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Daniel Gross

Union College - Schenectady, NY

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A House Divided: The Development of the Ideological Divide of American Jewry
and its Influence on the American Response to Nazi Germany, 1933-1943

By
Daniel Gross

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of the requirements for
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Acknowledgements and Dedication

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ABSTRACT

GROSS, DANIEL

The American Jewish Organizations'
Response to the Holocaust and their
Ideological Divide, 1933-1943

This thesis examines the response from the different American Jewish groups during Hitler's rise to power and the subsequent Holocaust, and how the ideological divide that formed between Zionists and non-Zionists ultimately shaped the ultimately limited their ability to exert political influence toward policies to aid European Jewry. The main groups that were analyzed were the American Jewish Committee, the Joint Distribution Committee, B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Congress, the World Jewish Congress, and the Zionist Organization of America. For purposes of analysis and clarity, the groups can be divided along the lines of extreme Zionist, which included the two Congresses and the Zionist Organization of America, and moderate to non-Zionists, which included the American Jewish Committee, the Joint Distribution Committee, and B'nai B'rith.

At the core of their debate was how to respond to the growing anti-Semitic threat in Germany. The extreme Zionists were concerned with the goal of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and would not divert funds or resources from that goal, while the moderate to non-Zionists were concerned with the more immediate and pressing issue of the destruction of European Jewry. Factors that exacerbated these divides were issues such as anti-Semitism sentiments in the United States, skepticism about

reports indicating the scale and scope of Nazi oppression of the Jews, and a Federal Government that believed in an Isolationist approach.

What is abundantly clear is that this fundamental divide shaped the overall lack of political mobilization. What was constant was a state of paralysis or ineffective leadership during three seminal moments. Hitler's appointment to Chancellor of Germany in January of 1933, with his anti-Semitic beliefs and doctrines, was met with some concern but generally dismissed by Jewish and political leaders in the United States. Kristallnacht, the economic destruction of German Jewry on November 9 and 10th, 1938, served as a wake up call to many in the United States, and helped shed light on the grave situation faced by Jewish refugees, as well as created a sense of urgency amongst Zionists for the establishment of a homeland. News of the Final Solution, that was initially found out in August of 1942, left many Jews in a state of helplessness, as Zionists attempted to further bolster their case for Palestine, while moderate Zionists and non Zionists were paralyzed in terms of what could be done.

Chapter 1- Literature Review

*“We must stand as a generation, not only condemned to witness the destruction of a third of our number but guilty of having accepted it without any resistance worthy of the name”- Nahum Goldmann, *The Autobiography of Nahum Goldmann: Sixty Years of Jewish Life*¹*

From 1938 through 1944, Nazi Germany, led by Adolf Hitler, began a mass murder of European Jews that culminated in the death of six million. The above quotation, from Nahum Goldmann, a Zionist leader and founder of the World Jewish Congress, reflects the frustration over the lack of response and resistance from Americans, and more particularly, American Jews. As early as 1933, American Jews, both groups and prominent leaders, began to express concern over the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany; despite their concern, and overwhelming evidence of the persecution of European Jews in the subsequent years, there was a fundamental divide between the various American Jewish groups that ultimately influenced their underwhelming response. One would be led to believe that the American Jews would feel a sense of duty to their European brethren, but when the time came, most did not act. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln famously said “A house divided against itself cannot stand”—this quotation can be aptly used to describe American Jews, groups, and the various leaders, and the lack of common ground they shared. In this thesis, I will make the argument that the division and overall lack of unity amongst American Jewry helped to shape and influence the response of the federal government to the Holocaust.

¹ Haskel Lookstein, *Were We Our Brother's Keeper?: The Public Response of American Jews to the Holocaust, 1938-1944*, (Hartmore: New York, 1985).

A number of factors contributed to the disconnect amongst American Jewry. Anti-Semitism, in the 1930's in particular, was widespread across the United States, which discouraged people from pursuing high profile activism. Prominent anti-Semitic figures such as Charles Coughlin, William Pelley, and Gerald Winrod rallied support against Jews and often downplayed what was happening in Europe during the 1930's. Jewish groups, as a result, were reluctant to present themselves as advocating specifically for Jews. In responding to what was happening in Europe, many Jewish leaders were hesitant to react aggressively; rather, they often took a measured response that was in line with the position of the government. This was particularly true of many prominent Jewish figures in the government, such as Felix Frankfurter or Louis Brandeis. This reluctance was exacerbated by a fundamental divide among the various Jewish organizations, particularly between Zionists and non-Zionists. The Zionist position, while sympathetic to the plight of European Jews, was that the overriding goal was to settle in Palestine and create an independent Jewish state, and any immediate response to Hitler would jeopardize that goal. The non-Zionist factions could not agree on a specific position, and accomplished little as individual groups. In fact there was even a difference in how the Jewish newspapers reported the different events.

When analyzing the lack of Jewish response to the Holocaust, another factor that bears considering is the relationship between American Jews and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It is impossible for the president, despite his reputation in the eyes of many American Jews during this time, to emerge unscathed from what occurred; he could have done more, but so could have numerous people. What

becomes clear during these years is that American Jews revered Roosevelt, which afforded him leeway with his actions. In the eyes of the Jewish people, he could do no wrong. The American Jewish community placed a great deal of trust in the President despite a long period of inaction. As mentioned by Henry Feingold, Roosevelt specialized in the “politics of gesture”, which was often enough to appease the Jewish masses. It was not just reverence for Roosevelt that complicated the Jewish American response, but also the lack of a unified leader, voice or agenda to communicate to Roosevelt. In his book, *Were We Our Brothers' Keeper*, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, believing that Jewish groups could have had an impact, posits, “Roosevelt was concerned about winning the war. He was not going to be distracted from the war effort without strong Jewish pressure. That pressure never came”.²

American perceptions of the Holocaust have evolved as the access to more information about what occurred has increased. In the two decades following the end of the Holocaust and World War II, there was a general naïveté in the role played by America and how it responded—Americans perceived themselves as the proud heroes who saved the day from the despicable Nazis and the Axis powers. The narrative began to change somewhat in the 1960’s with the trial in Israel of Adolf Eichmann, an SS official who had been an implementer of the Final Solution. The actions of Eichmann confirmed the gruesome actions taken during the Holocaust. However, it was the book of Hannah Arendt, a refugee from Hitler’s Germany that shocked the collective American psyche. Arendt, while not vindicating Eichmann, casted a wider net of blame from the perpetrators of the Holocaust, to the American politicians and

² Lookstein, 13.

Jewish leaders who did not react accordingly, despite a disturbing amount of evidence. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which covered Eichmann's trial in Israel, Arendt controversially suggested that Eichmann almost devoid of blame because, "This was the new law of the land, based on the Führer's order; whatever he (Eichmann) did he did, as far as he could see as a law abiding citizen. He did his *duty*...he not only obeyed *orders*, he also obeyed the *law*."³ Describing the idea of shared responsibility, Arendt identified Jewish leadership, as it had come up during Eichmann's trial, writing, "The Jewish people as a whole behaved magnificently. Only the leadership failed."⁴ Arendt also posits that European Jews essentially complied with their own demise through cooperation with Nazi deportation and extermination plans.

While not so much addressing the Allies' role in the Holocaust, Arendt's work opened up the floodgates and, "shattered an agreed on moral and historical tale". Arendt's work opened up a period of "self scrutiny, one in which virtually every aspect of America's self image was examined assiduously".⁵ Arendt's work essentially tore down the common narrative that had been associated with the Holocaust in World War II. Here was someone with first hand experience of what took place in Europe that was not absolving the Nazis, but spreading the blame out somewhat. In particular, her suggestion of European Jews' complicity was an eye opening opinion. Coupled with the rebellious nature of the 1960's that was beginning

³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), 135.

⁴ Arendt, 284.

⁵ Robert H. Abzug, *America Views the Holocaust, 1933-1945: A Brief Documentary History*, (Austin: University of Texas, 1999), 208-9.

to take shape across the American populace, where there was a more general questioning of authority, the question of guilt began to be reexamined.

It was in the 1960's that the *Holocaust* became an event, embedded in the vernacular of American culture. The cultural context of the 1960's also played a part in the national self-examination taking place. The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement awaked passions and stirred controversy across the country. The German crimes caused an exploration of America and all of its shortcomings. Comparisons of Americans' actions in Vietnam to the Nazi war crimes were made. The Civil Rights movement was analyzed with references to Nazi racial doctrines. In *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, author Thomas Fallace illustrates this infiltration of examination into American culture, as he quoted Rabbi Isaac Toubin, a former executive vice president of the American Association of Jewish Education, as saying, "In the midst of our American Crisis, what Jew, understanding the consequences of hatred, can remain indifferent to the plight of the Negro".⁶ With anti-government fervor increasing, and influencing how Americans perceived history at the time, the role of President Roosevelt and his administration fell under the microscope.

In the late 1960's, David Wyman and Henry Feingold came out with books that called into question America's role in the Holocaust. Wyman's 1967 work, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis 1938-1941*, dealt with the refugee crisis during the Holocaust and the stance and policies taken by the Federal

⁶ Thomas D. Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 22.

government.⁷ Wyman's work set the standard in terms of research for many books dealing with this topic; he used the archives at the Roosevelt Library, as well as the National Archives, which have been staples in research on this topic. Wyman suggests that the rampant anti-Semitism in the United States in the 1930's played a huge role in the quota system and explained why America admitted so few refugees; he suggests that Father Coughlin, a rampant anti-Semite, downplayed and minimized what was occurring abroad. Wyman demonstrates Coughlin's influence in writing, "Coughlin rapidly generated a large Catholic anti-Semitic movement and changed the complexion of organized anti-Jewish agitation...in the wave of violent Nazi persecution of the Jews, Coughlin minimized the attacks".⁸ Wyman included surveys done by American Jewish groups that documented the extent to which anti-Semitism influenced the collective American psyche. One such survey conducted by the American Jewish Congress illustrated that 60% of Americans believed that Jews had objectionable qualities.⁹

The American Jewish Congress, both before and during the war, believed in a policy of "quiet diplomacy". In describing the policy of the American Jewish Congress, Wyman writes that they "preferred to function more quietly, often through direct contact with leading people of influence".¹⁰ What was clear, however, was that there was a sense of apathy amongst the Jewish groups. For instance, the *National Jewish Monthly*, the newsletter of B'nai B'rith, did not complain nor call for opening up the refugee programs. The overall message from Wyman, and one that he expands

⁷ David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968).

⁸ Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 37-38

⁹ Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 22

¹⁰ Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 25.

upon in later works, is that all influential parties in the United States, particularly the Government, failed to meet their potential to help.

Feingold's *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945*, written at the same time as Wyman's *Paper Walls*, analyzed the issue of rescue of European Jewry, and the response of the Roosevelt Administration, in particular, the role of the State Department.¹¹ Feingold cites "paper walls" as how the State Department managed to restrict immigration—namely, they put forth regulations that made it nearly impossible for Jewish refugees to come to America. In describing Roosevelt's reaction, and the reaction of his administration, Feingold discerned a duplicitous manner in the president, in that Roosevelt would often remain out of the debate if possible, and could put himself in either camp. According to Feingold, Roosevelt also specialized in the aforementioned "politics of gesture"; what he means is that Roosevelt would make various gestures, such as support of resettlement that would placate the Jews and the leaders.

Feingold's analysis of the American Jewish response is consistent with what will be seen in the other works—namely that Jews in America were in a precarious position, lacking any considerable influence on the government and worried about anti-Semitic backlash. In explaining the response, Feingold cites a number of factors, including this lack of influence, a lack of credibility on all the reports coming out of Germany, and the belief in a spirit of civilization that simply did not exist as the reason's for American Jews' inaction in response to their European brethren. In contrast to Wyman, who does not excuse the American Jews but places a greater

¹¹ Henry L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970).

share of guilt on Roosevelt and the government, Feingold believes that American Jewish groups and leaders should be held accountable for not doing enough in terms of relief efforts, as he attributed much of America's underwhelming response to the, "failure of skill and power which was the cause of the lack of American Jewry success".¹²

During the 1980's, opinions regarding the American response to Holocaust evolved; as more primary sources became available, new books and opinions pertaining to the Holocaust were released. Similar to Feingold, Leon Weliczker Wells, in his work, *Who Speaks for the Vanquished?: American Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust*, was able to provide a unique vantage point, in that he was a prisoner during the war, and a key witness in the Nazi war crime trials.¹³ Such experience holds considerable weight in any account or opinion. Using archives from the *New York Times*, Wells is able to also illustrate what could have been done to prevent and save thousands of lives that were lost. It is always dangerous for historians to play the "what-if game" but in Wells' case, the suggestions he makes were plausible and easily could have been performed. Wells identifies a list of four steps that could have affected what happened. One such step was arousing world opinion to the Nazis.

Wells describes this step in writing:

The first responsibility of world Jewish leaders and organizations was to gather and publicize all of the measures taken by the Nazis as they occurred. This accurate information would have been the basis for all lobbying with governments, and for specific aims, and actions with regard to counteracting Nazi policy vis a vis Jews.¹⁴

¹² Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue*, xv.

¹³ Leon Weliczker Wells, *Who Speaks for the Vanquished: American Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1987).

¹⁴ Wells, 260.

