

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 420

### “A Continent-Wide Crime”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

An atrocity on the scale of the Holocaust can't be blamed solely on one person, or even one country. The Holocaust was a continent-wide crime.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 420. A Continent-Wide Crime.

I've discussed the Holocaust a few times now in the course of this podcast, and one of the topics I've touched on was the question of how many Germans knew about the Holocaust as it was happening. I pointed out that the mere logistics of moving so many people around meant at the very minimum hundreds of thousands of railroad workers would have been aware. Then there are the police and government workers and various eyewitnesses to the roundups and deportations. The total number of Germans who had at least some inkling of what was going on surely ran into the millions.

But just as we shouldn't focus only on the SS or the Nazi leadership and ignore the quiet complicity (at least) of millions of ordinary Germans, neither should we focus exclusively on Germans and ignore the complicity of other people in occupied Europe. In this regard, I am indebted to Dan Stone, director of the Holocaust Research Institute at Royal Holloway, University of London, whose book *The Holocaust: An Unfinished Story* has been valuable to me in organizing my thoughts on this topic.

Stone argues that the Holocaust should not be seen as one huge project entirely conceived and executed by the Germans, but rather as a series of interlocking genocides across Europe, encouraged and overseen by Berlin, yes, but each one managed locally.

Even within a nation, the war against the Jews varied from location to location. Romania, for example, had laws limiting the civil rights of Jews years before Germany enacted any, and its government voluntarily cooperated with the Germans in the deportation of its Jewish citizens,

and yet some in some regions of Romania, local elites refused to cooperate, and their Jewish communities survived. This despite the fact that the government in Bucharest was a more enthusiastic participant in the Holocaust than any of Germany's other allies.

Hungary, Bulgaria, and France refused to deport "their" Jews, although they had no objection to deporting Jews of other nationalities within their borders, despite, in the case of France, that country's tradition of acceptance of asylum seekers fleeing persecution.

In France, the Catholic clergy openly opposed deportation or persecution of Jews, which limited the Vichy government's options. Philippe Petain's conservative, right-wing government was staunchly Catholic, or it was supposed to be, so defying the Church meant undermining its own authority. The Nazis also understood this and applied no pressure to Vichy. Berlin valued the preservation of French sovereignty, or the illusion of it.

In countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, and Norway, there was some cooperation by police and local civil authorities with the German project. There were also resistance groups who attempted to save the lives of Jews in their countries. In Belgium, Jewish death rates varied by region. Three-quarters of the Jewish population of the Netherlands was deported and killed, the highest percentage in Western Europe; indeed a number comparable to Eastern Europe, where the Nazis were much more ruthless. This may reflect Dutch anti-Semitism; it no doubt also reflects the fact that the Netherlands are flat and densely populated, thus making it harder to hide. Also, as we have seen, the Dutch resistance movement had been thoroughly compromised by German intelligence.

The German occupation forces permitted local governments to continue to operate in Western Europe. The East was a whole other story. The Czech and Polish governments had been eradicated and the Nazis hunted down and killed any government officials they could get their hands on in the Soviet Union. Even so, many individuals in Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic states cooperated with the SS in hunting down Jews. So did some resistance groups, while others attempted to rescue Jews.

The governments of Italy and Finland both refused to deport their Jewish populations. In the case of Italy, Hitler made no effort to press Mussolini to deport Jews either from Italy or from Italian-occupied regions of France or Yugoslavia. Harmony among the Axis powers came first. No doubt the Nazis calculated that these matters could be revisited after the war had been won.

When the Italian government surrendered to the Allies, the Germans organized the northern part of occupied Italy as the Italian Social Republic, a rump fascist state ostensibly led by Benito Mussolini. Once the Germans occupied Italy, they began at once to deport Jews to the death camps, even in the part of Italy that was officially ruled by Mussolini and the Fascist Party, despite the fact that before the surrender, Mussolini and the Fascist Party had refused to allow deportations. How do we account for this?

