

Ken Burns Misrepresents America's Response to the Holocaust

Rafael Medoff
Monty Noam Penkower
Martin Ostrow

**The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies
Washington, D.C**

Table of Contents	Page
<i>2014: Ken Burns and the Roosevelts</i>	3
<i>2022: Ken Burns, FDR, and the Holocaust</i>	
Ken Burns Distorts FDR's Policy on Jewish Refugees	14
Wolf Blitzer's Father and the Bombing of Auschwitz	17
Ken Burns Has a Palestine Problem	20
David Ben-Gurion vs. Ken Burns	23
Was FDR a Victim of the "Deep State" ?	26
A Holocaust Mystery: Ken Burns Get Lost in a Bermuda Triangle	29
America and the Holocaust: A Filmmaker's Perspective	32
A Filmmaker's Post-Mortem on Ken Burns & the Holocaust	34

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Rafael Medoff is founding director of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies and author of more than 20 books about Jewish history and the Holocaust.

Dr. Monty Noam Penkower is Professor Emeritus of Modern Jewish History at the Machon Lander Graduate School of Jewish Studies and author of a five-volume study about the rise of the State of Israel between the years 1933-1948.)

Martin Ostrow has been an award-winning documentary producer, writer and director for public, commercial and cable television for more than 30 years.

Rafael Medoff

Ken Burns and the Roosevelts (2014)

I. Who Shut America's Doors to Jewish Refugees?

For seven consecutive nights in September 2014, PBS aired the latest Ken Burns documentary, *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History*. Millions of Americans watched the latest compelling Burns production, which masterfully interspersed old film footage with the actual words of Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor Roosevelt, spoken, in character, by Edward Herrmann, Meryl Streep, and other outstanding actors. It was great entertainment. But when it came to the topic of FDR's response to the Nazi persecution of Europe's Jews, *The Roosevelts* was fatally flawed.

The fifth and sixth episodes, covering the 1930s, briefly referred to the question of German Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler and seeking to immigrate to the United States. A Gallup poll found more than 80% of Americans "opposed offering sanctuary to European refugees," the narrator reported. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt "battled on behalf of admitting Jewish refugees to the United States for as long as the Nazis were willing to grant them exit visas," the narrator asserted. "Restrictive immigration laws frustrated her."

Missing from this discussion of America's immigration policy was any mention of the man who was actually responsible for America's immigration policy--the president.

Yes, the existing immigration laws were "restrictive." But the manner in which the Roosevelt administration chose to implement them made things much worse. The administration went above and beyond the law, imposing extra requirements and burdensome regulations, in order to discourage and disqualify would-be immigrants.

The annual quota of immigrants from Germany was 25,957, but in 1933, Hitler's first year in power, barely five percent of that German quota was filled. The following year, less than 14 percent of those spaces were filled. FDR permitted the German quota to be filled in only one year of his twelve years in the White House. In most of those years, it was less than 25% filled. As a result, some 190,000 quota places from Germany and Axis-occupied countries sat unused during the Hitler years.

Since opponents of immigration constantly claimed that newcomers would take jobs away from American citizens, refugee advocates proposed legislation, known as the Wagner-Rogers bill, to admit 20,000 German Jewish children outside the quota system. Nine year-olds would not take away jobs. Laura Delano Houghteling, a cousin of President Roosevelt and wife of the U.S. Commissioner of Immigration, said she was against the bill because "20,000 charming children would all too soon grow up into 20,000 ugly adults."

FDR himself took no position on Wagner-Rogers. An inquiry by a congresswoman as to the president's stance was returned to Roosevelt's secretary marked "File No action FDR." Without presidential backing, the bill went nowhere.

Anne Frank, the teenage Holocaust diarist, was one of those who had hoped to immigrate to the United States (and could have qualified under Wagner-Rogers). After the Franks fled from Germany to Holland in 1934, Anne's father, Otto, repeatedly sought permission to bring the family to America.

Otto Frank had already lived in the U.S. from 1909 to 1911, working as intern at Macy's Department Store, in New York City. Yet that was not enough to qualify them for immigration visas. Two of Anne's uncles lived in Massachusetts, giving the Frank family a support network should they fall on hard times. Yet that, too, was not enough. Their application was denied in 1941--a year when less than half of the quota for German-born immigrants was used. Refused asylum, the Franks ultimately secreted themselves in a cramped attic in Amsterdam; the rest of that tragic story is well known.

Anne's mother, Edith, wrote to a friend: "I believe that all Germany's Jews are looking around the world, but can find nowhere to go."

When it came to FDR and the issue of Jewish refugee immigration, Ken Burns's *The Roosevelts* got it wrong. Public opposition to increased immigration was not the main problem. President Roosevelt could have admitted many more refugees--within the existing law--without igniting any substantial public controversy. All he had to do was quietly instruct the State Department (which administered immigration) to permit immigrants to enter the United States up to the maximum number allowed by law. But he did not.

II. FDR'S Disappointing Response to Kristallnacht

According to Ken Burns, President Roosevelt responded to the 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom more forcefully than any other world leader. But the truth is that FDR responded with superficial gestures rather than meaningful action.

On the night of November 9-10, 1938, mobs of Nazi stormtroopers unleashed a hurricane of violence and destruction upon the Jews of Germany. Hundreds of Jews were beaten in the streets, and more than 90 were murdered. About 30,000 more were dragged off to concentration camps. Several hundred synagogues were burned to the ground, while fire fighters stood by, under orders from the Hitler government to act only to keep fires from spreading to property owned by non-Jews. An estimated 7,000 Jewish businesses were ransacked. The violence became known as Kristallnacht, the "Night of the Glass," a reference to the widespread smashing of windows of Jewish homes and shops.

Ken Burns's *The Roosevelts* emphasized that FDR was "the only leader of a democratic nation to dare denounce" the pogrom. Six days after the violence ended, Roosevelt told a press conference that he "could scarcely believe such things could occur" in the 20th century.

FDR also took two steps. He extended the visas of the approximately 15,000 German Jewish refugees who were then in the United States as tourists--but he also announced that liberalization of America's immigration policy was "not in contemplation." Roosevelt also recalled the U.S. ambassador from Germany for "consultations" --but he rejected suggestions by some members of Congress to break diplomatic ties with the Hitler regime.

The narrator on *The Roosevelts* pointed out that Roosevelt's temporary recall of the ambassador was "something neither Britain nor France dared do."

When it came to token gestures, FDR did indeed surpass Britain and France. But when it came to meaningful action to help the Jews, it was another story.

In the weeks following Kristallnacht, Great Britain took in 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish refugee children (known as the Kindertransport project), 5,000 refugees who had been released from Nazi concentration camps on condition that they leave Germany, and thousands of young German Jewish women who were admitted as cooks and nannies.

France, which was in the midst of cracking down on undocumented Jewish refugees, was less generous. Nevertheless, in the months following Kristallnacht, it did agree to admit 1,000 German and Austrian Jewish children,

eased the status of some illegal Jewish immigrants, and accepted 224 of the passengers on the refugee ship *St. Louis*, which was 224 more than the Roosevelt administration took in.

