

The Effectiveness of the War Refugee Board in Holocaust Relief

by Megan Martin

World War II was a brutal war that killed millions of soldiers. It was not just trained men that carried guns who lost their lives. Jewish people were murdered in masses by German Nazis in concentration camps all over Europe. To address this mass extermination President Franklin Delano Roosevelt set down Executive Order 9417, which created the War Refugee Board. This board was in charge of helping the Jewish victims by means of rescue, maintenance, and providing temporary havens for refuge. Despite its designated mission the War Refugee Board was ineffective in Holocaust relief because of poor timing, political games, its lack of refugee shelters, and outside obstacles.

World War II had been raging for almost five years when, on January 22, 1944, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9417 creating the War Refugee Board.¹ The poor timing of the Board's creation was important, in many ways, to why it failed in Holocaust relief. The United States Government received information in August 1942 describing the Nazis intentions to exterminate three and a half to four million Jewish people later that fall.² Even with the knowledge that millions of people would face certain death by "prussic acid," the government ignored this warning, taking no executive action for prevention.³

¹ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Executive Order 9417 Establishing a War Refugee Board," January 22, 1944, primary sources, *The American Experience: America and the Holocaust*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/filmmore/reference/primary/someexec.html>.

² U.S. State Department, "U.S. State Department Receives Information from Switzerland Regarding the Nazi Plan to Murder the Jews of Europe," August 11, 1942, primary sources, *The American Experience: America and the Holocaust*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/filmmore/reference/primary/newsdept.html>.

³ Ibid. The information of the upcoming Jewish extermination came from an inside informant, a prominent German businessman who was held in high esteem by the Jewish World Congress, where this telegram originated. The movement of Jewish people out of occupied France supported the informer's claim, as over 14,000 Jews were removed from German-occupied France in July 1942 and an overwhelming number of 56,000 had been deported overall.

A lot of the slow movement within the United States government stemmed from heavy feelings of anti-Semitism in the United States as a whole. Anti-Semitism had climbed to very high levels in the 1930s and reached its historic peak in the United States in 1944.⁴ There were hundreds of anti-Semitic groups, many of which published pamphlets, posters, and post cards promoting anti-Semitic feelings. This literature could be found almost anywhere from subway stations to schools.⁵

These anti-Semitic feelings were strongly linked with restrictionist ideals of the time. Restrictionists wanted tighter control on immigration, many people wanting to end immigration completely. This idea really began to take hold after World War I and only grew more once the Great Depression set in. People felt that immigrants and/or refugees brought into the United States would only usurp jobs from hard working unemployed Americans.⁶ This viewpoint was widely accepted by the public. Strong currents of nativism reinforced this after World War I, where Americans wanted “100 percent Americanism,” in other words, native workers only.⁷ These feelings were not only widespread among Americans, but were spearheaded by two very influential groups, The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR and The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW. There were at least fifteen other smaller organizations that shared these same restrictionist feelings. All fifteen organizations with the DAR and VFW totaled over two and a half million people wanting tighter restrictions on American borders.⁸

Even with these ideas present with the public, why did President Roosevelt or his advisors not push for Holocaust relief sooner, especially with the knowledge that so many people were dying? Why did over a year go by before anything was done? The main and most prominent reason stems directly from politics. Roosevelt had full support of the American Jews since the New Deal went into place.⁹ In their eyes he could do no wrong. One liberal Congressman at the time compared Roosevelt to a “modern Moses” except unlike the biblical Moses, American Jews never lost their faith in Roosevelt.¹⁰ Since it was not politically necessary to help the Jews suffering at the hands of the Nazis, Roosevelt left the whole issue alone.

⁴ David Wyman, *Abandonment of the Jews* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Sarah E. Peck, “The Campaign for an American Response to the Nazi Holocaust,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 2 (1980): 368-69, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260518>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 369.

Some historians place a lot of blame on the lack of urgency from the American Jews when it came to their suffering brethren overseas. They claim that a push at the Presidential Administration, demanding that they do something to help would have forced Roosevelt's hand in the matter and the War Refugee Board would have come about sooner.¹¹

While prevalent anti-Semitism, restrictionism, and political goals played a large role in the lateness of the War Refugee Board's creation, it was not the only reason. President Roosevelt was determined to end the war with an ultimate Allied victory. With the Allied victory would come the freedom of the Jewish people enslaved and forced into death camps. The problem with that thought process was that Hitler was not waiting for an Allied victory before he began exterminating millions.¹² "[Hitler's] grim executioners, working day and night, reaped a bloody harvest."¹³ This "harvest" goes on while the United States government sat by and did nothing. It was because of these two problems, lack of American Jewish support and the win-first, save later idea, that the Board's creation was not considered until very late in the war. It was this lack of help and relief early on that played a big role in War Refugee Board's inability to be successful.