Among other steps that could have been taken, Wells believed that an effort should have been made to reward rescuers, and simply, that Jewish Organizations should have put forth a greater and more direct effort.¹⁵ The author ultimately expresses resignation that more was not done but does conclude with what can be done in the future. Wells's analysis is particularly helpful as it sheds light on the actual goals of the leading Zionist groups, and where their priorities were.

Wells's work was largely critical of the Hadassah, the largest Zionist organization in the United States, and the American and World Jewish Congress, and their reaction to what was occurring in Europe. Wells posits that the Zionists used the tragedies inflicted upon European Jewry as reasoning for forming an independent Jewish state, and that they could not do anything that would have helped the Jews in Europe. In fact, the Zionists became active when it came time to bring Jews to Palestine. Wells's research also touches on the anti-Semitism prevalent throughout the United States, and various accounts that testify to the fact that any Jewish led movement could have done more harm than good, particularly in regards to anti-Semitic backlash.

In his book, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance, 1933-1941: A Historical Analysis*, published in 1982, Moshe Gottlieb analyzed the Anti-Nazi boycott that took place in America, and its effects in both Germany and America.¹⁶ In contrast to other authors, Gottlieb showed American Jews unifying in a common cause, in this case, a boycott against German goods. He traces the boycott's origins, citing Germany's boycott of Jewish goods as a spark that caused it all. Gottlieb's work differs from his contemporaries in that his boycott analysis details the economic impact and

¹⁵ Wells, 261.

¹⁶ Moshe R. Gottlieb, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance 1933-1941: An Historical Analysis*, (New York: Ktav, 1982).

repercussions of the war, as well as the possibility of using the boycott as a way to pressure the German government. Gottlieb used primary sources to illustrate, in particular, the German government's fear of the potential economic impact of the boycott. There was a palpable fear that the German economy would be crippled as a result. Gottlieb also shed light on the efforts of various Jewish groups in America, especially those that promoted the boycott, such as the American Jewish Congress and the Zionist Organization of America. What is clear is the sense of belief amongst Jewish groups that a boycott would work to curtail German proclamations and actions against German Jews.

Despite the boycott efforts, Gottlieb projected a sense of failure in that the Jewish groups failed to unite all America in the boycott efforts; more importantly was the failure of all of the American Jewish community to form "a united boycott front". Regardless, Gottlieb demonstrates that the boycott had a negative impact on Germany; unfortunately it also prompted German backlash as evidenced by how, "the Nazis magnified the 'Jewish boycott' by claiming that Jews were merely the avant-garde of a general conspiracy by the democratic world".¹⁷ In spite of the Nazi's comments on the boycott, Jews still felt a sense of dignity in what was one of the few acts of solidarity. Gottlieb includes a comment from Dr. Joseph L. Tenenbaum that illustrates the Jews' "pride in having given the initiative to such a great and common human struggle for freedom and democracy".¹⁸

Among the strongest and most critical of the opinions of the general American response, particularly that of the federal government, that came out was David

¹⁷ Gottlieb, 344.

¹⁸ Gottlieb, 349.

Wyman's work, published in 1987, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*.¹⁹ At this point in time, it was fairly established that the United States government had multiple opportunities to offer help or aid to European Jews, and for various reasons, mostly politically influenced, and did not. Wyman's account differs from others because of the blame and culpability he places at the feet of the United States government. This is not uncommon in history books but the degree and passion with which Wyman attacks the government sets him apart from his counterparts. Among the major points the author used in his criticism were their policy on immigration, the lack of pressure in shaping public opinion from both the government and the media, and the decision not to bomb Auschwitz and its railroads. Unlike Feingold, Wyman has a singular focus on where the blame should be placed—the U.S. government. He pardons American Jewish leaders and organizations, writing that they worked to spread information about what was occurring in Europe but could not sustain a united drive for Government action, as they were too politically weak.

Wyman's account also differs from scholars more critical of the American Jewish response in that he defends the actions and steps taken by Rabbi Wise during the process, expressing an understanding of the precariousness of the position Wise held both with the Jewish people and the government, and the difficulty of appealing to the needs and requirements of both sides. That being said, Wyman does cite the lack of leadership in the American Jewish Community as a major reason in their ineffective response; health issues and the aforementioned balancing act beset Wise, and Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver was more concerned with postwar Jewish statehood. Wyman also

¹⁹ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*, (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

criticizes the lack of unified action throughout the war, including infighting between non-Zionist groups. Zionists differed in intention, focusing on establishing a Jewish homeland, rather than responding to the Nazi actions. Describing this rift, Wyman puts forth that, “American Jewish leaders recognized that the best hope for rescue lay in a strong effort to induce the U.S. government to act...their effectiveness was severely limited by their failure to create a united Jewish movement and by their lack of sustained action.”²⁰

Published in 1995, Feingold’s work, *Bearing Witness: How America and its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*, while an extension of his 1966 work, delves further into the response of American Jews and the reasons behind their general ineffectiveness.²¹ In the intervening years, more information came out about the Holocaust. Feingold’s further analysis reveals discord amongst the leading Jewish groups and leaders during the Holocaust, which was consistent with most other works from the 1980’s. Feingold provides an analysis of the roles of Felix Frankfurter, then a Supreme Court Justice, and Henry Morgenthau, then the Secretary of the Treasury, who held considerable influence with the President. He also examined the role of Rabbi Stephen Wise, who was caught between serving the Jewish people versus maintaining the good will of President Roosevelt. What is readily apparent, and this will become a common theme in this analysis, is that influential Jewish officials were reluctant to speak out against what was occurring, mainly fearing that they would come across as putting their religion before being “American”, which would alienate both their associates and

²⁰ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 328.

²¹ Henry L. Feingold, *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

constituents.²² Feingold ends this work with the same question that he posed in *Politics of Rescue*, asking who should bear the guilt for the Holocaust? With more time, Feingold still spreads the blame. On one hand, saving the Jews did not fit in with the objectives of the United States at the time. On the other, dysfunction amongst the Jewish groups led to minimal impact or influence on the actions of the Federal Government. Feingold again mentions that false belief in civilization, in brotherhood, that simply did not exist.

Haskel Lookstein's work, *Were We our Brother's Keepers: The Public Response of American Jews to the Holocaust*, deals more directly with the question at hand.²³ Lookstein touches on common themes that are prevalent throughout in any work covering the subject—Jewish admiration of Roosevelt, and anti-Semites downplaying what was actually happening. In dealing with the subject, Rabbi Lookstein is able to shed considerable light on the particular topic of this thesis. Lookstein researches six separate events and the corresponding response of American Jews. In the Jewish press, Lookstein discerns differing degrees of alarm after Kristallnacht, the well-publicized pogrom in which the Nazis destroyed Jewish businesses, homes, and synagogues, and corralled and deported thirty thousand Jews. Some publications, such as Rabbi Wise's *Opinion* or the *Contemporary Jewish Record* were absorbed in what occurred. Others such as the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* or the *Hadassah Newsletter* made little mention of what happened, instead focusing on other issues.

Lookstein touches upon Zionist sentiments, and the debate that raged within Zionist ranks: an independent Jewish state or rescue of European Jews. There was

²² Feingold, *Bearing Witness*, 4.

also a common sense of disbelief, particularly at the possibility of the “Final Solution”; not just among Jews, but nationwide, there was a sense that something so horrible and drastic could never actually be carried out. In analyzing the lack of Jewish response, Lookstein, as mentioned earlier, writes that the lack of unity, the disorganization, and the lack of a central message, put no pressure whatsoever on Roosevelt, and essentially shaped his response.

More recently, Gulie Arad published her work, *America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism*, which reflects a more measured point of view that comes with the ebb and flow of scholarly opinion.²⁴ Arad’s book discusses the history of Jews in America, and how it affected their response to the Holocaust. More than anything, Arad’s work reveals the persistence of anti-Semitism throughout the history of the United States, and how the desire to “Americanize” shaped the response of Jewish leaders during the Holocaust. Arad plays devil’s advocate at times, offering a reason for the lack of Jewish response and the factors surrounding it. Different from her predecessors, Arad is largely critical of Rabbi Wise; the general impression that she gives is that Wise was seen as a pawn by the United States government to appease the Jewish constituency, and by the Jews in America as a figurehead obsessed with his standing in the eyes of the government.

As with any historic event, the subsequent reactions and opinions that are formed are constantly evolving. As time progresses, so do the resources we have that are readily available for research. The Holocaust itself was momentous in its impact—the damage it caused still resonates today. It is the natural tendency today for us in

²⁴ Gulie N. Arad, *America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

today's society to look back at history and think that we know better. In this case, it is no different. There are countless explanations for what the American government could have done better, or for what the Jewish groups and leaders could have done better. It is easy to fall into that trap. However, as the historical accounts of what occurred have come to the forefront, it has provided a much clearer picture. As it became more of a topic, there was a tendency amongst others to lean strongly towards one way or the other. As authors have gained greater access, through increased archives and findings from the principal figures, there has been more of a tendency to offer valid points to each side, and reasons for and against the decided action. Most important however, has been how the authors have evolved. Hindsight allows them to go back and correct or supplement one of their original beliefs. It allows them to add information when necessary, as well as introduce new sources that have come out since the release of their works. Analyzing the response to the Holocaust is a complicated undertaking, rife with political intrigue and influences. Using the resources available, the works that chronicle this topic vary in degree and focus. Each author provides their own spin on this controversial issue, some sharing similar views, and others differing greatly; what is constant, however, is a sense of acknowledgment that more could have been done.

This thesis does not intend to criticize or castigate anyone individual or group for what took place. It is common and tantalizing to look back on history and place it in the context of the time we live in, leading us to lament that more should have been done or what should not have been done. I will try to avoid that trap as much as possible in this work. My goal is to analyze why American Jewish groups could not

find a common position, and how the tension and differences in opinion helped to shape the overall lack of response, from the Jews to the federal government. At first, American Jewry was paralyzed by fear of anti-Semitic backlash and their tenuous place in American society. As the war progressed, an ideological divide between Zionists and non-Zionists developed as the debate raged over what was the more pressing issue: the establishment of a Jewish homeland or relief efforts for European Jews; as the war intensified, so did the debate and tensions, leaving American Jewry unable to rally behind a common cause or accomplish little in the way of influencing the American government. The Holocaust has been analyzed and covered by almost every angle in great detail. What is abundantly clear is that it was an atrocity that has a long lasting impact that resonates today; to learn about the groups involved, particularly as Americans, and the issues and ideas that affected and impacted their decision-making of the parties involved provide a template to learn and evolve from.

Chapter 2- Hitler's Appointment to Chancellor

In late 1930, Morris Waldman, at the time the executive Vice Secretary of the American Jewish Committee and later the executive Vice President, published a report on the Jewish situation in Germany following the time he spent there from June to September. Waldman titled the report, “The Anti-Semitic Menace in Germany”; in the report, Waldman sought to, “awaken the Jewish consciousness that many of them (American Jews) had labored so hard to suppress”.¹ Waldman’s report detailed the National Socialist Party’s proposed solutions to the “Jewish Problem”, and in particular, the passionately anti-Semitic leanings of the party’s leader, Adolf Hitler. Waldman emphasized that the goal of the party was a total destruction and expulsion of the Jewish identity in Germany, with an eventual impact on the rest of European Jewry. With the report, Waldman, in appealing to the committee, believed that it could “inform public opinion in the United States regarding anti-Jewish agitation in Germany, in the hope that a public opinion would be formed in this country which would have a favorable reaction in Germany.”²

With a nomadic history, and no true homeland, many Jews hoped to gain a foothold and a place in American society, to blend in and become “American”— Acting out in protest or cries for help could have jeopardized that goal. Waldman, realizing the importance of citizenship for American Jews, as well as the prejudicial climate of the era, had hoped to enlist and appeal to, “general (non-Jewish) public

¹ Gulie Ne’eman Arad, *America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 88.

² Executive Committee Meeting Minutes January 11, 1931, 3, Subfolder: 1930-1939, Folder: Executive Committee, File: AJC Minutes, American Jewish Committee Archives, New York, NY. (Hereafter: AJCA)

opinion against Hitlerism as the solution on the domestic front".³ What Waldman found in response was underwhelming support, particularly from American Jewry; in general, there was an effort to downplay, or even repress Waldman's findings. What Waldman could not have foreseen is that such actions served as a mere prelude for a similar reaction three years later, when Adolf Hitler took power in Germany.

On January 30, 1933, after losing the presidential election as the representative of the National Socialist German Workers Party in the 1932 election, Adolf Hitler was appointed the Chancellor of Germany. His appointment marked a shift in power in the German government, and the gradual change in the German beliefs and identity. With Hitler's ascension, Hermann Göring was made Minister of the Interior of Prussia, and Wilhelm Frick, Minister of the Interior, helping to consolidate Hitler's power, giving him total control of the German government. Before his ascension, Hitler served in the German Army during World War I, and became a full time member of the Workers Party in 1921. It was as a member of the party where Hitler found skill as an orator, as his propaganda against the Treaty of Versailles, Marxists, and Jews gained him a huge following in the party. In 1924, after leading an attempt to take power from the German government, Hitler was sentenced to five years in prison.⁴ It was in prison that Hitler wrote his famous work, *Mein Kampf*, where Hitler detailed his beliefs in Aryan purity, and the threat posed by world Jewry and communism.⁵

By the time of his election as Chancellor, Hitler's name was well known in America, as well as his beliefs. His rise to Chancellor was a mere prelude to total control of the German government. American Jewish groups and leaders were

³ Arad, 90.

