New Documents Reveal FDR's Project to Resettle Jews During World War II

Steve Usdin write in *Tablet:*

A new exhibition at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Americans and the Holocaust*, explores Americans' knowledge of and responses to Nazism, war, and genocide. An unstated question runs through the photographs, films, and artifacts: What explains FDR's apparent indifference to the plight of the Jews? If he'd had complete freedom to act without concern for the political consequences, what would he have done? Visitors leave the museum without answers.

Roosevelt didn't address these issues publicly, but confidential files kept in his personal safe in the White House and released to the public decades after his death, as well as correspondence in his personal files, provide valuable clues. They make it clear that the question of where to settle the Jews had been on FDR's mind for years. While he was

uncertain about whether they would be better off on the slopes of the Andes or the savannahs of central Africa, there was one place he knew he didn't want them: the United States of America.

Among the files in Roosevelt's safe were documents about the origins and goals of the "M Project," a secret study he commissioned of options for post-war migration (hence "M") of the millions of Europeans, especially Jews, expected to be displaced by the war. The President first discussed the project in the summer of 1942 with John Franklin Carter, a journalist, novelist, and former diplomat who ran an informal secret intelligence service for Roosevelt. Carter's No. 2 was an anthropologist named Henry Field.

In the beginning of July, FDR asked Carter and Field to sound out prominent anthropologists and geographers about the possibility of undertaking a survey of regions that would be suitable for settlement of displaced Europeans.

FDR found time on the afternoon of July 30, 1942, in the midst of a schedule packed with meetings with Soviet Ambassador Maxim Litvinov, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and General 'Hap' Arnold, to dictate a memo greenlighting the M Project. The memo, delivered by White House courier to Carter in his office in the National Press Building, a few blocks from the White House, stated: "I know that you and Henry Field can carry out this project unofficially, exploratorially, ethnologically, racially, admixturally, miscegenationally, confidentially and, above all, budgetarily." It concluded: "Any person connected herewith whose name appears in the public print will suffer guillotinally." Roosevelt repeatedly admonished Carter to keep the M Project completely secret.

Roosevelt's first choice to head the M Project was Aleš Hrdlička, curator of physical anthropology at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. The two men had carried on a lively correspondence for over a decade and the President had

absorbed the scientist's theories about racial mixtures and eugenics. Roosevelt, the scion of two families that considered themselves American aristocrats, was especially attracted to Hrdlička's notions of human racial "stock."

A prominent public intellectual who had dominated American physical anthropology for decades, Hrdlička was convinced of the superiority of the white race and obsessed with racial identity. Shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack, he'd written to Roosevelt expressing the view that the "less developed skulls" of Japanese were proof that they were innately warlike and had a lower level of evolutionary development than other races. The president wrote back asking whether the "Japanese problem" could be solved through mass interbreeding.

Roosevelt had asked Carter to recruit Hrdlička, and to tell him his task would be to head up a secret international committee of anthropologists to study the "ethnological problems anticipated in post-war population movements." Outlining the president's charge for the committee, Carter told Hrdlička it was expected to "formulate agreed opinions as to problems arising out of racial admixtures and to consider the scientific principles involved in the process of miscegenation as contrasted with the opposing policies of so-called 'racialism.' " The instructions were consistent with views Roosevelt had expressed for decades.

In 1925, while undergoing therapy for polio at Warm Springs, Georgia, FDR wrote a series of columns for the *Macon Telegraph*, including one that touched on his ideas about immigration. He praised elements of Canada's immigration policy, especially its regulations "to prevent large groups of foreign-born from congregating in any one locality." Roosevelt added: "If, 25 years ago, the United States had adopted a policy of this kind we would not have the huge foreign sections which exist in so many of our cities."

The future president remarked that "no sensible American wants

this country to be made a dumping ground for foreigners of any nation, but it is equally true that there are a great many foreigners who, if they came here, would make exceedingly desirable citizens. It becomes, therefore, in the first place, a question of selection." Roosevelt informed his readers that "a little new European blood of the right sort does a lot of good in every community."