When President Roosevelt finally gave the executive order it was not because there was an urgency to help the Jewish people, but rather to save face for the government. The Secretary of the United States Treasury, Henry Morgenthau Jr., had never been an advocate of the United States getting involved on behalf of the Jewish victims overseas. In December 1943 he became aware that Breckinridge Long, the Secretary in charge of the Visa Division in the U.S. State Department, had been intentionally dragging his feet with the Riegner plan, which had been created by the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, Switzerland. The plan involved American cooperation to possibly save up 70,000 Romanian and Italian Jews.¹⁴ Long and his subordinates prevented the plan from coming to fruition for over eight months, even after President Roosevelt gave his approval of the plan. Morgenthau was outraged and feared this knowledge would get out and cause rumors of anti-Semitism in the State Department to circulate. With the upcoming year being an election year rumors like that could put a dent in

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 394. Sarah Peck is very adamant in her argument that the American Jews share part of the blame in the slaughter of the six million Jews murdered by the Third Reich.

¹² Monty N. Penkower, "Jewish Organizations and the Creation of the U.S. War Refugee Board," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 450, (July 1980): 139, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1042563>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴ Wyman, *Abandonment of the Jews*, 180.

Roosevelt's American Jewish supporters.¹⁵ It was the fear of a potential scandal and the play of the political game that forced the hand of President, leading to the creation of the War Refugee Board and another reason it was unsuccessful—it was created for the wrong reasons.

Once the Board was under full operation at the end of January 1944, they sought to set an example for the other allied countries in hope they would create similar councils to aid in Holocaust relief. Overall, the government was not interested in helping the Jews, but more for hoping their example would incite others to provide the necessary means for rescuing them. On June 9, 1944, President Roosevelt announced that Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York would be used as a safe haven for persecuted Jews brought in from Italy. Roosevelt was very hesitant about doing this with the heavy feelings of restrictionism in the country, especially with it being an election year. He wanted to tread carefully and not risk any potential blows to the polls. Several members of Congress were adamant about the creation of the shelter and in the end Roosevelt relented.¹⁶

The refugees arrived in August 1944. There were a little less than 1000 in their group, which included men, women, and children. These people were hand-picked from the refugees in Italy where the Allies were now in control. On the whole, the people who were brought to Fort Oswego did not even make up ten percent of the Jewish people who were seeking refuge in Europe. Hungary alone had provided refuge for close to one million Jews over the course of the war.¹⁷ A *New York Times* reporter asked President Roosevelt specifically if the "1000 limitation applied to one group or to the total to be received in the United States" and Roosevelt's reply was "that is all."¹⁸ While this answer was a little unclear at the time, it became clear quickly. The less than 1000 refugees brought to Fort Oswego, New York would be the only Jewish refugees to receive sanctuary in the United States during WWII. Britain never set up a similar agency to help refugees.¹⁹

While the War Refugee Board failed in many aspects, it did make an effort to help the Jewish prisoners in others ways, but time and again it ran into outside obstacles. The Board itself could not just walk into Nazi occupied Europe and help the persecuted people. There were numerous

¹⁵ Peck, "The Campaign for an American Response to the Nazi Holocaust," 386. Morgenthau was a Jewish American.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 388; Associated Press, "1,000 Refugees Will Enter, To Be Housed at Fort Ontario," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), June 10, 1944. <http://ezproxy.twu.edu:2048/docview/106906183?accountid=7102>.

¹⁷ Peck, "The Campaign for an American Response to the Nazi Holocaust," 389.

¹⁸ Associated Press, "1,000 Refugees Will Enter, To Be Housed at Fort Ontario."

¹⁹ Penkower, "Jewish Organizations and the Creation of the U.S. War Refugee Board," 135.

other support groups and countries involved that had to give their support in order for things to happen. In July 1944 the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, Switzerland sent down a first hand account of the horrors going on in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. At the end of the recount the organization requested the United States' help in getting Pope Pius XII to denounce the Nazi's actions. The World Jewish Congress and the War Refugee Board were both certain this would have a great effect on Catholic populations all over Europe, though in spite of the Board's continuous efforts to persuade the Vatican hierarchy to condemn Nazi actions, they refused.²⁰

The World Jewish Congress also requested that the crematoria, gas chambers, and railroads leading to Auschwitz be bombed.²¹ This tactic was highly considered by the War Refugee Board. This action would prevent the Nazis from transporting or disposing of the bodies, which would discourage them from killing any more people until new railways and crematoria could be constructed. The War Department rejected this idea altogether on the grounds that the military would only provide rescue to refugees if it ultimately would aid in allied victory.²²

