

The Refugee Crisis Under President Roosevelt And Harry Truman

Posted on September 19, 2019

Introduction

The refugee crises confronted by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman arose from Nazi persecution, war, genocide, border changes, and mass displacement in Europe. The original essay correctly recognizes restrictive American policy and public hostility, but it contains serious errors: Roosevelt was not Jewish, the United States was not at war with the refugees' home countries in the 1930s, and postwar policy cannot be explained through later conflicts in Iraq. Roosevelt operated under the national-origins quota system and acted too cautiously until creating the War Refugee Board in 1944. Truman used existing quotas, supported displaced-persons legislation, and criticized Congress when the 1948 act discriminated against Jewish survivors. Their records show both constraint and presidential choice. (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013; Divine, 1957)

The National Origins Quota System

The Immigration Act of 1924 created quotas that favored northern and western Europe while sharply limiting immigration from southern and eastern Europe, where many Jewish refugees lived. The law classified people according to country of birth and reflected eugenics, racism, antisemitism, and fears about national identity. During the Great Depression, consular officials also applied the "likely to become a public charge" standard, requiring many applicants to secure financial sponsors. The United States had no separate refugee category, so a person fleeing persecution had to satisfy ordinary immigration rules. Roosevelt inherited this system in 1933, but his administration still controlled how strictly quotas, documentation, and security procedures were administered within the law. (Divine, 1957; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.)

Public Opinion and Political Constraint

American public opinion during the 1930s was shaped by unemployment, isolationism, xenophobia, antisemitism, and fear that foreign agents might enter as refugees. Congress showed little willingness to revise immigration law, and proposals such as the Wagner-Rogers bill for refugee children failed. Roosevelt worried that a major confrontation with Congress could damage other domestic and foreign-policy priorities. These constraints explain part of his caution but do not eliminate responsibility. Presidents can use speeches, appointments, administrative direction, and political capital to change debate. Roosevelt sometimes expressed sympathy and supported private relief, yet

he rarely made refugee admission a central public cause before the war. The gap between concern and action became morally significant as persecution escalated. (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013; Divine, 1957)

The Evian Conference

Roosevelt convened the Evian Conference in July 1938 after Germany's annexation of Austria intensified the refugee emergency. Delegates from thirty-two countries expressed sympathy, but almost none offered substantial new admission commitments. The United States did not expand its quotas. Evian demonstrated a collective-action failure: each government treated the crisis as tragic while expecting another country to bear the practical burden. Nazi propaganda used the result to argue that foreign nations did not want Jews either. The conference created an intergovernmental committee, but its achievements were limited. Diplomatic discussion without admission capacity could not provide safety to people whose time was disappearing, and the meeting became an enduring example of humanitarian language separated from concrete refuge. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.)

Visa Administration and Unfilled Quotas

Even the restrictive quotas were not always filled during the early Roosevelt years. Applicants confronted long waiting lists, affidavits, certificates, police documents, and changing security requirements. State Department officials often interpreted rules narrowly, and after war began they intensified screening. The administration did later liberalize some procedures, and more than one hundred thousand self-identified Jewish refugees entered the United States from 1933 through 1941. Hundreds of thousands more could not obtain visas. The policy should therefore not be described as complete refusal, but neither should the admitted number conceal the capacity that remained unused or the barriers imposed deliberately. Administrative discretion can save or endanger lives even when Congress leaves the statute unchanged. (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.)

The St. Louis

The voyage of the *St. Louis* in 1939 symbolizes the consequences of closed doors. More than nine hundred passengers, most of them Jewish refugees, sailed from Germany to Cuba, but Cuban authorities invalidated most landing permits. The ship approached the United States, yet the passengers were not admitted outside the existing visa process. European countries eventually accepted them, but many later came under Nazi control and 254 were murdered in the Holocaust. Roosevelt did not personally order the vessel turned away through a single dramatic command; the outcome followed law, diplomacy, and an unwillingness to create an exception. That institutional

complexity does not reduce the moral importance of the failure. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.)

War, Security, and Rescue

After the United States entered World War II, officials prioritized military victory and treated refugee admission through a national-security lens. By late 1942, the government had confirmed reports of systematic mass murder. Large-scale rescue from occupied Europe was extremely difficult, but possibilities remained through neutral countries, financial support, pressure on allies, temporary havens, and diplomatic protection. The question is not whether the United States could have rescued every victim. It is whether rescue received urgency proportional to the evidence. Bureaucratic resistance, fear of espionage, and the belief that winning the war was the only effective rescue strategy delayed a dedicated program until 1944, when much of European Jewry had already been murdered. (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013)

The War Refugee Board

On January 22, 1944, Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board after Treasury officials documented obstruction within the State Department and pressed for action. The board coordinated private organizations, financed rescue and relief, encouraged neutral states to protect refugees, publicized Nazi crimes, and supported Raoul Wallenberg's work in Budapest. It also established the Fort Ontario emergency shelter in New York for nearly one thousand refugees admitted outside ordinary quotas. The board helped save tens of thousands of lives, demonstrating that government action could matter even late in the war. Its first director later described the effort as "little and late," a judgment that captures both genuine achievement and the cost of delay. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025)

Roosevelt's Mixed Record

Roosevelt's record cannot be reduced either to indifference or heroic rescue. He faced hostile public opinion, restrictive law, congressional opposition, war, and security concerns. His administration admitted substantial numbers within the quotas, sponsored Evian, and eventually created an effective rescue agency. It also failed to fill quotas consistently, allowed restrictive administration, declined to champion major statutory reform, and created the War Refugee Board only after internal pressure. The president's responsibility lies partly in timing and priority. Political constraints are real, but leadership determines which constraints are challenged. A balanced judgment recognizes that Roosevelt's government did more than nothing and far less than the emergency demanded. (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025)

