



CONFRONT THE ISSUE

# FDR AND THE PRELUDE TO THE HOLOCAUST 1939-1941

TOUCH TO BEGIN

CONFRONT THE ISSUE  
**FDR AND THE  
PRELUDE  
TO THE  
HOLOCAUST  
1939-1941**

Whether Franklin Roosevelt should have or could have done more to rescue European Jews once the war had begun is a question that will likely be debated by historians for decades to come.

Scroll down to view  
select documents  
from the FDR Library  
and excerpts from  
the historical debate.

## Memos to the President about the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees September 26, 1939

After war broke out in Europe on September 1, 1939, President Roosevelt continued to hope that something could be done internationally to assist approximately 200,000 to 300,000 refugees who had fled Germany but were now without homes. A meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees was scheduled for October 1939 in Washington, DC, and FDR planned to attend. But many of his advisers, including James G. MacDonald, Chairman of the President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, recommended that the meeting be cancelled, as can be seen in this memo forwarded to Roosevelt by presidential secretary Edwin M. Watson. MacDonald argued that the war would limit governments—including the United States—from contributing money for resettlement, that further participation by the U.S. would damage its position as a neutral nation, and that the meeting might be perceived by anti-Semitic forces as an attempt by “Jewish circles” to drag the United States into the conflict. Despite this advice, President Roosevelt held the meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee at the White House on October 17. He urged the Committee to help displaced refugees and consider postwar resettlement of an expected ten to twenty million refugees in sparsely populated areas of the world.

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

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September 26, 1939.

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT:

I attach herewith a memorandum from James G. McDonald, Chairman of your Advisory Committee on Political Refugees, stating the Committee's reasons why your meeting on October 16-17 should be postponed or cancelled.

E.M.W.

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THE PRESIDENT'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE

ON POLITICAL REFUGEES x

Memorandum to the President recommending that the Conference of Officers of the Intergovernmental Committee on October 16-17 be postponed or cancelled.

While heartily welcoming the White House conference when the invitation was extended in July, the President's Advisory Committee now unanimously urges consideration of postponement or cancellation for the following reasons:

1. The problem of refugees from Germany has been radically changed by the war. It is too soon to appraise the changes competently and therefore to plan soundly.

2. The numbers of German refugees have been appreciably reduced because (a) emigration from Germany is now limited to old people and children, (b) foreign exchange must be supplied for transportation, (c) all transit countries have hermetically sealed their borders, (d) the full implementation of the Wohlthat Memorandum is impracticable, and (e) England and perhaps France no longer desire the re-emigration of refugees because employment is now becoming available for them.

3. Though the refugee problem as a whole has been greatly increased, the Intergovernmental Committee because of its terms of reference, the prevailing attitudes of

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its member Governments other than the United States, and the failure thus far to achieve comprehensive solutions in the lesser problem is not disposed to undertake the larger problem.

4. The Intergovernmental Committee has concerned itself primarily with large-scale settlement for which it is now clear that public funds will be required. The possibility of securing such funds has been reduced by the war and the consequent withdrawal by the British Government of its suggestion of last July. Meantime the relief needs of war refugees have increased so enormously that the private organizations foresee the exhaustion of their funds in the near future. Unless therefore governmental monies are made available, large scale settlement will be impossible.

5. In view of the prospect that the discussion of neutrality may continue through mid-October it may not prove strategic to give a handle for criticism by holding at the White House an international conference in which two belligerent countries will participate on a subject which vitally concerns a third belligerent.

6. The issue of neutrality may also be confused by the injection of the problem of German refugees who  
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are considered by the public to be predominantly Jewish. Anti-Semitic spokesmen may capitalize this opportunity to accuse Jewish circles of a desire to involve the Government at a time of national emergency. Others in no sense anti-Semitic may consider that the problem of German refugees is receiving undue emphasis now that it is but one aspect of the total refugee problem.

7. Britain and France, preoccupied by the war, will naturally attempt to place all responsibility for action including the provision of funds on the United States Government.

8. Under all these circumstances the success of the conference will depend even more than ordinarily on the ability of the United States to make concrete proposals for comprehensive solutions and substantial contributions in public funds. To date no convincing proposals have been developed and there is no assurance of the requisite public funds.

The President's Advisory Committee on Political Refugees urges consideration of the foregoing in proposing the postponement or cancellation of the conference. Should, however, the final decision be to hold the conference, the President's Advisory Committee on Political

Refugees

Refugees pledges its full cooperation.