⁴ Charles Bracelen Flood, *Hitler: The Path to Power*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 60-61.

⁵ Flood, 586-88.

conscious that this was an issue that merited their attention. Key questions to consider however include: Did they fully comprehend the situation? What factors helped shape their reaction? And finally, why, at the most critical time in the history of their people, was there a collective failure to act from American Jewry and why the dire situation did not merit their full attention? Answering these questions helps to illustrate an American Jewish base that, at this point, was largely paralyzed by the fear of provoking anti-Semitic backlash, both in the United States and in Germany.

1933 in the United States was a time of great turmoil and struggle. At the time President-elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt was to be inaugurated, the American economy fell to its lowest point in history. Many American Jews, daily life was a struggle to hold the tenuous position that they maintained in the culture and society. Many Jews strived to present themselves as Americans first, and Jews second. In 1933, Waldman wrote of the “liberal fantasy” of the Jewish people, as they were, “convinced that by demonstrating ‘good behavior’ conforming to and abiding by the rules and mores that defined the reference group, they would gain acceptance as well as access to the power and status of that group”.⁶ Most of the concern surrounding Hitler stemmed from his anti-Semitic rhetoric; no notable violence had been taken up against German Jewry to that point. However, there was a palpable fear among American Jewish groups that public criticism of Hitler and the Nazi regime would lead to anti-Semitic backlash in Germany. Coupled with the anti-Semitic fears that Jews faced domestically, and their tenuous foothold in the American consciousness, immediate action or protestation was deemed inadvisable by American Jews. Overall, this passive response to Hitler’s appointment from American Jewry, helped to foster a

⁶ Arad. *America, Its Jews, and the Rise of Nazism*. 93

general consensus across the country that, “in 1933, Hitlerism was not perceived by the general American public as a serious threat to the Jews in Germany”.⁷

Soon after Hitler’s ascension to Chancellor, American Jewish leaders and groups identified him as a major threat to Jewish existence. Despite this knowledge, an ideological divide existed amongst the American Jewry, between the extreme and fervent supporters of Zionism, and those who were moderate, or even against the Zionist initiative. From a Zionist perspective, a move towards establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine was the major goal. The moderates and non-Zionists took an approach of quiet diplomacy, resisting making any overtly public actions. To this point, Hitler had not truly established himself as a legitimate threat—to divert any resources or attention was not necessary in the eyes of many ardent Zionists. Jews who were more in line with the moderate point of view acknowledged the threat, but were also not overly concerned.

At this time, there were a number of major Jewish groups and leaders that differed in goal and intention. The American Jewish Committee was among the more prominent groups for American Jewry. Established in 1906 to prevent further anti-Semitism in Russia, it began to make an impact in the United States behind the leadership of Louis Marshall until his death in 1929; in the 1930’s and 1940’s, by President Cyrus Adler, Morris Waldman, and James Marshall were the group’s principal leaders.⁸ The group could be classified as being comprised of moderate Zionists and non- Zionists. Relative to the situation of German Jews and the problems posed by Hitler, the Committee exemplified the inaction that came to plague

⁷ Arad, 109.

⁸ Arad, 40.

American Jewry throughout the rise of Nazi Germany. An organization that worked closely with the Committee was B'nai B'rith, which was founded as a service and fraternal organization but later evolved into a group based on educational work for Jewish immigrants and defending Jewish rights. Similar to the American Jewish Committee, the organization aimed “for neutrality in political affairs, but a trend toward Zionism was gathering strength in its ranks during World War II.”⁹ While more activist than the American Jewish Committee, the B'nai B'rith could also be described as moderate in terms of Zionistic passions.

Among the most political and passionate of these groups was the American Jewish Congress, led for many years by its president and prominent Jewish voice, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. With a strong Zionist leaning, the Congress was the most politically active of the three major groups in the United States, being more willing than others to express public dissatisfaction. In 1936, with the help of prominent Zionist, Nahum Goldmann, Wise established the World Jewish Congress. Another faction at the heart of the American Jewish society, the Joint Distribution Committee, was among the most active in terms of relief efforts; as anti-Jewish violence began to increase, the group had locations in the United States and across Europe, through which they helped transport refugees from Germany to a safer place. The Committee's efforts became critical following Hitler's appointment as the group helped lead numerous early emigration efforts. However, as will be illustrated later, the Committee often clashed with both the American and World Jewish Congresses, and often competed for funding against the more Zionist groups.

⁹ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*, (Pantheon: New York, 1984), 68.

The overall ineffectiveness from leading Jewish groups was apparent soon after Hitler's appointment. On February 12, 1933, almost two weeks after Hitler's appointment, the American Jewish Committee identified a growing problem in Germany; in particular the topic at hand was, "the likelihood of anti-Jewish action being taken by the present government and by the government which would come into power following the elections of March 5".¹⁰ It was common knowledge that the upcoming elections were a mere precursor to Hitler having total control of the German government. But despite mounting evidence of growing anti-Jewish sentiment in Germany, the Committee decided to take a wait and see approach. Senator Alfred Cohen believed that the best course of action would be for the Committee, B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Congress to simply work together to gather information about the German problem, believing that if "the three pooled their information and exchanged views, beneficial action may be possible."¹¹ A sign of unity would have been a major sign and step for the American Jewish community, in part because of how the groups were divided ideologically.

The groups agreed that Hitler's rhetoric and beliefs could be tempered if the federal government, with help from the American press, were to get involved and denounce what he stood for. Hitler already had a representative in Washington D.C., who was going on radio broadcasts, "endeavoring to create the impression that the entire American people is sympathetic to Hitlerism".¹² In the conference between the three organizations, Nathan Perlman of the American Jewish Congress illustrated

¹⁰ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes; February 12, 1933, 1, Sub-Folder: 1930-1939, Folder: Executive Committee, File: AJC Minutes, AJCA, New York, NY.

¹¹ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, February 22, 1933, 1, Sub-Folder: 1930-1939, Folder: Executive Committee, File: AJC Minutes, AJCA, New York, NY.

¹² AJC Minutes, 2/22/33, 5.

how the government could affect Hitler and Nazism. He believed that newspapers and editorials would have little effect or influence in Germany. However, public opinion shaped by a rebuke from a governmental official had potential to hold influence in Germany. Perlman put forth, that the only thing that would get Hitler's attention, "will be the attitude of the American government. This attitude will be shaped by public opinion, and for effective public opinion non-Jewish publicity will be much more helpful than Jewish propaganda".¹³ No senator was going to comment until the March 5 elections played out however; Hitler's popularity was rising and American antagonism would be akin to pouring gasoline on the fire. The potential that a public rebuke could incite violence in Germany was enough to dissuade any prominent figure, Jewish or governmental, from making any immediate comment. The groups believed that attacking Hitler and his dictatorship would accomplish nothing, "because at the present moment the movement in the direction of dictatorship is popular".¹⁴ American Jewish organizations and the government were in a holding pattern; they believed publicly criticizing him and his movement would only strengthen the anti-Semitic fervor in Germany. Yet despite these concerns, there was still a sense of empathy into the viability of the Nazi movement, as many leading American Jews believed the, "Nazi regime was...manageable. Those elements that were deemed most threatening, such as the economic restrictions imposed on Jews, were dismissed as totally untenable and irrational."¹⁵

In the following months, the American Jewish Committee continued its politically inactive approach. The March 9 meeting of the board of directors discussed the

¹³ AJC Minutes, 2/22/33, 9.

¹⁴ AJC Minutes, 2/22/33, 11.

¹⁵ Arad, 123.

viability of a joint public statement with B'nai B'rith regarding the "German Situation". Here, the position of the American Jewish Committee became apparent. In discussing a public demonstration, the Committee argued:

All the American Jewish Committee can do just now is to refrain from participating in public agitation and endeavor, wherever possible, to dissuade other groups from participating... We should cooperate with other organizations so long as such cooperation is not incompatible with our own views.¹⁶

Throughout the duration of the war, this "hands-off" approach would become the signature of the Committee. This belief is symptomatic of what contributed to the friction between the different Jewish groups; a central reason for this discord was because the leading American Jewish groups held differed in beliefs. Zionist extremists and moderates, and their respective leaders differed in how to respond throughout the war.

In a later correspondence, Wise was also critical of the American Jewish Committee. In describing Germany post-election, in a later to his friend, Professor Richard Gotheill, Wise wrote, "it really is an unutterable tragedy. We are having trouble with the American Jewish Committee. They want us to be quiescent for they think that nothing should be done and that there is danger of blundering". Later in the exchange of letters, Wise told Gotheill that, "we feel something must be done. You cannot imagine the feeling that rages through the country... four millions and more Jews in America have a real purchasing power".¹⁷ While Wise would later be accused of being a "puppet" of the federal government, as well as decrease in stature in the

¹⁶ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, March 9, 1933, 5, Sub-Folder: 1930-1939, Folder: Executive Committee, File: AJC Minutes, AJCA, New York, NY.

¹⁷ Rabbi Stephen S. Wise to Richard J.H. Gottheil, February 20, 1933, 1, Folder 8, Box 3, MS-49 Stephen S. Wise Collection, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH. (Hereafter: AJA)

Zionist community, Wise was passionately involved both as a Zionist and as a American. The Rabbi deemed action necessary at first, but began to change as he began to regularly correspond with President Roosevelt. In hopes of currying favor and being looked on positively by the President, Wise began to fall in line with the messages of the government and toned down his rhetoric and beliefs.

Wise's words painted a picture of an America that was up in arms, particularly the Jewish community. Despite being up in arms, the leading Jewish groups could not agree on the nature of how to respond. Led by Wise, the American Jewish Congress believed a boycott could cripple the German economy. Moderate groups like the American Jewish Committee and B'nai B'rith did not want to attract negative attention to themselves through public demonstrations or protests.

The specter of Hitler as chancellor was not lost on Wise either. Rabbi Wise shared many of his concerns Gotheill. In a letter to the Professor, Wise wrote:

We are all terribly disturbed about Hitlerism. How sickening to read your word "the French Jews are disturbed at Hitlerism as Frenchmen, not as Jews". The nations can deal with Hitler, the Chancellor, but how hard for us in dealing with Hitler, the Judeophile. The dreams of Delagarde and von Treitschke are now come to realization. More and more I begin to see, excepting for the work one is permitted to do and excepting for such joy as comes from one's nearest, it is not so easy to be alive, more especially seeing that there is so much unclean and indecent in Jewish life.¹⁸

Wise's concerns mirror and help to shed light on a major reason for Jewish activity. In France, Jews were concerned about Hitler as countrymen, not because of their religion; in the United States, many Jews acted as Americans first in terms of how to respond to Hitler, putting their Jewish identity to a minor, secondary role. Wise sensed that many Jews were going to be hesitant to respond to this threat. As they put

¹⁸ Wise to Gottheill, 2/20/33, 5.

away their Jewish identities for American identification, and to avoid any anti-Semitic conflicts, Wise was concerned that stirring up Jewish passions and support may be tougher than he anticipated.

The lack of unity amongst the groups was reflected in the relationship between the groups' leaders. The aforementioned Rabbi Wise was a prominent voice for the Jewish people but was wary of angering or losing favor with the Federal government. Waldman touches on Wise's worries, as well as the inadvisability of public protest or action, in a telegram to Judge Alfred Cohen; describing his frustration, Waldman communicated that "Regret to inform you, despite these appeals and energetic remonstrances, representatives our committee and B'nai B'rith expressed opposition Rabbi Wise and other Congress representatives".¹⁹ Waldman was referring to the suggestion of a planned protest against Hitler, echoing the company line of the American Jewish Congress, and their reluctance to become politically active. Regarding this inactivity, Chaim Weizmann and Nahum Goldmann, both heavily involved with the World Jewish Congress, were consistently agitated at the inability to get anything resembling a sustained protest in the United States.

Despite efforts of groups such as the American Jewish Congress, many Jewish groups chose to remain politically inactive. During this inactivity, there was a gradual evolution and proliferation of the Nazi Party in Germany, as it spread its core tenets throughout the country. The first concentration camp was established in Dachau. The camp was no explicitly aimed at Jews at this time; rather, it was motivated more by political repression than anti-Semitism. Three days later the Enabling Bill was passed. The bill was particularly problematic because of its nature and intention; the bill

¹⁹ Morris D. Waldman to Alfred M. Cohen, "Day Letter," March 15, 1933. AJCA, New York, NY.

would give Hitler dictatorial power, giving him total control of the German government. The bill allowed Hitler to pass laws without presidential oversight or parliamentary oversight, rendering Hindenburg and the Reichstag as largely ineffective figureheads. Hitler also dissolved all trade unions and sent the leaders to concentration camps, and effectively banned the Communist Party and the Social Democratic party, arresting still active members.²⁰

On March 21, the American Jewish Committee received a particularly harrowing report Hitler's intentions with the Enabling Bill, and everything that was taking place against the Jewish populace in Germany. The report indicated that German Jews "are subjected to a ruthless campaign of terror and intimidation".²¹ With this terror and intimidation, Hitler was putting in a program steeped in anti-Semitic laws and rhetoric that would nullify the Jews' rights and privileges in Nazi Germany. His program established laws for citizenship, requiring that any member of the German people be of German blood, excluding Jews in this statement. While not expressly directed at the Jewish population, actions were being taken against them. Jewish artists were being forcibly removed from their studios or theaters. A cap of seventeen was placed on the number of Jewish lawyers allowed to perform law in German courts. Jewish doctors and physicians were being dismissed from urban hospitals and municipalities, despite having contracts. A nation-wide boycott was taking place against Jewish merchants and Jewish department stores, despite their profitability, were shut down. Jewish graveyards were being desecrated and the Swastika flag was being raised over numerous synagogues throughout the country. Finally, many Jews,

²⁰ Flood, 437.

