A S THE Kosovo crisis unfolds, the Clinton Administration and many in the mainstream press have issued stern warnings about the need to “draw the lessons” of the Second World War. As Clinton put it in his March 25 televised address, “In both [world] wars, Europe was slow to recognize the dangers, and the United States waited even longer to enter the conflicts. Just imagine if leaders back then had acted wisely and early enough, how many lives could have been saved…” An editorial in the April 4 Washington Post expanded on the theme: “At the Holocaust museum two weeks ago, the survivors of Nazi atrocities spoke of feeling utterly invisible to the Western world. Today, pretending not to know is not even an option. If there is to be any meaning in our Holocaust memorials—then this is a fight NATO can’t afford to lose.”

Since the Holocaust is being presented as a justification for war, it is important to explore the real historical record. It is often stated that the Western governments failed to learn about the Holocaust until it was too late, or acted “too slowly” once they knew. The appalling reality is that the Roosevelt Administration showed calculated indifference towards the Jews, thwarted rescue efforts and closed the borders to Hitler’s victims. There are indeed lessons to be learned from how the Allies handled the Nazi genocide, but they are not the ones Clinton has in mind.

By 1942 Hitler’s full plan to exterminate all the Jews was known throughout the world. U.S. newspapers published eyewitness reports from Warsaw, Poland that 700,000 Polish Jews had been massacred. That same year the Vichy Government in France deported 64,000 Jews back to Germany. On August 1, 1942, Dr. Gerhart Riegner, a Jewish leader in Switzerland, received a secret communication from Germany that documented the Nazis’ barbaric “Final Solution,” including Hitler’s method—Zyklon B gas. The State Department suppressed the report for months. R. Borden Reams, the State Department Specialist on Jewish Issues, said at the time that if the reports kept getting out, “the way will then be open for further pressure from interested groups for action that might affect the war effort.” Six months later, the State Department went so far as to cut off all reports “of that sort” from Switzerland.

News of the Nazi atrocities sparked a tide of protest in the U.S. Tens of thousands attended rallies that called on FDR to take action. However, in late 1942, FDR released a statement that there would be no Allied reprisals for Nazi war crimes. Over the next year, FDR refused to meet with Jewish leaders and never once mentioned the Jews in his weekly press conferences.

The Assistant Secretary of State in the Roosevelt Administration was an open anti-Semite named Breckinridge Long. In his previous post as ambassador to Italy, Long had been an effusive admirer of Mussolini. In a letter to FDR in 1933, he called the fascists “the most interesting experiment in government to come above the horizon since the formulation of our constitution 150 years ago. Many men are in uniform. The Fascisti in their black shirts are apparent in every community. They are dapper and well dressed and stand up straight and lend an atmosphere of individuality and importance to their surroundings.” Throughout his career, Long believed that he was under...
persistent attack from, in his own words, “the Communists, extreme radicals, Jewish professional agitators, refugee enthusiasts, Jewish radical circles, they all hate me.” And yet everything connected with the relief of Jews in Europe—from visas, to distribution of food and medicine—fell under this man’s supervision! Long helped craft one of the most deadly U.S. policies during the war—the refusal to open the border to fleeing refugees. During the three and a half years that the U.S. was at war with Germany, a mere 21,000 refugees were admitted into the country, just 10 percent of the numbers that could have emigrated under the quota. Refugees applying for visas were put through a maze of forms and regulations, and recalled being asked such questions as, “Are you Jewish by race and faith? Would you call yourself a socialist? Did the Social Democratic Party want to change the government?”

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The sick reality was that for the Allied powers the frightening scenario was not the extermination of European Jews but the prospect of taking responsibility for thousands of Jewish refugees. Shockingly open about this, a State Department official named Robert C. Alexander criticized rescue proposals that would “take the burden and the curse off Hitler.” In a similar vein, the British Foreign Office issued a memorandum stating that the real “complicating factor” in considering the rescue of refugees is that “Germany or their satellites may change over from a policy of extermination to one of extrusion [expulsion of the Jews].”

The voyage of a ship called the St. Louis became one of the most notorious symbols of Roosevelt’s criminal indifference. On May 13, 1939, the St. Louis arrived in Havana with 936 passengers fleeing Nazi oppression. The U.S.-backed Cuban government decided not to admit them and handed the matter over to the U.S. State Department. The refugees docked for weeks just a few miles from the ports of Miami, waiting to hear FDR’s ruling on their fate. FDR denied them entry and sent them back to Europe, where most of the people ended up in concentration camps. In another incident, a Romanian ship called the Sturma picked up 769 Jewish refugees from the Romanian port of Constanza. Overloaded, it began to sink near Turkey. Turkey refused to admit the refugees unless Britain issued them all certificates. Britain refused, and the Sturma sank six miles off the shores of Turkey. As they sank, passengers held up a banner that read “Save us.”

The Roosevelt Administration justified its indifference towards the Jews by claiming there was nothing the U.S. could do to stop the massacres except to carry on with the war. But public outrage at the Nazi massacres produced dozens of proposals for the rescue of Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe. At every turn the U.S. or the British government blocked rescue efforts and turned away Jews to their death. In 1939, Senator Wagner proposed a bill in Congress that would admit 20,000 Jewish children into the U.S. from Germany. The children would be adopted by American families and the whole enterprise would be funded by private organizations. Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles killed the bill, defending the administration’s position that, “It would be inadvisable to raise the question of increasing quotas or radical changes in our immigration laws.”

As one historian explained, “Roosevelt feared the antagonism of Congress, for at that very moment he was seeking half a billion dollars from an isolationist Congress to expand the Air Corps and to construct Naval bases. The President’s priority clearly went to defense.”