James G. McDonald,  
Chairman.

September 26, 1939.



## FDR's Memo to Eleanor Roosevelt

May 4, 1940

In the early months of the war, Roosevelt continued to pursue various plans for massive resettlement of refugees, both during and after the war. One idea that was investigated was the creation of a special Alaska quota that would allow refugees to move into vacant lands in the Alaska territory. Although the scheme had the support of Interior Secretary Harold Ickes and Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, the State Department opposed it as an end-run around the immigration laws. To avoid the perception that he was favoring Jews over other refugees, FDR suggested that Jewish admission to Alaska be limited to ten percent of the resettled population. The Alaska plan died in Congress in early 1940. Of more interest to FDR was the sweeping idea that remote territories in Latin America could be used for resettlement of displaced populations. He had been considering the plan for several years. In this memo to Eleanor Roosevelt, FDR explains his vision of a postwar resettlement of several million people in South America.

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May 4, 1940.

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

MEMORANDUM FOR E.R.

There is much to be said for the development of British, French and Netherlands Guiana. The climate along the Coast and adjacent lowlands is vile -- so vile that it would cost huge sums to make life there inhabitable for white people.

The interior of all three Guianas is, in large part, unexplored and inaccessible. It would cost vast sums to open up the interior of the country.

Nevertheless, there is probably a good chance, through careful planning, of building up a stable population of several million people over a period of years -- with the possibility, though only a possibility, that the expenditures would come back in time.

There are, of course, two difficulties. The first is the price that would be demanded by the three present owners.

The second is that it is very doubtful if the United States should undertake sovereignty or sole charge of development. I am, confidentially, considering the broad thought of creating a form of Pan American trusteeship for situations of this kind. It is a new idea in international or Pan American relationships but it is worth studying -- especially if there is a remote possibility that the American Republics may be forced to do something about European possessions in this Hemisphere.

I think it is best not to discuss this out loud, however.

F.D.R.

For  
Re: letter to Mrs. Roosevelt from Mr. Smith Hart making suggestion about the Guianas 4/20/40 and the President's memo to Sumner Welles of May 4th and Welles reply of May 6th  
See: Sumner Welles-Drawer 1-1940(May 6, 1940 letter)

## Memos for the President Regarding Refugee Children

June 14-15, 1940

During the spring and summer of 1940, calls for aid to refugees were overtaken by concerns over American security. Fears of Fifth Columnists led to the belief among some government officials that immigrants—particularly German Jewish refugees—might be spies intent on subverting the government and its neutrality. FDR felt he could not ignore these views of his FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, his Justice and State Departments, and his military intelligence chiefs. As a result, visa applicants were scrutinized even more closely, and the flow of immigrants slowed further. One area where there seemed to be some flexibility and popular support, though, was the rescue of children. In June 1940, Solicitor General Francis Biddle and White House adviser James H. Rowe, Jr., sent FDR these memos urging him to support an amendment to a Red Cross relief appropriation bill that would provide one million dollars to be used to rescue refugee children. Eleanor Roosevelt and WPA administrator Harry Hopkins also favored the amendment, but with the 1940 presidential campaign underway, FDR would not publicly support the measure. On June 20, refugee advocates organized the United States Committee for the Care of European Children and named Eleanor Roosevelt as honorary president. This and other private organizations continued to advocate for the admission of refugee children into the United States.

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

June 15, 1940

Memorandum For The President.

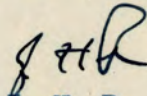
Refugee Children

The Solicitor General asked me to give you the attached memorandum. It advocates an amendment to the 50 million dollar Red Cross appropriation amendment, to provide that one million dollars may be used to defray transportation cost of refugee children.

It does not relax the immigration laws. Of course, the next step would be to attempt such relaxation since the quotas available July 1 are 60,000 (France); 1500 (Holland); 1000 (Belgium). Naturally these will all be greatly oversubscribed by adults and children. In other words, this is a mere first step.

Harry Hopkins tells me this question was presented to you last week and you turned it down. Because Biddle and others are so insistent, Hopkins thinks it might be brought to your attention again. The French and British Ambassadors are, of course, tremendously interested. Mrs. Roosevelt is also interested.

