

Two Gentiles, Two Jews and Roosevelt:

A Response to Ken Burns' *America and the Holocaust*, September 2022

The massacre of European Jews occurred during World War II in Europe. To historians, the question has always been, how was this possible? And more important, from an American perspective, it is: What was America's response to that event?

When I arrived at the University of Massachusetts in the mid-1970's, I found an answer. My History Professor David S. Wyman, himself a Gentile, was busily engaged in trying to figure out and analyze the American response to the Nazi extermination of European Jewry between 1942 and 1945. His project had begun at least ten years earlier, and in the end it took sixteen years to complete, culminating in his book The Abandonment of the Jews in 1984. I was his research assistant in this project for its final seven years.

Under Wyman, our investigation was to figure out and focused on an examination of the American Government response. From the outset for me, the question was did President Roosevelt understand the Holocaust: what did FDR know, and when did he know? When I questioned Wyman on this, his response to me was that to-date he had not found any document to pinpoint an answer. So I did my work; my job was set out for me. Ultimately I did find the document I had sought, which I published in the magazine Midstream in September 1980. And that document consequently became a major factor in Wyman's book, and resulted in his being very critical of Roosevelt and very critical of the FDR Administration response to the Holocaust. On December 8, 1942, at a meeting in the White House with a group of prominent American Jewish leaders, President Roosevelt told this Jewish leadership, in the White House, the details of the Holocaust. However, his words were left there, and over the next years it became tragically apparent that he would choose not to lift a finger to do something, to respond or take any direct action.

To my mind, two quintessential issues immediately arise. First, what were Roosevelt's sources? Second, why did Roosevelt prefer not to act? These two issues have been gnawing at me for the past forty-five years. As of yet, I have not seen a single historian who has dealt with these two issues.

Ever since Wyman's book The Abandonment of the Jews appeared in 1984, American historians have had to deal with Wyman's accusations. Most American historians did not really know what to do with such a book, so they started criticizing it. Now fast-forward to September 2022; we have another Gentile, a well-known film maker, who is about to present to America his twisted, distorted and unhistorical version of the Holocaust. Contrary to Burns' presentation, the history of America's response to the Holocaust is not an issue of responding to a refugee crisis or to anti-Semitism; rather, it is and should be about the response of the FDR Administration to the knowledge and facts of the massacre of European Jews, which was clearly known to them from the middle of 1942. The American response to the Holocaust is complex and multi-layered.

There were two prominent Jewish figures, both mentioned by Burns, who were involved in this American response: a Reform rabbi, Stephen Wise; and an ardent Zionist and freedom-fighter, a Jew from British Palestine named Hillel Kook, better known in America as Peter Bergson. Both these men were complex individuals. During the Holocaust, Rabbi Wise, shadowing FDR, worked hard to convince America's Jews that the solution to the ongoing massacre of European Jewry was the future Jewish State after the defeat of Nazi Germany. In contrast, Peter Bergson worked to convince Americans and the Roosevelt Administration that America needed to respond to the Holocaust and to take immediate, direct action to save Jews first and declare Israeli independence afterward. I know this from personal experience, as I worked for Peter Bergson for ten years.

Are America's Historians, Holocaust Museums and current American Jewish leaders embarrassed over the American response to the Holocaust, causing them such confusion and frustration that they are unable to deal with this subject fully and honestly? I have to wonder. Such seems to be the case with the upcoming PBS presentation of the Ken Burns Potemkin documentary.

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