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German Jews, Refugees, and the *Christian Century*, 1933-41

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The treatment of the Jews in Germany under the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler (1933-45) constitutes one of the most monstrous persecutions in all of history. Its culmination came with the Holocaust of the war years. The process began, however, almost immediately after Hitler came into power on January 30, 1933. The assault on the Jews was not—or should not have been—a surprise. Hitler's animus toward the Jews had been made abundantly clear long before he assumed the chancellorship.¹ Once in power, Hitler and his Nazi Party rapidly drove the Jews from the professions in Germany and in succeeding years gradually excluded them from other occupations and subjected

them to a policy of economic expropriation calculated to reduce them to utter poverty. Thousands of Jews sought to emigrate from Germany, at first voluntarily, later under pressure from the government. The pre-war onslaught came to a climax in 1938 as Nazi racial policies were applied with vicious fury in Austria and as the Jews were physically assaulted in the infamous *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 9 and 10.²

The attack upon the Jews and the plight of the refugees seeking escape from the heartless Nazi measures posed serious questions for Christianity. For the most part, American Protestantism remained apathetic to the issues raised. Insofar as it reacted, it did so largely in

terms of a rhetoric condemning the persecutors and sympathizing with the victims.³ Within one sector of American Protestantism, the religious press, the response varied greatly in frequency and intensity. In the forefront in both categories was the *Christian Century*.⁴

The *Christian Century* was the leading voice of liberal Protestantism in the United States. A weekly non-denominational journal of high quality aimed particularly at an educated constituency, it was vigorously, even pugnaciously, theologically liberal. It regularly carried several editorials and lengthy, provocative articles as well as numerous columns of religious news from throughout the country and the world. Under the editorial leadership of Charles Clayton Morrison,⁵ a strongly committed pacifist and staunch isolationist, the *Christian Century* crusaded on behalf of such causes as international justice and peace, passionately opposed militarism and war, and supported ecumenical causes and inter-faith understanding.

The *Christian Century* kept its readership well informed concerning the persecution of German Jewry and the resultant refugee problem. From March 1933 through December 1941 it published 153 articles of various types that dealt exclusively or in part with these two issues.⁶ Forty-five of these were editorials, but most of them were news reports, many from *Christian Century* correspondents in the United States and abroad.⁷ In this article we will focus particularly upon the editorial reaction of the *Christian Century*. Such an examination will serve not only to illustrate how a major Protestant journal responded, but will also be instructive of the thinking and shifting positions of its liberal, pacifistic editor.

Morrison reacted quickly to the unfolding Nazi assault on the Jews, but initially was skeptical that it was as

serious as press reports from Germany indicated. When it soon became evident that these accounts were accurate, he nevertheless remained hopeful—at times even confident—that the Nazi anti-Semitic outrages were temporary, soon to be abandoned in the face of protests from abroad and opposition from within by the German business community.⁸ Morrison therefore applauded protests by Christians in the United States and throughout the world, particularly since Christians, he noted, had been heretofore noticeably less sympathetic to sufferings of Jews than to those of other oppressed groups. Such a calloused attitude toward Jews, he charged, continued to prevail only among fundamentalists, who were “able even now to discuss the German situation without human feeling, and even to hail Hitler as an instrument of God’s wrath against a people who failed to recognize and own their messiah when he came to them.”⁹

The editor also threw his support behind a boycott of German goods being sponsored by American Jews. Such a boycott, he asserted, was perhaps the only action, short of military sanctions, that might cause a modification of German policies since the Nazi regime was heavily dependent upon big business, which would suffer as a result.¹⁰ At the same time he did not abandon his belief that world opinion would have some effect on Hitler.

