

An American Jewish Resistance during World War II

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Against the widespread idea that the American population remained indifferent to or willingly ignored the genocide of European Jews, Catherine Collomp traces the history of Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) and its action to raise awareness on Nazism but also to save many Jewish lives in France and Poland.

Résister au Nazisme. Le Jewish Labor Committee, New York, 1934-45, by Catherine Collomp, Paris, Editions CNRS, 2016

There is a widespread idea among some historians and the greater public that the American population, including American Jews, remained indifferent to or willingly ignored the genocide of European Jews during World War II. Popularized by the 1968 book, *While 6 Million Died, A Chronicle of American Apathy* by journalist A.D. Morse, historical research on the United States during the Holocaust has documented the failures of the Roosevelt Administration, American civil society, and even American Jews, who have been framed as indifferent and divided.¹ The title of Morse's book speaks for itself; its findings set forth the questions that historians continue to debate: at what point did the US government become aware of the Final Solution? Why did Congress refuse to alter the United States's restrictive and discriminatory immigration policies? Was the State Department driven by antisemitism? Why did the Roosevelt Administration wait until January 1944 to set up a rescue initiative? If Morse, and later Wyman set out to identify the guilty parties, others, such as Feingold, Breitman, Kraut and Lichtman, have sought to contextualize the American response to the Holocaust, and explain the barriers to rescue.² The verdict is still out: most historians agree on the basic facts, but disagree on how to interpret them. As a result, this rich and useful domain of historical inquiry often lapses into a "glass half-full or half-empty?" debate.

By focusing on what *should have* happened in the political sphere, the more straight-forward question of "what happened" has until recently been largely obscured.

American Jews, for example, divided by class, linguistic and ideological tensions, were unable to create a unified front. They could not prevent the massacre of 6 million Jews on European soil. They did indeed try, however, and sought solutions both in the political sphere and in civil society. Yet very few studies of such grassroots mobilizations in the name of American Jews have actually been conducted.³

This explains why Catherine Collomp's most recent book, *Résister au nazisme, le Jewish Labor Committee, New York, 1934-1945*, is a much-needed contribution to World War II history. The book's six chapters trace the establishment of the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) in New York in 1934, its activities in the US to raise awareness on Nazism, and its support for rescue and resistance in France and Poland. An expert on the American Labor movement, Collomp provides here a fascinating transnational social history of the response of European and American labor movements to the Third Reich. Meticulously researched, the book will interest scholars and advanced students working on Jewish rescue during the Holocaust as well as on labor and socialism during World War II.

The significance of the JLC's mobilization lay not only in its financial contribution to the resistance movements in France or Poland and the number of individuals it saved during World War II, but in the JLC's cross-cutting allegiances to the Jewish Bund and the Labor movement, which allowed for an unexpected collaboration. As chapter one points out, JLC leadership, including David Dubinsky, head of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), and Baruch Charney Vladeck, general manager of the Yiddish newspaper, the Jewish Daily Forward, had roots in the distinct political culture of the Jewish Bund. Neither Communist nor Zionist, the Bundist movement was formed in Vilna (now in Lithuania) in 1897 and spread throughout the Pale, serving as both a Jewish workers' union and a Socialist party. Fighting for the recognition of Jews and the Yiddish language within the broader Labor movement, Bundists were eventually forced underground because of their role in the 1905 Revolution, and especially after the 1917 Revolution, due to their rejection of Communism. Both Dubinsky and Vladeck had fled Eastern Europe, but traveled extensively in Europe during the 1930s, returning to the United States as credible messengers to the larger American labor movement about the growing Nazi persecutions.

Nonetheless, it was no small task to enlist the efforts of American labor, embodied by the American Federation of Labor and, after 1938, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, in the fight against Nazism. After World War I, a growing isolationist movement called for restrictions in US immigration policies. The “Quota System,” established in 1921 and reinforced in 1924, severely limited immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, intentionally setting up barriers to keep out non-Protestants. The AFL (American Federation of Labor) supported immigration restrictions as a means of improving American working conditions. Even though the AFL condemned Nazism and its persecution of labor leaders in 1933 and even organized a boycott of German goods, its isolationism kept European Labor at a distance.

