



Richard Breitman, Allan J. Lichtman. *FDR and the Jews*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. 464 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05026-6.



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Revisiting FDR's Response to the Holocaust

The appearance of a new book about President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's policies concerning European Jews during the 1930s and the Holocaust raises the question: what else can be said that has not already been published? One wonders what can be added to the significant body of existing literature documenting FDR's policy on the issue of Jewish refugees. Was Roosevelt indifferent and did he in fact turn his back to the flight of European Jews during the Nazi regime? Or, as some have argued, including the authors of this book, did FDR in the long run stop the Nazis "from extending the Holocaust," and did he do everything feasible to rescue European Jews? Given these two differing perspectives that have dominated the research, Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman take a different approach. In their own words, they "seek to capture the contemporary reality of FDR," especially domestic and political conditions that determined his attitude toward European Jewry (p. 2).

Breitman and Lichtman divide the president's behavior into four phases. "Only during his first term," they contend, was he "a bystander to Nazi persecution." Dur-

ing these early years, Roosevelt "put political realism above criticism of Nazi Germany and efforts to admit persecuted Jews into the United States"; but at the same time, he was wrestling with the humanitarian imperative to help Jewish victims (p. 3). In their view, FDR was privately sympathetic to the Jews but was prevented by domestic and political pressures from doing more for them. Determining Roosevelt's private feelings is a significant challenge for historians, since he wrote no memoirs and left few revealing letters, notes, or memos. One unfortunate consequence is that Breitman and Lichtman too often use such terms as "apparently" or "it seems" in place of actual evidence, in order to advance their thesis that in the end, Roosevelt was the best president for the Jews.

Although well written, readable, and certainly interesting, *FDR and the Jews* does not reveal significant new research. Moreover, the authors' tendency to go out of their way to present Roosevelt favorably raises concerns of possessing a certain bias and made me wonder whether their approach is politically charged. Instead of reaching their conclusions based on new documents, the

authors from the start analyze each event even slightly relevant to Jews from the assumption that Roosevelt was good for the Jews. Such an approach ends up sounding more like a defense attorney's plea than an analysis by objective historians. Every time they concede something FDR did that was unfavorable to the Jews, the authors insist there were mitigating circumstances. Yet every time something beneficial to the Jews happened, the president is given credit. Each encounter with Jews is used as evidence that Roosevelt was in fact sympathetic with the Jewish plight, but unfortunately could not do much due to domestic considerations.

For example, Roosevelt refused to issue a joint statement about German Jewry with outgoing president Herbert Hoover, but that was because FDR "sought a fresh start for his presidency" (p. 43). FDR declined to publicly mention German Jews in 1933 because he was trying to avoid "jeopardizing international economic negotiations and disarmament efforts" (p. 58). Throughout his first term, Roosevelt was silent regarding European Jewish refugees, because he "understandably" could not risk "expending precious political capital, or aggravating religious issues" (p. 64). When immigration from Germany to the United States increased slightly in 1937 (although the quota was still less than 50 percent filled), that was because FDR "broke the bureaucratic logjam" (p. 94).

While working on my book about U.S. consuls and their attitude toward Jewish immigration pleas (*In Search of Refuge: Jews and US Consuls in Nazi Germany 1933-1941* [2001]), I could not find any presidential evidence that Roosevelt "broke the bureaucratic logjam" concerning immigration in 1937, as Breitman and Lichtman claim. The authors themselves do not actually cite any documents showing what FDR supposedly did. In fact, they concede: "FDR left no presidential fingerprints" on that year's increase (p. 95).

The tragic saga of the *St. Louis* brought the issue of German Jewish refugees to a head. On May 27, 1939, the *St. Louis*, a ship of the Hamburg-American Line with 937 refugees aboard (nearly all of them Jewish), docked at Havana harbor but was denied landing. Among the passengers, 743 had applied for American visas in Germany and intended to wait in Havana until their turn came up. In spite of major efforts by American Jewish organizations, the ship was compelled to leave the port. Meanwhile, the State Department's Avra Warren ordered the U.S. consul-general in Havana "not to intervene in the matter," emphasizing "that word had come from the White House." This statement is cited in Richard Breit-

man and Alan Kraut's *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945*;[1] yet now Breitman and Lichtman claim that the Roosevelt administration was deeply concerned about the fate of the *St. Louis* passengers (pp. 138-139). They point out that in November 1938, Cuban leader Fulgencio Batista came to the United States to discuss the American tariff on sugar imported from Cuba. The tariff was indeed lowered, and the authors argue that "Roosevelt or someone close to him seems to have expressed the hope that Cuba would be able to accommodate additional Jewish refugees" (p. 134). "Roosevelt or someone close to him"—Who? "Seems to have"—Did he or didn't he? Why are there no statements in the diplomatic correspondence during the *St. Louis* crisis alluding to this alleged trade-off of lower tariffs for Jewish refugees? And why were the *St. Louis* passengers turned away if Cuba had made such a deal with FDR?