In any event, the real question is not how President Roosevelt compared to other heads of state, but what options were actually before him as he weighed how to respond to Kristallnacht. Here are some of the most promising ones:

—The governor and legislative assembly of the Virgin Islands, a U.S. territory, offered to open their doors to Jewish refugees. FDR rejected the offer; he said Nazi spies disguised as Jewish refugees might sneak from the islands to the mainland.

—Several members of Roosevelt's cabinet, and some members of Congress, proposed opening the Alaska territory to refugees. The president said he would consider it only if no more than 10% of the immigrants were Jews.

—College professors, students, rabbis, cantors, and their families were exempt from the quota limits. Roosevelt could have quietly told the State Department to be more lenient in approving their visas applications. He did not.

—The British government suggested that the Roosevelt administration give unused British quota places (there were more than 60,000 left over each year) to German Jewish applicants. U.S. officials indignantly rebuffed the proposal as unwarranted interference in America's domestic affairs.

When it came to FDR's response to Kristallnacht, Ken Burns's *The Roosevelts* got it wrong. The president's actions were thin gestures that look even less impressive when one considers the other steps that were proposed to him at the time.

III. Giving Credit Where Credit Isn't Due

After President Roosevelt learned that Hitler was slaughtering the Jews, he created a government agency to try to rescue them--according to Ken Burns.

Burns's depiction of FDR's response to the Holocaust is an excellent example of something that is technically true--yet is, in fact, utterly misleading.

"When news began to reach [Roosevelt] at the end of 1942 that the Germans had moved on from mistreatment to mass murder," the narrator of *The Roosevelts* recounted, "he joined Churchill and Stalin and ten Allied governments

in exile in promising to prosecute and publish those responsible for what they called 'this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination.' "

Technically true, but profoundly misleading.

The president did not exactly rush to acknowledge and condemn the mass murders. In fact, when information about the killings began reaching Washington in mid-1942, Roosevelt administration officials suppressed it. When that information reached American Jewish leaders from another source, U.S. officials pressed them to hold back the news until it could be investigated further. Finally, three months later, the administration grudgingly conceded that the information was correct.

Even at that point, the White House was in no hurry to speak out. It was the British government that suggested issuing a joint Allied statement about the killings. Roosevelt's State Department at first resisted the proposal, fearing--as one official put it--that "the various Governments of the United Nations [as the Allies were informally known] would expose themselves to increased pressure from all sides to do something more specific in order to aid these people."

The Roosevelt administration eventually went along with the joint Allied statement, but only after watering down some of the language. For example, the proposed phrase "reports from Europe which leave no doubt" (that mass murder was underway) was whittled down to just "numerous reports from Europe."

Back to the Ken Burns version of history: "And [President Roosevelt] eventually created the War Refugee Board, that provided funds and authorization to help Jews flee from the edges of the Nazi empire."

"Eventually" is what we might call a wiggle word. It's correct, but it's so vague that the listener has no idea whether it means four weeks or four months. In this case, it actually meant 14 months.

After verbally condemning the mass murder (in December 1942), President Roosevelt shunted the issue aside. That's where it would have remained, except for the fact that in late 1943, senior aides to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. discovered that State Department officials had been blocking transmission of Holocaust-related information to the U.S. and obstructing opportunities to rescue Jews from Hitler.

Meanwhile, at almost the same time, the rescue issue was reaching the boiling point on Capitol Hill and in the press. Throughout 1943, the Jewish activists known as the Bergson group had been waging a campaign of rallies, full-page newspaper ads, and lobbying Congress for U.S. rescue action. In November,

Members of Congress introduced a Bergson-inspired resolution calling for creation of a U.S. government agency to rescue refugees.

The agency that the activists had in mind ultimately came into existence as the War Refugee Board--that's the board which Ken Burns credits Roosevelt for establishing. The problem is that the White House actively opposed the resolution that urged creating the board.

In other words, FDR was against the refugee board before he was for it.

The Roosevelt administration's attempt to block the resolution in the House of Representatives backfired. FDR's old friend Breckinridge Long, the assistant secretary of state in charge of refugee matters, gave wildly misleading testimony about the number of refugees who had already been admitted into the country. Long's lies were quickly exposed, triggering a wave of criticism of the administration. Meanwhile, the rescue resolution was quickly approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

It was against this backdrop of congressional pressure and Jewish protests that Secretary Morgenthau met with the president in January 1944. He explained to FDR what his aides had discovered about the State Department blocking rescue, and he warned that "you have either got to move very fast, or the Congress of the United States will do it for you." Ten months before election day, the last thing FDR wanted was a public scandal over the refugee issue. Within days, Roosevelt did what the Congressional resolution sought--he issued an executive order creating the War Refugee Board.

So, yes--Roosevelt did indeed "eventually" establish the board, as Ken Burns put it. But he did so only after the administration's attempt to kill the board proposal failed. And it took him 14 months from the time the genocide news was confirmed--14 crucial months in which much more could have been done to rescue Jews from Hitler.

When it came to President Roosevelt's creation of the War Refugee Board, Ken Burns's *The Roosevelts* got it wrong. Praising FDR for establishing the board that he fought against tooth and nail is giving him credit where credit isn't due.

IV. "Rescue Through Victory" Meant No Rescue

"Europe's Jews were Hitler's prisoners," according to Ken Burns. And since the Jews were prisoners, there was nothing the United States could do to help them "other than to obliterate that madman and his monstrous regime."

The claim that there was nothing President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration could have done to rescue Jews is not new. FDR and his spokesmen themselves made that claim repeatedly during the Holocaust years. They even coined a sound byte to give their policy a positive spin: "Rescue through victory."

To which Congressman Emanuel Celler replied: "Victory, the spokesmen say, is the only solution...After victory, the disembodied spirits will not present so difficult a problem; the dead no longer need food, drink and asylum."

The truth is that Hitler's Europe was not hermetically sealed. We know that many Jews could have been rescued prior to the Allied liberation, because many Jews *did* escape or were rescued before the war ended, without the help of the Roosevelt administration.

More than 26,000 European Jewish refugees reached Palestine between 1941 and 1944 in transports organized by Zionist activists. An estimated 27,000 Jewish refugees escaped to Switzerland and were granted haven during the war years, though tens of thousands more reached the Swiss border but were turned back. More than 7,000 Danish Jews were smuggled out of Nazi-occupied Denmark to safety in Sweden in 1943. Thousands of French Jews escaped the 1942 deportations by fleeing to Spain. Thousands more reached Allied-liberated Italy.

There was a myriad of ways to save Jews within Europe.

For example, in 1944, the U.S. government's War Refugee Board -- operating with almost no support from the White House or other government branches-- convinced Rumania to move 48,000 Jews out of the path of the retreating German Army.

The WRB also financed operations to help refugees survive in France, Germany, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, including bribing German officials, providing supplies and forged documents, and sustaining 8,000 Jewish orphans hidden in France.

The WRB also mobilized the international pressure that stopped the deportation of Jews from Budapest to Auschwitz in 1944, and Raoul Wallenberg, who was financed and assisted by the Board, saved many thousands in Budapest. As a result, some 120,000 Jews were still alive in Hungary at war's end.

There were also numerous opportunities to save Jews that were squandered.

For instance, Rumania offered in early 1943 to allow 70,000 Jews to leave Transnistria. The Allied governments ignored the offer.