Displacement after World War II

The defeat of Nazi Germany did not end the refugee problem. Millions of forced laborers, prisoners, survivors, expellees, and other displaced people remained outside their former homes. Jewish survivors often encountered destroyed communities, antisemitism, and violence when attempting to return. Camps administered by Allied authorities provided emergency shelter but could become places of prolonged uncertainty. The United States still lacked a general refugee law, and national-origins quotas remained in force. Truman inherited responsibility for transforming wartime relief into resettlement. His approach differed from Roosevelt's in its more explicit advocacy for displaced persons, though it continued to operate within domestic political limits and a refugee system centered mainly on Europe. (Divine, 1957)

The Truman Directive

On December 22, 1945, Truman directed that displaced persons receive preference within existing immigration quotas. The directive did not increase the total number of visas, but it changed their allocation and enabled tens of thousands of displaced people, many of them Jewish, to enter before broader legislation passed. The action demonstrates how executive authority can matter even without congressional reform. Its limitation was built into the quota system: preferences could not create sufficient spaces for the scale of displacement. Truman also supported the work of the International Refugee Organization and called publicly for legislation. His policy was more proactive than the original essay suggests, although it remained selective and constrained by the national-origins framework. (Divine, 1957)

The Displaced Persons Act of 1948

Congress finally passed the Displaced Persons Act in 1948, authorizing admission of two hundred thousand people over two years. Truman signed it reluctantly and issued a strong statement condemning provisions that discriminated against Jewish displaced persons. Eligibility deadlines favored people who had entered camps earlier, while many Jewish survivors arrived later after leaving eastern Europe. The act also charged admissions against future national quotas and allocated preferences in ways shaped by Cold War politics. Truman decided that an imperfect program was better than no program and promised to seek amendments. His response illustrates a difficult executive choice: signing flawed relief legislation while making its injustice visible rather than presenting the law as a complete humanitarian solution. (Truman, 1948)

The 1950 Amendments

In 1950 Truman signed amendments that expanded the program and removed important discriminatory features. He stated that the revised law brought greater fairness to displaced-person admissions. Across the program's life, hundreds of thousands of displaced people entered the United States. The policy remained geographically and historically limited, and it did not create the universal refugee framework later associated with the Refugee Act of 1980. Nevertheless, the postwar legislation marked a transition from treating refugees only as ordinary immigrants toward recognizing displacement as a distinct humanitarian concern. Truman's advocacy mattered because he used presidential statements to challenge exclusions embedded in a law he had signed and supported corrective legislation rather than accepting the initial compromise as final. (Truman, 1950)

Comparing Roosevelt and Truman

Roosevelt and Truman governed different phases of the crisis. Roosevelt confronted refugees seeking escape before and during genocide, when admission could be a form of rescue. Truman confronted survivors and other displaced Europeans after military victory, when transportation and resettlement were more feasible. Roosevelt was more cautious about confronting immigration restriction, though his late War Refugee Board saved lives. Truman acted earlier through a directive and pressed Congress more openly, but the laws he accepted remained discriminatory and selective. Comparison should therefore account for opportunity as well as rhetoric. Postwar generosity cannot undo prewar exclusion, and wartime difficulty cannot excuse every administrative barrier. Both presidencies reveal how humanitarian policy is shaped by law, bureaucracy, public opinion, and political leadership. (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013; Divine, 1957)

Parallels and Limits of Historical Comparison

The original essay compares the 1930s with the present through the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The act did end the national-origins quota system, but modern refugee policy developed through the 1967 Protocol and Refugee Act of 1980 as well. Historical parallels should be used carefully. Security fears, racialized exclusion, economic anxiety, and distinctions between "deserving" and "undeserving" refugees recur, but institutions and legal categories have changed. The lesson is not that every contemporary crisis repeats the Holocaust. It is that delay, administrative complexity, and sympathetic language can still produce exclusion when governments avoid measurable commitments. History provides questions for policy, not a simple one-to-one analogy. (Divine, 1957)

Conclusion

The United States response under Roosevelt and Truman moved from restrictive immigration administration toward limited rescue and postwar resettlement. Roosevelt was not Jewish, and the refugee crisis was not caused by American wars against the refugees' countries. It arose from Nazi persecution, World War II, genocide, and displacement. Roosevelt operated within hostile politics but delayed forceful rescue until the War Refugee Board of 1944. Truman gave displaced persons priority within quotas, advocated legislation, signed the flawed 1948 act, and helped secure fairer amendments in 1950. Their records demonstrate that statutes matter, but so do administrative choices and presidential priorities. Refugee policy is most ethical when sympathy is translated early into lawful admission, protection, and durable resettlement capacity. (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013; Divine, 1957; Truman, 1948, 1950; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2025)

Works Cited

1. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Immigration to the United States, 1933-1941."
2. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The United States and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-41."
3. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The War Refugee Board." Updated 2025.
4. Truman, Harry S. "Statement Upon Signing the Displaced Persons Act." 25 June 1948.
5. Truman, Harry S. "Statement Upon Signing Bill Amending the Displaced Persons Act." 16 June 1950.
6. Divine, Robert A. *American Immigration Policy, 1924-1952*. Yale University Press, 1957.
7. Breitman, Richard, and Allan J. Lichtman. *FDR and the Jews*. Harvard University Press, 2013.