²¹ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, March 9, 1933, 5, Sub-Folder: 1930-1939, Folder: Executive Committee, File: AJC Minutes, AJCA, New York, NY.

some of them American citizens, were the victims of violent and heinous attacks throughout the entire country.²²

In response to Hitler's new program, the first major American Jewish protest took place at Madison Square Garden, on March 27, 1933. Led by the American Jewish Congress, and Rabbi Wise, the Congress gathered to protest and voice their displeasure with the anti-Jewish actions being taken in Germany. At the protest, Wise spoke of the need for unity at the protest, saying, "We must speak up like men. How can we ask our Christian friends to speak up against the wrongs suffered by Jews if we keep silent? It is not the German Jews who are being attacked. It is the Jews".²³ In describing the Madison Square Garden protest, the *New York Times* wrote, "More than 250,000 Jews in the city will join in protest meetings today... The protest in this city will center in a rally in Madison Square Garden to be addressed by leaders of the Jewry and the Christian world."²⁴

In light of what had occurred up to this point, the American Jewish Committee and B'nai B'rith felt that a joint public statement denouncing Hitlerism would be the most effective tool in the fight against Nazi Germany. In the joint public statement, the two groups came together and said:

The American Jewish Committee and the B'nai B'rith express their horror at the anti-Jewish action in Germany which is denying to German Jews the fundamental rights of every human being in a spirit contrary to the traditions of American freedom of conscience, religion, and liberty. The events of the past few weeks in Germany have filled with indignation, not only American Jews, but also

²² Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, March 21, 1933, 1, Sub-Folder: 1930-1939, Folder: Executive Committee, File: AJC Minutes, AJCA, New York, NY.

²³ Rabbi Stephen Wise, "The Anti-Nazi Boycott of 1933," March, 27, 1933, 1, Stephen Wise Papers, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY. (Hereafter: CJH)

²⁴ "250,000 Jews here to Protest Today." *New York Times*, Mar 27, 1933, Folder: 1923-Current File, New York Times Online Archive,

Americans of every other faith. The conscience of the civilized world is aroused against this reversion to medieval barbarism.²⁵

Through the public statement, the two groups conveyed their dismay to what was taking place; hopefully the American public would take notice and be horrified at what was taking place in Germany, and rally support and public opinion in hopes of influencing governmental action.

Unsurprisingly, the joint statement had little impact on what took place in Germany. In a meeting that took place on April 9, Judge Joseph Proskauer, a prominent member of the American Jewish Committee, said that, “the situation in Germany now warrants a more fundamental and comprehensive attack”.²⁶ Proskauer proposed a movement should be started to protest what was taking place but that the group should be made up of “predominantly non-Jews”. This echoes the sentiment of wanting to be American first; a group led by mostly Jews would not be well received across the United States, as anti-Semitic tensions were high at that point. A group led by non-Jews would hold more weight. However, choosing a leader for said group was a task in itself. The leader of the group could not be someone who sympathized with what was happening to Jews, but rather someone who was against anti-Semitism, thus projecting a general feeling that would be shared by all Americans.

Similar to the American Jewish Committee and B’nai B’rith, the Joint Distribution Committee expressed a comparable level of concern over the appointment of the new Chancellor. The group, which had offices throughout Europe including Germany, actually had first hand experience of the aggressive tactics that

²⁵ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, March 20, 1933, 1, Sub-Folder: 1930-1939, Folder: Executive Committee, File: AJC Minutes, AJCA, New York, NY.

²⁶ Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, April 9, 1933, 2, Sub-Folder: 1930-1939, Folder: Executive Committee, File: AJC Minutes, AJCA, New York, NY.

would become the norm in Germany. The committee dealt with an attempt from officers in Hitler's Germany to strong-arm them, and exploit them for speaking out or undertaking actions against the country. On April 19, 1933, in the European Executive offices of the committee in Berlin, five men, three of whom were S.S. officers, broke into the office, and searched through the various rooms, and eventually taking, "a number of books, documents, correspondence, etc., from each room".²⁷ The S.S., also known as the Schutzstaffel, was a military organization under the direction of Hitler's right hand man, Heinrich Himmler.

Two days later, with both Aaron Levy and Gertrud Schwarz, the Joint Distribution Committee Members present, two officers arrived, "there to make a search of our office records, quite independent of what had happened previously". What the two men found was that the search was prompted by information the officers had received that the office contained, "printed and other material of an objectionable character to the German government". The illegal search, and the subsequent legal one, illustrated the shift in power and government that was taking place and clearly evident. Adolf Hitler was not going to allow anyone to speak against his aims and goals, and those who did would be persecuted for it. In their summary of what took place, the two men write that, "we do not believe that the raid on the night of April 19th was made under proper authority", further illustrating the sense of impunity permeating throughout Germany.²⁸

²⁷ Memorandum from Aaron Levy and Gertrud Schwarz, JDC Berlin, "Concerns German Police Raid on JDC Office in Berlin, 4/19 and 4/21/1939" April 21st, 1933, 1, Folder: Germany: Administration, General 1933 (March-July), 1933-1944 New York Collection, Joint Distribution Committee Archive, New York, NY. (Hereafter: JDCA)

²⁸ Memo from Levy and Schwarz, "German Police Raid", 3-4.

The Joint Distribution was among the most active of the Jewish groups, and was in constant contact with the State Department. On April 4th, a letter written by the secretary of the Joint Distribution Committee, Joseph Hyman, illustrated a greater understanding of what was taking place, as well as sharp criticism aimed at the American Jewish Committee. He intended to inform Undersecretary of State William Phillips, of what was taking place, using, “several cables from an unimpeachable source on the situation in Germany”. Hyman described the issues in Germany in writing of the “fundamental problem developing from the dislocation of business and trade and which Jews have been engaged”. Hyman described the feedback provided from the cables as, “ominous in the extreme”; in his meeting with Pierrepont Moffat, who was in charge State Department, Moffat , “was impressed with the gravity of the situation which had made us feel that we should have to move our office to Paris or elsewhere”. Hitler’s Germany was becoming an unwelcome place for the Jewish religion. He also touched on the difficulty Jews had in leaving Germany, a situation compounded by the strict border patrol as well as the less than favorable quota system put in place by the United States government, which made entry next to impossible for many. Hyman’s correspondence reveals the troubling knowledge of growing anti-Semitic actions in Germany, adding to an abundant amount of evidence already being compiled.²⁹

Hyman was also critical of the American Jewish Committee, and he was particularly up in arms over their quiet diplomacy approach in response to what was taking place. In describing the American Jewish Committee’s involvement, Hyman

²⁹ Letter from Joseph C. Hyman, JDC NY, “Account of Hyman’s Meeting with U.S. Officials at the State Dept. concerning conditions of Jews in Germany” April 4, 1933, 1-2, Folder: Germany: Administration General, 1933 (March-July), 1933-1944 New York Collection, JDCA, New York, NY.

mentioned the American Jewish Committee's policy towards public protests or actions, writing that they were, "against any demonstrations or talk of retaliation, boycott, etc." and that the, "most effective voice would come on the score of humanity from non-partisan and non-Jewish sources".³⁰ Similar to Wise's opinion of the American Jewish Committee, Hyman decried their overall passivity, the hope essentially that things would resolve themselves that emanated from the Committee, particularly in contrast to the actions being taken by the Joint Distribution Committee.

Despite an increasingly alarming situation, little was done on the American Jewish front in response. The American Jewish Committee continued its *laissez faire* approach to the situation, preferring to place their belief in the Federal government, and support any actions they deemed necessary. B'nai B'rith and the Joint Distribution Committee continued to attempt their relief efforts, whether putting out informational pamphlets castigating Germany or more actively helping to transport Jewish refugees from Germany, with minimal funding or support. The American Jewish Congress, established and led by Rabbi Wise, and the World Jewish Congress, also established by Wise but also Nahum Goldmann and Chaim Weizmann, continued its proactive approach.

Other leading Zionist groups, like the Zionist Organization of America and the Hadassah, began to increase the rhetoric of a Jewish homeland as the overriding goal that all Jews needed to look toward, especially in a time of persecution for their people. At this point, the Nazi movement was in its fledgling stages, and no one foresaw what was to come. In the eyes of many Zionists, nothing could take precedence over the establishment of a Jewish homeland—they believed that all

³⁰ Letter from Joseph C. Hyman, 4/4/33, 3.

funding and resources should be directed to creating Israel, and providing a place for Jews all over the world to call home. Moderate Zionists and Non-Zionists were of the belief that the situation at hand merited their attention—while understanding of how integral a Jewish homeland could be, it also a distant goal at this point, especially in light of the growing threat in Germany.

The different approaches of the Jewish groups manifested itself in discontent and discordance amongst the different groups and leaders. A unified approach or message could not be reached because the groups would not compromise from their core tenets or beliefs. In the following years, the gulf between the groups would only grow. In a 1934 letter to Nahum Goldmann, then the President of the World Jewish Congress, Rabbi Wise, in addressing what the main focus of the Zionist collective should be, commented on the extreme Zionist perspective, writing:

The Zionists need to be reconciled...It is his (Justice Brandeis) view that the focus of whatever we do must be Palestine and democracy, and I share that view. I think that the Congress, when held, could be employed to supplement, in terms of the attitude of general Jewry, rather than Zionist Jewry, the demand for the Open Door in Palestine.³¹

Wise's concerns over inner strife amongst Zionists compounded the numerous issues plaguing American Jewry at the time. Wise also expressed dismay at the "Americanizing" taking place with many Jews, which was tied to concerns about anti-Semitism, writing, "Our people, especially the well-to-do ones, as usual are much more influenced by what the Goyim think than what is good or right for Jews," an interesting viewpoint considering the lengths that Wise went through to maintain

³¹ Rabbi Wise to Nahum Goldman, 11/14/34, 1, Folder 9, Box 2, MS-49 Rabbi Stephen S. Wise Collection, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

his good standing in the eyes of Roosevelt.³² At this point, the palpable fear amongst American Jewry was that speaking out against Hitler would provoke anti-Semitic backlash. This paralysis would continue throughout the war in many ways, but would eventually be overshadowed by larger issues. While there was inner strife amongst American Jewish groups, along ideological lines, the division would become cavernous as the years progressed, as the issue of Jewish refugees and how to help them and where to send them came to the forefront.

³² Wise to Goldmann, 11/14/34, 2.

Chapter 3- Kristallnacht and the Collective American Jewish Reaction

By 1938, anti-Semitism, as well as German Expansionism, was becoming increasingly prevalent in Germany. That March, Germany blatantly violated the Treaty of Versailles as they took over Austria without bloodshed and made it part of the German republic. As the Nazi persecution intensified, and more Jews attempted to leave Germany, President Roosevelt convened what came to be known as the Evian Conference, a meeting that included representatives from thirty-two countries and representatives from relief organizations was held to discuss the German-Jewish refugee situation. At the conference, all the representatives expressed sympathy for what was taking place, and there was a general belief that a long-term solution needed to be created. Despite this shared belief, many countries, including the United States, would not ease their draconian immigration restrictions, fearing that an influx of immigrants would cause economic distress for their respective citizens; there was a belief in the United States, still feeling the effects of the Great Depression, that the Jewish refugees would take away jobs and overwhelm social programs designed for assistance. At the end of the conference, only the Dominican Republic decided to open their doors to more refugees. For the German government, they relished the opportunity to identify hypocrisy in these countries, stating that, “it was astounding that foreign countries criticized Germany for their treatment of the Jews, but none of them wanted to open their doors when the opportunity offered”.¹

Further complicating matters was the conduct of the Jewish representatives at the conference. The manner in which the Jews in attendance conducted themselves at the

¹ “The Evian Conference on Refugees,” July 16, 1938, *Bulletin of International News*, Volume 15, No. 14, 16-18.

Evian Conference painted a picture of a disjointed dynamic between the groups. In a letter to Wise, Goldman, who was in attendance, wrote:

All the Jewish organizations came to Evian, swarmed around like bees and made a very bad impression on the Conference and the press. If ever a lesson for the necessity of Jewish united representation was given, it was done in Evian. But I am afraid that Jewish notables have learnt nothing from this lesson.²

Goldmann later decried the fact that the idea of Palestine as a refuge for Jews was not well received at the conference. The disjointed nature that permeated throughout the conference was a troubling sign for all involved, including the Jewish groups as well as the governments present. Of the leading nations involved, the conference came off as more of a grand gesture than accomplishing anything of substance; there was discussion of ways to help the persecuted Jews but nothing was actually done. Chaim Weizmann lamented this passivity in a letter to Rabbi Wise, writing, “The Conference appears to have limited its scope very severely, and there is apparently not much co-operation between the private organizations and the Government”.³ Weizmann and Goldmann, leaders of the World Jewish Congress, were not alone in their assessment of the conduct of the Jews at the Evian Conference. In an American Jewish Committee report, a similar sentiment is displayed. Writing of the lack of unity that was evident amongst the different Jewish groups, the report said:

It is not easy to draw a moral from the result of these meetings of Jewish organisations, but the difficulty in getting any sort of agreement and the insistence on points of disagreement rather than points of accord among Jewish organisations must have proved a spectacle far from edifying to the non-Sectarian organisations also

² Nahum Goldmann to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, Date, Folder 10, Box 2, Manuscript 49 Stephen S. Wise Collection, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

³ Chaim Weizmann to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, Date, Folder 20, Box 4, Manuscript 49 Stephen S. Wise Collection, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

present. I think it was just at this period in the Conference that somebody discovered that Evian written backwards becomes “naïve”.⁴

Even though there was a general acknowledgement of the need to help the Jewish refugees, the apparent lack of cohesion amongst the Jewish groups helped foster a disappointing response to the present issue. To many, the Conference, in actuality, was a “resounding fiasco and did great harm to German Jews.”⁵ In the end, the participating countries would eventually come to regret their refusal to create more palatable immigration standards, and the Jewish organizations would come to regret their behavior and inability to coax a solution out of the representatives involved, as a few months later, in November, the virulent anti-Semitism towards Jews would explode.

