

LECTURE
THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE:
WORLD RESPONSES TO THE HOLOCAUST

I. What the Allies Knew and How They Responded:

A. The Newspapers:

1. **1938:** There was extensive press coverage by American, British and French newspapers of the attacks on Jews and the anti-Jewish riots during the *Kristallnacht*.
 - a. The newspaper accounts prompted President Roosevelt to recall the American Ambassador from Germany for a brief time.
 - b. Roosevelt also issued a public statement condemning German behavior.
2. **1941:** In December, the *New York Herald Tribune* noted that reports of mistreatment of Jews were no longer news; what was news was the “sheer mass” of those who had already been killed.
3. **1942:** American reporters were allowed to stay in Germany until May 1942. They regularly reported the public humiliation and mistreatment of Jews in the streets of Germany.
 - a. In June 1942, the Polish government in exile reported that the Germans were systematically killing all the Jews of Poland.
 - 1) The *New York Times* gave the story 17 lines on the bottom of page five.
 - 2) *The Daily Telegraph*, a London newspaper, reported the gassing of 700,000 Jews in a small article in the middle of the paper.
 - 3) A later report of the death of a million Jews got 13 lines on page three of the *Los Angeles Times*.
 - b. Almost every newspaper in the United States treated the stories the same way—burying them in short articles in the middle of the papers next to the weather reports or on the comic pages.
 - 1) This included stories with details of deportations to Auschwitz. massacres of entire communities and eyewitness accounts of mass murder.
 - 2) On April 20, 1943, the *Detroit Evening Times* printed an article whose headline read: “2,000,000 Jews Murdered.” The article was two inches long and appeared next to a group of large ads.

RESPONSE: **Denials:** Allied government officials, including President Roosevelt, denied the reports of the Holocaust or labeled the newspaper accounts as “unconfirmed.”

B. Other Sources of Information:

1. **World Jewish Congress:** In June 1942, a German industrialist told representatives of this Jewish agency in Switzerland precise details about the “Final Solution.” The report was immediately sent to the Allied governments.

RESPONSE: The news was suppressed, that is, blocked, and no action was taken because of the urging of U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull and later Acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles. On December 17, 1942, the American and British governments announced that the Nazis were murdering the Jews of Europe. In the U.S., officials still voiced doubts in private and sometimes in public. By the time this statement was issued, over three million European Jews were already dead.

2. **U.S. Air Force:** In the fall of 1943, American reconnaissance, or scouting planes, flew over Birkenau and photographed the gas chambers. The photos showed lines of people moving into a gas chamber.

RESPONSE: When the reconnaissance photos were sent to the U.S. Department of War, the Assistant Secretary of the War Department, John McCloy, insisted they be kept secret and no action taken.

3. **Polish Underground:** Reports for members of the Polish underground resistance movement against the Germans began arriving in Allied countries starting in 1941. These reports, along with photographs of mass graves and mass murders, were circulated among government offices.

RESPONSE: a. All reports from the Polish underground and the World Jewish Congress were kept secret by Allied governments.

b. All requests for aid from Allied armed forces were refused because the reports were either denied or called “unconfirmed.”

- 1) When Polish and Jewish leaders asked the U.S for planes to bomb the gas chambers or the railroads at Auschwitz, they were told it was a British responsibility. All requests were turned down by the Assistant Secretary of War, John McCloy.

- 2) Prime Minister Winston Churchill demanded that Auschwitz be bombed. But his orders were undermined

by the Foreign Office and Air Ministry. The British told Jewish and Polish leaders that such bombings were “outside the realm of tactical efficiency”; in other words, they refused on military grounds.

- 3) Both governments claimed that these were non-military issues, not directly related to the war efforts, and that the only way to destroy Auschwitz was to destroy the Germans in the war. Auschwitz, it seemed, was a “civilian target.”

WHEN THE ALLIES REFUSED TO BOMB AUSCHWITZ IN 1944, THE NAZIS WERE KILLING 15,000 JEWS EACH DAY. ONE BOMB, DESTROYING ONE GAS CHAMBER OR ONE RAILROAD LINE, MIGHT HAVE SAVED THOUSANDS OF LIVES.

4. **Jan Karski:** This Polish messenger between the underground and the Polish government in exile was taken into the Warsaw Ghetto on two separate occasions in 1943.
 - a. The two Jews who smuggled him in and out pleaded with him to tell his story to the outside world.
 - b. Karski did what they asked—even speaking personally to President Roosevelt.

