

Beyond the Nazi realm

Another type of agent might have taken significant rescue action – the governments of Allied and neutral countries beyond the Nazi realm. Those governments had periodically protested persecution of German Jews before the beginning of mass killing, although on the whole they had shown only the most grudging willingness to provide sanctuary for those fleeing the Nazi terror and had taken little notice of the plight of Jews in other countries within the Nazi orbit. From late 1941 and throughout 1942 reports of mass killings reached the Soviets, the West, and outlying areas through a variety of channels. Recipients of those reports, however, faced even greater problems of imagination and analysis than did people who experienced the Nazi regime up close: officials in wartime London or Washington, working in the familiar, relatively tranquil surroundings of St James's Park or the Capitol Mall, could hardly grasp, as historian Bernard Wasserstein put it, that 'the agony of European Jewry was enacted in ... a grim twilight world where their conventional moral code did not apply' (Wasserstein, 1979: 357). Thus the Bund Report of May 1942 does not appear to have had much lasting effect upon the consciousness of Allied or neutral policymakers. Only in December 1942, following Polish underground courier Jan Karski's arrival in London, did the three principal Allies and the exile governments of nine occupied countries officially note and condemn the Germans' 'bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination'.

Karski brought to London and Washington a demand from Jewish resistance organisations in Poland to 'adjust [the strategy of war] to include the rescue of a fraction of the ... Jewish people' (Karski, 1944: 328). On behalf of the Jewish leaders he asked the Allies to negotiate exchanges of Jews for German prisoners or for ransom, to drop leaflets from the air upon German cities informing the German people what their government was doing to Europe's Jews, and to send supplies (especially blank passports) that might help Jews escape or survive in hiding. Other Jewish spokesmen outside occupied Europe called upon Allies and neutrals to open their gates to Jewish escapees requiring temporary asylum, to warn Germans that the deportation and murder of Jews would be punished after the war, to create special government bodies to explore ongoing rescue opportunities, and to bomb the killing centre at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the rail lines leading to it.

For the most part, these demands were either ignored or rebuffed.

Following their December 1942 statement the Allies took no further official joint public notice of the German killing programme. An Anglo-American conference on refugees was held at Bermuda in April 1943, but no action stemmed from it. A February 1943 Romanian proposal to release 70,000 Jews from Transnistria in return for payment was rejected by the British and US governments, as was an April 1944 German offer to exchange a million Jews, including all the Jews of Hungary, for 10,000 trucks and amounts of various foodstuffs. No Allied or neutral country expressed readiness to take in large numbers of Jewish exchangees or escapees (except Sweden with regard to Jews from other Scandinavian countries); in particular, British restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine were not lifted, and Jews attempting to make their way to the country were intercepted and imprisoned. Auschwitz was not bombed. To be sure, the US War Refugee Board, established in January 1944, catalysed the return of the survivors of the Transnistrian camps to Old Romania the following March and helped generate the international pressure that prompted Horthy's cessation of the Hungarian deportations in July. The board was also active in searching for havens for the minority of Europe's Jews that remained alive in the last year of the war, and it underwrote the mission of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg to Budapest, through which some 20,000 Jews were rescued from deportation with the aid of special protective passports issued by the Swedish and other governments. However, even its chairman characterised the board's activity as too little, too late.¹⁰² Analysis

Historians have advanced various explanations for the relative paucity of significant Allied and neutral rescue action. Some have stressed faulty perception, reiterating that the enormity and unprecedented nature of the Nazi crime prevented real understanding of the threat facing Jews (even after reliable reports of mass killing had been confirmed) and suggesting

that had the shock of the news not been so great, Allied and neutral policymakers would have accorded rescue high priority. Others, in contrast, have argued that Jewish matters would in any case not have been a central concern, whether because of the single-minded attention the combatants needed to devote to winning the war, the lack of Jewish political leverage in a situation where free-world Jewish groups would have to support the Allied cause enthusiastically in any case, or personal ill will towards Jews on the part of certain officials in key positions. In fact, claimed historian Walter Laqueur, it was precisely the low priority that Allied bureaucrats gave the Jewish situation that allowed them to pass lightly over reports of mass murder without seriously considering their implications.

In the end, though, it appears that the Allied and neutral governments did not do more to extricate European Jews from their mortal peril because the only reason that could be adduced for them to do so was a moral one. Allies fighting a bloody and protracted war that demanded the full measure of their concentration and resources, and neutrals striving to avoid their own possible occupation, found accession to such a moral argument an unaffordable luxury. No country could see any compelling political, strategic, or legal reason to 'adjust [the strategy of war] to include' the rescue of Jews who were not its citizens. What Helen Fein called 'the organizational incapacity and unreadiness among nation-states to protect members of other nation-states' made rescue from beyond the Nazi realm a most improbable expectation (Fein, 1979: 166).