Breitman and Lichtman repeatedly make it seem as if any effort by Roosevelt to help the Jews would have led to some catastrophe for him, or for American interests, or for world peace. Thus, for example, Roosevelt's silence regarding German Jewry in the 1930s is defended on the grounds that he was trying to "avert war" with Adolf Hitler (p. 58). FDR's response to *Kristallnacht* was so limited because "Roosevelt expected a war and believed he would have to run again to save the country," and helping Jewish victims would have caused his defeat (p. 124). They repeat, without any disagreement, FDR's claim that a pro-Zionist congressional resolution would set off mass Arab violence against Allied soldiers in the Middle East, causing "the death of 100,000 soldiers" (p. 257).

Surprisingly, Breitman and Lichtman portray FDR as a vigorous opponent of the British White Paper, which closed Palestine to most Jewish refugees. They emphasize that in a meeting with two Jewish leaders in 1944, the president authorized them to state publicly his view that "the American government had never given any approval to the White Paper of 1939." American Jews hailed this as the "first official American statement expressing explicit disapproval of the White Paper," the authors report (p. 257). There are obvious questions, but *FDR and the Jews* does not address them. If FDR was so opposed to the White Paper, why did he use Jewish leaders to express alleged views, instead of saying so himself? Why did the first "official" statement on the subject come only in 1944, five years after the White Paper was first proclaimed? Instead, Breitman and Lichtman conclude by declaring that the statement of disapproval in 1944 "accurately reflected FDR's views ever since early 1939" (p. 257). As usual, their focus is on Roosevelt's alleged pri-

vate sentiments, not on whether he did anything about them.

No less surprising is the authors' assertion that it was Roosevelt who stopped the Nazis "from extending the Holocaust" from Europe to the Middle East and North Africa. The Nazis "planned to annihilate the region's Jews," they write, but then FDR sent the British forces in North Africa a shipment of Sherman tanks, which had "greater range and firepower than Rommel's," and as a result "the mass slaughter of Jews" in Palestine and North Africa was averted (pp. 260-261). Without FDR, then, there would have been "no Jewish State, no Israel" (p. 318).

This is not a new argument; in fact, Breitman and Lichtman are not even using new language. In the pages of the newspaper *The Forward* two years ago, former New York City district attorney Robert Morgenthau and law professor Frank Tuerkheimer wrote that it was Roosevelt who stopped the Nazis' plan for an "extension of the Holocaust" from Europe to the Middle East. Their "annihilation plan" for the region's Jews was stymied when FDR sent the British forces in North Africa a shipment of Sherman tanks and as a result the mass "murder of Jews in North Africa and Western Asia" was averted. Without FDR, then, "the State of Israel would not exist."^[2] Although the Sherman tanks argument is not original, it is typical of how *FDR and the Jews* reads: anything Roosevelt did that inadvertently or unintentionally helped some Jew in some way is presented as evidence that FDR was the Jews' savior. A logical, strategic U.S. shipment of weapons to an ally fighting in North Africa, having nothing to do with Jews or the future Jewish state, is transformed by Breitman and Lichtman into the salvation of hundreds of thousands of Jews and even the creation of the State of Israel.

In the same vein, the establishment of the War Refugee Board is presented in a way that credits Roosevelt, and pictures him as a hero of the Jews, while the documents tell a different story. The president did indeed establish the board in 1944; however, when Jewish activists and members of Congress first proposed creating such a board in 1943, the Roosevelt administration fought strongly against it. Under political pressure and facing an election-year scandal, FDR belatedly and grudgingly established the board, but his State and War Departments constantly refused to cooperate with it. In 1944, there was a need to do something for the Jews because the approaching election in November and the weight of

Jewish votes in important states could not be ignored. In addition, the internal tensions between the Treasury and State Departments—concerning the State Department hiding information about the Final Solution—threatened to embarrass Roosevelt's administration. Establishing the board was a convenient way to alleviate a political headache. Yet Breitman and Lichtman characterize the board as FDR's "chosen instrument of rescue" (p. 325). Roosevelt gets to have it both ways, receiving credit for the life-saving work of the very agency that he tried to prevent from coming into existence.

The authors try hard to mitigate the Roosevelt administration's rejection of pleas to bomb Auschwitz. While mildly critical of the administration in some respects, in the end they find excuses. The administration's rejections are explained away on the grounds that U.S. officials "could not spare resources for a humanitarian mission" and in any event were hampered by "imperfect information" about the death camp (p. 283). The authors ignore what decades of research long ago demonstrated: the problem was not a lack of resources for humanitarian missions nor was it a lack of information. The documents make clear that senior officials knew what was happening in Auschwitz in 1944 and possessed detailed maps of the area, which the United States was already bombing because of the German oil factories there.

Breitman and Lichtman want *FDR and the Jews* to be regarded as a kind of middle ground between those who have argued that FDR abandoned the Jews and the apologists who believe Roosevelt could do no wrong. But in the end, the "balance" they purport to seek eludes them. Every time FDR callously rejects an opportunity to help Jews or privately makes a hostile remark about Jews, the authors find a way to rationalize it. Every time some Jew benefits as the accidental byproduct of something Roosevelt did, he is a hero of the Jewish people. That is bias, not balance.

Note

[1]. Richard Breitman and Alan Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 72.

[2]. Robert M. Morgenthau and Frank Turkheimer, "How FDR Helped Save Jews of the Holy Land," *The Forward*, October 21, 2011, <http://forward.com/articles/144213/how-fdr-helped-save-jews-of-the-holy-land/>.

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