

HISTORIANS, POLITICIANS AND MORALITY: AMERICA AND THE HOLOCAUST

By Michael N. Dobkowski

Very little was done to rescue Jews during the Holocaust; that is a tragic fact. But how are we, today, to interpret that fact? Richard Breitman correctly pointed out in a recent article in *Dimensions* ("American Inaction During the Holocaust," Vol. 8, No. 2) that it would be expedient, even cathartic, to blame the world for its lack of forthright action in helping the targets of Nazism, and to oversimplify complicated issues by claiming that anti-Semitism afflicted the principal Allied nations and their leaders during the war years. Breitman argues persuasively, however, that this approach is too narrow, "that not all opposition to humanitarian action during the Holocaust was anti-Semitic in nature." Fairness demands attention to context, the political climate and the practical possibilities of action. Henry L. Feingold, in the same issue of *Dimensions* ("Roosevelt and Europe's Jews: 'Deceit and Indifference,' or Politics and Powerlessness?"), takes the point further. As another "realistic" voice, he takes issue with the point of view of the historian David Wyman and others, who have meticulously developed the argument that more should and could have been done to assist Jews during the Holocaust. Feingold concludes that Wyman "... was writing about the Roosevelt administration and American Jewry, not as they were, but as he felt they should have been."

It is certainly true that historians scrutinizing America's actions in regard to Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe need to take into account that the U.S. was involved in a total war with the Third Reich. They need to be less accusatory and more cognizant of the limitations of power and the constraints against action that existed during World War II. Historians need to recognize that all the rescue and relief plans proposed to the Roosevelt administration "had only limited prospects of success."¹ Both Breitman and Feingold believe that the failure to do more to assist Europe's imperiled Jews is, of course, symbolically important, but the actual effects of such failure should not be exaggerated.

Michael N. Dobkowski is professor of religious studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. He is the editor of Jewish American Voluntary Organizations, and coeditor, with Isidor Wallimann, of Genocide In Our Time: Radical Perspectives on the Rise of Fascism in Germany, 1919-1945; Genocide and the Modern Age, and Towards the Holocaust.

*Pragmatism,
moral imperatives,
and the study of
history.*



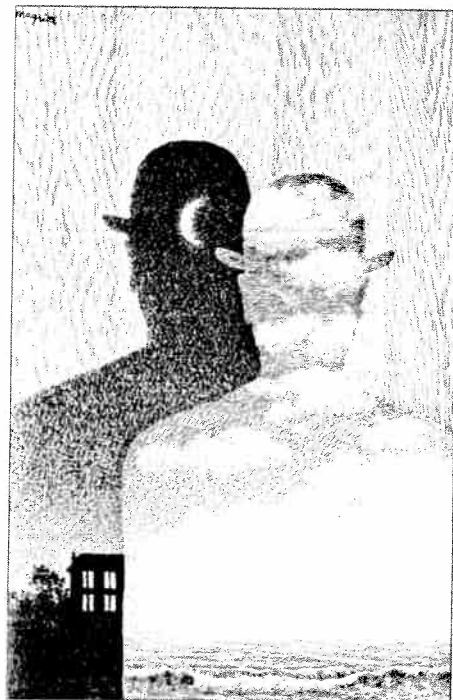
*de Chirico, Giorgio. The Enigma of a Day. 1914. Oil on canvas.
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It is really on this last point that I would like to depart from these two eminent scholars and respectfully submit that the debate among historians of the Thirties and Forties should be, in fact, about historicity, about the real consequences — both practical and moral — of choosing pragmatism over humanitarianism. Breitman, Feingold and others make a strong case for why little was done to save the victims of Nazism, and they correctly point out that we will never know whether alternative policies would have saved lives. But it is legitimate, necessary, to ask: What does our inaction say about America as a nation? What does it reveal about Americans as a people that we apparently did not care enough to make the saving of Jewish lives a principal objective of World War II? Were there reasons, other than the ones cited by Breitman and Feingold, why the saving of Jewish lives was not a priority? In the end, what was done or not done to save Jews prompts us to explore momentous moral, political and social issues, issues that inevitably intersect with, and illuminate, each other. Walter Benjamin noted that there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present. The past has a claim on the present and that claim cannot be dismissed or settled cheaply by present generations resorting to “facts” to excuse irresponsible behavior in earlier times. Benjamin recognized this obligation even before the onset of the catastrophe of which he himself was to become a victim.