On November 7, a German diplomat, Ernst vom Rath, was assassinated in France by a German-Jewish youth, Herschel Grynszpan; the youth was incensed following the forced deportation of his father, mother, sister and brother from their home in Hanover to Poland. Before they were forcibly removed, his sister was able to send a telegram, which upon receiving it, left Grynszpan, in France at the time, enraged. The following day, Grynszpan went to the German Embassy in Paris and shot the Von Rath, who had come down to assist him. For the Nazis, a diplomat’s death at the hands of a Jew was the perfect excuse to launch “a night of anti-Semitic excesses.” Goebbels defined Von Rath’s death as a Jewish conspiracy, initiating pogroms and leading to “spontaneous riots” throughout the country. Despite the appearance of spontaneity, the soldiers and rioters were given certain guidelines, such as not

⁴ “Inter-Governmental Conference on Refugees Held at Evian,” July 6th 1938, 2-3, AJCA, New York, NY.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, (New York: Viking, 1963), 66.

endangering non-Jewish life or property, not endangering foreigners (even Jewish foreigners), and to remove all archival material from synagogues. The S.S. was ordered to arrest as many Jews as possible. The pogrom's collective damage resulted in the destruction of 267 synagogues and over 7,500 Jewish-owned shops and stores. Many Jewish cemeteries were desecrated, and the attacks were especially destructive in the cities with the highest population of Jews, Berlin and Vienna. Over 36,000 Jewish males were arrested and sent to various concentration camps such as Dachau or Buchenwald.⁶

Kristallnacht marks the first occasion where Jews were incarcerated and persecuted on such a grand scale, solely because they were Jewish. In the following days, German officials and leaders capitalized on what had occurred, and began taking steps to eliminate Jews and their "perceived influence" from Germany. In the days and weeks following Kristallnacht, laws and decrees were put forth that "deprived Jews of their property and of their means of livelihood." Much of this property, as well as the destroyed businesses, were transferred to Aryan "ownership," for cheaper than their actual costs. Other laws made Jews ineligible for employment in both the public and private sector, while Jewish children were expelled from German schools. Use of public transportation was restricted, and Jews were banned from theaters, cinemas or concert halls. The events of Kristallnacht and the subsequent actions taken by the Nazi government set off a powder keg of anti-

⁶ Elizabeth Domansky, "Kristallnacht, the Holocaust and German Unity: The Meaning of November 9 as an Anniversary in Germany" *History and Memory*, Summer 1992, Volume 4, No. 1, 68.

Semitism and anti-Jewish policies that resulted in the singular goal of full removal of Jewish life in Germany in the following years.⁷

It was no secret that anti-Semitic tensions in the days and months prior to Kristallnacht were reaching a boiling point. With representatives in their various offices abroad, the Joint Distribution Committee was aware of the increasing vitriol and was attempting to communicate this information with other leading Jewish groups. In a letter to Joseph Hyman, Morris Troper noted that, “Even before the assassination in Paris, the situation of the Jews in Germany was extremely acute...the moment of complete Jewish unemployment had come into view.”⁸ Later in his letter, Troper speculated on the uncertain future that lay ahead for European Jewry. It was becoming clear that in essence, the clock was ticking on German Jewry. By January 1, the German government hoped that, “all Jewish stores and artisan enterprises must be Aryanised or liquidated... There will be nothing left of Jewish wealth after payment for the repair of stores and homes and the collection of the billion mark fine”.⁹

The Joint Distribution Committee was proactive in its condemnation of the events however, publishing newspapers and flyers attacking the Nazi government. The Committee put out a joint flyer with both Christian and Jewish groups alike for the general American public—included in the flyer was the American Committee for Christian German Refugees, the Committee for Catholic Refugees from Germany, and the United Palestine Appeal. This sign of unity was a form of progress, as the

⁷ Domansky, 73.

⁸ Morris Troper, “Cover Letter from Morris Troper to Joseph Hyman with reports on Kristallnacht” November 30, 1938, 1933-44 New York Collection, JDCA, New York, NY.

⁹ Troper, “Letter to Joseph Hyman with Reports on the Kristallnacht”, November 30, 1938.

groups were coming together against a common enemy, but it is important to point out that many Jewish groups could not put aside their differences for an act as simple as putting out a flyer, yet Christian groups managed to do so. While these groups did in fact unite, it should be noted that the Joint Distribution Committee felt it necessary to turn to Christian groups for backing. The joint statement was seen as a means of conveying their angst to a larger mass of people. In regard to the statement, Joint Distribution Committee member Paul Baerwald, regarding the mass appeal of the statement, wrote to his fellow members, “What will interest you particularly in this advertisement is that we are demonstrating to the country that we are in close touch and cooperation with the organizations for the Catholic and the Protestant refugees”.¹⁰

Kristallnacht in many ways served as a wake up call to Jews and Americans alike—up to that point, there had been an effort to downplay or disregard many of the reports from abroad. Anti-Semitic leaders downplayed the Nazi treatment of German Jews. Father Charles Coughlin in particular, became such a popular voice because he was able to “relate anti-Semitism to economic fears and resentments born of the Depression”. Following Kristallnacht on a radio broadcast, Coughlin “minimized the attacks and explained them as a defensive reaction by Germans against Jewish-inspired Communism”.¹¹ In the broadcast, given on November 27th, Father Coughlin not only supported Nazism, but attempts to blame the Jews for the Russian Revolution of 1917 and link them to Communism, believing that it was Jewish bankers who helped fund and provide aid to Russia, even citing an American Secret

¹⁰ Paul Baerwald, “Circular Letter from Paul Baerwald with Copy of Advertisement on Kristallnacht,” 1933-44 New York Collection, JDCA, New York, NY.

¹¹ David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968), 17-18.

Service report. In the speech, Coughlin said, “There is evidence that Jewry is silent on Communism and reluctant to oppose it. There is the question of so-called anti-Semitism, which is really a question of anti-Communism. I am an advocate of Nazism, when I decry Communism”.¹² However, eventually it was revealed that many of Coughlin’s claims were based on Nazi propaganda. Following this news, many radio stations demanded a pre-examination of Coughlin’s material to put him on the air, to which he refused, resulting in many stations to end contact and association with the Priest.

Rabbi Wise, while sympathetic and dismayed over what had taken place for the Jews in Germany, had hoped the events of Kristallnacht would stir passions in the collective American consciousness. In an emotional speech eleven days after Kristallnacht, given in Carnegie Hall in New York, Wise passionately told his audience:

I speak in sorrow for the needless unmerited suffering of men, women, children...for the young German youth who was slain...for the grief crazed lad who slew...for a people, though you may not understand once great and long great, the German people, who has been brought low to the deepest depths of inhumanity...Above all, over the circumstance that it has taken nearly 6 years to bring home the truth, the bitter tragic truth, to the heart of all mankind, which at last has come to see and know the truth.¹³

Wise hoped the events of November 9th and 10th would end the denial and incredulity that was pervasive across the country; many chose to believe that was being reported simply could not have possibly occurred. Kristallnacht served to awaken the

¹² Charles E. Coughlin, “Concluding Remarks of Coughlin’s Speech of November 27, in which he asserted that an American Secret Service document proved the link between Jewish bankers and the Russian Revolution” November 27, 1938, 3. AJCA, New York, NY.

¹³ Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, “Must This Happen Anywhere?”, November 20, 1938, Stephen S. Wise Collection, Manuscript 49, Box 17, Folder 7, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

collective American senses. Wise ended the speech reiterating his devout support for President Roosevelt, and termed what had taken place as not only an attack on the Jewish religion, but an overall attack on democracy, and as a result, the United States.

Kristallnacht also brought out an indignant reaction from the President—Roosevelt expressed shock and dismay, and could, “scarcely believe that such things could occur in a 20th century civilization.”¹⁴ The President also recalled the American ambassador to Germany, Hugh Wilson, in what was portrayed as “sharp slap at the Nazis”.¹⁵ Roosevelt’s swift and angry response was well received—to many Jews, the President represented their best hope and chance to combat Hitler and Nazi Germany. The President’s popularity only furthered in the following months, as his castigation of Germany continued. In an April 1939 “letter” to Adolf Hitler, Roosevelt broached the possibility of war, telling the dictator, “Heads of great governments in this hour are literally responsible for the fate of humanity in the coming years...History will hold them accountable for the lives and happiness of all.”¹⁶

Following his swift rebuke, Roosevelt’s name was celebrated in synagogues throughout the country. But regardless of the reverence he was receiving, Roosevelt’s actions were more in line with the politics of gesture of which he had come to master. An effective measure would have been making alterations to the quota system that limited the number of immigrants to enter the United States. The most that the

¹⁴ Wise, “Must This Happen Anywhere?” November 20, 1938, Stephen S. Wise Collection, AJA.

¹⁵ Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 73.

¹⁶ President Franklin Roosevelt, “For Immediate Release,” April 14, 1939, Box 519, Correspondence- The President 1933-1945, General Correspondence, The Papers of Henry Morgenthau, Jr. 1866-1960, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum Archives, Hyde Park, NY. (Hereafter: FDRPL)

President did in light of the situation was to extend the visitors' visas of the 12,000 to 15,000 refugees already in the United States.¹⁷

The American press, in particular newspapers, were active in reporting the events of Kristallnacht, and as well as publishing the indignant reaction of many prominent Americans. On November 13, the *New York Times* published a public rebuke to Germany from former President Hoover, as well as the novelist Sinclair Lewis, and union leader and activist, William Green. In the article, Hoover is quoted as saying that the actions of the Nazis, "had taken Germany back four and half centuries and were building their own condemnation by mankind for centuries to come."¹⁸ *New York Times* writer Anne O'Hare McCormick also condemned the Nazis, but also saw what had happened as something that solidified Nazi Germany's standing as a legitimate threat in opposition to the American way of life. Published on November 12, McCormick wrote with great trepidation and worry, it "is difficult to write calmly about what has happened in Germany." Providing detailed accounts of what took place, McCormack was dismayed at what has taken place, as she wrote "This highlights a tragedy more portentous than the tragedy of the Jews. It means that the millions who detest this brutality have lost the power to protest and that other millions have no desire to protest because they have been worked on by years of anti-Semitic propaganda."¹⁹ McCormack's words were almost a warning, a plea that the United States become more active in the face of Nazi brutality, a terrible phenomenon that was only gaining steam.

¹⁷ Wyman, *Paper Walls*, 73

¹⁸ "Hoover Protests Brutality in Reich," *New York Times*, November 14, 1938, 6, New York, NY.

¹⁹ Anne O'Hare McCormick, "Nazi Day of Terror a Threat to All Civilization," *New York Times*, November 12, 1938, 14, New York, NY.

Response and coverage from American newspapers was countrywide as well. The *Los Angeles Times* bemoaning the hopelessness of the situation German Jews faced as well as attempting to explain the American collective consciousness in response to what had occurred, as it wrote

The reason the people of the United States are bewildered as well as horrified at the official German attacks upon the small minority of Jews who live in that country is because...there is no other example of a government deliberately and shamelessly provoking such a violation of ordinary rights against a helpless group living in its midst.²⁰

In general, there was a consensus feeling of disbelief that permeated throughout the country. For American newspapers to publish and criticize Nazi Germany could be interpreted as a step in the positive direction, particularly for American Jewry; it could have been a vital opportunity for American Jews to capitalize on a chance to influence public opinion across the country, and gain sympathy for their plight. However, rather than use this opportunity to help gain support for a relief effort, American Jewish groups continued with a passive approach.

In the days and weeks following Kristallnacht, the Jewish groups approached the situation differently. B'nai B'rith took a more active approach, attempting to amplify its relief efforts in Europe. In receiving reports of what happened, the organization believed that, "every agency in Jewish life covers, in these difficult days, a record of despair and usually concludes with fervent pleas for relief or a defense program...The B'nai B'rith must devote the major part of its energies to implementing techniques for the relief of a shattered and harried Jewish world."²¹ The group put major coverage in

²⁰ "Those Who Suffer in Germany from the Des Moines Register," *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 1938, A4, Los Angeles, CA.

²¹ B'nai B'rith Committee Meeting Minutes, "Minutes for Meeting on November 20, 1938," B'nai B'rith Medad Lodge No. 216 (New York, New York). Manuscript Collection 376, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

its newsletter, *The National Jewish Monthly*, detailing the situation faced by the Jewish refugees. The newsletter, however, made no call to arms, no requests to make changes to the current policy towards immigration in the United States, and was hesitant to make any overt complaints about the stance of the federal government.