Several Bills have been introduced along this line. If you do not feel you can publicly approve it, Biddle asks if he and other interested governmental officials may be active in its behalf privately, although not of course publicly.

  
J. H. R.

It is very improbable anything can be done about this in connection with the Red Cross Bill since the Senate will finish debate today and send the Red Cross amendment back to the House for concurrence, thereby removing the necessity for a conference.



Office of the Solicitor General  
Washington, D. C.

June 14, 1940

FB:vb

My dear Mr. President:

There seems to be a very strong public opinion in favor of bringing over children, who have now become refugees on account of the war, from France, England and perhaps other countries. One bill has already been introduced into the House for this purpose; and another is about to be. I have discussed the matter in detail with Clarence Pickett of the Friends Service Committee, Miss Katharine Lenroot of the Children's Bureau, and other representatives of the child agencies.

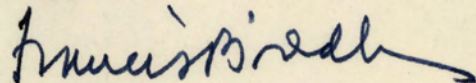
In view of the possibility of such legislation being adopted, it seemed to us wise to suggest to you the advisability of having included in the Red Cross amendment to the relief bill, or in some later appropriation, a provision authorizing you, in your discretion, to reserve a sum not to exceed one million dollars to pay for the traveling expenses of any children who might be admitted under existing quotas or under this legislation.

The British Ambassador tells me that he has described the plan and mentioned the possible reservation in the appropriation

bill to Mr. Norman Davis of the American Red Cross. The chief purpose of the reservation would be to provide a basis for immediate action whenever that becomes possible, and further to encourage voluntary contributions for the care of the children in this country. Very large contributions are already in sight.

I am enclosing also a draft of such suggested provision in the Red Cross relief bill, together with a brief memorandum.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Francis Biddle", with a long, sweeping underline.

FRANCIS BIDDLE  
Solicitor General

The President

The White House

SUGGESTED AMENDMENT

Provided that a sum not exceeding \$1,000,000 may be reserved by the President out of the amount appropriated to be used as the President may direct to defray the transportation and reception costs of refugee children who may be lawfully admitted into the United States.

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## FDR's Exchange of Letters with Harold S. Vanderbilt

May 19-26, 1941

After winning reelection to a third term in November 1940, Franklin Roosevelt felt he could more freely take steps necessary to aid democracies threatened by Germany and move the United States towards greater preparedness for possible war. But isolationism was still a potent political force that limited FDR's ability to act, particularly with regard to American immigration policy. Roosevelt was frustrated by the short-sightedness of the most vocal isolationists, including Charles Lindbergh, who painted him as a warmonger bent on sending America's young men to die on battlefields in Europe. In May 1941, FDR received this letter from Harold S. Vanderbilt—known to friends and family as Mike—expressing the widely held belief that the war in Europe was futile and that aid to Britain would only weaken America's own defenses. FDR wrote a blistering response letter on May 25, just two days before proclaiming a state of Unlimited National Emergency.

*President's Personal File 6666: Harold S. Vanderbilt*



NEW YORK CENTRAL BUILDING  
230 PARK AVENUE  
NEW YORK

May 19, 1941

President Franklin D. Roosevelt,  
The White House,  
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President,

It has been announced that on May 27th you will address the nation. It is assumed that your address will deal largely with foreign policy. There are many who are hot-headedly urging you to advocate an immediate declaration of war against Germany.

I am one of the vast majority who favor peace. The latest Gallup poll shows that 79% of the American people are opposed to intervention. Consequently, if we fight now it will be as an aggressor and divided nation, and it is hard for a divided nation to wage a successful war.

If we must fight, let us fight later on as a united nation in defense of our homes, our liberties, our shores. And I, for one, firmly believe we can avoid that later fight if we build up our home defenses to a point where Germany, with headquarters almost 4,000 miles away, will realize the futility of attacking us. Furthermore, there are many who believe that Germany has no idea of waging other than an economic war against us.

If we fight now we may precipitate a world-wide conflict, the British and ourselves against the Axis powers, France, Japan and perhaps Russia; in other words, America and Britain against the world.

Would you bear with me for a moment, Mr. President, and put yourself in the other fellow's shoes? Such a procedure is always instructive and widens one's horizon.

Assume you were the head of some country in eastern Europe, or in western Asia. What course would you follow? First, you would study the handwriting on the wall, which reads -

"England (whether or not for good and sufficient reasons is immaterial) has failed to adequately support any of the countries attacked by Germany, namely - Czechoslovakia, Poland, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France, Yugoslavia and Greece. One by one they have fallen into enemy hands.