Today, with the attention of the West once again concerned with genocides, real or potential, and with public debates occurring about the appropriate foreign obligations of the United States, it is important for Americans to reflect on the claim the past has on the present, to think about memory and about moral responsibility. As with a nightmare we hoped would never return but has, we are afflicted with a troubling sense of *déjà vu*. In Europe there is a resurgence of various extreme nationalisms, a search for and celebration of pure ethnic identity that has led to the horrors in Bosnia and racial violence in Germany. We have seen, tragically, this past year that ideas can kill, that apathy and tolerance of hatred can have deadly consequences; we have seen it in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Gaza, Sarajevo. We have seen it in Oklahoma City.

Something utterly profound and

unbelievable happened 50 years ago. What the death camps in Europe meant was that nothing could ever be sacred again. In the twentieth century it has been revealed that human beings are capable of demolishing every imaginable boundary. George Steiner, for one, has written eloquently about the demonic impulses inherent in modern culture, about the relationship between barbarism and our civilization. He has cited the Holocaust specifically as a prime example of what he calls the “suicidal impulse in Western civilization.” The Holocaust, Steiner has also pointed out, represents a voluntary exile



Magritte, René. *The Thought Which Sees*. 1965. Graphite.

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from the garden, a second fall from grace. “Needing Hell we have learned how to build and run it on earth.... No skill holds greater menace.... In locating Hell above ground, we have passed out of the major order and symmetries of Western civilization.” Never has there been a phenomenon as unexpected and complex as the Holocaust: at no other time have so many lives been extinguished so swiftly and by so potent a combination of technological and bureaucratic ingenuity, fanaticism and cruelty.

The Shoah raises many significant moral issues because of its scope, the unprecedented involvement of the legal and administrative systems of the Reich

and its allies, the ideological passion of the Nazis, the horrible treatment meted out to Holocaust victims, the varied physical and psychological techniques used to dehumanize the victims (to literally turn them into tattooed arms, into objects to be burned as refuse), and the relative indifference of the Allied nations in the face of this unprecedented tragedy. This is the universe we must keep in mind when evaluating what America chose to do or not do during the Holocaust. Franz Kafka observed that people can draw back from the suffering of others, and drawing back may be in accordance with human nature; but, he added, perhaps this very retreat is the one suffering we could have avoided.

Morality is not innate. There are times and places when it disappears. These moments are preeminently important because they are the diabolical reversed image of the holiness of the Judeo-Christian God who is traditionally understood to be a purposeful actor in history. Fifty years ago, it was primarily vile killers who acted.

Morality does not, cannot compel people to behave in certain ways. Men and women have choices and they must be held accountable for the choices they make — or don't make. How is it that those who are indifferent to evil deeds, but not actual participants in them, often end up being implicated in the very horrors they have tried to ignore? Can it be that indifference in this kind of situation, ostensibly passive, harbors a covert malign activism? The act of turning toward someone with a weapon is clearly an example of violence; can the same be said for the act of turning away from someone in desperate need of lifesaving assistance? Certainly, the least that can be said about America's behavior during the Holocaust was that its inaction was an act. This was most likely caused by an active resolve on the part of too many government officials and members of the public *not to feel*. We need not accede to Feingold's plea that we view “the role of witnesses in a historical rather than a moral setting.” Nor are we obliged to accept his designation of those who bring a moral consciousness to historical study as “moral athletes” — individuals who, to his way of thinking, dogmatically judge the past by quixotic ethical principles. (Such benighted moral athletes are compared by Feingold, to their detriment, of course, to “historians,” who, he claims, are “better equipped to make a

reasonable determination regarding what the possibilities for certain actions were.") I side squarely with those historians like Wyman who bring a little moral sensitivity to their reasoned analysis. We need not lower "our expectations to a more realistic level."⁷³ History — and historical interpretation — must be grounded in a moral imperative.

Detailed scholarly reconstruction of the events relating to the extermination of the Jews and the response of the Allies is now quite accessible to anyone interested in these subjects. One thinks immediately of the work of Wyman, Feingold, Breitman, Yehuda Bauer, Martin Gilbert, Deborah Lipstadt, Monty Penkower, Bernard Wasserstein and many others. We know a great deal about the inner workings of the Final Solution. And we know what the Allies knew about the Third Reich's genocidal policies, when they knew it, and what they did and did not do about those policies. The governments of the Soviet Union, the United States and Britain did not show any pronounced interest in the fate of those Jews threatened by the Nazis. The first reports about the Final Solution reached Britain and America at an early date, certainly by 1942. News of the massacres by the *Einsatzgruppen*, teams of mobile killers that operated in Eastern Europe, reached the Soviet government within days of the first mass slayings (they began right after the German invasion of the U.S.S.R. in June 1941); the Western powers knew of the slaughter soon after. Information about Nazi genocide was known in the highest echelons of the Allies' military forces, intelligence circles and governments, but it was considered low priority.

Some Allied officials doubted the veracity of the reports concerning the Holocaust, believing they were too fantastic and smacked of propaganda. Other Allied functionaries believed the accounts of mass killings but refused to support policies that would provide large-scale assistance to Europe's Jews because, they often claimed, rescue efforts and their corollary, publicizing the plight of Hitler's victims, were distractions from the war effort. One can legitimately ask whether there was adequate sympathy in the Allied governments for European Jewry. Behind the Allies' refusal to take action in behalf of Jews (e.g., bombing the death camps or, at least, the rail lines leading to them), or to offer significant sanctuary that might have saved the lives of tens

of thousands, one can now observe a terrible mixture of bureaucratic distancing, military rigidity, amoral political calculation, anti-Semitism, and just plain inertia.

Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, apparently showed more interest in, and compassion for, the targets of the Final Solution than did the U.S. President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, but neither really acted forthrightly to stop the Nazi murder machine from operating. The American and British publics were informed through the media about the Reich's brutality, but they were little moved. Many felt little sympathy for foreign Jews when their own kin were dying. Jewish leaders in Britain and the United States also failed to act aggressively on the evidence: because they did not believe, or did not want to believe, the reports of genocide, because some of them felt insecure about their own positions in America and the United Kingdom, they failed to adequately publicize the atrocities. When these leaders finally did begin to react to the catastrophe, they were confused and conflicted as to what to do. There was a crisis of leadership within the Jewish communities in Britain and the U.S., and a feeling of helplessness afflicted most ordinary American and British Jews.

Despite the fact that we currently possess a mass of information about the Holocaust, there remains an opaqueness, a mystery, at the heart of the event. The Holocaust does not lend itself to easy explanation. It does not inform in the conventional sense. The Holocaust perplexes and exhausts; it frightens and defies. It leaves us with many more questions than answers. How could Europe's most cultured people have devised the most efficient mass-murder operation in history? How could "ordinary" people have willingly participated in genocide? Why did so many people faithfully support Hitler even after it became clear that Germany had lost the war? Why, apparently, did so few of the victims of the Final Solution resist? Why did the world at large remain indifferent to their plight? Why was it so difficult, as John K. Roth asks, "for 'good' people to move from knowledge of what the Nazis were doing, to comprehension of the significance of Nazi activities, and then to action aimed at thwarting Nazi success?"⁷⁴