In a pragmatic move, the JLC did not try to challenge US immigration policies. It did however, push the AFL to mobilize to save European labor leaders. As chapter two points out, the JLC, through its Bundist networks and international connections, had a clear vision of which European labor leaders were in the greatest danger. The JLC thus set out to save European labor by helping its leaders (many of whom were Jewish) find refuge. Chapter four analyzes how, in spite of US immigration restrictions, the JLC, with the support of the AFL, obtained temporary emergency visas from the US State Department, helping about 1500 labor leaders and their families immigrate to the United States in 1940-42. With the Nazi Occupation, France, where many of the hunted political activists had sought refuge, had become a death trap. Working closely with Varian Fry’s Emergency Rescue Committee, Frank Bohn evacuated the individuals identified on the JLC/AFL list. The JLC was also concerned about Bundist leaders who were trapped in what had become, after 1940, Soviet Lithuania. The JLC therefore again fought for emergency visas and, thanks to the actions of Sempo Sugihara, Japanese ambassador in Kovno, some of these individuals were provided visas to Japan, and thus were able to continue on to the US via the Pacific.

The JLC also worked within the borders of the United States, as Collomp demonstrates in chapter three. Indeed, like the AFL, the JLC joined the movement to boycott German products in 1935, establishing the Joint Boycott Council with another American Jewish organization, the American Jewish Congress. The latter’s working-class, Yiddish-speaking membership made these two organizations natural allies, even if the issue of Zionism divided them. Together, the organizations mobilized thousands of

newly-minted American Jews in rallies, calling for an aggressive boycott and “in your face” tactics that shocked the more discreet, elite American Jewish organizations. To protest the Berlin Olympic games in 1936, the JLC also organized a Counter-Olympics, gathering 20,000 spectators over two-days in New York. Collomp’s analysis shows a grassroots protest movement among a faction of US Jews. However, while she takes time to carefully situate the JLC within the diverse “American Jewish Community,” Collomp does not dwell on the inter-organizational dynamics of Jewish organizations in the same detail in which she analyzes the ins and outs of the American and European labor movements.

Indeed, it was labor ties that led to the most unexpected aspect of the JLC’s work in Europe. Chapter five explores how the American Jewish organization not only supported the Jewish Bundist resistance in France, but also sent funds to French socialists and the French labor movement, supporting the underground publication of the SFIO’s *Le Populaire*, for example. If the JLC’s solidarity took multiple forms and was never designed to remain only within the Jewish circles, Collomp demonstrates in her final chapter the visceral attachment of its leaders to save lives in Poland. In collaboration with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee,⁴ the JLC sent funds for relief. It also financed armed resistance and supported both Jewish and non-Jewish resistance networks.

Collomp’s approach reframes the American Jewish response to the Holocaust from the bottom-up, showing how one subset of this population mobilized, not only out of ethno-religious solidarity but in the name of European socialist and labor movements. By documenting the role of an American Jewish organization in Europe during World War II, the book “internationalizes” American history. It would be reductionist to consider this book as only a contribution to “American Jewish history” or “Holocaust studies.” Other scholars could have interpreted the JLC as a tale of Jewish solidarity and would have missed a great deal of the picture. An American Jewish resistance, indeed, but not only.

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¹ In order of publication, the historiography includes: A. D. Morse, *While Six Million Died : A Chronicle of American Apathy*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1968; D. S. Wyman., *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1968 ; H. L. Feingold, *The Politics of Rescue: The Roosevelt Administration and the Holocaust, 1938-1945*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1970; D. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1984 ; R. Breitman and A. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945*, Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987 ; H. L. Feingold., *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1995 ; R. Breitman and A. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews*, The Belnap Press, Harvard University Press, 2013.

² See note one.

³ Exceptions include Y. Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust, The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939-1945*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1981; M. Gottlieb, *American Anti-Nazi Resistance, 1933-1941*, Ktav, 1982.

⁴ On the JDC in France, see Laura Hobson Faure, *Un « Plan Marshall Juif » : la présence juive américaine en France après la Shoah, 1944-1954*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014.