The easy and obvious answer is that before the surrender, Germany needed Italy, while after the surrender, the Italian Social Republic needed Germany a lot more than Germany needed the Italian Social Republic, which gave the Nazis sufficient leverage to impose their will. Or to put it more succinctly, Mussolini had become a Nazi puppet and had no choice. Right?

There is truth to that, but Mussolini couldn't have deported all those people on his own. His change of heart regarding Jewish Italians had to be accepted by the Italian authorities who worked under him. Within the Fascist Party, it was only the most devoted and fanatical Fascists who stuck with Mussolini after the surrender, and those zealots were far more likely to have embraced anti-Semitism as part of their ideology. Mussolini's remaining followers were self-selected extremists.

But even what was left of the Fascist Party would not have been able to implement the deportations on their own. Thousands of local officials and police in northern Italy had to participate, and they did so willingly. When government policy toward the Jews changed at the top, these officials went right along with the change.

The same is true in Hungary after the Germans occupied that country in 1944, another "puppet government" comparable to Italy in 1943. Once again, the Germans could not have rounded up hundreds of thousands of people without local help.

The use of terminology like "puppet government" obscures more than it reveals. The Independent State of Croatia, created by the Germans and Italians in April 1941, after the fall of Yugoslavia, certainly qualifies as a puppet, but that alone doesn't account for the intense anti-Semitic zeal of the Ustaše government, which began persecuting its Jewish citizens within days of its creation. Within weeks, Croatia had its own concentration camps and its very own murder camp. Croatia was, in fact, the only country in Europe other than Germany to operate one of these death camps. There they murdered some 25,000 Jews, 20,000 Roma, and more than 50,000 ethnic Serbs.

Similarly, you would be justified in calling Slovakia, the nation created by Germany when it invaded and occupied the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, a German puppet. But as in the case of Croatia, as soon as the new government of Slovakia was formed, it set to work stripping its Jewish citizens of their legal rights. Slovak soldiers fought on the Eastern Front in 1941, as did Romanian and Hungarian soldiers. They knew about the mass murders in the Soviet Union and surely took that knowledge home with them. When the Germans demanded Slovak laborers to work in Germany, the Slovak government sent Jews.

In early 1942, when German government representatives came to Bratislava to discuss the deportation of Jews—what would become Operation Reinhard—with their Slovak counterparts, the Slovaks embraced the idea "with enthusiasm," the German ambassador reported. While the Germans forced Jews across Europe to pay their own train fares to the death camps, the government of Slovakia alone chose to pay for the deportations itself.

The president of Slovakia, Jozef Tiso, was a Catholic priest, an awkward fact that made the Vatican uncomfortable, especially given Tiso's loud, noxious, and very public anti-Semitism. He went so far as to declare the removal of Jews from Slovakia a Christian imperative. The Church threatened Tiso with sanctions, but never imposed any punishment on him or anyone else in Slovakia.

By 1943, 70,000 Jewish Slovaks had been sent to their deaths, leaving only about 25,000 in Slovakia. These people were alive because they had been given government exemptions for various reasons, in most cases because they had professional skills that were in short supply.

In 1944, following the German defeats of 1943 and the German occupation of Hungary, the mood in Slovakia began to shift, as it became clear that Germany was losing the war. An underground coalition of Communists and democrats began plotting an uprising to overthrow the Tiso government, but German intelligence picked up on the pending revolt, and in August 1944, Slovakia got the Hungary treatment. The underground coalition rose up against the German invaders in what is known as the Slovak National Uprising. It took the German Army three months to put down that revolt, and even afterward, partisan fighters took to the mountains and continued the fight until the Red Army arrived.

The occupation of Slovakia gave the Germans the opportunity to send the country's remaining Jewish population to their deaths. This deportation was run by the Germans, though many Slovaks assisted. The partisans, on the other hand, helped hide Jews in the mountains, and because of their efforts, about 10,000 survived.