RESPONSE: After listening to his moving and impassioned plea for help, President Roosevelt told Jan Karski that the U.S. and the Allies were helping the Jews by winning the war. They, therefore, had to focus all their efforts on fighting the Germans, not rescuing the Jews.

ROOSEVELT INSISTED THE WAR AND THE HOLOCAUST WERE THE SAME. TO HIM, FIGHTING THE GERMANS WAS AUTOMATICALLY HELPING THE JEWS. THIS OPINION ALLOWED THE HOLOCAUST TO CONTINUE AND RESULTED IN THE DEATHS OF HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF INNOCENT PEOPLE.

5. **Roumanian Government:** In 1943, the Roumanian government revealed the extent of the massacres of the Jews of Roumania to American Officials. The Roumanians offered to aid in the rescue of 72,000 Jews from the region of Transnistria. They asked only for the cost of the passage of each person out of Roumania (about \$130 per person).

RESPONSE: The American authorities refused to consider or publicize the offer. Over 125,000 Jews died in Transnistria between 1943 and the end of 1944.

6. **Bermuda Conference:** With public pressure increasing, especially in England, the American State Department met with the British Foreign Office at the Bermuda Conference on Refugees on April 19, 1943. Coincidentally, it was the day the Warsaw Ghetto Rebellion began. The members of the conference were to discuss what should be done about the refugees of the Nazi invasions-especially the Jews.

RESPONSE: Nothing was accomplished. The American and British representatives decided the following: There would be no negotiations with the Nazis. Nor would there be any contact with Jewish and other refugees. No food would be sent to the ghettos or camps. No ships would be made available for those who were able to escape on their own. The America and British people were told that important, secret decisions were reached to help rescue the refugees. Both governments lied to their people.

7. **Adolf Eichmann:** In 1944, Adolf Eichmann, in charge of Jewish deportations, contacted the British and offered to exchange one million Jews for 10,000 Allied trucks.

RESPONSE: The Allies refused. When he was asked why he has refused to negotiate with Eichmann, Lord Moyne, British Deputy Minister of State, later responded: "What would I do with one million Jews? Where would I put them?"

8. **War Refugee Board:** Three members of the U.S. Treasury Department had learned of the murder of the Jews through all the reports received by the government offices. They prepared a "Report for the Secretary of the Treasury on this Country's Acquiescence in the Murder of the Jews." As Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, Henry Morgenthau thus learned the fate of the Jews. He changed the title of the report and presented it to President Roosevelt as "A Report to the President."

RESPONSE: As a result, in January 1944, the President had the War Refugee Board formed "to take all measures consistent with the successful prosecution of the war" to "rescue the victims of enemy oppression." The Board was given a free hand to negotiate with foreign governments, including enemies, for the rescue and/or relief of those "victims." Although the WRB rescued some Jews, by the time they began their efforts most of Hungary's Jews had been killed.

9. **Escaped Prisoners:** Two escaped prisoners from Auschwitz managed to reach high officials in the British and American governments through representatives of the War Relief Board in Spring 1944. They gave exact statistics and descriptions of what was happening to the Jews of Europe. In June 1944, two months after German forces had occupied Hungary, their report reached President Roosevelt. Deportations of Hungarian Jews to the gas chambers at Auschwitz had already begun.

RESPONSE: At first, the report of the two escapees from Auschwitz was ignored, kept secret or denied. It finally became public when it was sent to the leaders of every government. The pope received the report. As a result:

- a. President Roosevelt issued a public warning to the German and the Hungarian governments about punishment for what he called the “systematic persecution of helpless minority groups” and the “insane desire to wipe out the Jewish race.” He warned that “the criminals” would pay.
- b. British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden also made a public statement to the British Parliament condemning the Nazis.
- c. The pope instructed Vatican diplomats to hide Hungarian Jews and warned members of the Hungarian government not to cooperate with the Germans.
- d. On July 2, 1944, American planes bombed Budapest, the capital of Hungary.
- e. In September 1944, British planes bombed the factories and railway yards at Auschwitz.