The War Refugee Board drew up a plan for pressuring Spain to shelter more refugees. The plan was blocked by the U.S. ambassador in Madrid, Carlton Hayes.

More than 200 rabbis held in the Vittel internment camp in France were deported to their deaths in 1944 because the U.S. State Department stalled for seven weeks before asking America's allies to vouch for the rabbis' questionable Latin American passports.

The Roosevelt administration refused to order the bombing of the Auschwitz gas chambers or the railways leading there, on the grounds that it would have required diverting aircraft from the battlefield. But, in fact, U.S. planes repeatedly flew over Auschwitz in 1944 when they struck German oil factories within a few miles of the crematoria, and when they dropped supplies for the Polish Home Army.

It was also possible to ship food and medical supplies to Jews in Nazi Europe. Pressure from the War Refugee Board resulted in the Red Cross delivering 40,000 food parcels to concentration camp prisoners in 1944–45. Near war's end, the Board itself acquired trucks and delivered additional parcels to prisoners—and even brought 1,400 women refugees back across the Swiss border to safety.

When it came to the feasibility of rescuing Jews from Europe, Ken Burns's *The Roosevelts* got it wrong. "Rescue through victory" was not a policy; it was an excuse. There were indeed ways to rescue Jews prior to victory. The problem is that in the White House, there was no will to do so.

V. Why FDR Abandoned the Jews

The Jews were not the only minority group whose abandonment by President Franklin D. Roosevelt was misrepresented and minimized in *The Roosevelts*. Japanese-Americans, too, received short shrift in the PBS series. And there is a crucial connection between FDR's response to the Holocaust and his mass internment of the Japanese.

In episode #6, Burns referred briefly to President Roosevelt's decision to place more than 110,000 Japanese--most of them U.S. citizens--in internment camps during World War Two. But instead of examining the reasons for FDR's actions, *The Roosevelts* quickly turned its attention to First Lady Eleanor

Roosevelt, who sympathized with the internees and visited one of the detention centers.

Burns used the same device in episode #5, when referring to the Roosevelt administration closing America's doors to Jewish refugees who were trying to flee the Nazis. Instead of exploring the reasons for FDR's attitudes toward immigration, Burns described the First Lady's sympathy for Jewish refugees.

In effect, Burns used Mrs. Roosevelt as a cover for the president's troubling actions. In doing so, Burns missed--or ducked?--an important aspect of FDR's worldview, which had a direct impact on U.S. policy.

While living in Warm Springs, Georgia, in the 1920s, Roosevelt authored a number of overheated articles about Asian immigration to the United States. He warned against granting citizenship to "non-assimilable immigrants," and opposed Japanese immigration on the grounds that "mingling Asiatic blood with European or American blood produces, in nine cases out of ten, the most unfortunate results."

In another column, FDR said he favored the admission of some Europeans, so long as they had "blood of the right sort." He argued that immigration should be restricted until the U.S. could thoroughly "digest" those foreigners who had already been admitted. He proposed limiting future immigration to those who could be most quickly and easily assimilated, including through dispersal around the country.

FDR viewed the Japanese, including Japanese-Americans, as having innate racial characteristics that made them unassimilable and untrustworthy. Prof. Greg Robinson (an American historian at the University of Quebec), who revealed Roosevelt's articles in his 2001 book, *By Order of the President*, concluded that the president's private views about the Japanese played a significant role in shaping his decision to intern them--a decision FDR reached even though no cases of treason or espionage by Japanese-Americans had been uncovered.

Roosevelt's remarks about Jews bore a striking resemblance to what he said about Asians.

In a newspaper interview in 1920, when he was the Democratic candidate for vice president, FDR said that "the greater part of the foreign population of the City of New York" should have been "distributed to different localities upstate" so that they would feel pressured to "conform to the manners and the customs and the requirements of their new home."

Roosevelt spoke privately, on numerous occasions, about the alleged racial characteristics of Jews, the danger of allowing Jews to concentrate in particular areas, and the pernicious Jewish influence on various economies.

In 1923, for example, as a member of the Harvard board of directors, Roosevelt helped institute a quota to limit the number of Jewish students admitted to the college. In a conversation with American Jewish leader Rabbi Stephen S. Wise in 1938, Roosevelt claimed that Jewish domination of the Polish economy was what caused antisemitism in Poland. In 1939, FDR told U.S. Senator Burton Wheeler he was glad that "there is no Jewish blood in our veins." In 1941, the president remarked at a cabinet meeting that there were too many Jews among federal employees in Oregon.

Meeting with government officials in Allied-liberated North Africa in January 1943, FDR said that the number of local Jews practicing law, medicine, and other professions "should be definitely limited to the percentage that the Jewish population in North Africa bears to the whole of the North African population." Otherwise, the president said, there would be a recurrence of "the specific and understandable complaints which the Germans bore toward the Jews in Germany" because of their alleged overrepresentation in various fields.

At a private White House luncheon later that year, President Roosevelt told Prime Minister Winston Churchill that "the best way to settle the Jewish question" was "essentially to spread the Jews thin all over the world." Roosevelt said that this approach had been "tried out" in Meriwether County, Georgia, and in Hyde Park, New York "on the basis of adding four or five Jewish families at each place," and "the local population would have no objection if there were no more than that."

FDR also exhibited a fondness for 'Jewish jokes.' Racially-tinged humor, of course, sometimes reflects the speaker's genuine feelings of disdain toward the target of the joke. At the 1945 Yalta conference, when asked by Stalin whether he would make any concessions in his upcoming meeting with the king of Saudi Arabia, Roosevelt joked "that there was only one concession he thought he might offer and that was to give him the six million Jews in the United States."

Much of what we know about FDR's unpleasant jokes about Jews actually comes from the same historian who wrote the script for the Ken Burns documentary--Geoffrey C. Ward.

In his 1989 book, *A First Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt*, Ward recounted a fishing trip that Roosevelt took with friends off the coast of Florida in 1923. One of his friends "hooked and landed a 42-pound

Jewfish. ‘...I thought we left New York to get away from the Jews,’ [the friend's] wife said, and Franklin thought the remark so good he included it in his log.”

Elsewhere in that log, according to Ward, FDR added a little Jewish joke of his own: “The tip end of Florida is where Jonah had his trying experience--he was a Hebrew and hence cast up.” Roosevelt’s friend and closest political adviser, Louis Howe, later presented FDR with an album of anecdotes, photos, and illustrations from the fishing trip, including a drawing of --as Ward describes it-- “a Jewfish with a prominent nose and a sort of crest from which hung the triple balls of a pawnbroker’s sign.”

In the book, Ward also recounts (albeit in a footnote) a revealing interview that he conducted with Curtis Roosevelt, one of the president’s grandchildren. Curtis told Ward that he “recalled hearing the President tell mildly anti-Semitic stories in the White House.” According to Ward, “The protagonists [in FDR’s jokes] were always Lower East Side Jews with heavy accents...”

But Ward did not see fit to mention anything about FDR's private remarks about Jews in his script for Ken Burns' "The Roosevelts." That's unfortunate, because it would have helped viewers better understand both Roosevelt's refusal to open America's doors to Jewish refugees during the Holocaust, and his internment of the Japanese.