Throughout 1933 and 1934 Morrison continued to call upon Christians to make their voices of protest heard and remained sanguine that a change in Nazi racial policies was impending.¹¹ But the cautious optimism of 1934 was superseded in early 1935 by the confident assertion that Nazi policies were indeed in the process of transformation as the editor proclaimed “startling developments” and “dramatic shifts” due to the German economic

difficulties brought on in part by the Jewish boycott. Admitting that the world needed more than the announcements thus far made by the Nazis to convince it that the Jewish persecutions would be terminated, he nevertheless declared that it "hails with joy this evidence that controlling elements in Germany have awakened to the folly of the Nazi Jewish policy."¹²

Morrison's euphoria did not long continue. By the summer of 1935, in the context of a new rash of physical and verbal attacks on the Jews, Morrison conceded to the "bitter realization" that Hitler's anti-Semitic policies were not about to end—indeed, he acknowledged, the struggle of the Jews with the Nazi regime, "far from having ended, has hardly more than begun." New rumors of possible modification of the policies failed to rekindle his optimism. The editor now recognized that racial intolerance was a fundamental principle of the Nazi regime and was being inculcated into German minds by every means possible.¹³ It would seem that Morrison had come, in a few months' time, to a much more realistic understanding of the nature of the Nazi Jewish policies.

The editor's new assessment of the situation in Germany led him to ponder what effective support could be provided to those who suffered from Nazi barbarity. He was adamant that such support should not, under any circumstances, involve external interference in the internal affairs of the German Reich. Consequently he avidly seized upon the campaign then underway to move the 1936 Olympic Games from Berlin to another site as a worthy project. Such action, he contended, would offer a dramatic means for demonstrating world disapproval of the events in Germany, a blow to the legitimacy of the Nazi regime, and a way of informing Jews and Christians suf-

fering under the oppression of Hitler that the rest of the world was not indifferent to their plight.¹⁴

Morrison's unequivocal stance against interference in German affairs soon began to erode in the face of his now pessimistic view of Hitler's intention in regard to the Jews. Early in 1936 he insisted that, "in spite of Hitler's arrogant denial, what Germany is doing to these victims of Nazi brutality is the world's business" and argued that the governments of the world had to confront the plight of the Jews through peaceful means, to be sure, but "without diplomatic evasions or ambiguities."¹⁵ A few months later he urged support for action by the League of Nations on behalf of the Jews, arguing that intervention in the internal affairs of a nation was justified "when considerations of humanity are involved" and when the refugee exodus resulting from that nation's policies placed serious burdens on other countries.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the editor continued to denounce the Nazi measures against the Jews and to applaud those who protested against them.¹⁷

Intensification of the Jewish refugee crisis in 1938 caused Morrison to focus increasingly on this issue. He had first expressed concern for refugees in the fall of 1933 when he had appealed to President Roosevelt to state publicly that the United States was still ready to function as a haven for the oppressed and to demonstrate this by adopting a more liberal immigration policy. The editor's call for the admission of refugees had been carefully circumscribed, however; it requested only a more liberal administration of existing legislation, not liberalization of immigration laws.¹⁸ In 1937 he had supported a highly unrealistic scheme to settle Jewish refugees on the island of Madagascar.¹⁹ Now in the summer of 1938, he commended Roosevelt for

calling an international conference on refugees to be held at Evian, France. Morrison was hopeful that such a gathering might result in concrete assistance to the refugees "without recourse to undiplomatic language."²⁰ Apparently he still believed that blunt language was to be eschewed, a position seemingly at odds with his recommendation to world governments a year and a half earlier to cease "diplomatic evasions and ambiguities" in dealing with the Nazi regime.

A short time later, the editor expressed his pleasure that the conference had created a permanent Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, but impatience with the committee's failure to devise a plan to resettle the refugees quickly. It was absurd, he commented, that the relatively few refugees could not be settled somewhere. The problem, as Morrison saw it, was that every nation wanted another to assume responsibility for resettlement. It might not seem fair, he acknowledged, for some nations to accept the refugees "at some cost and inconvenience to themselves." But, he maintained, "the humane, the civilized, the morally sensitive always have to share among themselves the responsibility for doing the decent thing by the victims of the cruel, the barbarous and morally obtuse." He went on to express confidence that the world would not be "so poor and heartless," even in a time of economic depression, as to deny entry to the desperate refugees.²¹