Germany, on the other hand, when her ally Italy

May 19, 1941

met with reverses in Greece and Africa, promptly sent reinforcements which have been sufficient to more than recoup the lost ground. Everywhere Germany has been victorious."

In spite of what might be your natural pro British leanings, in view of the above record you would have no alternative but to either remain neutral and risk peaceful German domination, or to fight on the German side in the hope of obtaining a more favorable treatment later.

In the last few days Iraq and France have given striking proof of the importance which must be attached to the record. Judging by it, and surely it is the best index we have to go by, there can be little doubt, I fear, of the eventual outcome of the campaign in Iraq.

"If you must go to the races, be sure to put your money on the winning horses." There is a lot of truth in that old saying. But now is the time to stay away from the races abroad. I am 100% pro British and 100% anti Nazi. I have many English relatives who are being bombed daily and I have many dear English friends. I have no German relatives or friends. But this is no time to be governed by our sympathies or our emotions. We must be hard-headed and practical.

For the above reasons, I oppose convoys and other similar contraptions which are sure to lead us into war, and I oppose "all out" aid to Britain which must cripple our own defense. I also oppose any new appropriations for non-defense items.

In conclusion, I pray, Mr. President, that you will not be unmindful of your solemn pre-election promises not to lead this country into war.

Respectfully yours,

*Harold S. Vandenberg*

x394  
x4193-7/12

D.P.F.

6666

May 26, 1941

Dear Mike:

Thanks for your letter. It is truly a plea for inaction against evil because the forces of evil seem to be winning. It seems so clear that the ultimate choice is between right and wrong that smug inaction on our part is in effect an aid to wrong. Even if our continental limits remained intact I, personally, should hate to live the rest of my days in a world dominated by the Hitler philosophy. In the last analysis, I think you would hate that too.

xpp76677

xpp75780

Always sincerely yours,

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

Harold S. Vanderbilt, Esq., #  
New York Central Building,  
230 Park Avenue,  
New York, New York.

fdr/tmb

x463-6

## Albert Einstein's Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt

July 26, 1941

Eleanor Roosevelt's efforts to aid Europe's refugees continued into the war years. She was seen by many as a trusted advocate who could bring their views to President Roosevelt's attention. In July 1941, acclaimed physicist and German-Jewish immigrant Albert Einstein wrote this letter to Eleanor urging her to tell the President about the State Department's rigid application of immigration rules and regulations. A "wall of bureaucratic measures" erected by the State Department, Einstein asserts, made it all but impossible to aid the victims of Nazi brutality. At the bottom of the letter in Eleanor Roosevelt's handwriting are two notes. One says simply "FDR" and is an instruction to her secretary to send Einstein's letter to the President. The second notation is Eleanor's reply to Einstein which was later typed into a letter: "Tell Mr. Einstein I will bring his letter at once to the President." Although Einstein's letter was given to FDR, there is no evidence that the President responded to him or took any action based upon it.

*President's Personal File 7177: Albert Einstein*

1 JUL 2 1941  
EINSTEIN,  
112, MERCER STREET,  
PRINCETON,  
NEW JERSEY, U.S.A.

July 26, 1941

Knollwood  
Saranac Lake N.Y.

x P.P. 7, 7

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt  
The White House  
Washington D.C.

P.P. 7,  
7177

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I have noted with great satisfaction that you always stand for the right and humaneness even when it is hard. Therefore in my deep concern, I know of no one else to whom to turn for help.

A policy is now being pursued in the State Department which makes it all but impossible to give refuge in America to many worthy persons who are the victims of Fascist cruelty in Europe. Of course, this is not openly avowed by those responsible for it. The method which is being used, however, is to make immigration impossible by erecting a wall of bureaucratic measures alleged to be necessary to protect America against subversive, dangerous elements. I would suggest that you talk about this question to some well-informed and right-minded person such as Mr. Hamilton Fish Armstrong. If then you become convinced that a truly grave injustice is under way, I know that you will find it possible to bring the matter to the attention of your heavily burdened husband in order that it may be remedied.

Very sincerely yours,

*A. Einstein.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Albert Einstein.