Neither Jews nor Japanese had what FDR considered "blood of the right sort." He believed both groups possessed innate racial characteristics that made them untrustworthy. Keeping out as many as possible, dispersing the others around the country, putting the Japanese in detention camps during the war--all this was consistent with Franklin Roosevelt's vision of how America should look and how it should treat potentially dangerous minority groups.

Thus, once again, when it came to understanding President Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust, Ken Burns's *The Roosevelts* got it wrong.

2022: Ken Burns, FDR, and the Holocaust

Rafael Medoff

Ken Burns Distorts FDR's Policy on Jewish Refugees

If you're going to make a documentary about America's response to the Holocaust, shouldn't you at least know how many Jewish refugees were admitted to the United States during those years? Surprisingly, filmmaker Ken Burns doesn't seem to have a clue.

Burns has announced that his forthcoming film will challenge the “myth” that President Franklin D. Roosevelt abandoned Europe's Jews. As evidence for that remarkable assertion, Burns claims (in his pre-release publicity) that during the Roosevelt years, the United States “accepted more refugees than any other sovereign nation.” That's simply false.

In 1933, the year that Adolf Hitler and the Nazis rose to power in Germany, U.S. immigration law would have permitted the entry of 25,957 German immigrants. But the Roosevelt administration suppressed immigration far below what the law allowed. That year, only 1,324 German nationals were admitted to the U.S. Smaller numbers came from other European countries—961 Poles, 864 Hungarians, 236 Rumanians (and not all of them were Jewish refugees.)

By contrast, the British government in 1933 admitted over 33,000 European Jews to Palestine, thousands more to the United Kingdom, and small numbers to other British controlled-territories.

In the years to follow, the contrast between the Roosevelt administration and the British government was even more stark. In 1934, 3,515 German citizens, most of them Jewish refugees, were admitted to the United States (which was just 13.7% of that year's quota). That same year, the British admitted about 50,000 Jewish refugees to the U.K. and British territories (mostly Palestine). In 1935 and 1936, the numbers were similar.

Even in 1937, after the British had begun reducing Jewish immigration to Palestine in response to Arab rioting, they were still providing haven to more European Jews than the United States.

In 1938, the Roosevelt administration admitted 17,872 refugees from Germany and German-annexed Austria. The British and the Japanese rulers of

Shanghai each took in a similar number that year. Although the precise number of German Jews admitted to France in 1938 is not known, historians' estimates are larger than the number who entered the U.S. that year.

During the years 1939-1941, the picture changed, but the United States still did not accept more refugees than any other country, as Ken Burns claims.

The number of German Jews admitted to the U.S. increased in 1939; that was the only year from 1933 to 1945 that the German quota was filled. At the same time, however the Soviet Union began admitting many more Jewish refugees than the U.S.—from 1939 to 1941, the Soviets took in an estimated 300,000 Jews fleeing from Nazi-occupied Poland.

Following America's entry into World War II in December 1941, the number of European immigrants to the United States dropped drastically, while the number admitted to the United Kingdom or British-held territories increased.

In 1942, the two countries' figures were similar. In 1943, however, the gap was again considerable. That year, the United States admitted just 1,286 German immigrants, 1,338 Poles, 230 Rumanians, and 212 Hungarians. The British that year admitted 8,507 Jewish refugees to Palestine, as well as small numbers to other British territories. That trend continued in 1944 and 1945.

None of this information is secret. It all appears in publicly-available Immigration and Naturalization Service charts, which historians have been citing, and circulating, for decades. If Burns has not seen the charts—or has not read any of the many history books that cite them—that's dereliction of duty. If he knows the true figures but is deliberately distorting them in order to improve FDR's image, that's even more troubling.

There is, additionally, the problem of the moral relativism inherent in the argument that Burns is making. What he is asserting, in effect, is that Roosevelt's response to the Holocaust was not so awful, because other leaders were worse. But would it really be impressive if the president of a country claiming to represent high ideals of humanitarianism was slightly more generous in admitting refugees than, say, the military juntas ruling in South America? Is that the moral standard by which we as Americans judge our country and our leaders?

Ironically, the rulers of the tiny South American country of Bolivia—which is only 424,000 square miles—took in more than 20,000 Jewish refugees during the Nazi years. What does that say about the United States, which is nearly 3.8-million square miles?

Translating Burns's point into more contemporary terms, is it really a badge of pride that America's meager response to the Darfur genocide was slightly better than the response of, say, Peru or Lithuania? We have a right to expect better from our country.

We also have a right to expect better from our filmmakers--especially when their documentaries are broadcast on the publicly-funded PBS network, where the Burns film is scheduled to appear. The federal government gives PBS \$445-million annually. A film that misrepresents the historical record is not a good use of taxpayers' money.

(August 2022)

Rafael Medoff

Wolf Blitzer's Father and the Bombing of Auschwitz

Has Wolf Blitzer's father just pulled the rug out from under filmmaker Ken Burns?

Testimony from the late David Blitzer about his experiences in Auschwitz was featured in CNN's August 26 special about the Holocaust, hosted by his son, anchorman Wolf Blitzer. Among other things, the elder Blitzer denounced the Roosevelt administration's refusal to bomb the railways leading to Auschwitz.

The airing of the Blitzer testimony comes just weeks before the PBS broadcast of a new documentary film by Ken Burns about America's response to the Holocaust. In recent interviews, Burns has minimized the Roosevelt administration's abandonment of the Jews and suggested there was not much the U.S. could have done to rescue Jews from Hitler.

Wolf Blitzer himself has written (in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1985) of what he called "the documented abandonment of European Jewish refugees before and during World War II." And now the powerful testimony of his father has cut through all the excuses and rationalizations:

"The biggest puzzle for me is that they did not bombard the railroads leading to the crematoria. This is the biggest puzzle. We saw the airplanes—in 1944, we saw airplanes bombarding cities. We were laughing, we were happy, we were even praying to God—we could get killed from those bombs, but we couldn't understand why they did not bombard—every day, thousands of people were burned and gassed in the camps, only because they had the possibility to bring those trainloads of people. If those rails had been bombarded, they couldn't have done it so perfectly."

In just a few sentences, the elder Blitzer reminded us of three key aspects of the bombing issue:

First, bombing the railroads and bridges leading to the camp would have disrupted the mass murder process. Hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were deported along those routes in the spring and summer of 1944. Twelve thousand were being gassed daily in Auschwitz. Damaged railways took time to repair—and damaged bridges took even longer. Every delay in the deportations—whether for hours or days—would have saved lives.

Those who today excuse the failure to bomb Auschwitz on the grounds that prisoners might have been harmed, are ignoring the fact that hitting the railways and bridges would not have involved a risk of civilian casualties.

Second, American planes were already flying in the area—they were bombing German oil factories in the industrial section of Auschwitz, just a few miles from the gas chambers. At the time, Roosevelt administration officials falsely claimed they would have to “divert” planes from distant battle zones if they wanted to hit Auschwitz. But as David Blitzer said in his testimony, “we saw planes bombarding” the region. He was probably referring to the American planes bombing the oil factories, since those raids were close enough for Blitzer and other prisoners to have witnessed them.