The stepped-up harassment of the Jews in 1938 led Morrison to reflect more fully upon the purposes of the Nazis in respect to the Jews, an exercise that drove him to increasing pessimism over the fate of the latter. By summer he was convinced that the Nazis intended to drive all of the Jews out of Austria and Germany, a conclusion prompting him to reconsider

whether any feasible solutions existed for the problem. This led to further retreat from his opposition to interference in the internal affairs of Germany, as the editor now even seemed ready to entertain the possibility of unilateral intervention of some sort by the United States.²²

Horrified by *Kristallnacht* and subsequent harsh measures²³ imposed upon the Jews, Morrison, in November and December 1938, undertook an agonizing search for the proper response to such atrocities. For four consecutive weeks he struggled in his editorial columns to find answers. The church, he declared, had to "disassociate itself from this program of calculated cruelty and paganzied racial nationalism, succor those who are its immediate victims, and strive to immunize the rest of the world to the contagion of this spirit." As for governments, the editor declared, again changing his position, the time for "the frozen smile of diplomatic cordiality" was past. They, as well as the churches, should bluntly denounce the pogrom. But he was not at all certain as to what, if anything, might be done beyond words, although again he entertained the possibility of foreign intervention:

It does not seem a violent assumption to suppose that somewhere there must be a point beyond which a nation, or the government of a nation, cannot be allowed to go in its treatment of the people within its borders without evoking protest or even possibly providing preventive measures from its neighbors.²⁴

Morrison concluded, however, that the point justifying intervention had not yet been arrived at, although he did not rule out the possibility that it might be in the future. Conceivably the Nazis might

take further reprisals against the Jews, he speculated, or might even decide to "massacre" them. Then what? What should be done when the end of the world's tolerance had been reached? The editor despairingly confessed that he had no answer to this question. But military force was clearly out of the question. "That solution," he asserted, "can be considered as out even before anyone suggests it."²⁵ The editor was not ready to compromise his pacifism.

A partial solution to the problems created by *Kristallnacht* in particular and the Nazi racial policies in general, Morrison implied, was to assist refugees to find new homes. However, here he perceived new difficulties. Not only were there physical problems associated with getting the Jews out of Germany, but there was the "all but universal" presence of anti-Semitism, not excepting the United States. He feared, therefore, that to allow substantial numbers of Jewish refugees to settle in the United States would inevitably stimulate American anti-Semitism and hence render "a tragic disservice" to American Jews. Besides, the editor argued, admitting substantial numbers of refugees would be detrimental to the already precarious economic condition of the country. Further, the United States already confronted a task of "social integration" larger than any other nation of the world and should not be expected to make it more difficult. No ethical principles, he declared, required a nation "to expose itself to a condition sure to involve a moral overstrain." American immigration laws perhaps should be tightened rather than relaxed, he added. Morrison acknowledged that his arguments led to a "blind alley" and he again admitted to "bafflement" as to what then should be done.²⁶ The brave sentiments expressed by the editor but a few months before seemed to have dissipated. At

least they did not, apparently, apply to the United States, for he did not call upon it to assume the burdens that often came to the "humane, the civilized, and the morally sensitive" nations, nor did he summon it to do the almost impossible but "decent thing" for the victims of persecution.

In subsequent months, Morrison became increasingly dubious that the refugee problem could be solved. Mass resettlement of the Jews was an impossibility—"beyond the reach of human agency," he believed. If somehow it did succeed, it would merely serve to embolden other countries to emulate the Nazis, thereby compounding the problem.²⁷ He failed to see much hope of success in a plan then being negotiated between the head of the Intergovernmental Committee created by the Evian Conference and German representatives attempting to arrange the removal of some 400,000 Jews from Germany.²⁸ Nor was he optimistic that Palestine could provide a solution to the problem.²⁹ By June 1939 Morrison's typically liberal confidence in man and progress lay shattered as he contemplated the tragic saga of 900 hapless refugees aboard the German liner *St. Louis*. Possessing seemingly valid Cuban landing certificates, they were nevertheless refused permission by Cuban officials to disembark at Havana. Although the *St. Louis* steamed for several days off the coast of Florida while futile attempts were made to gain entry into the United States for the refugees, eventually the increasingly desperate passengers were transported back to Europe.³⁰ The *St. Louis* episode, and others similar to it, the editor despairingly concluded, were "evidence that the great humanitarian hope of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries utterly perished in the twentieth, and [were] symbols of mankind's self-defeat."³¹