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x 789

*LoP*

*Tell Mr. Einstein I will bring her  
letter about to the President*

CONFRONT THE ISSUE  
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## Memo from the Secretary of State and Statement by the President October 24-25, 1941

In the fall of 1941, news of Nazi atrocities against Jews in occupied Europe filled America's newspapers. Reports filtered out of Jews dying in Polish ghettos, of executions of Jews in Germany, Poland and Russia, and of mass deportations. These reports constituted a first glimpse of what was developing into a systematic campaign by the Nazis to rid Europe of its Jewish populations. On October 24, Secretary of State Cordell Hull sent this memo to FDR proposing that he issue a statement in coordination with the British and other Allied governments denouncing the Nazi atrocities. Roosevelt's handwritten note at the bottom orders that the statement be released at 12:00 noon the next day, "unless previously announced in London." The statement carefully avoids identifying victims as Jewish, but makes it clear that such actions against innocent civilians "will one day bring fearful retribution."

*Official File 198: Germany, 1941-1943*

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

THE SECRETARY

October 24, 1941

MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

x48  
The British and the Allied Governments contemplate issuing a declaration similar to that quoted in the attached telegram concerning the shooting of hostages by the German authorities. While practical effects of such a declaration may be slight, I believe that this Government should also forcefully declare its revulsion at this practice. There is accordingly attached a statement which, if you approve, you may wish to make to the press either concurrently with the issuance of the Allied declaration or at a fixed time. I suggest tomorrow noon.

x20  
12 noon E.S.T., Oct 25 -  
unless previously announced  
in London.

10-25-41

FOR THE PRESS

STATEMENT BY THE PRESIDENT

The practice of executing scores of innocent hostages in reprisal for isolated attacks on Germans in countries temporarily under the Nazi heel revolts a world already inured to suffering and brutality. Civilized peoples long ago adopted the basic principle that no man should be punished for the deed of another. Unable to apprehend the persons involved in these attacks the Nazis characteristically slaughter fifty or a hundred innocent persons. Those who would "collaborate" with Hitler or try to appease him cannot ignore this ghastly warning.

The Nazis might have learned from the last war the impossibility of breaking men's spirit by terrorism. Instead they develop their "lebensraum" and "new order" by depths of frightfulness which even they have never approached before. These are the acts of desperate men who know in their hearts that they cannot win. Frightfulness can never bring peace to Europe. It only sows the seeds of hatred which will one day bring fearful retribution.

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## Eleanor Roosevelt's Draft "My Day" Column October 25, 1941

Although FDR felt politically constrained in the fall of 1941 from clearly identifying victims of Nazi brutality as Jewish, Eleanor Roosevelt felt no such limitations. In this draft of her "My Day" column which appeared in newspapers on October 25, she publicly grapples with the difficult subject of mass deportations of Jews from Germany to Poland and Russia and tries to make the horrors in Europe more relatable to her readers. Admitting that the deportation experience was difficult for Americans to imagine, Eleanor writes, "It would be a kind of leave-taking which could savor somewhat of death. In all partings with people whom we love, there is in a minor way that sense of temporary loss which presages the horrible finality of separation which comes over one at the time of death."

*Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; Speech and Article File: My Day Drafts; Box 1432*

Yesterday was

~~Thisxxxxxx~~ a day spent very largely on one subject because from nine o'clock until twelve thirty we sat in Room B in the Labor Auditorium and talked about participation of young people in civilian defense. <sup>The conference</sup> ~~It adjourned here at the White House~~ <sup>at the Labor Dept building</sup> for lunch and we were back ~~there~~ at two o'clock. We actually finished at four o'clock which was the time we had scheduled to bring the conference to a close, <sup>that</sup> which I think speaks well for the young people and their ability to keep their program <sup>moving</sup> ~~to a~~ <sup>on time</sup> ~~xxx schedule. without~~ <sup>it</sup> There was a feeling <sup>should</sup> that certain goals should be set ~~for~~ which we all strive to ~~attain~~ <sup>through</sup> attain in our defense work in the next few years. It was agreed that these goals could not be goals for youth, <sup>also</sup> but must be goals for every age and group, and cover the entire overall picture, though there ~~might~~ <sup>will</sup> easily be certain ~~special~~ <sup>on</sup> interests ~~xx~~ which youth <sup>would</sup> wanted to place special emphasis.