George McGovern was one of the pilots. The future U.S. senator and 1972 Democratic presidential nominee flew a B-24 Liberator bomber in World War II and took part in the 1944 strikes on the Auschwitz oil sites. “There is no question we should have attempted...to go after Auschwitz,” McGovern said in a later interview. “There was a pretty good chance we could have blasted those rail lines off the face of the earth, which would have interrupted the flow of people to those death chambers, and we had a pretty good chance of knocking out those gas ovens.”

Third, the prisoners themselves were, as Blitzer said, “praying” for the Allies to bomb the gas chambers and crematoria in Auschwitz, despite the risk that Jews might be harmed, because they knew the prisoners were doomed anyway and hoped something would be done to disrupt the mass-murder machinery.

Elie Wiesel was a slave laborer in those oil factories. In his famous book, *Night*, he described the prisoners’ reaction when U.S. bombers struck on August 20, 1944: “We were not afraid. And yet, if a bomb had fallen on the blocks [the prisoners’ barracks], it alone would have claimed hundreds of victims on the spot. But we were no longer afraid of death; at any rate, not of that death. Every bomb that exploded filled us with joy and gave us new confidence in life. The raid lasted over an hour. If it could only have lasted ten times ten hours!”

The Roosevelt administration’s decision to refrain from bombing the gas chambers and crematoria had nothing to do with concern about harming prisoners. The U.S. policy was based on the principle that military resources should not be used for humanitarian purposes, a principle that was established before there were any requests for bombing Auschwitz, and without reference to the issue of civilian casualties.

The planes were sent to bomb the Auschwitz oil factories in broad daylight, when it was likely the sites would be filled with Jewish slave laborers. As Martin Gilbert notes in his book *Auschwitz and the Allies*, forty Jews were killed in the U.S. bombing of the oil targets on September 13, 1944; thirty more were killed by stray bombs in that day's raid. But that didn't deter the Roosevelt administration from carrying out additional attacks there.

Likewise, U.S. planes were sent to bomb a rocket factory in the Buchenwald concentration camp on August 24, 1944. They struck in the early afternoon, when there was every reason to believe Jewish prisoners would be working there. Over three hundred prisoners were among those killed by the American bombers. The Roosevelt administration considered that to be a price worth paying in order to hit that military target.

The original interview with David Blitzer was conducted by the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors on April 13, 1983. We are all indebted to those who have conducted oral history interviews with Holocaust survivors over the past several decades. Every time some partisan tries to distort the historical record, we can turn to an actual witness, such as the late David Blitzer, to remind us of the painful truth about the Roosevelt administration and the bombing of Auschwitz.

(August 2022)

Rafael Medoff and Monty N. Penkower

Ken Burns Has a Palestine Problem

For the past five months, in interviews and press releases about his upcoming documentary, filmmaker Ken Burns has been claiming that the Roosevelt administration “accepted more refugees than any other sovereign nation” during the Nazi era.

That phrase, “sovereign nation,” struck us as odd. Ordinarily, one would say, “than any other country.” Why emphasize the word “sovereign”?

Now Burns has let the cat out of the bag. Apparently responding to criticism of his handling of the immigration statistics, Burns admitted to an interviewer from *The Daily Beast* on September 4 that he has been using the term “sovereign nation” to distinguish from the fact that “people escaped to other places, like Palestine.”

Why is Burns trying to disqualify Palestine from the conversation? Why resort to a technicality about sovereignty in order to try to push Palestine out of the discussion?

Even though Palestine was not sovereign, the ruling authorities there—the British—certainly were a sovereign power, and they had to make a decision about how many Jews to admit either to the United Kingdom or to the territories under its control. Likewise, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had to make a decision about how many Jews he would admit either to the mainland U.S. or to the non-sovereign territories it controlled, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Sadly, FDR chose to keep Jews out of the Virgin Islands—despite the offer by the governor and legislative assembly of that territory to open their doors to Jews fleeing Hitler. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr. specifically raised the possibility of admitting the 930 refugees aboard the infamous ship, the *St. Louis*, to the Virgin Islands in June 1939. But FDR said no, and the refugees were forced to return to Europe; many of them were murdered in the Holocaust.

If Roosevelt had allowed the *St. Louis* passengers, or other Jewish refugees, to stay in the Virgin Islands, surely today we would be crediting him for doing so. We wouldn’t say that rescuing them doesn’t count because the Virgin Islands are not sovereign. The same goes for Palestine.

When we compare the number of Jewish refugees admitted by FDR to the U.S. during the Nazi era and the number admitted by the British to Palestine, we begin to understand the rhetorical game Ken Burns has been playing.

From the rise of Hitler to power in early 1933 to the defeat of the Nazis in May 1945, the United States admitted between 200,000 and 210,000 Jewish refugees.

The British authorities ruling Palestine admitted over 250,000 Jews to Palestine during that same period. (We are using the numbers cited by Dalia Ofer and other widely-accepted historians.)

Remarkably, even if Palestine is arbitrarily removed from the calculation, the Roosevelt administration still doesn't qualify as having accepted more Jewish refugees "than any other sovereign nation." That distinction actually belongs to the Soviet Union.

According to the website of the U.S. Holocaust Museum—which Burns says persuaded him to make the film in the first place—"between 1939 and 1941 nearly 300,000 Polish Jews, almost 10 percent of the Polish Jewish population, fled German-occupied areas of Poland and crossed into the Soviet zone."

We have no illusions about what life was like for Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union. But those Jews fled there for a simple reason—they chose life, under the Soviets, instead of likely death, under the Germans.

Likewise, in noting how many Jews the British authorities admitted to Palestine, we are not gainsaying the tragic fact that the cruel British White Paper of May 1939 reduced Jewish immigration to a trickle precisely when it was the most urgent. And even the White Paper's paltry pledge of 75,000 over the next five years was not fulfilled. (Fearing Arab anger over a "flood" of Jews, the British doled out those immigration certificates ever so slowly, not reaching the promised figure until late 1945.)

Nevertheless, it is a fact that the Roosevelt administration's track record on admitting Jewish refugees was worse than that of either the Soviets or the British.

Even more important than who took in the most, is who could have taken in many more. The British could and should have let more Jews into Palestine. Their fear that Jewish immigration would make the Arabs pro-Nazi was obviated by the fact that many Arab leaders, and a large segment of the Arab masses, were pro-Nazi anyway.

As for the United States, the Roosevelt administration deliberately suppressed immigration below what the existing laws allowed. That left more than more than 190,000 quota places from Germany and German-occupied territories unused during the Holocaust years.

But reminding viewers of all those unused U.S. quota places would mean admitting that it was President Roosevelt's deliberate policy—not the general atmosphere of nativism and isolationism—that prevented the rescue of those 190,000 Jews. And that, apparently, would not have been consistent with Ken Burns's chosen narrative.

(As published in the *Jerusalem Post* - September 13, 2022)

Rafael Medoff and Monty N. Penkower

David Ben-Gurion vs. Ken Burns

Seventy-eight years ago this week, David Ben-Gurion rose before the Asefat Hanivcharim, Palestine Jewry's elected body, and delivered an explosive *J'Accuse* against the Allies for abandoning Europe's Jews during the Holocaust.