I suppose I should round out this discussion about Germany's allies and their roles in the Holocaust by saying a little more about Romania. Romania's enthusiasm for persecuting Jews rivaled Germany's and sometimes surpassed it. Like Germany, Romania enacted legislation to limit the rights of Jews. By late 1940, when the fascist Iron Guard became part of the government, Jewish Romanians across the country were subjected to confiscation of property, relocation, acts of humiliation, beatings, rape, torture, and murder, as Jews were in Germany.

Even after Ion Antonescu cracked down on the Iron Guard, anti-Semitism remained state policy. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Romania was rewarded for its support with the return of Bessarabia, the region the Soviet Union had seized from Romania in 1940 and which had a sizeable Jewish population. Romania was also granted the authority to administer Transnistria, that is, the lands immediately east of the River Dniester, which defines the eastern border of Bessarabia. In the autumn of 1941, Romanian authorities rounded up and deported more than 100,000 Jews from Romania and Bessarabia to Transnistria. Virtually no provisions were made to feed, clothe, or house these people when they arrived. They spent the exceptionally cold winter of 1941-42 living in barns or pigsties, or whatever shelter they could find. Most were starving, and soon a typhus epidemic tore through the region. Most of the Jewish people killed

by Romania died in this manner. This was entirely a Romanian project, with little German involvement.

Other Jewish Romanians were spared for the sake of their labor, and as I mentioned earlier, in some regions of the country, local officials resisted the deportation orders, though this had less to do with respect for human rights than it did with concern about the economic impact of losing Jewish members of the community.

[music: Ravel, *Pavane for a Dead Princess*.]

We've looked at the ways in which Germany's European allies and some people in German-occupied countries supported the German genocide project. Now let's consider the actions of neutral European nations during the Holocaust: I speak of Portugal, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Turkey, and let's throw in the Vatican, too.

Last week we saw that diplomats from all of the countries I just named, except Turkey, were involved in rescuing Jewish people from Hungary in 1944. That was late in the war, of course, after it became clear that Germany was losing. One could say generally of all these countries that in the early part of the war there was fear that too much overt opposition to Nazi German policies might trigger German military action against them, though as Germany's military position became weaker, these countries became somewhat bolder.

Sweden, though it was happy to sell strategic materials to Germany, accepted Jewish refugees from Norway and Denmark in defiance of the Nazis. Switzerland accepted more than 25,000 Jewish refugees from surrounding countries, but it also denied refuge to a further 20,000 or so. Swiss banks purchased gold plundered from Holocaust victims in exchange for Swiss francs, which the Nazis could then use to purchase imports from neutral nations.

During the war, there were thousands of Jews in occupied Europe who could claim citizenship in some neutral country, in most cases Turkey or Portugal. The Germans exempted these people from persecution or deportation to the camps because of their citizenship status. This changed in 1943, when the German government demanded that neutral nations either accept repatriation of these people, some of whom had never been to the country in which they could claim citizenship, or else revoke their citizenship, which would free the SS to murder them.

Turkey refused to accept repatriation of its Jewish citizens living abroad and stripped thousands of them of their citizenship, although in a couple of cases, local consulates defied Ankara and issued citizenship documents to Turkish Jews. This was sometimes done for humanitarian reasons; other times, in exchange for bribes.

Portugal accepted small numbers of Sephardic Jews with Portuguese ancestry, though the evaluation process was strict and thousands of Jews who could have been granted Portuguese

citizenship were denied it because the Portuguese chose to be sticklers about paperwork and proof of ancestry.

I should note that Portugal assisted the Allies beginning in 1943 by leasing airfields in the Azores, which were strategically important for the Allied war against the U-boats. Portugal was also generous with transit visas that allowed some 70,000 Jews from occupied Europe to flee to Lisbon and from there on to the United States or Latin America.

Both Portugal and its neighbor Spain were governed by right-wing dictators who were sympathetic to the Nazis at least as far as their anti-Communism. The Spanish government flirted with joining the Axis in late 1940, and the country created a registry of Jews living in Spain. To be fair though, Spain did not join the Axis, and Madrid had more reason to fear the Germans than Portugal had, since German-occupied France lay right next door. Like Portugal, Spain passed on the opportunity to claim as citizens thousands of Sephardic Jews of Spanish ancestry in occupied Europe. Also like Portugal, Spain did permit the transit of tens of thousands of Jews, mostly from France, through Spain and on to asylum in other countries.