Mr. Eugene Meyer came in to tea with me <sup>yesterday</sup> ~~today~~ to tell me how deeply impressed he <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ with the work of the women. He considered <sup>is</sup> ~~was~~ that this work not only ~~was~~ contributing valuable service, but ~~was~~ <sup>is</sup> creating unity throughout the British nation. There is no doubt that women have a tremendous role to play and I am looking forward to the meeting which Miss Eloise Davison will hold on November the Eighth, when the role of women in civilian defense will be canvassed from many points of view.

I have been reading some accounts of the removal of <sup>the</sup> Jewish people from Germany to Poland and Russia. Somehow the ~~idea~~ <sup>fact</sup> of being suddenly told that within an hour you must leave your home ~~perhaps~~ never to return, is a very difficult one for us here to visualize. It would be the kind of leave-taking which ~~will~~ <sup>would</sup>

savor somewhat of death. In ~~all~~ partings with people whom we love, there is, in a minor way that sense of ~~even~~ temporary loss which presages that horrible finality <sup>of separation</sup> ~~of separation~~ ~~something~~ <sup>which comes over us at the time of</sup> ~~which accompanies~~ death. These mass removals where people are treated like animals and not like human beings, are so horrible to contemplate that one can only hope that at a certain point feelings become numb and suffering ceases to be acute.

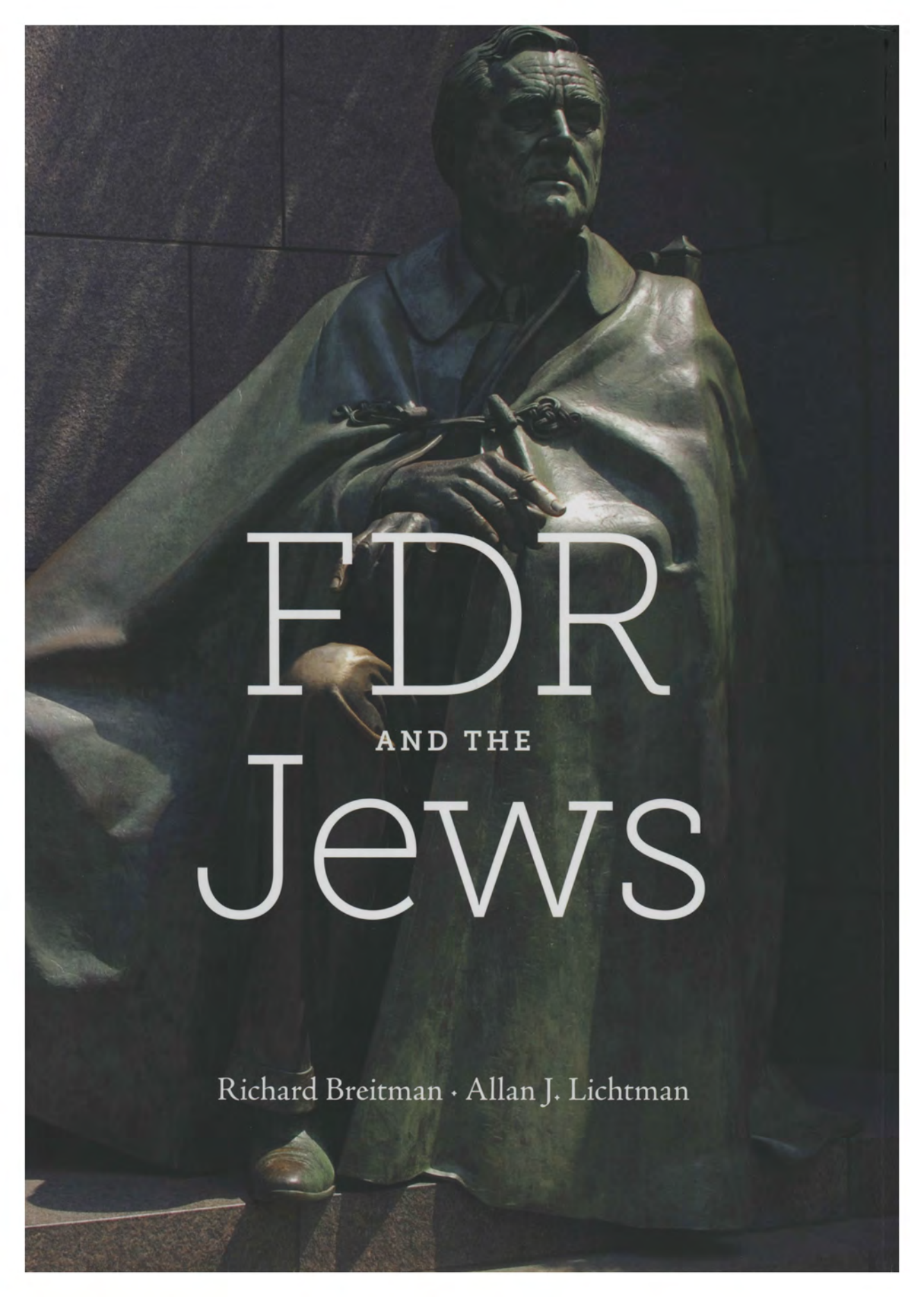
There will be at Madison Square Garden on October 27th, a mass meeting <sup>to help pay for the cost of</sup> to alleviate suffering in Russia, not only through the Red Cross services to military units, but on a wider basis for the civilian population. The Russian people are fighting heroically for their homes and we must admire their courage and do what we can <sup>to lessen their sufferings -</sup> ~~not only on the military front, but on the humanitarian side.~~