Despite his pessimism, Morrison insisted that Christians and Jews should not be reduced to inaction simply because they could not totally solve the problem.³² He therefore continued in 1939 and 1940 to advocate proximate and partial solutions. He supported, for instance, a plan considered by Congress in the spring of 1939 to admit into the United States twenty thousand German refugee children.³³ He apparently did not fear that the project might place a "moral overstrain" on the United States. Rather, he agreed with one supporter of the proposal that "the situation of these German children . . . rises above logic, above economy, and certainly above any personal self-preservation."³⁴ He did not supply any clue, however, as to why this was true in respect to children but not to adult refugees.³⁵

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the *Christian Century* under Charles Clayton Morrison regularly took cognizance of the Nazi Jewish policies and the consequent refugee crisis and frequently wrestled with these issues editorially. Unequivocally Morrison condemned the Nazi treatment of the Jews and often expressed his concern for those seeking to escape the clutches of the Nazis. Yet at certain times his insights were less than profound, his compassion seemed to be restrained, and the solutions he proffered were inconsistent and inadequate. At times, too, he was unduly, even naively, sanguine concerning future policies and actions, both inside and outside of Germany. When such expectations failed to materialize, Morrison, perhaps recognizing that the reality of the situation made a mockery of his optimistic perception of human nature and apparently unable or unwilling to accept the fact of man's innate sinfulness, was reduced to a mood of gloom and hopelessness.

As to the refugee crisis, the editor for a time believed that it could be solved through cooperation among the nations of the world. But again optimism yielded to pessimism and in the aftermath of *Kristallnacht* he abandoned any real hope for an effective solution. Morrison called for the United States to be a haven of refuge for the oppressed, but opposed opening the gate so that they could enter. His compassion became circumscribed by a highly conjectural concept of national "moral overstrain," a limitation probably reinforced by his isolationist views. He very nearly proposed that other nations assume the burden of solving the problem. When they did not, his despair became the greater.

Morrison became convinced that the Jewish persecution and refugee issues exceeded the capacity of voluntary or private organizations to handle them; only governments could cope with them. But given his commitment to non-intervention and pacifism, there was, from his perspective, little international pressure that could be brought to bear on the Nazi regime to alter its policies. Moreover, he remained reluctant to acknowledge an obligation for either the United States or other nations to make a supreme effort to find room in their countries for the refugees. Thus, increasingly the editor was driven to hopelessness and helplessness in the face of the situation.

In the end, Morrison was reduced to paralysis by contradictory emotions. No impassioned pleas urging Christians to extraordinary and sacrificial efforts came from his pen. At best he could only admonish his readers not to acquiesce in the Nazi oppression of the Jews but to continue to condemn it and give what limited assistance they could to the victims without endangering their own welfare. And the most he could advise governments was to abjure

diplomatic language and speak more sharply to Hitler and the Nazis. In the final analysis, except for some assistance to those refugees who managed to escape, Morrison and the *Christian Century* had little to offer or recommend.

The root cause for the editor's frustrations and vacillation, his naiveté and despair, can be traced to his lack of an authentic Biblical understanding of man and the world. To be sure, possession of such a perspective would not automatically have supplied him with answers to a difficult and challenging situation, but at least it would have prevented his flights into optimism and his retreat into an immobilizing despair and would have provided a sound basis from which a realistic, but consistently Christian, response might have been erected. Ultimately, Morrison's failure reflected the inadequacy and sterility of theological liberalism in confronting the evil that was Hitler and Nazism.³⁵

Notes

¹For instance, in *Mein Kampf*, written by Hitler between 1924 and 1926, he repeatedly referred to Jews in a contemptuous fashion and insisted that there would be no room in a future Nazi Germany for both Jews and Germans. See Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. by Ralph Manheim (Sentry Edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943).

