

David S. Wyman, Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945

(Pantheon Books, N.Y.), 444 pages, \$19.95

This is already considered the most definitive study of the behavior of America, and of American Jews, during the Holocaust. The author is a professor of history, and, a Protestant, has served as head of the Judaic studies program at the University of Massachusetts, as well as an advisor to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council.

But even this book does not lay to rest all the relevant questions. It is again as though the Holocaust, even in its American reverberations, is too profound and too tragic to be encompassed by the intellect.

By June of 1942, there was documented proof in the U. S. that the Nazis were killing Jews by the hundreds of thousands. By August of that year, there was documented proof in the U. S. that the Nazis planned to exterminate the Jews. But it was November of 1943 before Congress was prepared to pass a resolution calling for "a plan of immediate action designed to save the surviving Jewish people of Europe from extinction at the hands of Nazi Germany." And it was January of 1944 before President Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board to implement such a plan.

Why was there such a terrible lag of time? And why, from the very beginning of the Nazi oppression, and even after the creation of the War Refugee Board, was there so much resistance to measures which might have saved some Jewish lives? Why, as late as October 1943, did we hear public statements like those of Congressman William Elmer of Missouri, who warned Congress of "a determined and well-financed movement to admit all the oppressed Hitler-persecuted people of Germany and other European countries into our country."

Wyman documents such shocking and callous instances. He cites as reasons for the

sentiment against immigration: high unemployment, nativism and anti-semitism. Within the bureaucracies of both England and the U.S., there were officials who preferred to stall rescue rather than undertake immigration.

But that doesn't explain everything. There were, after all, many American non-Jewish leaders, as Wyman points out, who publicly worked for rescue and immigration, after they became convinced of what was happening. (The slowness to believe in the Holocaust by even well-meaning people was another phenomenon that still requires more exploration). William Randolph Hearst and his newspapers, the heads of the AFL and CIO, the federal council of churches and many others came into the fight for rescue and immigration at various stages. (In Cincinnati, a hundred Christian ministers held a rally). So why didn't more happen?

Out of Wyman's book, there emerges another factor: the belief that everything else had to be subordinated to the war against the Nazis. The language in the Executive order creating the War Refugee Board, instructed it "to afford victims all possible relief and assistance consistent with the successful prosecution of the war." (My emphasis). Among others, Eleanor Roosevelt told Jewish leaders that the priority for American resources must be the war against the Nazis. There was, according to Wyman, some Jewish sentiment along the same lines. He writes that the leadership of the Jewish Agency in Palestine "concluded in 1942 that almost no useful rescue action was possible. They decided that nearly all the limited funds available should go into the development of Palestine."

But, at the very least, many American leaders betrayed great insensitivity by taking this accounting approach. It is true that the war against the Nazi could not be downgraded. It was even possible to say that by ending the war in 1945 rather than in 1946, more Jews could be saved than by any other action that could be taken. But there are times when logical priorities are not enough. There were times when the

saving of even a relatively few lives would have been worth any risk. There were times when even a symbolic act such as the bombing of death camps would have been worth any risk. Those would have been civilizing acts, in contrast with the "abandonment" which seemed to take place - whether it was an abandonment by ill will, or an abandonment by cold logic. Wyman's book skirts this issue, but then, he is only an historian.

As for the behavior of American Jews, a companion piece should be read with this book: the article by that distinguished Jewish historian, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, entitled "Indicting American Jews" in the June, 1983 issue of Commentary. She cautions against our becoming accomplices to that old ant-semitic trick of finally blaming the Jews for all the evil that befalls the Jews.

The "apathy" of American Jews during that period has often been highly exaggerated. The chief crime of the Jews during that period was that they were too politically ineffective to accomplish even the limited goals suggested above. Now, it is worth while to quote one paragraph from Wyman:

"To read through the archives and publications of American Jewish organizations in the period is to journey through a landscape of continual fighting. Zionist organizations regularly clashed with...non-Zionist bodies...Zionists feuded bitterly among themselves...Orthodox non-Zionists quarreled with each other. Acrimony interfered with cooperation on rescue between the Joint Distribution Committee and Jewish organizations that claimed the JDC was holding back funds. Twice between 1942 and 1945, power struggles within the United Jewish Appeal nearly destroyed that combined fund-raising mechanism. Little wonder, then, that an early War Refugee Board memorandum...warned that one of our problems is to get all the groups, particularly the Jewish groups, to work together and to stop fighting among themselves."

Never again?