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## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The outbreak of World War II led to the emergence of a third Roosevelt, preoccupied with aiding Germany's opponents and protecting the internal security of the United States. FDR believed that Europe's democracies could survive only with an infusion of American aid, which required the dispatch of arms and materiel abroad. With such momentous and difficult battles to fight, the president no longer spent political capital on Jewish refugees or sought to keep admitting streams of Jewish immigrants, who, some feared, might harbor in their midst German spies and saboteurs. FDR salvaged a small number of refugees and planned for a massive postwar resettlement of displaced persons, preferably in sparsely settled places around the world, including Palestine. After his reelection in 1940, FDR also pushed through a reluctant Congress his Lend-Lease program for aiding the allies resisting Nazi and fascist aggression by all means short of war. Under Lend-Lease, FDR supplied British forces with the Sherman tanks that helped it prevail in the pivotal battle of El Alamein. This victory kept the Nazis from taking Egypt and then overrunning Palestine and killing Jewish settlers there. Without FDR's policies and leadership there may well have been no Jewish communities left in Palestine, no Jewish state, no Israel.

*Richard Breitman and Alan Lichtman, FDR and the Jews (Belknap Press, 2013), 317-318*



FDR  
AND THE  
Jews

Richard Breitman · Allan J. Lichtman

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## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Until the Nazis blocked the exits in the fall of 1941, the oppressed Jews of Europe might have fled to safety. But relatively few got out, mainly because the rest of the world would not take them in. The United States, which had lowered its barriers a little in early 1938, began raising them again in autumn 1939. Two years later, immigration was even more tightly restricted than before 1938. In fact, starting in July 1941, America's gates were nearly shut. The best chance to save the European Jews had passed....In the years before Pearl Harbor, the United States had reacted to the European Jewish crisis with concern but had refused to permit any sizable immigration of refugees. Although Congress and the Roosevelt administration had shaped this policy, it grew out of three important aspects of American society in the 1930s: unemployment, nativistic restrictionism, and anti-Semitism....These attitudes raised formidable barriers to the development of an American initiative to save European Jews. Yet the need was critical: an entire people was being systematically eliminated by America's principal enemy. And pressures against extending help were not the only forces on the scene. Other important factors in American society created the potential for a positive response. America was a generous nation, a land of immigrants, led by a national administration known for its humanitarian sympathies. Most Americans embraced Christianity, a faith committed to helping the helpless. The country had an articulate and organized Jewish population that could play a vital role in arousing those positive forces. A truly concerned leadership in the government and in the Christian churches could have turned that potential into a powerful influence for effective action.

*David S. Wyman, The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*  
(Pantheon Books, 1984), 5-6, 15

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T H E

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# ABANDONMENT OF THE JEWS

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A M E R I C A

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A N D T H E

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H O L O C A U S T

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DAVID S. WYMAN

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## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