Eleanor Roosevelt later reflected on the fate of the Wagner-Rogers Bill: “Franklin frequently refrained from supporting causes in which he believed, because of political realities.” In May 1943, Sweden presented the Allies with a plan where it would arrange for the safe transfer of 20,000 Jewish children from Germany. Sweden offered to provide housing for the children for the duration of the war. It only asked that Britain and the U.S. share the cost of food and medicine and permit supplies to go through the naval blockade. After five months of silence, the U.S. responded that they did not want to antagonize the Germans by limiting the rescue to Jewish children, and the plans were scrapped.

The Allied Forces’ criminal indifference to the Nazi genocide was symbolized for many people by the Bermuda Conference of 1943. The British government called the conference to offset heightening public criticism that they were doing nothing to help the Jews. But Bermuda was a sham from the beginning. The conference was initially scheduled to take place in Washington, and was then moved at FDR’s request to a more remote location. No Jewish organizations were invited or represented. The State Department instructed American delegations to the conference “not to raise questions of religious faith or race; not to make a commitment regarding shipping space for refugees; not to expect naval escorts or safe-conducts for refugees; not to pledge funds; and not to expect any changes in U.S. immigration laws.”

In the opening speeches, politicians reiterated that victory in the war was the only solution and that the Jews “should not be betrayed...into a belief that aid is coming to them when, in fact, we are unable to give them immediate succor.” Still, Breckinridg Long found fault with the toothless message, writing in his diary, “One danger in it all is that their activities may lend color to the charges of Hitler that we are fighting this war on account of and at the instigation and direction of our Jewish citizens.”

Coincidentally, on the first day of Bermuda, the Warsaw Ghetto erupted in fiery rebellion against the Nazis. The Polish fighters transmitted a message by radio that the media broadcast across the world: “Save Us.” But no mention was made of those Ghetto fighters at the Bermuda Conference.

**The Refusal to Bomb Auschwitz**

If the Jews were beginning to believe that the U.S. did not have their interests at heart, there was no greater confirmation than the Allied Forces’ refusal to bomb the railroad tracks to Hitler’s death camps. In 1944, two Slovak Jews escaped from Auschwitz and provided the Allies with detailed information about the location and function of the gas chambers. By April of that year, the U.S. had also obtained aerial photographs of Auschwitz and Birkenau. The pleas poured into the Roosevelt
Administration from around the world: Bomb the gas chambers! Bomb the railroad!

But the War Department ruled that such an action “could only be executed by diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations.”19 Or as Colonel Thomas Davis put it more bluntly, “We are over there to win the war and not to take care of the refugee problem.”20 Yet in June 1944, Air Force bombers actually flew over the railroad tracks in question several times on their way to bomb other targets. And on August 20, 1944, U.S. planes bombed targets less than five miles east of Auschwitz. Had they destroyed the death camp on that day, they might have saved the 150,000 Jews who would die there before the end of the war. The only bombing that ever occurred at Auschwitz was undertaken by the prisoners themselves in February 1944 when a Jewish worker in a munitions factory managed to smuggle in an explosive and blow up one of the crematoriums.

Why didn’t the U.S. government take action? It is true that there was anti-Semitism at the highest levels of the U.S. government. FDR once spoke in Casablanca about the need to limit the number of Jewish professionals allowed to relocate to North Africa, referring to the “understandable complaints which Germans bore towards the Jews in Germany, namely that while they represent a small part of the population, they are over 50 percent of lawyers and doctors.” (In fact, Jews occupied only 2.3 percent of professional positions before the Holocaust.)21

But the roots of the Allies’ indifference go much deeper. The reality is that U.S. imperialism did not have an interest in rescuing the Jews.

If anything, Allied leaders saw the rescue plans as a hindrance to the war effort—not an aim of the war. As Breckenridge Long said to FDR after Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, “I expect I am a good deal of a cynic. Whether I am or not, I am unable to see any moral element in this whole war. To me it is not a holy war.”22 The U.S. and Britain did not go to war to fight a “holy war” against fascism. The Second World War was a continuation of the war between the imperialist powers to redivide the spoils of the world. German expansion under Hitler threatened Britain’s control in Europe. Eventually the U.S. also saw Germany as a threat to its control on the world stage. For the U.S., the stakes of winning were about establishing itself as the dominant military and economic power on the globe.

As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote at the time,

U.S. capitalism is up against the same policies that pushed Germany in 1914 on the path of war. The world is divided? It must be redivided. For Germany it was a question of “organizing Europe.” The United States must “organize” the world. History is bringing humanity face to face with the volcanic eruption of American imperialism.23

For the people in charge, this was neither a war for democracy nor a war to save the Jews. Instead of democracy, it brought the Cold War division of the world. Instead of stopping genocide, the Allies, in their indifference, became cold accomplices to the Nazi genocide. Once again we are facing the volcanic eruption of U.S. imperialism, and again its leaders are cloaking themselves in the moral authority of the Holocaust. We can’t let them get away with it.

2 Wyman, p. 179.
3 Wyman, p. 29.
5 Wyman, p. 191.
6 Wyman, p. xix.
7 Wyman, p. 129.
8 Wyman, p. 99.
9 Wyman, p. 105.
10 Morse, p. 308.
11 Morse, p. 255.
12 Morse, p. 255.
13 Morse, p. 255.
14 Morse, p. 65.
15 Morse, p. 52.
16 Morse, p. 53.
17 Morse, p. 54.
18 Wyman, p. 300.
19 Wyman, p. 291.
20 Wyman, p. 293.
21 Wyman, p. 311.
22 Morse, p. 40.