The words of the man who would soon be Israel's first prime minister take on added significance in view of the upcoming release of a Ken Burns documentary which claims it is a "myth" that the United States was indifferent to the fate of Jews under Hitler.

"As millions of Jews were taken to the slaughter—young and old, infant and newborn, mother and daughter—the world leaders, those who shout slogans of democracy and socialism, looked away from the bloodshed and did not undertake rescue action—they did not even try to rescue them," Ben-Gurion told the assembly of yishuv leaders in Jerusalem on September 12, 1944, according to a report in the next day's *Ha'aretz*.

Two months earlier, Ben-Gurion had spoken in similar terms at a ceremony on the fortieth *yahrzeit* of Theodor Herzl. Addressing himself to the Allies, he thundered: "What have you allowed to be perpetrated against a defenseless people while you stood aside and let them bleed to death, never lifting a finger to help....Why do you profane our pain and wrath with empty expressions of sympathy which ring like mockery in the ears of millions who are being daily burnt and buried alive in the hell centers of Europe?"

These were not words uttered after the fact. The Holocaust still raged as Ben-Gurion spoke. Trainloads of Jewish deportees were being sent to Auschwitz every day. On the day of the Herzl speech, July 10, three trainloads of Hungarian Jewish deportees arrived in Auschwitz. Over the course of four days that week, more than 30,000 Jews were gassed.

The deportations from other countries continued even after those from Hungary stopped. On the day of Ben-Gurion's speech to the Asefat Hanivcharim, September 12, three hundred Jewish children from Kovno arrived at the death camp; most of them were sent straight to the gas chambers.

The very next day, September 13, American planes bombed German synthetic oil factories in the industrial zone of Auschwitz, just a few miles from the gas chambers. It was one of numerous such raids, which put the lie to the Roosevelt administration's claim that the only way to strike the death camp

would be to “divert” planes from distant battle zones, thus undermining the war effort.

Over the years, Ben-Gurion’s view with regard to the idea of bombing Auschwitz, or the railways and bridges leading to the camp, has been misrepresented by those who want to minimize the Roosevelt administration’s refusal to bomb the mass murder facility.

The controversy over Ben-Gurion’s view of the bombing issue has arisen because until late June 1944, Ben-Gurion and other members of the Jewish Agency Executive did not yet understand that Auschwitz was a death camp. When the idea of asking the Allies to attack it was raised in a June 11 meeting of the executive, Ben-Gurion responded that “we do not know what the actual situation is in Poland,” and his colleague Emil Schmorak said, “It is said that in Oswiecim [the Polish name for Auschwitz] there is a large labor camp. We cannot take on the responsibility for a bombing that could cause the death of even one Jew.”

Two weeks later, however, Ben-Gurion and his colleagues learned the truth about Auschwitz from their Geneva representative, Richard Lichtheim, who had received eyewitness testimony about the camp from two recent escapees. During the weeks following receipt of that report, Jewish Agency officials lobbied Allied diplomats in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States to bomb the railways or the gas chambers, or both. Chaim Weizmann, Moshe Shertok (Sharett) and Golda Meyerson (Meir) were among those promoting the proposal.

In early September, just before the meeting of the Asefat Hanivcharim, Jewish Agency official Eliyahu Epstein (Elath) reported to Ben-Gurion about his recent efforts to persuade a Soviet diplomat in Cairo that the Allies should bomb the death camps.

Nahum Goldmann, who was the Jewish Agency’s representative in Washington as well as co-chairman of the World Jewish Congress, repeatedly asked U.S. officials to bomb Auschwitz and the railways and heard their excuses about not wanting to “divert” planes from the war effort.

Three days after Ben-Gurion’s speech, Ernest Frischer of the Czech government-in-exile reported to the World Jewish Congress that the Allies had been bombing “fuel factories...in Oswiecim and Birkenau,” not far from the “extermination installations.” Goldmann pointed out that fact to Allied officials, to no avail. They were, as Ben-Gurion put it, not willing to even “lift a finger” to rescue Jews.

According to Ken Burns’s narrative in his upcoming film, the Roosevelt administration did its best to help the Jews during the Holocaust. Ben-Gurion,

who actually lived through those days, understood what was happening far more clearly.¹

¹ This article originally was published by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on September 16, 2022, under a different title that was chosen without consulting the authors.

Rafael Medoff

Was FDR a Victim of the “Deep State” ?

Some supporters of former President Donald Trump believe that a group of entrenched bureaucrats, who they call the “Deep State,” prevented Trump from carrying out many of his policy initiatives.

Filmmaker Ken Burns is a strong critic of Trump, yet Burns seems to have embraced a version of the Deep State idea in his forthcoming documentary about America’s response to the Holocaust. According to Burns’s narrative, President Franklin Roosevelt wanted to help the Jews in Europe but was obstructed and undermined by his own State Department.

In other words, the “Deep State Department.”

Burns recounts how State Department officials went out of their way to block Jewish refugees from entering the country. In eleven of FDR’s twelve years in office, immigration from Nazi Germany and other countries was kept far below what the existing quotas would have permitted.

What Burns does not explain is that the State Department was implementing FDR’s policy, not sneaking around behind the president’s back. In one 1935 letter to New York Gov. Herbert Lehman, Roosevelt bluntly noted that “nearly all immigration quotas have been considerably under-issued during the past four years.” And that’s how he wanted it.

Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long, who was in charge of the department’s visa division, wrote in his diary—never intended for publication—that he briefed the president on the tactics that he and his colleagues were using to restrict immigration. In one diary entry from 1940, Long wrote that in a discussion at the White House on ways to curtail immigration, he “found that [FDR] was 100% in accord with my ideas,” and “expressed himself as in entire accord” and “wholeheartedly in support” of what Long and other State Department officials were doing.

Moreover, it was President Roosevelt himself who falsely claimed, at a June 5, 1940 press conference, that some refugees, “especially Jewish refugees,” had agreed to spy for the Nazis out of fear that their relatives back in Germany “would be taken out and shot.” That became a stock excuse for shutting America’s doors even tighter.

Burns's film describes how American rescue activist Varian Fry saved more than 2,000 refugees in Vichy France in 1940-1941, until the Nazis and their Vichyite collaborators complained to Washington, at which point Secretary of State Cordell Hull forced Fry to leave France.

Here, too, President Roosevelt is mysteriously absent from Burns's story. It's as if Secretary Hull was making up his own foreign policy. In reality, it was FDR's policy to maintain friendly relations with Nazi Germany and Vichy France during the years prior to America's entry into World War II. Hull's action against Fry was part and parcel of the State Department implementing Roosevelt's policy of appeasing Vichy.

Shortly after Hull acted against Fry, the Roosevelt administration publicly condemned De Gaulle's Free French forces for liberating two islands off Nova Scotia that had been occupied by the Vichyites. And when the Allies liberated North Africa from the Nazis and Vichyites in 1942, it was FDR who decided to leave the Vichy Admiral Francois Darlan in power in the region. That was Roosevelt's policy, which the State Department and War Department carried out.

Of course, the reason Hull and Long were in the State Department in the first place is because President Roosevelt appointed them to those positions. FDR initially chose Long as U.S. ambassador to Italy, but Long had to leave that post after causing controversy by praising Mussolini (including the punctuality of his trains). Instead of getting rid of Long, Roosevelt promoted him to assistant secretary of state, putting him in charge of 23 of the State Department's 42 divisions.