While the column doesn't define "the right sort," it provides two examples of good emigrants, those from Southern Germany and Northern Italy. Roosevelt also expressed the opinion that "for a good many years to come European immigration should remain greatly restricted," and that "foreigners" who had congregated in large American cities should be encouraged to disperse into the heartland. Roosevelt apparently held onto these opinions when he moved into the White House.

Roosevelt's goals for the committee were consistent with the views he had expressed in 1925. He wanted it to identify "the vacant places of the earth suitable for post-war settlement" and the "type of people who could live in those places." Initial work was to focus on South America and Central Africa. Roosevelt wanted the committee to explore questions such as the probable outcomes from mixing people from various parts of Europe with the South American "base stock."

FDR asked the committee to consider some specific questions, such as: "Is the South Italian stock—say, Sicilian—as good as the North Italian stock—say, Milanese—if given equal economic and social opportunity? Thus, in a given case, where 10,000 Italians were to be offer[ed] settlement facilities, what proportion of the 10,000 should be Northern Italians and what Southern Italian?"

Roosevelt "also pointed out," Carter informed Hrdlička, "that while most South American countries would be glad to admit Jewish immigration, it was on the condition that the Jewish group were not localized in the cities, they want no 'Jewish

colonies,' 'Italian colonies,' etc." Keeping with this theme, the president also tasked the committee with determining how to "resettle the Jews on the land and keep them there."

Hrdlička ultimately refused to participate in the M Project because Roosevelt wouldn't give him absolute control. Isaiah Bowman, president of Johns Hopkins University and a geographer, was promoted from his role as a member of the committee to the head of the project. Roosevelt knew Bowman well and so was presumably aware of his anti-Semitic views.

Bowman understood what Roosevelt was trying to achieve through the M Project. Years earlier, in November 1938, he had undertaken research for FDR about the prospects for European settlement in South America. Requesting the research, Roosevelt wrote to Bowman: "Frankly, what I am rather looking for is the possibility of uninhabited or sparsely inhabited good agricultural lands to which Jewish colonies might be sent." Roosevelt added that "such colonies need not be large but, in all probability, should be large enough for mutual cooperation and assistance—say 50 to 100,000 people in a given area."

The M Project expanded far beyond Roosevelt's original charge, producing thousands of pages of reports, maps, and charts analyzing the suitability of locations around the globe for settlement by Europeans who were expected to be displaced by the war, analyzing the characteristics of myriad racial and ethnic groups, and theorizing about optimal proportions in which to combine them in their new homelands.

Bowman provided overall direction to the M Project. The hands-on leader was Robert Strausz-Hupe, an Austrian émigré intellectual who went on to hold prominent positions in the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, including U.S. Ambassador to NATO. Strausz-Hupe was in charge of six social scientists and three secretaries, along with additional part-time translators, cartographers, and secretaries. They

produced memos on a plan for Jewish settlement in northwestern Australia, rice farming in Manchukuo, settlement possibilities in Nigeria, and scores of other topics.

Settlement contingencies for a wide range of peoples were studied, but when Roosevelt described the M Project to Churchill during a lunch at the White House in May 1943, he focused on one particular group. FDR described it as a study about “the problem of working out the best way to settle the Jewish question,” Vice President Henry Wallace, who attended the meeting, recorded in his diary. The solution, which the President endorsed, “essentially is to spread the Jews thin all over the world,” rather than allow them to congregate anywhere in large numbers.

After Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, Carter wrote to Truman explaining his work for FDR, offering to continue his unit’s covert activities and urging the new President to fund completion of the M Project.

Truman was deeply skeptical about the need for espionage or secret intelligence, and he had been informed by the State Department that the $10,000 per month that was being spent on the M Project was a waste of money. He terminated Carter’s operations and cut off funding for the migration studies.

Very few people outside the team that produced the reports were allowed to see them and they had no discernible impact on policy decisions. In retrospect, the M Project’s principal accomplishment was to shed light on how now-discredited eugenic theories influenced FDR’s thinking about race, immigration, and the Jews of Europe. As the M Project’s reports rolled into the White House, so did news about the methodical starvation, torture, and extermination of Europe’s Jews in the Nazi Holocaust.