²In the *Anschluss* of March 1938, Hitler annexed Austria to Germany, thus opening the way to the application of Nazi racial policies in Austria. *Kristallnacht* (Night of Broken Glass) involved an ostensibly spontaneous attack by Germans on Jewish-owned business establishments and synagogues and sometimes on Jewish persons in response to the assassination in Paris of a German diplomatic official by a teen-age Polish Jew crazed by the sudden and ruthless expulsion of his parents from Germany by the Nazis. Over seven thousand Jewish businesses were destroyed or looted, six hundred synagogues burned, and as many as one hundred Jews lost their lives while thousands more were subjected to violence, humiliation, and arrest. See, e.g., Nora Levin, *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European*

Jewry, 1933-1945 (New York: Crowell, 1968), pp. 78-81. For an extensive treatment of the events surrounding *Kristallnacht* see Lionel Kochan, *Pogrom: 10 November 1938* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1957).

³Yet there were significant exceptions to the general indifference. Not only did expressions of concern for both Jews in Germany and refugees come from many quarters, but also a dedicated nucleus of concerned individuals tried hard to arouse the Protestant community over these issues. Additionally, response sometimes went beyond words to action. The American Friends Service Committee, for instance, embarked upon an impressive effort to assist German refugees. The American Christian Committee for German Refugees, an interdenominational agency, and a few denominational committees also rendered valuable service to refugees.

⁴In general, the theologically liberal journals tended to comment more frequently than the conservative. There were exceptions. David A. Rausch, for instance, in a recent article in *Fides et Historia*, the journal of the Conference on Faith and History, has pointed out that *Our Hope*, a fundamentalist journal, treated the Holocaust issue both often and significantly. See David A. Rausch, "Our Hope, An American Fundamentalist Journal and the Holocaust, 1937-1945," *Fides et Historia*, 12 (Spring 1980), 89-103.

⁵Morrison had become editor of the *Christian Century* in 1908. He was an ordained Disciple of Christ minister and, in the 1930s, also lectured at Chicago Theological Seminary. See *Religious Leaders of America, 1941-1942*, ed. J.C. Schwarz (New York: n.p., n.d.), II, p. 815.

⁶The figure does not include letters to the editor. The journal also devoted much space to the general political aspects of Nazism and the Church Struggle in Germany.

⁷News articles numbered 102. The remaining six articles were full-length, signed feature articles.

⁸"World Wrath at Hitler's Attack on the Jews," and "A Need for Light, Not Heat," *Christian Century*, 50 (April 5, 1933), 443. Hereafter all citations of articles in the *Christian Century* will omit the name of the journal.

⁹What is "Happening Behind the Scenes in Germany?" 50 (April 12, 1933), 483-484; "Jews and Jesus," 50 (May 3, 1933), 582-584; "Christian Ministers Protest Anti-Jewish Campaign," 50 (June 21, 1933), 804-805; and "The Greater Ghetto," 50 (September 13, 1933), 1131. The charge made by Morrison against fundamentalists was vigorously rebutted by a Lutheran missionary to the Jews in two articles appearing in the *Lutheran*. See Paul I. Morentz, "What Would Paul Think?" *Lutheran*, 15 (June 8, 1933), 4-5; and 15 (June 15,

1933), 10-11.

¹⁰"Boycotting German Products," 50 (September 13, 1933), 1131.

¹¹"Churches and Crisis," 50 (November 29, 1933), 1495-96; and "Boycott of German Goods is Having its Effect," 51 (April 11, 1934), 484.

¹²"The End of National Socialism," 52 (March 13, 1935), 326-27.

¹³"Nazism Reverts to Type in New Outbreak of Violence," 52 (July 31, 1935), 980; and "Nazi Intolerance Grows Clearer," 52 (August 7, 1935), 1004.

¹⁴"Move the Olympics!" 52 (August 7, 1935), 1007-08.

¹⁵"Commissioner McDonald's Resignation," 53 (January 15, 1936), 67.

¹⁶"Appeal to the League to Stop Inhumanities," 53 (August 19, 1936), 1100-01.

¹⁷"German Christians Address Hitler," 53 (August 19, 1936), 1100; "Germany Protests against Sympathy for Refugees," 54 (April 28, 1937), 571; and "Nazis Suppress B'nai B'rith," 54 (May 5, 1937), 571.