The president could have fired Hull or Long at any time if they were defying his policies. FDR repeatedly demonstrated that he was entirely capable of dismissing government officials who fell out of his favor for one reason or another—including his first two vice presidents.

President Roosevelt is often described as strong and decisive in leading America out of the Great Depression and against the Axis powers in World War II. How plausible is it to suggest that officials of the State Department, operating in broad daylight, would have been able to defy and undermine such a president?

If FDR had been opposed to appeasing Vichy, and wanted Varian Fry to continue his rescue work, how could the State Department have dared to appease Vichy and force Fry out of France? If Roosevelt wanted the immigration quotas to be filled, why would he knowingly allow the State Department to keep under-filling them?

The answer is that there was no “Deep State Department” working against President Roosevelt. FDR was indeed a strong and decisive president, and his subordinates implemented his policies, including those concerning Jewish refugees, with his knowledge and approval—for better or for worse.

(September 2022)

Rafael Medoff and Monty N. Penkower

A Holocaust Mystery Ken Burns Gets Lost in a Bermuda Triangle

Scientists have long been puzzled by the frequent disappearance of ships in the Bermuda Triangle. In his new Holocaust documentary, filmmaker Ken Burns has managed to make the entire Bermuda Conference on Refugees vanish.

A rising tide of calls in the British parliament, media, and churches in early 1943 for the Allies to rescue Jews from the Nazi slaughter prodded the British Foreign Office and the U.S. State Department to plan an Anglo-American conference on what they termed the refugee problem.

The island of Bermuda was chosen for the gathering. Nahum Goldmann, cochairman of the World Jewish Congress, told colleagues that the remote setting was selected so that “it will take place practically in secret, without pressure of public opinion.”

Like the Evian Conference on Refugees five years earlier, Bermuda was conceived as a gesture rather than a serious attempt to rescue Jews from the raging Holocaust. Jewish Agency official Arthur Lourie said its aim was “quieting public opinion without undertaking anything effective.”

The Joint Emergency Committee of European Jewish Affairs, an umbrella for major U.S. Jewish organizations, requested permission to send representatives to the conference. The request was rejected. The Committee sent Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles a detailed list of proposals for rescue action. The proposals were ignored.

A group of seven Jewish congressmen met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to discuss the rescue issue in advance of the Bermuda gathering. “It was a very unsatisfactory interview,” Congressman Daniel Ellison (R-Maryland) reported afterwards. “[We] asked the President about refugees, the White Paper, etc. What he proposed to do about these things. [We] made a number of suggestions to him as to what [we] thought he ought to do and the answer to all of these suggestions was ‘No’.”

The Bermuda Conference opened on April 19, 1943. Both sides had agreed beforehand that there would be no emphasis on the plight of the Jews—even the name of the conference masked their identity—nor would they adopt any policies that would benefit Jews in particular.

The U.S. would not agree to the use of any trans-Atlantic ships to transport refugees, not even troop supply ships that were returning from Europe empty. And there would be no increase in the number of refugees admitted to the United States.

The British delegates refused to discuss Palestine as a possible haven, because of Arab opposition. They also rejected negotiating with the Nazis to release Jews, on the grounds that “many of the potential refugees are empty mouths for which Hitler has no use.” Their release “would be relieving Hitler of an obligation to take care of these useless people,” a senior British official asserted.

The delegates dismissed the idea of shipping food to starving Jews as a violation of the Allied blockade of Axis Europe, even though they previously made an exception for German-occupied Greece. Instead, the Bermuda conferees spent a large amount of time on very small-scale steps, mainly the evacuation of 5,000 Jewish refugees from Spain to the Libyan region of Cyrenaica.

After twelve days of basking in the Caribbean sun, the delegates adjourned without achieving anything of significance. The two governments kept the proceedings of the conference secret, which only generated further suspicion.

The failure of the Bermuda Conference provoked the first serious public criticism of U.S. refugee policy. A large advertisement in the *New York Times*, sponsored by the rescue advocates known as the Bergson Group, was headlined “To 5,000,000 Jews in the Nazi Death-Trap, Bermuda was a Cruel Mockery.”

Congressman Emanuel Celler (D-New York) accused the delegates in Bermuda of engaging in “diplomatic tight-rope walking,” at a time when “thousands of Jews are being killed daily.” In a slap at Congressman Sol Bloom (D-New York), who was a staunch defender of the administration’s refugee policy and a member of the U.S. delegation to Bermuda, Rep. Celler characterized the conference as “a bloomin’ fiasco.”

The editors of *The New Republic* charged that Bermuda revealed “the bitter truth” that the U.S. and Great Britain were unwilling to aid “these potential refugees from murder....If the Anglo-Saxon nations continue on their present course, we shall have connived with Hitler in one of the most terrible episodes of history.”

Bermuda galvanized some mainstream Jewish leaders to speak out more forcefully. Dr. Israel Goldstein, president of the Synagogue Council of America (the umbrella for the major Jewish religious denominations) charged that “the victims are not being rescued because the democracies do not want them, and the

job of the Bermuda conference apparently was not to rescue victims of Nazi terror but to rescue our State Department and the British Foreign Office from possible embarrassment.”

Even the chief British delegate to Bermuda, Richard Law, later acknowledged that Bermuda was a “façade for inaction.”

The Bermuda conference was one of the era’s most vivid demonstrations of the Roosevelt administration’s abandonment of the Jews, as well as a pivotal moment in stimulating stronger American Jewish protests against the Holocaust.

How, then, could Ken Burns have omitted any mention of Bermuda from his six hour-long PBS series on “The U.S. and the Holocaust”? Was it because one of the themes of the series was to minimize President Roosevelt’s responsibility for America’s harsh refugee policy, and the Bermuda Conference conflicted with that narrative?

For now, this question remains a mystery. To date, no interviewer has asked Burns about this glaring omission, and he has not volunteered any comment. Is he hoping that, like ships disappearing in the Bermuda Triangle, his own Bermuda omission will vanish from public view before anyone notices?

(As published by the History News Network - October 2, 2022)

Martin Ostrow

America and the Holocaust: A Filmmaker's Perspective

As the producer and director of a PBS film on America's response to the Holocaust some years ago, I was at first delighted to learn that Ken Burns has now likewise made a film for broadcast on PBS about how our country responded to the Nazi genocide. But some advance publicity for the broadcast raises questions as to whether his film will accurately portray key issues such as U.S. refugee policy and the failure to bomb Auschwitz.

My film, *America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference*, was first broadcast in 1994 as part of the PBS history series *The American Experience*. I have been most gratified that it has become a staple for American history and Holocaust education in many secondary schools around the country. Ensuring that young people learn about these difficult periods in our country's history is essential to our future as a morally responsible nation.

When I set out to tell the complex and troubling story of our nation's response to the Holocaust, I believed it would be most effective to chronicle those events through the experience of a single person.

I was fortunate to discover the moving story of Kurt Klein, a German Jew who immigrated to America in 1937 at age 17, and then spent several years struggling against a wall of Roosevelt administration obstacles that stood in the way of rescuing his parents from Nazi Germany. My film examined the profound social, political and economic factors that led the American government, along with much of American society, to turn its back on the plight of the Jews.