Despite good intentions, the overall tenor of Jewish groups did not change that much. On November 13, the major Jewish organizations met to discuss securing equal rights for Jews in Germany, as well as with anti-Semitic attacks, but not in reference to Kristallnacht, and Jewish unemployment. Despite their European brethren suffering their worst injustice only days earlier, no changes were made in the agenda to acknowledge the pogroms in Germany. It was suggested that the groups take a restrained approach, that “there should be no parades, public demonstrations, or protests by Jews”.²² Wise, in contrast to his more active approach in beliefs in 1933, echoed these sentiments, believing that this quiet approach was the best course of action for American Jews, for fear of antagonizing both the American and German governments.

At this point, one of the hot button topics that resulted from the Night of Broken Glass was the issue of Jewish refugees and what country would take them. Despite the clear need for a refuge for German Jews, the Zionist movement was not swayed from their beliefs. Days after the events, the Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, put out a newsletter that said that the goal of Palestine was ever more important to Jewish survival—no mention was made of helping the Jews or efforts to combat the Nazis. Rather, the group, through its newsletter, asked its followers to raise money for the construction of the Hadassah University Hospital.

²² Arad, 199.

The group argued that their fear of anti-Semitism was why they did not raise funds for refugees—the sole interest was Palestine and establishing a homeland there. Leon Wells later offered a biting critique of Nahum Goldmann, in particular, his urging in 1938 that American Jews stay calm, yet saying otherwise in his biography, claiming, “From the first I was one of those, unfortunately a minority, who took the phenomenon of Hitler seriously.”²³ Goldmann, like many Zionist leaders, saw an opportunity in the tragedy, and, “stated again and again that nothing (in regards to the European tragedy) could be done, and so he repeatedly used the tragedy to motivate Jews for the postwar drive to establish a Jewish state.”²⁴

In their first meeting following the Jewish pogroms, the American Jewish Committee reiterated their forgiving position that they maintained throughout Hitler’s time as leader of Germany. In an emergency council meeting that took place weeks after the events, it was agreed, “that public Jewish demonstrations were inadvisable, and so informed the key members of the four constituent organizations. In addition, the General Council has kept in touch with situation through contacts in Washington”.²⁵ The group also pledged their support to the Palestine Initiative, a Zionist program, pledging \$2,500 to Zionist Programs. Following the economic massacre of German Jewry, the group felt that their best approach was to remain in the periphery, and place their faith in the government’s discretion.

A few months later, in January of 1939, the American Jewish Committee put out its annual report, detailing what the group had done in the past year, and what it

²³ Leon Welickzer Wells, *Who Speaks for the Vanquished?: American Jewish Leaders and the Holocaust*, (New York: P. Lang, 1987), 40.

²⁴ Wells, 247.

²⁵ American Jewish Committee Minutes, “American Jewish Executive Committee Meeting Minutes”, December 4, 1938, 3, AJCA, New York, NY.

intended to do in the coming year. Naturally, the main topic at hand was the persecution of Jews and Germany and the actions that could be taken to send relief and help. The overall tone of the report was positive—the committee was particularly happy with the efforts of the American press and called Roosevelt’s statement, “the most stinging rebuke ever administered by a head of the Government to any great power”. However, the Committee did not pledge a move towards more activism on their part. Rather, they reaffirmed their faith as, “American citizens in the American way of life”.²⁶ In a critical time for the livelihood of their people, the group continued to identify itself as Americans first. Consistent in its approach, the group believed that making their complaints known with leading people of public influence was the best action they could take. The group attempted to correct the misconception that an influx of Jewish immigrants would displace American workers—the Committee believed that this idea that Americans would lose their job was overblown, and an influx of refugees would represent a boon to the American economy. Many immigrants traveled as a family, which would create new markets, and as a result new jobs. Towards the end of their statement, the group believes that unity across ideological lines was necessary for success and a victory against Nazism. At this point, especially following Kristallnacht, it had reached a point where action, and not words, was the response that should have occurred. Instead, the Committee continued with its inactive approach, putting its faith in the Federal Government that relief would come.

With a greater sense of urgency emanating from Americans following the stunning news of the Jewish pogroms, a few months later in February, Senator Robert

²⁶ “American Jewish Committee 32nd Annual Report”, 37, AJCA, New York, NY.

Wagner and Representative Edith Rogers, introduced the Wagner-Rogers Bill, which intended to admit 20,000 refugee children over a two-year period. In a rare show of unity, the Jewish organizations backed the measure. The Bill gained support from numerous people including that of former president Herbert Hoover. Describing his support, the *New York Times* wrote, “Former President Herbert Hoover heartily endorsed today the Wagner-Rogers resolution to permit entry into the United States, outside the quota, of 20,000 German refugee children.”²⁷

Despite the intentions of the measure, there was backlash from right wing groups and restrictionists in Congress. It was the belief of the restrictionists that immigrants entering the country were taking jobs from hard working Americans—to that point, there was already eight to ten million Americans out of work. To open the doors to refugees would only further compound the matter in their view. In many cases, this restrictionist fervor manifested itself in anti-Semitic viewpoints, particularly in regards to immigrants entering the country. Eventually, the bill was altered to include the children in the current quota system the country used at the time. Disagreeing with this change and without backing from Roosevelt or his administration, Senator Wagner withdrew the bill.

Kristallnacht served as a turning point, and in many ways, brought to light issues that many Americans, both Jews and non-Jews, were hesitant to address. The refugee situation became ever more pressing and perplexing; despite the clear need to relocate European Jews, many countries including the United States would not open their doors to new immigrants, while the leading Zionist groups would not endorse a

²⁷ “Hoover Backs Bill to Waive Quota Act for Reich Children,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1939, 1, New York, NY.

relocation to any country unless it was Palestine. There were multiple proposals that came to the Zionist Organization of America in the months that followed that offered the refugees a chance for survival, including proposed plans to send the Jews to Africa or England—because it was not Palestine, the group refused to help fund the projects. Wells described one such example of this singular focus, citing an example from February 1939, writing “Hadassah leaders kept telling their membership that Palestine was the only place for refugees, and they said that according to experts, it was able to absorb 100,000 Jews a year. Hadassah did not give any details as to how this could be accomplished”.²⁸ The sole attention placed on Palestine came at the cost of the livelihoods of numerous children, who were not receiving the support or aid necessary to immigrate to a safer place. The events of November 9th and 10th was a wake up call for Americans as well—to that point, many of the reports emanating from Germany were either downplayed, or just hard to believe.

In the year that followed, Hitler and his Nazi regime became more aggressive—in March 1939, the German army invaded Czechoslovakia and a few months later, Great Britain and France, declared war on Germany. The invasion of Czechoslovakia had long been planned, and occurred shortly following Kristallnacht. Similar to the pogroms in Germany, the Jews were expelled from the country, either sent to concentration camps or seeking refuge in other European countries. Describing how the Jews were treated, a transcript from the Joint Distribution Committee conveyed the maltreatment of the Jews, in writing, “The Soldiers seized Jewish citizens...placed them in trucks, which were requisitioned for this purpose, and took them at night across the new border, where they were dumped in open fields or

²⁸ Wells, 42.

forests”.²⁹ Emboldened by a strong army, Hitler declared war on the rest of Europe. In 1940, engaged in war with Great Britain and France, the Nazis invaded Belgium and other smaller countries. In June, Hitler called for Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the largest invasion of a country in the history of warfare. Recently conquered territories and western parts of the Soviet Union were where most of Europe’s Jewish population lived. Overall, the Nazis sent over four million soldiers into the country.³⁰

Despite ideological differences, many Jewish leaders realized that unity was vital if proper relief efforts were going to be made. In a speech given by Louis Lipsky, a prominent Zionist and member of the American Jewish Congress, he put aside his beliefs and spoke of the need for American Jewish unity. In the speech, Lipsky said:

Through the democratic elections and the referendum, it is the intention of the American Jewish Congress to organize American Jewry for the defense of Jewish rights. This defense is an inevitable, natural American action. It is not intended through the referendum to obtain any power or authority for the American Jewish Congress. It is intended to get an expression of opinion from American Jews as to whether they prefer anarchy to order in Jewish affairs...In view of the multiplicity of Jewish organizations, their diverse programs, and the competitive nature of some of them, our inability to bring about a union of national organizations, each of which is interested in a separate, distinct program...It is the union of American Jews which we aim to create through the democratic elections and the referendum. It is a union aimed at no existing organization. Out of these efforts a merger will evolve, in which all constructive elements may unite for the furtherance of Jewish interests.³¹

Lipsky’s comments serve as an acknowledgement of the rift that existed between the American Jewish organizations. Competition in the way of funding and resources

²⁹ “Victims of Fate: Expulsion of Jews from Slovakia” November 28, 1938, Joint Distribution Committee Archives, 1933-1944 New York Collection, Czechoslovakia: General Administration 1934-1938, New York, NY

³⁰ Joseph L. Wiczynski, *Operation Barbarossa: The German Attack on the Soviet Union June 22, 1941*, (Salt Lake City: Schlacks, 1993), 33-35.

³¹ Louis Lipsky, “American Jewish Congress, re: United Jewish Front, 1938,” Folder 4, Box A9, Subseries 2. Executive Files. 1920; 1931-1975, Series A. Central Files, 1919-1976, Manuscript 361 World Jewish Congress Records, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

helped to further divide the groups. Lipsky, an active Zionist himself, was cognizant of the fact that unless the American Jewish groups could unite behind a common cause, and put aside their ideological differences, a mounted, sustained relief effort was impossible.

By 1942, the complexion of entire war had changed. After the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan, the United States entered the war, a major victory for the Allied powers. Germany increased its power base across Europe, occupying numerous countries. German persecution of Jews had also increased its scope, as the focus shifted from the destruction of German Jews, to the complete and utter destruction of Jewish identity in Europe. In fact, plans were in place for the systematic extermination of Jewish life in Europe. Orchestrated by Heinrich Himmler, the plan came to known as the “Final Solution” would feature the use of inhumane and brute force, highlighting the disgusting power and processes of the concentration camp. News of the “Final Solution” reached the United States reached the country in August 1942. To this point, the country had increased its efforts to combat the Nazis, but with more of an American focus than one to save Jews. How did the American Government react to news of this mass extermination? How did American Jewish leaders and organizations respond? What measures were undertaken to combat the Nazis? To this point, did American Jewish organizations find a way to put aside their ideological differences to unite behind a common cause? Despite a clear need for aid and relief, some Jewish leaders were still hesitant to openly speak out against Nazi Germany, while others were reluctant to press Roosevelt for specific action.

Chapter 4- The Final Solution and the American Jewish Inactivity

The immediate aftermath of Kristallnacht served as a wake up call for many Americans, as well as a harbinger of things to come, that things were only going to worsen. While there were certainly efforts made for by some Jewish groups to respond, for many there seemed to be a sort of paralysis in deciding how to respond, and what the situation called for. Harold Ickes, the United States Secretary of the Interior and a prominent voice in the United States, was particularly shocked at the overall lack of resolve that emanated from the Jewish groups. In his diary, describing an encounter with Justice Louis Brandeis in 1939, a Supreme Court Justice and one of the pre-eminent Jewish voices in the United States at the time, Ickes expressed shock at the overall temerity of American Jewry to that point, particularly the upper class, writing, “I spoke to him of the cowardice on the part of the rich Jews of America...I would like to get a large group of them and tell them that they couldn’t hope to save their money by meekly accepting whatever humiliations others chose to impose on them”.¹

To Ickes, it was hard to fathom that the upper class Jews in the United States were not more active; they had the resources and connections to truly make an impact in relief efforts, whether through donations or organizing rallies. In many ways, Ickes saw this cowardice combining with a paralysis that shaped the relative inaction of American Jewry. Other issues that plagued American Jews was the overall lack of urgency, or as David Wyman puts it the “business as usual pattern” they maintained, where “Too few schedules were rearranged. Vacations were rarely sacrificed...Even

¹ Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 510.

from afar, this inability to adapt was painfully clear”.² For whatever reason, whether disbelief or indifference, fear or paralysis, many American Jews could not or would not speak out or take action against the German government, regardless of the overwhelming evidence that was reaching the United States. Despite the need for a unified front more than ever, the different Jewish organizations could not come to terms on a unified action, as disagreements persisted over what the main focus of the American Jews should have been. A few short years later, the discord amongst American Jewish groups and their leaders would come back to haunt them.

By 1941, anti-Jewish violence in Europe became more commonplace and violent in nature. The Nazis began to establish ghettos for deported Jews across Poland, and entire communities were being massacred in the German invasion of the Soviet Union, including women and children. Part of this shift in attitude culminated in the first of five killing centers being constructed in Chelmno, using gas vans as the murder vehicles.³ To this point, there were widespread rumors of Hitler’s stated intention of a mass extermination of the Jewish identity in Europe; the exact dates from whence this plan was originated remain somewhat uncertain but can be placed in the final months of 1941 and early months of 1942. As early as July 1941, Herman Goring had made mention of a solution to the “Jewish Question”, that would begin with Operation Reinhard, which was the plan to systematically murder the Jews in Poland.⁴ To garner support and justification, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, came out with a series of statements, critical of the Jews, describing the

² David S. Wyman. *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*, (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 329.

³ Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia*, (New York: Norton, 2004), 563-565.

⁴ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 22.