And then there is the case of the Vatican. This is a complex topic. Pope Pius XI had been the first pope to rule as sovereign of Vatican City after that entity was created by the Lateran Treaty, the agreement between the Holy See and Mussolini's Italy, signed in 1929. During his pontificate, Pius XI issued encyclicals at various times critical of fascism, Nazism, Communism, and unrestrained capitalism. You just can't please some people.

Pius XI died on February 10, 1939 at the age of 81. At the time of his death, he had been working on an encyclical emphasizing the unity of the human race and denouncing racism, colonialism, and anti-Semitism. He was succeeded by Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli, who had previously served as the Apostolic Nuncio to Germany and the Vatican Secretary of State. It was Pacelli who negotiated the concordat with Nazi Germany. Upon his election, Pacelli took the papal name Pius XII.

The new Pope had spent much of his earlier career as a diplomat and much of his diplomatic work involved Germany, so you could understand if he'd developed a habit of using vague diplomatic language when talking about that country. It's worth noting that Hitler and the German government did not remember Cardinal Pacelli fondly. Germany was the only major country that did not send a representative to the new pope's coronation, and Adolf Hitler mused out loud about the possibility of responding to Pacelli's election by voiding Germany's concordat.

On the other hand, the pope's diplomatic manner meant his criticisms of Nazi actions, including the Holocaust, were usually weak and vague. By autumn of 1942, the Holy See was well aware that the SS was murdering Jews in large numbers. In his Christmas message that year, the pope spoke of the importance of respecting human rights and lamented "the hundreds of thousands of persons who, without any fault on their part, sometimes only because of their nationality or race,

have been consigned to death or to a slow decline.” This was the strongest public statement against Nazi genocide that Pius XII ever made, and yet he never specifically named *who* was being consigned to death or who was doing the consigning. This makes his statement pretty weak tea, although in Berlin the Nazis understood very well that the pope meant them and interpreted his remarks as hostile. On other occasions, when Allied diplomats attempted to get the Vatican to denounce the Holocaust, they were told that the Vatican had to remain neutral, or that the Vatican could not confirm claims of mass killings, or that the Vatican would not be able to condemn the Nazis without also condemning the Bolsheviks.

To sum it up, the pope’s diplomatically-tempered public pronouncements failed to placate the Allies, who wanted to hear stronger language, or the Nazis, who heard enough to know that the pope was not on their side.

In fairness, the pope and the Holy See had to think about the safety of Catholics and Catholic clergy in occupied Europe, people who were also sometimes subject to Nazi persecution. They also had to consider their own safety during the period beginning in September 1943, when Rome came under German occupation. German soldiers never invaded the territory of the Vatican, but they were close by. In fact, some have claimed there was a German plot to kidnap the pope. The evidence to support this claim is pretty thin, but the possibility must have been on the minds of some in the Vatican.

I will note that after the Germans seized Rome, the Vatican gave sanctuary to thousands of Jewish Romans. They were held in convents and monasteries across the city under Vatican protection, including about 500 in the Vatican itself. In some cases, the Vatican claimed jurisdiction over buildings it didn’t truly own, to protect the people inside. But it is not clear to what degree this was done on the pope’s orders, or on the initiative of lower-ranking clergy.

So what is there to say about Pius XII’s response to the Holocaust? He made his opposition to Nazi race theory and mass murder sufficiently clear to give his supporters room to defend him, but his comments were sufficiently weak and sporadic to give his critics room to condemn him for failing to take a stronger stand against the greatest evil perpetrated in the twentieth century.

Wikipedia has a page titled “Pius Wars,” which refers to the debate among historians and other scholars over the pope’s actions during the Holocaust, a debate that continues to rage even in our time, eighty years later.