America and the Holocaust explored the decisions that President Roosevelt and his State Department made to block news about the growing genocide, as well as to keep Jewish immigration drastically below the legal limits that the existing quota system allowed.

That policy's result: nearly 200,000 Jews, eligible for entry to America, such as Kurt Klein's parents, were prevented from immigrating and were murdered in the Holocaust.

Not surprisingly, there were some viewers at the time whose fond memories of FDR—a fondness I have always shared—made it difficult for them to accept the president's disturbing choices.

For filmmakers, one of the most important elements in the process of making a historical documentary is to have as our advisors historians who are experts in the subject material.

I was fortunate to have the late David S. Wyman as my main historical advisor. As the author of the definitive work in this field, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, Prof. Wyman was able to bring to our collaboration a comprehensive and nuanced appreciation of the historical issues and materials.

For *The U.S. and the Holocaust*, Ken has worked with writer Geoffrey Ward, his longtime collaborator. I hope they have examined the historical research published in the years since my film came out. And that they have made room in their expansive documentary for some of the uncomfortable truths about FDR, such as remarks about Jews behind closed doors. That information may help us better understand Roosevelt's decisions concerning Jewish refugees.

Inevitably, portions of *The U.S. and the Holocaust* will echo the social, political, economic story we told in 1994 about what America was like during the Roosevelt years and how that impacted the U.S. government's response to events overseas. The racism, antisemitism, and isolationism of those years—found in both political camps—is by now a well-known story.

But what will merit special scrutiny in the new Ken Burns film is how he presents the key controversies:

Does he attempt to blame “American society” — as if the president was a helpless captive of public opinion?

Does he attempt to blame everything on the State Department -- as if that branch made its own foreign policy?

Does he make it seem as if the immigration quotas in themselves were the problem, instead of acknowledging how FDR's policies kept the quotas vastly unfilled?

Does he convey the impression that bombing the railways leading to Auschwitz was too difficult to accomplish, when we know that U.S. planes bombed railroad lines throughout Europe—with multiple bombing raids on German oil factories in the vicinity of Auschwitz, some less than five miles from the gas chambers...?

Like many other Americans, I will be watching closely to see if *The U.S. and the Holocaust* honestly portrays these issues or fails to confront the difficult truths that need to be faced.

(September 11, 2022)

Martin Ostrow

A Filmmaker's Post-Mortem on Ken Burns & the Holocaust

Ken Burns's advance interviews for his new Holocaust film provided much material for public discussion. Now that PBS has broadcast the six-hour series, how does the film measure up?

The answer, unfortunately, is that it's a disappointment. *The U.S. and the Holocaust* misrepresents some key historical issues and entirely omits crucial information. Ultimately, Ken and his producer partners, Sarah Botstein and Lynn Novick, have failed to deliver the kind of film that we would have expected, given their track record.

I write not as a historian, but as the producer and director of a previous PBS film on America's response to the Holocaust, "America and the Holocaust: Deceit and Indifference," which first aired in 1994.

Inevitably, both my film and Ken's cover some of the same ground. We both describe the context in which America's response to the Holocaust evolved, such as the racism, isolationism, and antisemitism in the United States in the 1930s. Ken handles those themes and the unfolding of the Nazi genocide quite well, worthy moments of Holocaust education.

It is one thing, however, to acknowledge the disturbing trends in public and congressional opinion in those days; it is another to make it seem as if President Franklin D. Roosevelt was captive to them, as Ken does. FDR, after all, was a masterful leader. When he cared about an issue, he knew how to fight for it. But he made no real effort concerning the plight of Jewish refugees, keeping immigration drastically below the legal limits that the existing quota system allowed— not even letting them stay temporarily in a U.S. territory such as the Virgin Islands.

One might argue that Ken's series is so broad and complex that it's easy to lose Roosevelt in its massive story. Perhaps that was his intention. Ken certainly has the skill to render his subjects with vivid three-dimensional effect. Yet in this vast work, FDR is at times ghost-like—a hapless, impotent figure. The film offers excuses for the president's inaction and shifts almost all the blame to Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long. Viewers could easily forget who actually hired Long, and who could have fired him if he had wanted to. Long served at the pleasure of the president, not the other way around.

It's a shame the series brings nothing new to understanding Roosevelt's troubling decisions and motivations. Ken had a major advantage in making this new film. He could have drawn on significant information scholars have

uncovered in the past two decades about FDR and America's response to the Holocaust. I'm puzzled and disappointed he did not. For example:

— **FDR's Private Feelings About Jews.** Historians have uncovered more than a dozen private statements made by Roosevelt in which he disparaged "Jewish blood," advocated quotas on Jews in various professions (and college admissions), and even accused the publishers of the *New York Times* of using a "dirty Jewish trick" to gain a tax advantage. While President Roosevelt's private feelings about Jews may or may not offer a clue to his policies concerning Jewish refugees, they at least need to be part of the conversation. Yet they are not mentioned in the film.

— **The James McDonald Diaries.** The discovery of the diaries of the late refugee advocate and diplomat James G. McDonald shed new light on his efforts to help the Jews—and the refusal of the Roosevelt administration to assist him. Remarkably, McDonald is not even mentioned in the film.

— **The George McGovern Interview.** In a revealing 2004 interview with filmmakers Chaim Hecht and Stuart Erdheim, George McGovern, the former senator and presidential nominee, recounted his experiences as a World War II pilot who bombed the oil factories in the slave labor section of Auschwitz. McGovern's eyewitness recollections about the feasibility of bombing the railways leading to the camp tell us much more than Ken's commentators, who offer confusing speculations about why neither the railways nor the gas chambers were ever bombed.

Admittedly, a disadvantage Ken suffered was that in the decades since my film, some of the remaining principal figures in the story passed away. For example, unlike Ken, I had the opportunity to personally interview John Pehle, the first director of the War Refugee Board.

Recalling the British-American conference on refugees held in remote Bermuda in 1943, Pehle told me it was "a conference set up to not accomplish anything, and the people who represented the United States there were given those instructions." Yet the Bermuda meeting, a crucial event in the history of the U.S. response to the Holocaust, was not even mentioned by Ken.

Regarding the failure to bomb Auschwitz, Pehle says in my film, "After we recommended to the War Department that the extermination facilities at Auschwitz be bombed, we were told [that] this would involve bombers being sent from England...and therefore, it was not possible to do this. Later, perhaps after the war, we discovered at the very time we were recommending this, bombing all around Auschwitz was going on from Italy, and we had been misled." Pehle's powerful words should have been in Ken's film. They are not.

As with every Ken Burns film, *The U.S. and the Holocaust* includes affecting cinematography, touching moments, and memorable music--although the decision to appropriate the precise Bach violin concerto passage from the most poignant moment of my film, is certainly questionable.

But the film's strengths do not make up for the fact that this Burns production stumbles when it comes to the most important parts of the historical record. Ken promised *The U.S. and the Holocaust* would answer many of the lingering questions about our nation's response to the Nazi genocide. But after watching all six-plus hours of the film, I can only imagine that many people are still asking the same questions. They certainly should be.

(September 29, 2022)