Jews as the enemy of the German people and calling for their destruction. In response to Goebbels' statements, Rabbi Wise passionately said, "Hitler and his crew are not going to destroy us. We happen to belong to a living and imperishable people. What 4,000 years have not done, 10 years of Hitlerism will not do".⁵ Wise was correct in asserting that the Nazis would not destroy the Jews, but he could not have foreseen how close Hitler would come.

On January 20, 1942, the Wannsee Conference, a meeting held between the SS and German government agencies, took place. The topic at hand was the discussion and implementation of the "final solution to the Jewish question," a plan that originated from Hitler's right hand man, Heinrich Himmler.⁶ The plan called for the deportation of Jews to one of the five killing centers, immediate death for those unable to work, whether young, old or weak, gender segregation of the Jews, and decimation of the remaining population through hard manual labor with little to sustain them. The resulting deaths totaled over six million Jews by the end of World War II.

Jewish groups around the world were receiving reports of increased Nazi intensity in killing of the Jews, and were aware of Hitler's rumored Final Solution. While there remained skeptics to the veracity of the reports, American Jews were aware that European Jewry was in dire straits. Zionists, in particular, saw it as an opportunity to advocate for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and argued that homeland could help solve the refugee problem. In the later months of 1941, Chaim Weizmann, the

⁵ Rabbi Stephen S. Wise Sermon, "Churchill and Goebbels on the Jewish Future," November 30, 1941. Stephen S. Wise Collection, CD-176, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

⁶ Francois Furet, *Unanswered Questions: Nazi Germany and the Genocide of the Jews*, (New York: Schocken, 1989), 182.

president of the World Jewish Congress, had travelled to the United States to, “sway the government to support Zionist demands, as well as attain unity among Jewish leaders for a coordinated fundraising drive to meet their immediate postwar requirements”.⁷ The Zionist collective believed that the critical situation of the European Jews presented an opening to where they could mobilize and convey their Palestine initiative to a wider audience, particularly to the other Jewish groups that had been hesitant to align themselves with the extreme Zionist perspective.

With the influx of reports of German brutality, it would seem as if a sense of urgency would emanate from the American Jewish groups, but that did not happen. Rather than unite for a common cause, the different groups were still sniping at each other and finding avenues of unnecessary conflict. In a letter addressed to Rabbi Wise, Nahum Goldmann, a fervent supporter of Zionism and heavily involved in the World Jewish Congress, makes mention of these conflicts, regarding attacks being made on the Congress, writing:

I enclose a copy of a circular letter which the headquarters of the UJA has sent to its field men, and which makes one of the dirtiest on filthiest attacks on the WJC I have ever read. The thing is still more incredible because of the fact that the WJC has never appealed for funds in the United States, and is therefore not competing in anyway with the UJA. It is obvious that the JDC people in the UJA have done it...I think the moment has come when we have to take some firm action in putting an end to the vicious and cowardly attacks on the JDC against us. They never dare to come out into the open, but do their dirty work by methods such as were employed for the UJA.⁸

In most cases, the way American Jewish groups raised money was through fundraisers and donations; to openly compete for fundraising, especially when the

⁷ Monty Noam Penkower, “American Jewry and the Holocaust: From Biltmore to the American Jewish Conference”, *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Spring, 1985), Indiana University Press, 95

⁸ Nahum Goldmann to Rabbi Wise, February 20, 1942. MS-49 Stephen S. Wise Collection, Box 2, Folder 11, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

groups should have been focused on what was happening in Europe, illustrated the level of discontent that existed between the groups.

Goldmann's anger illustrates the ideological and philosophical differences that existed among many Jewish groups. The Joint Distribution Committee was amongst the most active groups in terms of providing relief to European Jews; their numerous outposts throughout Europe allowed them to assist in transporting and deporting refugees to safer places. The United Jewish Appeal (UJA) was also among the more active Jewish groups and worked closely with the Joint Distribution Committee on their relief efforts in Europe. To these two groups, the focus had to be on immediate relief for European Jews, not a "homeland" that was still years in the making. These actions were in contrast to those taken by the Zionist Collective, who would not divert privately raised funds or efforts away from Palestine; they would agree to help move the refugees, but only if it was to Palestine. In light of these conflicts, the Zionist movement saw an opportunity to make major strides in their Palestine initiative.

On May 9th through the 11th in 1942, months after the Wannsee Conference, the American Zionist movement met in the Biltmore hotel to discuss the challenges their brethren were facing. American Jewish groups had been receiving numerous reports of widespread Jewish slaughter. Despite the numerous reports, general disbelief or skepticism at what was being reported was still rampant amongst the Jewish groups, not only in the United States but also all over the world; the organizations, "fundamentally could not perceive that Hitler actually meant to murder each and

every Jew on European soil.”⁹ The dictator’s intentions were without precedent; anti-Semitic persecution had existed for centuries, but never had it been so systematic or focused in brutality. What further fed this doubt was that many of the reports the groups were receiving were conflicting or contradictory; they, “had spoken of mass murder, never a total plan”.¹⁰ The events at the Biltmore Conference should also be mentioned because of what was happening with the Zionist leadership—up to that point, Rabbi Wise had been the prominent voice and face of American Jewry and the Zionist movement, but his ideological shift to moderate Zionism made him unpopular amongst many Zionists. At the Conference, a young rabbi, Abba Hillel Silver gave a rousing speech as he proudly and strongly called for a homeland in Palestine. Silver’s aggressiveness and Wise’s moderate approach, coupled with Wise’s deteriorating health, helped plant the seeds for change in Zionist leadership.¹¹

In June, reports came from London that estimated the number of Jewish deaths at the hands of the Nazis were between 700,000 and 1,000,000. A combination of emotions ranging from rage to suspicion permeated throughout Jewish groups and leaders. What was clear was that something had to be done to protest the Nazi atrocities. On July 21st, the American Jewish Congress, Jewish Labor Committee, and B’nai B’rith joined forces to cosponsor a protest rally in Madison Square Garden, where American Jews were able to express their frustrations and anger towards the German government; the rally also featured messages from Roosevelt and Churchill that promised to hold the Nazis accountable for their actions. Describing the protest,

⁹ Pemkower, 96

¹⁰ Pemkower, 97.

¹¹ Dr. Kenneth Libo and Michael Skakun, “Clash of the titans: Stephen S. Wise vs. Abba Hillel Silver,” Part 4, CJH.

the *New York Times* wrote, “The American people will hold the Nazis to ‘strict accountability’ for their crimes of oppression on an inevitable day of reckoning”.¹²

Also featured at the rally was a speech from Rabbi Wise, who, typical to his approach thus far, expressed support in Roosevelt, and maintained his belief in the collective strength of the Jewish people that had lasted thousands of years. In expressing these beliefs, Wise said:

Tonight, we meet, not only to sorrow over an ancient grief but also over a limitless wrong of our own day, the Nazi threat to destroy Jewish people...we do not mourn the destruction of the Jewish people. The destruction of the Jewish people can never be. Its Temple may be destroyed, its people plundered and stricken and wounded, but the eternal people shall not be destroyed.¹³

To understand Wise’s point is to have a basic understanding of the Jewish narrative.

As he later compares Hitler to Pharaoh and Haman, Wise was hearkening back to the belief that Jews have been persecuted throughout their existence, and have maintained an unbreakable spirit throughout

One group conspicuously absent from the protest rally was the American Jewish Committee. The group refused participation, because, “it considered additional appeals to be made there for the Yishuv’s (Jewish Palestinian Community) defense, a controversial issue that also defied announced British policy”.¹⁴ Palestine, at that time, was under British Control, and while the Zionists hoped it would be their homeland, the American Jewish Committee would not take any action that went against the decisions of the British government. Rather than being perceived as against a government’s policy, the group chose to put out a statement that promised

¹² “Nazi Punishment Seen by Roosevelt: Says Hitler will be held to ‘Strict Accountability’—Churchill Greets Rally, President Pledges Nazi Punishment After War” July, 22, 1942, *New York Times*, 1.

¹³ Excerpt of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise’s speech at Madison Square Garden, July 21st, 1942. Stephen S. Wise Collection, Box 5, Folder 9, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

¹⁴ Pemkower, 97.

protect against oppression and tyranny. Consistent with their approach to this point, the Committee was wary over provoking any anti-Semitic backlash, and rather, chose to maintain its policy of quiet diplomacy. In the months that followed, the approach of quiet diplomacy continued to produce minimal results.

That July, things abroad began to worsen. The Jewish organizations in the United States faced increased pressure for action, as the information streaming in was seemingly catastrophic, as gruesome and unthinkable acts were happening. The situation of the Jews in Poland was reaching dire levels, as evidenced by various reports from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. One such transcript detailed the degree of degradation taken by the Nazi officers, including a testimony from a Soviet officer, that said, “The Germans snatched the infants from their mothers’ arms and used them for balls, bouncing and kicking them around the arena”.¹⁵ To many the level of depravity being reported seemed too surreal to be possible. One month later, in November, the Agency put out a report that included the number of deaths totaled in Poland, and the methods the Nazis were using. In the report, dated November 24th from London, at least “1,000,000 million Jews have already been annihilated by the Nazis in Poland. During the mass expulsion...the victims were herded into cattle cars...when the trains arrived at their destinations, half of the passengers were dead from suffocation.”¹⁶ If they were not murdered the Jews were being sent to concentration camps, where in most cases, death awaited them.

¹⁵ “Nazi Soldiers use Jewish Infants for Footballs, Jewish Red Army Man Relates,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, October 7, 1942, Jewish Telegraphic Agency Archives, New York, NY. (Hereafter: JTAA)

¹⁶ “Unprecedented Mass-extermiation of Polish Jews; Only 40,000 left in Warsaw Ghetto.” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* November 25 1942. JTAA, New York, NY.

A report from Gerhart Riegner on August 8th, the Swiss representative of the World Jewish Congress, brought verified news of Hitler's Final solution, including the use of Zyklon B gas as the murder tool. What is now known as the "Riegner telegram", explicitly said, "Received an alarming report that in Fuhrer's headquarters plan discussed and under consideration all Jews in countries occupied or controlled Germany number 3.5 to 4 million should after deportation and concentration in East at one blow exterminated to resolve once and for all Jewish question in Europe."¹⁷ Riegner's report reached the United States on August 8th, but many leading Jews, particularly Rabbi Wise, were left in the dark for nearly a month. When Wise finally was told of the news, Sumner Welles, then the Undersecretary of State, alerted him that he must remain silent until the information could be confirmed. As he waited for word for what actions should be taken, Wise made inquiries to his contacts in Europe for direction and more details. One such telegram advised Wise, as had Welles, that "no publicity until report fully investigated, authenticity reasonably established. He urges closest consideration this may be Nazi propaganda method to provoke reaction".¹⁸ After eleven weeks finally passed, until Wise was finally allowed to hold a press conference, confirming to the press the fears of Jews everywhere that a plan for a mass extermination was in place.

In discussing to the Riegner report, and how to respond, problems began to manifest themselves amongst the federal government, particularly with a leading Jewish government official. In a letter from the President, addressed to Henry Morgenthau Jr., the United States Secretary of Treasury and one of the prominent

¹⁷ "Riegner Telegram", August 8, 1942. Gerhart Riegner Biography, worldjewishcongress.org

¹⁸ Jan Papanek to Rabbi Wise, October 5, 1942. Folder 8, Box 4, Manuscript 49 Stephen S. Wise Collection, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

Jews appointed by Roosevelt, it is mentioned that difference of opinion amongst the different governmental departments was “unavoidable...too often, in recent months, responsible officials of the government have made public criticism of other agencies of the government...This is inadvisable at any time. But in times of war it is particularly contrary to public policy.”¹⁹ Morgenthau was among the most active Jewish representatives in the Federal government, and one of Roosevelt’s most trusted friends and advisers. As the war progressed, so did Morgenthau’s level of activity. Morgenthau, in particular, was critical of Cordell Hull, the Secretary of State, throughout the war. Following the release of the Riegner report, Morgenthau was especially bothered by the slow rate at which the State Department responded and believed that the job they were doing was less than satisfactory, given the situation at hand.²⁰

In the months after, American Jewry remained divided, however. Despite a lack of any meaningful action on the part of the Jewish refugees by Roosevelt, Wise remained loyal, writing to Nahum Goldmann about a prospective press conference:

The thing that I am most fearful of is that any strong complaint against FDR, at this time, will simply mean that we will hand him a gift of Congressional support for the first time in this Congress, because Congress will certain approve of what is not being done for the refugees. It is very easy to hold press conferences and to call meetings, but we must in advance consider what it will lead to—that it will shut every door and leave us utterly without hope of relief as far as FDR is concerned. He is still our friend, even though he does not move as expeditiously as we would wish. But he moves as fast as he can, in view of the Congress on his hands, a bitterly hostile and in a very real sense partially anti-Semitic Congress.²¹

¹⁹ Letter to Henry Morgenthau Jr., August 20 1942, Box 519, General Correspondence, The Papers of Henry Morgenthau Jr. 1866-1960, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum Archives, Hyde Park, NY.

²⁰ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 184-186.