In 1939, the problem had revolved around finding new homes for displaced persons, refugees from Nazi-dominated countries. Roosevelt's "basic solution" was "the development of a suitable area to which refugees would be admitted in almost unlimited numbers."... In pressing the case for resettlement in other nations, Roosevelt labored under the handicap of American unwillingness to do the same. Though the United States gave sanctuary to 90,000 immigrants in 1939—6000 more than all of Latin America and twice the number accepted by Britain and her colonies—it was clear that Americans would resist opening their country to the kind of mass influx Roosevelt described in his plan. Indeed, in 1939-1941, when international conditions and American neutrality had not foreclosed the possibility of mass migration to the United States, Congress showed little interest in relaxing immigration restrictions. The United States, moreover, would not give entry to the full quota of Europeans allowed under the law. Convinced that the admission of immigrants gave foreign agents easy access to the country, the administration transferred the Immigration and Naturalization Service from the Labor Department to the Justice Department in 1940 and barred anyone even faintly under suspicion. As a result, the flow of European immigrants to America in 1939-41 fell some 15,000 a year below what the quotas would allow. Roosevelt himself was not willing to press the case for greater immigration to the United States. At a time when he desperately needed congressional backing for a greater American role in foreign affairs, he refused to clash with the Congress by asking for a change in immigration laws. Also convinced that national security dictated a rigorous application of those laws, Roosevelt refused to challenge the State Department's narrow interpretation of who could come to the country.

*Robert Dallek, Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945 (Oxford University Press, 1979) 444-446*



**FRANKLIN D.  
ROOSEVELT  
AND  
AMERICAN  
FOREIGN  
POLICY,  
1932-1945**

**Robert Dallek**

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1939-1941

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Eleanor [Roosevelt] became embroiled in a fiery argument with the State Department over its refugee rescue operation. In mid-September [1940], she learned from friends on the President's Advisory Committee [on Political Refugees] that the visa arrangements entered into with such high hopes in July had completely broken down....A deliberate policy of obstruction was under way, directed from the top of the State Department, from the man in charge of refugee matters, Breckinridge Long. Working with what one refugee scholar has called "a singleness of purpose and a formidable arsenal of political weapons," Long had successfully devised a series of obstructive tactics that walled out any applicant the State Department wished to exclude....On September 28,...Eleanor penned an indignant note to her husband describing the unhappy situation....Eleanor's note stirred Franklin to contact Undersecretary [of State] Sumner Welles. "Please tell me about this," the president wrote....In reply, Welles suggested that the president first talk to Breckinridge Long. A meeting was set for noon, October 3. Long was well armed, carrying fearsome stories purporting to prove that many of the refugees Eleanor and her friends wanted to bring into the country were not refugees at all, but German agents trying to use American hospitality for their own dark purposes. By playing on the president's fears that spies had infiltrated the refugee stream, Long managed to persuade Roosevelt that the State Department's cautious policy was the only way to go....So the battle to save lives by bringing large numbers of refugees into America was lost during the crucial months of 1940, when Germany was still willing to grant exit permits to the Jews....Eleanor's failure to force her husband to admit more refugees remained, her son Jimmy later said, "her deepest regret at the end of her life."

*Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II (Simon & Schuster, 1994) 172-176*

# NO ORDINARY TIME

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*Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt:  
The Home Front in World War II*

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**DORIS KEARNS  
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*Author of *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys**

CONFRONT THE ISSUE  
**FDR AND THE  
PRELUDE  
TO THE  
HOLOCAUST  
1939-1941**

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The murder of Jews during the first two years of the war had aroused much public sympathy in the west. The war was being fought, after all, against the evils of the Nazi system. But with the United States remaining neutral throughout those first two years, with France defeated, and Britain alone, there was nothing that could be done to loosen the Nazi grip on Europe. Even after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Russia, far from being an effective ally, seemed more likely to succumb to the German attack. The United States did not enter the war until December 1941; she too, in the early months of 1942, was in a weak position, losing vast territories to Japan in the Pacific, and having little immediate involvement in Europe, beyond Hitler's own ill-timed declaration of war. At the same time, the British were facing the prospect of defeat in North Africa, at the hands of Rommel's Africa Corps. Thus it was that the beginning of the "final solution" in March 1942 coincided with the moment at which the Allies were at their weakest. In several ways, it was intended to do so; it was the Nazi aim to murder the Jews of Europe without provoking a world reaction, to do so secretly and silently, and to complete the task while Britain, Russia and the United States could do nothing about it.

*Martin Gilbert, Auschwitz and the Allies (Henry Holt and Company, 1981) 26-27*

# Auschwitz AND THE ALLIES

A Devastating Account of How the  
Allies Responded to the News of  
Hitler's Mass Murder



MARTIN GILBERT