of all Jews; Wise brought the information to Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles. Welles asked him not to release the story until it was investigated for confirmation. Three months were spent checking the report. During that time a million Jews were killed in Europe.

It is doubtful that all those Jews could have been saved.

But thousands could have been rescued. All the entrenched governments and organizations were negligent.

The British were slow and cautious. In March 1943, in the presence of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Secretary of State Hull pressed British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden on plans to rescue the 60,000 Jews in Bulgaria threatened with death. According to a memo by Roosevelt aide Harry Hopkins who was at that meeting, Eden worried that Polish and German Jews might then also ask to be rescued. "Hitler might well take us up on any such offer and there simply are not enough ships and means of transportation in the world to handle them." When there was a possibility of bombing the railroad lines leading into the murder chambers of Auschwitz, to stop further transportation of Jews there, the opportunity was ignored.

It should be noted that the Jewish organizations themselves behaved shamefully. In 1984, the American Jewish Commission on the Holocaust reviewed the historical record. It found that the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a relief agency set up during World War II by the various Jewish groups, "was dominated by the wealthier and more 'American' elements of U.S. Jewry.... Thus, its policy was to do nothing in wartime that the U.S. government would not officially countenance." *condone?*

Raul Hilberg points out that the Hungarian Jews might have been saved by a bargain: the Allies would not make air raids on Hungary if the Jews would be kept in the cities and not sent away. But "the Jews could not think in terms of interfering with the war effort, and the Allies on their part could not conceive of such a promise .... The Allied bombers roared over Hungary at will, killing Hungarians and Jews alike."

As I read this I recalled that one of the bombing raids I had done was on a town in Hungary.

Not only did waging war against Hitler fail to save the Jews, it may be that the war itself brought on the Final Solution of genocide. This is not to remove the responsibility from Hitler and the Nazis, but there is much evidence that Germany's anti-Semitic actions, cruel as they were, would not have turned to mass murder were it not for the psychic distortions of war, acting on already distorted minds. Hitler's early aim was forced emigration, not ex-

termination, but the frenzy of it created an atmosphere in which the policy turned to genocide. This is the view of Princeton historian Arno Mayer, in his book *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken*, and it is supported by the chronology that not until Germany was at war was the Final Solution adopted.

Hilberg, in his classic work on the Holocaust, says, "From 1938 to 1940, Hitler made extraordinary and unusual attempts to bring about a vast emigration scheme .... The Jews were not killed before the emigration policy was literally exhausted." The Nazis found that the Western powers were not anxious to cooperate in emigration and that no one wanted the Jews.

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