

AMERICAN JEWISH FAILURE AND THE HOLOCAUST

Everyone seems to be missing the main failure of American Jews with respect to the Holocaust.

What, after all, was the main thing America could have done to save significant numbers of European Jews? It would have been to establish a strong military force and tell Hitler that we would not stand for expansion. Hitler depended on that expansion. It would have been to enter the war earlier to halt that expansion. Only in those ways could the bulk of European Jews have been saved.

What was the main thing American Jews could have done -- the only thing they could have done -- to save the bulk of European Jews? It would have been to act as a political force to help establish a strong military posture in this country, and to get the U.S. into the war earlier.

But American Jews failed to organize to do that, for a couple of reasons. In the first place, as the initial reports from the Goldberg Commission hint, Jews were not well organized for any kind of political action. There was no absence of direct action. I remember one angry protest rally of about half a million (mostly) Jews in the streets of New York around Madison Square Garden in 1938, when every mounted policeman in the city was brought out to try to maintain order. It was a powerful demonstration. There were others. I also remember how bands of Jewish youths went out to physically attack Nazi Bund members who tried to sell their newspapers on the streets.

But direct action is useful only when it is combined with political action, especially in this country. And the Jewish community was weak and in disarray on the political front. When a government conference was held on the crucial refugee policy, a number of different Jewish groups came with a number of different memos on the subject. That kind of disunity always lets politicians off the hook, no matter how many demonstrations there are on the street.

We are not in that kind of disarray today -- with all the national organizations belonging to the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, along with over a hundred local Jewish community relations councils to which all groups belong, all backed by AIPAC and the PACs. But we were in that kind of disunity during the 1930s, and that was our high crime.

But the substance of the crime was our disunity and failure on the score of getting this country involved in facing down Hitler militarily, early on. Partly that was because of our organizational disunity in general. Partly it was because

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many American Jews were too insecure to publicly oppose the strong isolationist temper of the country. Partly it was because many Jews were caught up in a political ideology which prevented them from supporting a strong American military posture. Thousands of the Jewish youth who were vociferous participants in the anti-Nazi rally around Madison Square Garden were during the same period swearing to the "Oxford Peace Oath" -- that they would never take up arms for the U.S. And Hitler laughed.

There were further American Jewish failures which tragically cost a certain number of Jewish lives, owing to lack of unity and lack of political organization. But the main failure, which cost the bulk of Jewish (and other) lives, was our failure to organize for an American foreign and military policy which could have saved those lives.