²¹ Rabbi Stephen Wise to Nahum Goldmann, April 22, 1942. Folder 10, Box 2, Manuscript 49 Stephen S. Wise Collection, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

However, Wise, at one point considered the heart and soul of American Jewry, was beginning to be perceived as a Roosevelt figurehead, someone whose quiet diplomacy and faith in the federal government had not been rewarded. Rising from the ashes of Wise's plight was Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, a Cleveland Rabbi whose passionate Zionist speeches made him a prominent figure in the Zionist community. It was notable that at one time, Silver looked upon Wise as a mentor. It was Wise who helped convince Silver to get involved in American Zionist affairs, and prior to the war, the two preached corresponding messages of the growth of the Jewish identity in the United States, and the need to establish a Jewish State in Palestine.²²

However, as the war progressed and Wise began to align himself to a more moderate form of Zionism, a schism developed between the two rabbis over the main focus of the Zionist collective. As Wise continued to preach patience and faith in Roosevelt, Silver resented "Wise for gaining the ear of FDR only to have the President contradict his promises behind closed doors in his talks with the British." Silver believed that a more aggressive approach was necessary, taking note of Roosevelt's penchant to please rather than take direct action; Silver believed that the "the threat of suffering politically would keep FDR from going back on his word to American Jewry." As previously mentioned, Roosevelt excelled in the politics of gesture; while many American Jews perceived his strong rebukes of Hitler as political activity, little was actually done in the way of any concrete action.

With a more aggressive beliefs, and compared to the constraint exhibited by Wise, Silver believed in a "more militant approach. Instead of ingratiating himself with the administration, he envisioned the Democrats and Republicans outbidding each other

²² Libo and Skakun, Part 2.

for the Jewish vote”.²³ Silver’s aggressiveness was a welcome change to the Zionist contingent, and his belief in Palestine, coincided with the groups’ overriding goal. Silver’s aggressiveness could also be the source of criticism however; Wyman believed that Silver as a leader was, despite his propensity to create enemies, “a forceful leader, but his single-minded commitment to postwar Jewish statehood meant that he did not participate in the campaign for government rescue action”.²⁴ Wyman’s description of Silver could be applied to numerous Zionists throughout the war; namely, such singular focus on a specific and future goal such as Palestine, detracted from the issues such as the pain and suffering endured by European Jews, issues that were immediate and close in terms of feasibility.

The lack of unity that existed between the different American Jewish organizations and the discord that manifested itself amongst many leading Jews was ultimately the reason for the underwhelming response to the Nazi persecution and extermination of European Jewry. Despite a mountain of evidence and numerous warnings, it was as if a sort of paralysis overcame the Jewish consciousness in the United States. As has been mentioned, numerous factors contributed to this relative inaction. For one, anti-Semitic rhetoric and fervor was very much present in the United States, which helped to foster this paralysis amongst American Jewry, as they feared that any action could provoke anti-Semitic backlash. Another factor was a general disbelief or skepticism from the American population that such horrible things were actually occurring. People could not comprehend that humans could reach the level of depravity that the Nazis were reaching; it just did not seem possible.

²³ Libo and Skakun, Part 2.

²⁴ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 329.

But, the major contribution to this paralysis at this time was the battle waged between extreme Zionists and the moderate Zionists and non-Zionists.

Prior to the war and throughout its duration, the goal of a Jewish homeland in Palestine was a real, yet distinct, possibility. For extreme Zionists, an independent Jewish state was their sole focus and priority; while the disturbing reports were coming in, it was the belief of the extreme Zionists that private funds and resources could not be diverted away from Palestine, despite the obvious need for immediate help and action. In contrast, it was the belief of moderate Zionists that the dire situation in Europe necessitated immediate action such as placement for the different refugees, even though the location may not have been in Palestine. This fundamental divide was at the core of the inaction on the part of American Jewry. Groups such as the American Jewish Committee and B'nai B'rith attempted to mount their own efforts to place pressure on the government for rescue action, but accomplished little. The Zionist groups had the resources to plan protests and rallies but would not shift their focus from a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Ultimately, however, the discord and subsequent failure to respond could be circled back to the Zionist divide. Even with full knowledge of the Final Solution, Jewish leaders were still at odds over where the Jewish efforts and attention was required. In a meeting for the American Emergency Committee for Zionist Affairs, on September 1st, 1943, Rabbi Silver “emphasized that there can be no compromise on the Zionist demand for a Jewish commonwealth”. The major issue at hand was Palestine, and the Committee on Palestine drafted a declaration that attempted to establish Palestine as a Jewish commonwealth. However, numerous groups took

exception to the declaration; the major groups that took umbrage with the American Jewish Committee and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations while the Jewish Labor Committee remained, “divided in their attitude on this question”.²⁵ American Jewry could not come to terms on what the next step should be for their people; with countless lives lost, they were still ideologically divided on how to respond to this tragedy. This divide was at the root of everything. Because the groups could not agree, and the leaders remained divided, there was not a common cause or singular leader, through whom pressure could be placed on Roosevelt for more action to help European Jews. Without that pressure, and without a united front, Roosevelt did not see that the collective American Jewry believed there was a proper way in which to respond.

Before continuing, the question exists as to what any relief efforts in 1943 might have accomplished. By this point, countless lives had been lost, and while efforts still would have saved lives, it paled in comparison to the amount that could have been saved. For the Zionist collective, news of the Final Solution further reinforced their belief in the establishment of an independent Jewish state. Groups like the American Jewish Committee and B’nai B’rith were in many ways, helpless at this point, as they lacked the resources and political clout to sustain any mounted relief efforts. It is unfortunate, but fair to question, at this point, what any relief efforts might have accomplished.

As the war progressed, it only got worse before it got better for European Jewry. Following news of the Final Solution, the Nazi army increased its violence in Europe,

²⁵ Jewish Telegraphic Agency. “Dr. Silver is Chairman of Palestine; Presidium Elected,” September 1st, 1943. JTAA, New York, NY.

particularly in Poland, and then Vichy, France.²⁶ It was not until early in 1943, that the Allied involvement, particularly that of the United States, began to increase in intensity, as the United States and British military began to bomb Nazi Germany on a consistent basis. In the United States, the federal government began to take a somewhat more aggressive approach, as the War Refugee Board was formed, designed to aid those persecuted and imprisoned by the Nazis.

Another seminal moment came later, in November 1944, when the War Refugee Board published to the American press, the Vrba-Wetzler Report, also known as the Auschwitz Protocol, a detailed account of mass murder at the concentration camp in Auschwitz, Poland. The report authored by Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, two Slovakian Jews who managed to escape from Auschwitz, attempted to provide context to the amount of killings taking place at the concentration camps as well as awaken the American consciousness to the degree of brutality and depravity of the Nazis. Describing the brutal manner in which the Jews were murdered, the report described the gas chambers, writing that, “it is presumed that this is a ‘CYANIDE’ mixture of some sort which turns into gas at a certain temperature. After three minutes, everyone in the chamber is dead...the chamber is then opened and the ‘special squad’ carts the bodies on flat trucks to the furnace rooms where burning takes place”.²⁷ Even after the report came to the United States, there was still a sense of disbelief emanating from many in the United States.

In the years that followed, the Nazi movement lost steam. The United States entrance into the war in 1942 changed the complexion of it. By 1945, an Allied

²⁶ Overy, 487.

²⁷ “The Auschwitz Protocol: The Vrba-Wetzler Report,” November 1944, Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team, www.HolocaustResearchProject.org.

victory was all but assured, as the Nazi concentration camps were being liberated. Realizing his apparent defeat, Adolf Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945, followed in the next month by his henchmen, Joseph Goebbels and Heinrich Himmler. Following the end of the war, the Allied forces, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the United States held the Nuremberg Trials, prosecuting the prominent members and actors of Nazi Germany. While nothing could make up for the millions of lives lost or heal the wounds created by the Holocaust, the Nuremberg trials put to death numerous perpetrators of the gross and despicable actions that took place.

For the Zionist collective, vindication would come on May 14, 1948, as David Ben Gurion, the head of the World Zionist Organization declared the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel. A process that had started decades earlier had finally come to fruition. While this could certainly be viewed as a Zionist victory, it begs the question of the cost at which it came. Israel long was a goal of the Zionist, and those fervent supporters throughout the war and the persecution of European Jewry believed that funds and resources could not be diverted from establishing a Jewish state. Moderate Zionists and non-Zionists believed that the situation at hand merited their attention; establishing a homeland was naturally important, but it was not an immediate goal at the time. What started out as a sort of paralysis rooted in fear of anti-Semitic backlash both domestically and abroad eventually developed into an ideological divide over the most pressing priority for world Jewry. It was this fundamental divide that lay at the root of American Jewish discontent, and ultimately, helped to shape their underwhelming response to the Holocaust.

Chapter 5- A Collective Failure

History is littered with countless examples of prejudice, anti-Semitism, and racism towards different ethnic groups. The United States, in particular, has a checkered history in this regard, with their treatment of Native Americans and African Americans a stain many try to forget. Even today, there are still stubborn remnants of anti-Semitism and racism in the country. This history of religious and ethnic persecution, while no doubt negative, provided a valuable learning experience in the context of human interaction. The African American history in the United States provides a good contrast in particular to the Jewish history and organized, united movements. For much of their time in the United States, African Americans were considered slaves, treated as less than humans. Similar to the Jewish organizations, not every African American agreed on the best course of action to take in response to the racial persecution they experienced. That being said, unlike American Jewry during the Holocaust, when push came to shove, during the Civil Rights movement, African Americans were able to unite behind one common cause, equality in all aspects of life, putting any ideological or political differences behind them for the betterment of their livelihoods.

The response is where American Jewry failed as a collective entity. As early as 1928, American Jewry was very aware of a growing threat in Germany. Despite this knowledge, American Jewish organizations, from the moderate American Jewish Committee to the extreme Zionist beliefs maintained in the American Jewish Congress and World Jewish Congress, collectively failed throughout the war to unite behind a common cause, saving and preventing European Jews from utter and total

destruction. Without a concentrated message, American Jewish leaders could not place any pressure on President Roosevelt, which allowed him to get by using a combination of powerful statements and political gestures aimed at appeasing the American Jewish identity. At the time, during the duration of the Nazi regime, the Jewish population in the United States numbered between four and five million people, out of a population that numbered 140 million and increasing by 1945.¹ Representing no more than three to five percent of the American voting public during this period, American Jewish political influence was limited with the President.

However, there is also the question of what-if: What if American Jewry had united behind a common cause and placed pressure on Roosevelt to act in response to the actions in Nazi Germany? Would they have accomplished all that much? The answer, in all likelihood, is an unfortunate, but resounding, no. As mentioned earlier, American Jews represented only a small part of the eligible voters, so they lacked the political clout to influence the President. When Hitler was appointed chancellor, there were far more pressing issues as well that demanded Roosevelt's immediate attention—the country was still reeling from the crippling impact of the Great Depression, and restoring the nation's economy took precedence. The economic climate in the United States also affected Roosevelt's perspective in other areas, particularly immigration; there was a fear to many Americans, that allowing immigrants into the country, in this situation, Jewish refugees, would take jobs away from American citizens. Despite numerous proposals, including the Wagner-Rogers Bill, and due to his indebtedness to Breckenridge Long, Roosevelt never raised the

¹ United States Census Bureau. "Historical National Population Estimates: July 1, 1900 to July 1, 1999" Population Estimates Program, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, April 11, 2000.

quota system placed on immigrants throughout the war. Ultimately, throughout the reign of Hitler in Nazi Germany, Roosevelt had to perform a balancing act, in many cases, came at the cost of particular ethnic groups. Even with a united, sustained movement from American Jewry, it is fair to question how much they would have been able to accomplish.

Placing blame and culpability can often be a difficult, and often, futile exercise in any endeavor. In this case, it is no different. While the stated goal of this entire thesis was to put forth that the lack of unity between the various American Jewish groups and their leaders and their failure to respond shaped the underwhelming response that came from the United States, they are not the only culprits in this collective failure. President Roosevelt, despite a copious amount of evidence and ample opportunity, was slow to respond throughout the reign of Adolf Hitler. Many of the American Jews in high positions appointed by Roosevelt stayed in line with the policy of the President, rather than act out in support of their religious brethren. Anti-Semitic fervor also was a key determinant in the reason many Jews would not speak or act out against Nazi Germany. That being said, most of the culpability can be placed at the hands of the American Jewish organizations. In what Rabbi Wise called the “critical hour in the life of our people,” not enough was done.²

In the end, rather than uniting behind the idea of rescuing their European brethren, the leading organizations and their leaders could not agree on whether private funds should be used, whether what was taking place could be sacrificed with Palestine in sight. The extreme Zionist groups would not divert any funds or attention away from

² Rabbi Wise to Edward Cahn, October 26, 1943. Box 1, Folder 8, MS-49 Stephen S. Wise Collection, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

establishing a Jewish homeland. Moderate Zionists and Non-Zionists did not have the strength nor the organization to organize any movement or rally that would truly produce substantive change. The lack of unity also enveloped itself in a crisis in leadership, as leaders such as Rabbi Wise, Rabbi Silver, Chaim Weizmann, Nahum Goldmann, Justice Brandeis, and Henry Morgenthau among many prominent Jews, holding much respect but never able to organize a movement or pressure of any effectiveness in any direction. What we are left with as a nation, and as co-religionists today, is acknowledgement of the American Jewish failure to respond because of the discordance and in fighting between the groups and their leaders, a failure that is inexcusable and troubling on every level as deep investigation illustrates, and the knowledge that as a whole, this lack of unity shaped the underwhelming response the Nazis' persecution of European Jews, in what is the most inhumane tragedy history has ever seen.

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