¹⁸"Maintain the American Tradition," 50 (September 6, 1933), 1099.

¹⁹"A French Haven for the Jews," 54 (June 30, 1937), 828.

²⁰"Helping the Refugees is Telling Hitler," 55 (April 6, 1938), 421.

²¹"Jewish Refugee Problem Studied at Evian," 55 (July 20, 1938), 885-86; "Permanent Organization for Relief of Refugees," 55 (July 27, 1938), 907; and "By the Jericho Road," 55 (August 31, 1938), 1030-31.

²²"First Rob the Jews and then Starve Them!" 55 (May 11, 1938), 581-82; "Nazi Drive against Jews Enters Final Phase," 55 (June 29, 1938), 805-06; "Jewish Refugee Problem Studied at Evian," 55 (July 20, 1938), 885; and "Polish Jews Deported to Germany," 55 (November 9, 1938), 1356.

²³For example, an "atonement payment" of \$400 million for the assassination of the German official was levied upon the German Jewish community which was already rapidly being impoverished.

²⁴"Terror in Germany," 55 (November 23, 1938), 1422.

²⁵"Terror in Germany," 55 (November 23, 1938), 1422-23; and "Demonic Germany and the Predicament of Humanity," 55 (November 30, 1938), 1456-58.

²⁶"Demonic Germany and the Predicament of Humanity," 55 (November 30, 1938), 1456-58. For further comment by the editor in the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*, see "New Measures against Jews," 55 (December 7, 1938), 1485; and "Pinpricks for German Jews," 55 (December 14, 1938), 1535.

²⁷"Quakers and Refugees," 56 (January 18,

1939), 80-81.

²⁸"Selling the Jews Down the River," 56 (January 25, 1939), 108-09; "Ransoms Stimulate Kidnapping," 56 (January 25, 1939), 109; and "Refugee Plans are Taking More Definite Form," 56 (March 1, 1939), 268. The proposed plan called for international Jewry to establish a corporation with an initial capitalization of \$50,000,000 to finance resettlement ventures and the German government to create a trust fund based on Jewish assets in Germany to finance necessary materials for the Jewish emigrants. For various reasons, nothing ever came of the scheme.

²⁹"Palestine and the Refugees," 56 (March 29, 1939), 407-08.

³⁰Fortunately, while the ship slowly made its way back across the Atlantic, strenuous efforts by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee succeeded in arranging havens for the passengers in Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, thus sparing the refugees the ordeal of having to reenter Germany. Most of the refugees already possessed American immigration quota numbers that would have enabled them to enter the U.S. in succeeding months and years. This episode is recounted in many places. See, e.g., Arthur Morse, *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy* (New York: Ace, 1968), pp. 219-224.

³¹"An Unheroic Odyssey," 56 (June 28, 1939), 813.

³²"Palestine and the Refugees," 56 (March 29, 1939), 407-08; and "Hunting Homes for the Refugees," 55 (December 7, 1938), 1485.

³³This was known as the Wagner-Rogers bill, having been introduced into Congress by Senator Robert F. Wagner (D-NY) and Representative Edith Nourse Rogers (R-Mass). The idea, however, had originated with American clergymen.

³⁴"Quakers and Refugees," 56 (January 18, 1939), 80-81; and "Refugee Children Await Action by Congress," 56 (May 10, 1939), 596.

³⁵Morrison also promoted a refugee resettlement project sponsored by the Federal Council of Churches and denied that any of the refugees resettled under the program were "Fifth Columnists." See "Churches Can Aid Refugees," 57 (May 8, 1940), 595-96; and "Refugees are Not Fifth Columnists," 57 (July 10, 1940), 868. The editor did not again return to the refugee problem prior to American entry into the war in December 1941.

³⁶For another view and assessment of the *Christian Century* in reference to its treatment of the Jewish persecutions in Germany and the refugee problem, see Hertzfel Fishman, *American Protestantism and a Jewish State* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), pp. 53, 57-61. Fishman is harshly critical of the journal's response to both issues.