Nazi killers were perfect killers, as Elie Wiesel has often remarked, because

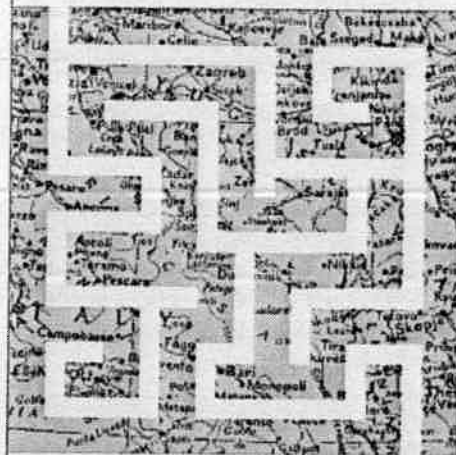
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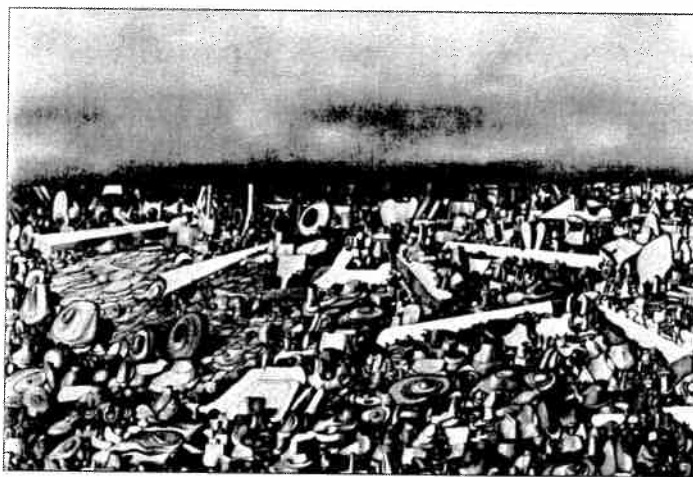
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they had been directed by their culture and political system to nullify the essential humanity of their victims. Moreover, as the killing process became more technological and bureaucratic, it became simpler to implement because the murderers were distanced from their victims. But in the end, it may be the case, horrible as it is to contemplate, that the Holocaust was made possible by the numbing of the victims and bystanders. The victims were benumbed — “perfect” targets — because they were Jews burdened with a long history of nonresistance to oppressors and because they didn’t have the appropriate resources to mobilize against the Nazis. But Jews were also ideal prey because they lacked possibility and hope, a sense that the world wanted them to survive, the belief that there was some place, somewhere, to escape to, a belief that people really cared. This deep disillusionment on the part of European Jewry during the Holocaust was the result of the silence, indifference and active hostility that they confronted almost everywhere. It must also be noted that the relative nonintervention of the West in the Nazis’ genocide contributed to the despair of Hitler’s victims. It could have been otherwise. There was nothing inevitable or deterministic in any of this. Given motivation, and action on the part of the Allied powers — difficult but possible — the history of the Holocaust might have been different, even if only for a relative few. But it was not to be.

Why were so many basically decent people so callous about the plight of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe? Apathy about moral issues is certainly an age-old problem, but it may be a particularly acute one in the modern world. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, the founders of sociology, recognized that the modern division of labor and bureaucratization of society altered, and even fundamentally threatened, the moral nature of individuals. They realized that this division of labor, and bureaucratization, contributed to progress and efficiency. But they also saw that they inhibited people from accepting responsibility to act in a morally appropriate way, by coaxing them to retreat into certain specialized roles — societal and professional — and to address broad social issues solely from the limited, wary, self-protective vantage point of those roles. In today’s society, we are no

longer usually even asked to concern ourselves with the consequences of actions outside our specific — invariably narrow — spheres of responsibility. “Someone else will take care of it,” we remark, trying to rationalize our behavior. Ordinary people in the 1930s and ’40s also abrogated their personal responsibilities, by relying on others — “experts” and leaders — to cope with the crisis besetting Europe’s Jews. When those experts and leaders failed in their ethical duty to the Reich’s victims, the consequences were tragic.

The Nazis were guilty of what the German philosopher (and mentor of Hannah



Tanguy, Yves.
Multiplication of the Arcs.
1954. Oil on canvas.

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Arendt) Karl Jaspers called criminal guilt. Those who were directly involved in the planning, preparation, or implementation of genocide were criminally guilty. Those who stood by and did little to assist the targets of Nazi barbarousness — the Allied nations, for instance — were, Jaspers asserted, metaphysically guilty. “There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each coresponsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty.”