C. Some Reasons for the Allied Responses:

1. **War Propaganda:** Newspapers like the *Daily Telegraph* had reported stories of German atrocities in World War I. These had been proven false. Reports of mass killings in World War II were considered a return of war atrocity propaganda.
2. **Disbelief:** Reports of mass killings, extermination camps, gas chambers, mass graves and crematoria were simply unbelievable. People found it impossible to accept that such inhuman behavior could occur on such a grand scale.
3. **German Denials:** The Germans denied the reports, and the Allies chose to believe the official denials.
4. **Anti-Semitism:** Statements like that of Lord Moyne indicate that there was anti-Semitism among the Allied Leaders.
5. **“Useless People”:** Some of the Allied officials seemed to have expressed the belief that the Jews were a “useless” people—they had no state, no political or military power.

THE LAST REASON IS PERHAPS THE MOST DISTURBING BECAUSE IT SUGGESTS THAT THE MORALITY OF SOME ALLIED BUREAUCRATS WAS NOT UNLIKE THE MORALITY OF GERMAN BUREAUCRATS.

II. What the Christian Churches Knew and How They Responded:

- A. **The Vatican:** There is much conflicting evidence over the Vatican's, that is, the pope's response to the murder of the Jews. During World War II, the Vatican made no pronouncement against the "Final Solution." Yet, there is much evidence that the pope directed the rescue of Jews when he could.
1. **The Pope:** The Catholic popes during World War II and the Holocaust were Pius XI (1922-1939) and Pius XII (1939-1958).
 2. **The Concordat:** In 1933, Pope Pius XI negotiated a Concordat or agreement with Hitler. The Vatican recognized the Nazi government thus giving it Catholic approval. The Vatican also disbanded all Catholic political parties. The pope believed it was his duty to protect the 30 million German Catholics by maintaining a good relationship with Hitler. Hitler agreed to leave the Catholic Churches alone. Catholics, as Catholics, would remain out of politics; the Nazis, as Nazis, would remain out of religious issues.
 - a. **Papal Silence:** By signing the Concordat, Pope Pius XI hoped to silence the Catholic opponents of Hitler because he believed they were endangering the other German Catholics.
 - b. **Vatican Opposition to the Third Reich:** In general, Catholic opposition to the Nazis was based on fear of Nazi interference in Catholic matters: closing Catholic schools, disbanding Catholic youth groups, attacking Catholic doctrine. The Vatican did not openly oppose anti-Semitism.
 3. **"Final Solution":** By the summer of 1942, the pope and other leading Catholics knew about the "Final Solution." They knew that Jews who were deported to Poland were not only being used for labor but were being annihilated there in a policy known as the "Final Solution."
 4. **The Fate of Italian Jews:** In October 1943, after Italy was occupied by the Germans, the SS began the first round-ups of Jews in Rome. The Germans scheduled over 8,000 Jews for deportation. By the end of October, 1,007 Jews had been sent to Auschwitz.
 - a. German officials were worried that the Vatican would publicly protest the treatment of the Italian Jews.
 - 1) When similar events had occurred in France, Catholic bishops there had staged open protests.

- 2) The French bishops and some Italian clergymen began to put pressure on the Pope to protest against the unchristian treatment of Italian Jews.
- b. Catholic priests and people on the staff of the Vatican hindered the round up by hiding Jews and protecting them.
 - c. Of the 8,000 Jews marked for deportation, 7,000 were rescued from the SS—seven out of every eight Jews in Rome. Catholic clergymen had been very important in the rescue.
 - d. **Papal Silence:** The pope had said nothing about the fate of the Italian Jews.
 - 1) Many Catholic clergymen from around the world called on the pope to speak out.
 - 2) Protestant leaders began to criticize the pope’s silence as Jews were being rounded up “right beneath his window.”
 - 3) The pope, however, remained silent. After the first round-up of Jews in October 1943, the German Ambassador to the Vatican noted with relief that the pope had “done everything in order not to burden relations with the German government and German agencies in Rome.”
5. **Rescue:** In 1944, after the secret publication of the report of the two escaped Auschwitz prisoners, the pope approved the protection of Jews by Vatican diplomats in Hungary. With this single action, thousands of lives were saved.

VATICAN SOURCES ESTIMATE POPE PIUS XII WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR SECRETLY DIRECTING OR APPROVING CATHOLIC ASSISTANCE TO HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF JEWS. HAD THE POPE MORE OPENLY AND OFFICIALLY CONDEMNED NAZI ACTIONS, MORE JEWS MIGHT HAVE BEEN SAVED.

6. **Some Reasons for the Vatican Responses:**

- a. **Fear of Reprisals:** The Vatican feared Nazi reprisals against German Catholics and for that reason tried to preserve good diplomatic relations with Germany.
- b. **Fear for the Jews:** Some scholars argue that Pope Pius XII believed that a formal protest from him would have caused more harm to the Jews and endangered Catholics as well. Vatican sources say he knew that Hitler would not have changed his anti-Jewish policies.