Now let’s turn to the subject of the Western Allies and their actions during the Holocaust. Information about mass killings of Jewish people in Poland was forwarded from the Polish resistance to the Polish government-in-exile, which published a report in London in December 1942. That same month, the United Nations issued a formal statement condemning the murders.

So it's worth noting that by early 1943, the Holocaust was well known inside Allied governments. Newspapers in Allied countries published articles describing what the Nazis were doing. And yet the response was curiously lackluster.

One reason for this is that these reports, though accurate, were vague accounts of people being used as slave labor or being killed, but there were no precise details, no hard numbers, and no photographs, which made it hard for Allied governments or the public to grasp the full reality. After the experience of those overblown accusations of German atrocities made in the last war, many were inclined to assume that the reports coming out of Poland were exaggerated, even if there was some kernel of truth to them. Only later did it become clear that these early reports tended to *understate* the horror taking place in Eastern Europe.

But this doesn't explain the muted response. Allied governments condemned the killings, but took few concrete steps to accept or resettle those Jewish people who'd escaped from occupied Europe. Church leaders, intellectuals, and academics in Allied countries likewise had little to say. Even prominent Jewish Americans were reluctant to speak out. This was partly out of fear that public condemnation would only provoke further Nazi retribution against Jews in Europe. There was also a fear that public expressions of Jewish outrage would reinforce anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as a people who cared little for the welfare of anyone other than their fellow Jews. Even *The New York Times*, the most respected newspaper in the city with the largest Jewish population in the world, whose publisher, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, was a Jewish American from a family that could trace its American roots back to Colonial times, downplayed the killings by printing its reports of them in the back pages.

With regard to refugees, the United States and the British Empire took in more Jewish refugees than any other countries, but even so, the numbers were smaller than they could have been. In the United States, the government's hands were tied to some extent by the strict limits imposed by the Immigration Act of 1924, but Washington did not take in even the maximum number the law did allow. After the war began, the State Department *decreased* the number of refugee admissions, citing concerns that there might be dangerous Nazi or Bolshevik spies among those admitted.

There were similar concerns in Britain. When I speak of the British Empire taking in Jewish refugees, I'm speaking specifically of the United Kingdom and Palestine. But if you recall from episode 343, in 1939, in response to the Arab revolt in that country, the British adopted a plan to sharply curtail Jewish immigration to Palestine and end it entirely after five years, which would be...in 1944. Right now in our podcast chronology.

Franklin Roosevelt had been sympathetic to the plight of Jews in Europe throughout his Presidency. I'll remind you that anti-Semites in the United States liked to call him "Rosenfeld" and refer to the New Deal as the "Jew Deal." Still, the Immigration Act said what it said, and there was no groundswell of public opinion demanding that the law be amended.

The State Department itself was a problem. It was riddled with officials from privileged backgrounds guilty of what has been called “genteel anti-Semitism.” State Department officials tended to downplay the stories of mass murder and oppose efforts in Congress to accept more refugees.

The State Department’s attitude became intolerable in 1943, when the US Treasury Department backed a plan by the World Jewish Congress to pay bribes to officials in the Romanian government in exchange for permitting the emigration of some 70,000 Jewish Romanians to unoccupied France. The money was to have been held in escrow in Switzerland, payable after the conclusion of the war. The State Department delayed its approval of the transaction for five months, until Operation Torch and the German occupation of previously unoccupied France rendered the plan moot.

Outraged officials in the Treasury Department investigated the hold-up and discovered that besides opposing the use of funds to rescue Jews, the State Department had instructed its foreign missions not to send information about German atrocities on to Washington. These Treasury officials drew up a memorandum reporting their findings, that the State Department was deliberately opposing efforts to rescue Jews from the Nazis. The report was sent to the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, who was himself Jewish, and Morgenthau showed the memorandum to the President.

On receiving this information, Roosevelt reacted in a very Roosevelt way: he chose to bypass the State Department and in January 1944 created a three-letter government agency, the WRB, which stands for the War Refugee Board, and charged it to provide assistance to victims of Nazi oppression. After the German occupation of Hungary and the threat to that country’s Jewish population, the WRB provided some of the money that Raoul Wallenberg and other diplomats in Budapest used to arrange the evacuation of Jews. The WRB funded leaflet drops over Hungary warning that after the war, the Allies would prosecute perpetrators of war crimes. New York City’s Francis Cardinal Spellman, the ranking American Catholic clergyman, recorded an address broadcast into Catholic Hungary, pointing out that persecution of Jews contradicted Catholic doctrine. Roosevelt himself made a public declaration, which received wide publicity, calling for the prosecution after the war, not only of the leaders who ordered the Holocaust, but of anyone who knowingly participated in the deportations and killings.

In the years since the war, many have asked why the Allies did not bomb the murder camps, which Allied air forces were certainly capable of by 1944. The proposal was raised at the time, but the military firmly opposed it. You and I know and they knew that Allied strategic bombing wasn’t very accurate, though they didn’t like to admit it. It was unclear how much of a bombing effort would have been required to do enough damage to interfere meaningfully with the deportations and killings. US military officers all the way up to Dwight Eisenhower and George Marshall argued that diverting the bombers from military targets would prolong the war, which

increased the risk to Europe's surviving Jewish population. In their view, the best way to stop the Nazis from killing Jews was to defeat them on the battlefield, as quickly as possible.

The Holocaust is a difficult subject to talk about, or even to think about, and I find myself at a loss to describe the enormity of it. Sadly, little is known about most of the victims, and the Nazis did their best to obliterate any evidence of their deaths, or indeed of their existence, and while they were not completely successful, they erased a good deal, leaving us with little more than the bald fact of the murder of millions, a number larger than the human mind can easily grasp.

We'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Filip and Luke for their kind donations, and thank you to Alec for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Filip, Luke, and Alec help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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I've gotten a lot of responses to my call for questions, and it looks like there will be a question-and-answer episode, sometime before the end of the year. I'll keep you posted.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we consider American popular music of the era and how and why something new was on the horizon. Two Strikes and You're Out, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The Holocaust is indeed a difficult topic, and I'll ask you to indulge me while I tell you a story. Two years ago, Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century and I were in Winnipeg and we visited the Canadian Museum of Human Rights.

This museum is very modern, and like many modern museums, it offers a variety of exhibits and experiences in various media. What it does not have much of is artifacts, although it does have quite a bit of contemporary art, on themes related to human rights. I'm old fashioned, so to my mind a museum is a place that houses artifacts, but increasingly that seems not to be the case these days. The Canadian Museum of Human Rights is one example of this trend, though certainly not the only one.

Another museum I visited a few years back that struck me the same way was the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. This sort of museum appears to me more a sort of secular cathedral, dedicated to some worthy principle.

I say this not as a criticism, only as an observation.

These thoughts were on my mind as we toured the Canadian Museum of Human Rights. The exhibits are set up roughly in chronological order, and as we approached the twentieth century and the part of the museum dedicated to the Holocaust, I began to pay particular attention. I hadn't begun that topic on the podcast yet, but I knew it was coming soon, so I tried to be alert to what I could learn at the museum.

When we reached the Holocaust exhibit, we came across the first actual historical artifact we had seen in the museum. It was a child's shoe, one shoe from one of the mountains of shoes the SS collected from its victims before murdering them. I remarked wryly to Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century that it stood to reason that the one artifact we saw would be this one, as it would be relatively easy for the museum to acquire such a shoe, given how many the SS left behind.

Then I heard the words coming from my own mouth, and felt a sudden need to sit down. I hunted around until I found a single chair in a corner and sat in it for a long time, staring at the floor. After a while, one of the docents came along and asked me if I was all right. I told her that I'd been overwhelmed with emotions from looking at the exhibits. She told me it happened often in this museum and pointed me toward a room set aside as a place of meditation for people who experienced the kinds of feelings I was experiencing.

Afterward, I realized how difficult a topic this was going to be.

[music: Closing War Theme]