Americans, who like to think of themselves as decent people, have never really been able to justify or explain away their nation’s unwillingness to vigorously help Jews during the Holocaust. Our understanding today of what we did and did not do continues to provoke strong feelings, feelings that help shape our citizens’ vision of their country.

Could the Allies have done more to save Jews? The answer is, obviously, yes. David Wyman has cataloged many things that could have been done: pressuring the

Axis satellites to release the Jews within their borders to Allied or neutral territory; pressuring neutral countries like Spain and Switzerland to offer refuge to Jews; devising and supporting escape plans; sending food and supplies; disseminating information about the killing centers; bombing the death camps, and the rail lines leading to the camps. The Allies, especially the United States and Britain, could have accepted a great many more refugees than they did. (The British also refused to open Palestine to unlimited Jewish immigration in order to maintain their strong ties with Arab leaders.) The

United States, during the war years, refused to liberalize its restrictive quota system — the Johnson-Reed National Origins Act of 1924, which provided for an annual immigration of 153,879 people, based on the proportional representation of the respective nationalities comprising the United States population in 1890.

What the Jews of Europe needed during the Holocaust was decisive leadership in the White House. They needed a President willing to take political risks in order to push the issues of rescue and relief to the foreground of foreign policy and public debate. Franklin D. Roosevelt did not exercise such leadership. And notwithstanding all the pragmatic reasons militating against helping Europe’s menaced Jews, the course of action Roosevelt chose must be evaluated not only in historical terms, but as a moral issue. Leaders must be held accountable for what they do, but also for the consequences of what they choose not to do. That is what leadership is all about. When the news of Nazi Germany’s genocidal activities reached the President by early 1942, it may have

shocked him; but he was not about to endanger the Congressional coalition he needed to support his domestic agenda and his major foreign policy concerns by pushing for changes in the immigration laws, or by making rescue a high priority of his administration.

To those pleading for help for Europe's Jews during the war, administration officials responded again and again that defeating the Reich had to be the nation's main priority, that that was the only way to end Hitler's slaughter of the Jews. That argument rang a bit hollow 50 years ago and it still does. To be candid, for too many Americans and their leaders during the war, Jewish lives were, simply, not worth "hindering" the war effort for; Jewish refugees, for many American politicians, government officials and ordinary citizens, were political liabilities, mouths to feed, unemployed workers, importers of alien ideas, a European, not an American, problem. Clearly, if the American government offered little help to refugees from 1933 to 1945, it did as much as most

Americans wanted it to do — and, regrettably, considerably more than many desired.

Walter Laqueur has noted, about America's failure of will to help Nazism's victims:

Paralyzing fear on the one hand and, on the contrary, reckless optimism on the other; disbelief stemming from a lack of experience or imagination or genuine ignorance or a mixture of some or all of these things. In some cases the motives were creditable, in others damnable. In some instances moral categories are simply not applicable and there were also cases which defy understanding to this day.⁶

Of course, there were compelling reasons — substantial military and political impediments to action — for not aiding those brutalized by the Reich. In the final analysis, however, the United States failed to assist European Jewry because there just were not enough Americans who truly believed that their country should be a haven for the oppressed; there were not

enough Americans who cared about Europe's beleaguered Jews. On that level, the moral level, America's behavior is explained quite simply. The rabbi and philosopher Emil Fackenheim once asked the distinguished Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg why the Nazis attempted to murder all the Jews. Hilberg responded: "They did it because they wanted to do it."⁷ Why didn't America do more to save the Jews? It didn't, I would say, because it decided not to. We all live with the consequences of that decision. □

1 Henry L. Feingold, *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*. Syracuse University Press, 1995, pp. 9-10.

2 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*. Yale University Press, 1971, pp. 46, 56.

3 Feingold, *Bearing Witness*, pp. 15-16.

4 John K. Roth, "Comment: Foreboding and Melancholy," in L. H. Legters, ed., *Western Society After the Holocaust*. Westview Press, 1983, p. 25.

5 Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*. 1947, p. 32.

6 Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret*. 1980, p. 208.

7 Emil Fackenheim, "The Holocaust and Philosophy," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 82, 10 (October 1985), pp. 505-514.

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