The blockade policy was another major roadblock for the War Refugee Board. This British policy prevented any allied movement of supplies into German occupied Europe. The idea behind this strategy was an intelligent one. This kept any and all possible supplies out of Nazi hands was important toward the big picture goal in ending the war. This plan did not factor in the people suffering in concentration camps and made it extremely hard for the Allies to move any supplies to Nazi war victims. To circumvent this issue the War Refugee Board provided the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) with \$100,000 in January 1944 for supplies. The ICRC could use this money to buy supplies from places within in Europe. The agency was pleased to receive the money, but at the same time it was difficult for them to locate adequate amounts of supplies for concentration camp relief within Europe, which caused a considerable hang up on both ends. The United States would not provide any supplies because of the blockade policy and the ICRC had trouble locating supplies in Europe

²⁰ Peck, "The Campaign for an American Response to the Nazi Holocaust," 389; Gerhart Riegner, World Jewish Congress, "Summary of Auschwitz Escapees Report," July 5, 1944, primary sources, *The American Experience: America and the Holocaust*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/holocaust/filmmore/reference/primary/bombssummary.html>.

²¹ Riegner, "Summary of Auschwitz Escapees Report" and Wyman, 288.

²² Wyman, *Abandonment of the Jews*, 291.

they could purchase.²³ It took some time, but eventually the ICRC found an adequate amount of supplies in Hungary and got authorization to use the money provided by the War Refugee Board. In March 1944 German troops occupied Hungary, therefore no supply purchases were made.²⁴ At this point the plan to transfer relief food and supplies began to unravel. Both the United States and Great Britain were slow to make any approvals on buying aid from anywhere else and with the blockade there were not many options.²⁵

On top of the blockade the support of Great Britain in our rescue endeavors was very important to the United States. Winston Churchill argued very strongly against any major relief program implementation. He feared that any kind of refugee rescue operations or movement inside German-occupied Europe would ultimately hamper Operation Overlord.²⁶ There was also a certain fear of embarrassment on both Allied sides when it came to rescue operations. Both the United States and Great Britain were adamant about no full-scale plans to rescue any of the Jewish people. This would require troops and supplies for a battle the Allies knew they were certain to lose. Neither of the Allies wanted to take the chance of a significant loss. The repercussions of the loss could have negatively affected their war efforts and that was not a risk they were willing to take.²⁷

While the Allies refused to make any efforts in big rescue operations, they did make requests from neutral nations. Typically their requests had to be bartered and argued over for some time, but in this instance the Swedish complied. In July 1944, the Swedish foreign minister sent Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat, to Budapest, Hungary, the last surviving Jewish community in Europe. Over 400,000 Jewish Budapest residents had been deported from May to June 1944 to Auschwitz concentration camp where they were killed. Wallenberg's presence could not bring those people back, but he did successfully prevent the Nazis from taking over 120,000 Jewish Budapest residents by the time the Soviet Union occupied Hungary in 1945. Wallenberg was very skilled and tactical at

²³ Ronald W. Zweig, "Feeding the Camps: Allied Blockade Policy and the Relief of Concentration Camps in Germany, 1944-1945," *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 832, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639905>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 836.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 836 and Penkower, 136.

²⁶ Zweig, "Feeding the Camps: Allied Blockade Policy and the Relief of Concentration Camps in Germany, 1944-1945," 835. Operation Overlord took place on June 6, 1944 when the United States military, along with Great Britain and Canada, invaded the beaches of Normandy, France. This event is widely known today as D-Day.

²⁷ Penkower, "Jewish Organizations and the Creation of the U.S. War Refugee Board," 135.

thwarting the German plans of deportation by issuing Swedish protective passes that prevented the holders from being deported to death camps. He acquired numerous buildings around Budapest and placed signs in front of them claiming they were Swedish Libraries or some other affiliation with the neutral country.²⁸ At the request of the War Refugee Board and the United States government Wallenberg was able to save more than 100,000 lives, though over 500,000 Hungarian Jewish would die before the war's end.

While big relief operations were off the table, some individualized relief missions were taken on by the board. In May 1944 a member of the War Refugee Board became aware of Mrs. Ida Schleifer's persistent bombardment of the State Department. Mrs. Schleifer and her husband were Romanian Jews who came to New York early in the war and left their children behind with relatives.²⁹ They tried to move their children once they were settled, but by then the United States had entered the war and any attempts to extract the children out of fascist Romania were unsuccessful. The War Refugee Board decided to take on this plea for help as a "test case."³⁰ The Schleifer's weren't the only family members of persecuted people overseas who were requesting sanctuary for their loved ones, but they were established in the United States and were very capable of providing for their children. This meant that there was little chance of the children falling under as "public charges" or becoming wards of the state. In other words, there was little risk for the government if this test case became successful.³¹

Like everything else working with any sort of relief operation in Europe the Board had to go through a long list of steps and deal with all different countries and agencies. British authorities approved six certificates to be charged against the 1939 White Paper Quota so that the children, along with their two guardians could immigrate to Palestine, currently under British control.³² The British offered no safe passage in this regard and the

²⁸ Sandra Elizabeth Boland, "Raoul Wallenberg: His Lessons for the Social Work Profession," *Social Work* 59, no 1 (2014): 88, accessed April 20, 2014, Academic Search Complete. It was difficult for the Nazis to circumvent Wallenberg's efforts. Not only were they raging a full-out war on the world, but since Sweden was a neutral country they were able to claim diplomatic immunity for their places of residence inside German-occupied Europe as well as for their citizens who may reside there.

²⁹ Alexis P. Rubin, "The Schleifer Children: A Holocaust Rescue Case," *American Jewish History* 84, no. 1 (1996): 1, accessed April, 10, 2014, http://ezproxy.twu.edu:2485/journals/american_jewish_history/v084/84.1rubin.html.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 4. One for each of the four children and two for their guardians.

children had to make their own way with the help of illegal agencies. Before they could attempt to move them from Romania, they also had to have approval and authorization of transit visas from neutral Turkey, who was to play the middle stopping point for the family on their way to Palestine.³³ Turkey did not want any more refugees passing through their country than previously agreed and denied this request. The War Refugee Board responded with strong requests that the Turkish government change their mind. They reluctantly complied.³⁴

Just days before the children were able to leave Romania for Turkey, Operation Overlord had come to pass and had been a success for the Allies. Turkey broke its neutral obligations with Germany and expected retaliation from the Nazis. This led the Turkish government to close their ports, thus the Schleifer children were trapped in Romania unable to make passage to Turkey. After several days, Turkey finally gave permission to three refugee boats in Romania for passage to Turkey. There was only room left on one ship for two of the Schleifer children, the two girls ages eleven and seven. The two older boys stayed behind with their guardians. The day after the girls' ship set sail, the ship was attacked by a Nazi submarine. The crew abandoned the ship leaving close to three hundred refugees below deck, most of whom were children. The ship caught fire, burning most of the refugees to death. Only five survived and the two girls were not among them. Further complications proceeded to follow when Romania surrendered to the Soviet Union in late August. It looked as if the remaining children would be forbidden to emigrate after all. Ultimately they gained passage to Turkey and then Palestine in October 1944. It is presumed that they were reunited with their parents at some point after this, but there is no official War Refugee Board documentation on what ultimately happened to the children and their parents.³⁵ The case of the Schleifer children was the only specialized case that the War Refugee Board became involved with and while the Board worked tirelessly in the rescue of the children, the process was long, drawn out, flawed, and mostly unsuccessful as half of the children

"British Palestine Mandate: British White Papers," Jewish Virtual Library, accessed April 15, 2014, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/whitoc.html>. The 1939 White Paper Quota was created by Great Britain, stating that Palestine would neither be a Jewish or Arab state, but instead an independent state that would be fully formed within ten years. They also place a cap of 75,000 Jewish people who could travel to Palestine to live. These six certificates would be charged against this amount so the children and their guardians could have permission to go to Palestine.

³³ A transit visa is a visa that allows a person to pass through a country, but not stay there permanently.

³⁴ Rubin, "The Schleifer Children: A Holocaust Rescue Case," 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

perished. This was further proof for the U.S. and Great Britain that a full-scale rescue of thousands would be a disaster.

The War Refugee Board was, in a big picture view of the war, unsuccessful. It was created barely a year before the end of the war and not even with the good intention of saving the lives of innocent people, but instead to meet political goals in an election year. Much of the Board's efforts were for show with intentions of enticing others instead of actually trying to help people. When the Board did try to make progress with providing provisions or rescuing a few children, they found themselves constantly stalled by outside forces. And while they made requests of neutral countries to send diplomats, the number of people saved, around 121,000 total, amounted to less than two percent of the six million that were slaughtered at the hands of the Nazis.³⁶ At the end of the day the Allied forces prevailed, at least on paper, but with statistics like these, did anyone really win?

³⁶ This number includes the 1,000 people brought to Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York.