- c. **Catholic Lands:** There was concern in the Vatican that the Nazi government would seize Catholic lands—including Vatican City—when the Germans occupied Italy in 1943.
 - d. **Anti-Communism:** The Catholic Church was strongly anti-Communist and anti-Socialist. The Vatican saw Hitler as a safeguard against Communism.
- B. **Individual Protests:** Many individual Catholic, including clergy, actively spoke out against the persecution and murder of the Jews.
- 1. **German Catholic Opponents of Nazism:** Many German Catholic leaders had opposed Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s. They were among the first concentration camp prisoners in 1933.
 - a. One priest, Bernhard Lichtenberg, after the *Kristallnacht*, told his congregation: “Outside this church the synagogue is burning, and that also is a house of God.”
 - b. Bishop Faulhaber of Munich condemned Nazi racist teachings.
 - c. The British Catholic Archbishop of Westminster and the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury issued strong letters of protest to their own government and to the German governments.
 - d. Cardinal Archbishop of Lvov, Count Andreas Szeptycki, ordered his clergy to save Jews. The Ursuline sisters and some village priests did the same.
 - e. Individual Catholic priests and higher clergymen all over Europe hid Jews, helped them escape and often hindered the German efforts. Four thousand priests were murdered by the Nazis, many for hiding Jews or opposing the “Final Solution.”
- C. **Some Protestant Responses to the Holocaust:** Just as with the Catholic Church, no major Protestant church took an official stand against the persecution of the Jews. There were, however, just as among Catholic, thousands of individuals who opposed the “Final Solution” and helped Jews when and where they could.
- 1. **Individuals:** Individual Protestant ministers and congregations protested against Nazi anti-Jewish policies in Germany and later in the occupied countries.
 - a. **Andre Trocme:** Andre Trocme, a Protestant (Huguenot) minister, led the village of Le Chambon in Southern France in their efforts to rescue Jews from the “Final Solution.”
 - b. **Archbishop Damaskinos:** In Greece, the Greek Orthodox Archbishop Damaskinos of Athens helped to rescue Jews by declaring them Christians and/or by hiding them in Greek Orthodox churches.

2. **The Confessing Church:** In 1934, Pastor Martin Niemoeller, fearing the Nazi takeover of the Protestant churches, founded the Confessing Church in Germany.
 - a. **Niemoeller and Barth:** Leading members of this church, like Niemoeller and Karl Barth, spoke out publicly against the Nazis but not against persecution of the Jews.
 - b. **The Barmen Confession:** Leading theologians, Niemoeller and Barth, did not mention the persecution of the Jews in the “Barmen Confession,” their formal declaration of principles. Barth later admitted that his church’s neglect of this issue was a serious omission.
 - c. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer:** Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated that a good Christian must protest against evil state policies, even those outside the realm of religion. He was murdered in a Nazi prison.
 - d. **Protestant Opponents of Nazism:** Thousands of ministers and pastors were imprisoned in concentration camps. About 500 died.
3. **Church Policy:** As Church policy, no Protestant church declared that Nazism or the murder of the Jews were unchristian or immoral.

D. Some Reasons for the Protestant Responses:

1. **Danger:** Protestant churches felt endangered by the Nazis.
2. **Religious Principles:** Some Protestants actively opposed anti-Jewish policies on religious grounds. One pastor quoted Jesus’ words on the good Samaritan who had helped a Jew attacked by robbers: “Go and do as he (the Samaritan) did.”

III. Summary

Shmuel Zygelboim wrote that the primary responsibility for the murder of the Jews was with the murderers themselves. But, what drove him to despair and suicide was the realization that the Allies, too, shared the responsibility by refusing to help when and where they could.

THE PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE MURDER OF THE JEWS LIES WITH THE PERPETRATORS, THE GERMAN DESTRUCTION MACHINE. BUT THE SECONDARY RESPONSIBILITY COMES FROM INDIFFERENCE AND REFUSAL TO ACT. THE ALLIES DID NOT DETERMINE “WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE,” BUT THEY WERE INDIRECTLY INVOLVED IN SUCH DECISIONS. CHURCH OFFICIALS OF DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS DID NOT CONTROL THOSE LIFE AND DEATH DECISIONS. YET, SOME OF THEM FAILED AS MORAL LEADERS OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLD.