

Production of Discourses to Counter Prevailing Attitudes and Stereotypes: How the War Refugee Board Developed a World War II Public Relations Campaign

WILLIAM B. ANDERSON
Elon University

ABSTRACT: This paper demonstrates how the leaders of the War Refugee Board, a U.S. government agency created during World War II to rescue European Jews from Nazi oppression, tried to overcome public opinion and government bureaucracy with a public relations campaign that countered prevailing discourses related to immigration and Jews in World War II America. This study shows the potential for public relations practitioners to introduce and maintain discussions about the qualities of a public, initiate meaningful action, and negotiate the meanings of different publics and the people within them - illustrating the possibilities of government public relations beyond advocacy for policies.

Keywords: Public Relations, World War II, Framing Analysis, Wisconsin Newspapers.

1. Introduction

Most World War II public relations historiography focuses on how government officials used the function to explain the rightness of their cause or to persuade citizens to help with the war effort. This study advances understanding of government public relations during World War II through an examination of discursive practices related to immigration and race. Specifically, this study explores how a U.S. government agency named the War Refugee Board (WRB) used public relations to promote its agenda to rescue European Jews from Nazi persecution. Effectiveness in this endeavor was hampered by government bureaucracy as well as by negative American attitudes, as expressed in public opinion polls, toward immigration in general and Jews specifically. Despite those obstacles, WRB officials attempted to persuade the American people to pay more attention to the plight of European Jews by recasting those refugees as innocent victims of tyranny. Although the WRB was not alone in that effort, as many prominent Jews and their respective organizations also publicized the need to rescue European Jews from the Nazis, this paper emphasizes the discourses and resulting identities that the government agency constructed.

This paper begins by situating the WRB efforts in the broader context of government public relations history. The paper then dives deeper into the constraints such as public opinion and bureaucracy that affected how government public relations practitioners crafted discourses to achieve organizational objectives, followed by a discussion of those findings. This paper found that the discourses created by the WRB differed from the typical government missives used during wartime.

2. Literature Review

This case helps fill a gap in public relations historiography, specifically related to government public relations. Lamme and Russell (2010) maintained that public relations work typically had one (or more) of the following motivations: advocacy, fundraising, recruitment, legitimacy, and agitation. Lee (2014) noted that advocacy was one of two (legitimacy being the other) primary motivations for government public relations. The public relations efforts of the War Refugee Board also used advocacy as its primary motivation - only the messaging differed from typical government public relations missives.

U.S. government agencies and political figures have used public relations to advocate for their respective causes since at least the American Revolutionary War.

William B. Anderson is an Associate Professor at Elon University. Please address all communication to the author William B. Anderson, School of Communications, Elon University, Elon, NC 27244. Email: banderson11@elon.edu

Lattimore et al. (2004, p. 22) noted that Samuel Adams, in his “public relations campaign,” used symbols such as the Liberty Tree to arouse patriotic fervor. Similarly, Berger (1976), Cutlip (1976), Nevins (1962), and Smith (1976) described how American leaders utilized persuasive communication techniques to incite the colonists to revolt against Great Britain. Other scholars (Endres, 1976; Maihafer, 2001; Ponder, 1994, 1999; Tebbel & Watts, 1985) found that in the following century American political figures continued to use public relations-like tactics and techniques to advocate their points of views.

Gower (2007) and Pinkleton (1994) contended that public relations advocacy was prevalent during World War I. In that war, the U.S. government created the Committee on Public Information (CPI), in the words of that agency’s director, to “fight for the minds of men” (Creel, 1920, p. 3, emphasis in original) and “to plead the justice of America’s cause before the jury of Public Opinion” (Creel, 1920, p. 4). They succeeded in that endeavor, Vaughn (1980, p. 4) noted, because “The CPI ... organized patriotic enthusiasm where it existed and created it where it did not.” Pinsdorf (1999) argued that part of the CPI’s success could also be attributed to their transformation of a once highly respected ethnic group (Germans) into one that should be feared. In sum, the CPI communicated the need for national unity behind the war effort, the morality of the American cause, and the despicable quality of the enemy.

Likewise, most government use of public relations during World War II centered on justifying the righteousness of one side of the conflict or explaining how a nation’s citizens could contribute to winning the war (L’Etang, 2004). Honey (1984) and Ward (1994) found that government agencies used public relations to promote the rectitude of each citizen doing his or her part for the war effort, including planting victory gardens; rationing clothing, food, and gasoline; and buying war bonds.

This study, on the other hand, highlights a humanitarian effort. Erbeling (2018) and Medoff (2017) covered the WRB’s rescue efforts in different books, with both detailing how the agency navigated onerous bureaucracy, unsympathetic government officials, the fog of war, and competing interests to rescue thousands of European Jews from the Nazis. The current study offers a new perspective – how WRB officials used public relations in an attempt to influence policy and to sway public opinion. Erbeling (2018, p. 273) noted: “The War Refugee Board’s creation was – and remains – the only time in American history that the U.S. government founded a

government agency to save the lives of non-Americans being murdered by a wartime enemy.” This distinction offers the opportunity to explore a different discourse than the ones typically identified with government public relations advocacy. Rather than asking citizens to do their part to help win a war, the WRB’s discourse centered around creating sympathy for a specific group of war victims.

3. Case Study Context

To comprehend that impact required an examination of American public opinion on immigration and race. Goldstein (2019, p. 3) argued that Jews in pre-World War II America saw themselves as a distinct “race,” “a description that captured their strong emotional connection to Jewish peoplehood.” Concurrently, Goldstein (2019, p. 2) added, white Americans saw Jews as a race, “demonstrating distinctive social patterns, clustering in urban neighborhoods, concentrating in certain trades and professions, and largely marrying within their own group.” Understanding American public opinion about Jews prior to and during World War II – and the subsequent WRB discursive practices designed to counter those attitudes – must also include a discussion about the broader context of the prevailing American outlook toward immigration.

The United States experienced an unparalleled wave of immigration during the early twentieth century, which, Higham (1988) noted, created angst among many conservative native-born Americans who feared the foreigners’ cultural diversity would present a threat to the values and social cohesion of the nation. More than 15 million people immigrated to the United States between 1900 and 1915, which was about the same number of immigrants who had arrived in the previous 40 years combined, and the newest wave of immigrants tended to forge close-knit communities in urban areas (Gibson & Jung, 2006). Some American commentators linked the rise of these large, thriving communities of immigrants and minorities to societal ills ranging from crime to poverty (Laughlin, 1913). Carr (2001) posited that American anti-Semitism during the pre-World War II years was partially a response to that crisis of modernity and concluded that those concerns fostered stereotypes of Jews that reduced them to either capitalists who extorted the lower classes, anarchists who threw bombs, journalists who printed lies, or entertainment moguls who polluted American culture.

Economic crisis intensified concerns about immigrants such as Jews (and Italians and Asians) and their potential influence on national identity. With the advent of the Great Depression in 1929, U.S. President

Herbert Hoover, along with many other politicians, blamed immigrants for exacerbating American economic problems (Tucker, 2019, p. 50). Hoover instructed the U.S. State Department to strictly interpret a 1917 law to make visa applicants without sufficient financial resources ineligible for entry to America. The year before Hoover's restriction, 25,957 German immigrants entered the United States, but by 1933 that number had dropped to 1,324 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1976, pp. 56-57).

By 1938, unemployment in the United States had spiked to 20%, and with nearly half of Americans believing that the United States had not yet hit the low point of the depression, the notion that those immigrants would take our jobs prevailed across much of the nation (Greene & Newport, 2018). One group in particular – the Jews – drew the ire of some Americans. Dinnerstein (1994, p. 112) noted that more than 100 new anti-Semitic organizations were founded in the U.S. between 1933 and 1934. One of the most influential organizations, the National Union for Social Justice, broadcast anti-Semitic ideas to millions of radio listeners, asking them to “pledge” to “restore America to the Americans” (Greene & Newport, 2018). That message seemed to resonate with certain Americans – between one-third and one-half of Americans polled in the late 1930s and early 1940s believed Jews had “too much power” and about one-third regarded Jews as overly aggressive (Stember, 1966, pp. 8, 210).

Even those Americans who were not so overtly anti-Semitic wanted to limit immigration. An Opinion Research Organization survey in March 1938, the same month Germany annexed Austria, asked Americans, “Should we allow a large number of Jewish exiles from Germany to come to the United States to live?” Seventy-five percent of survey respondents said no (Stember, 1966, p. 145). An April 1938 survey found that more than half of Americans blamed European Jews for their own treatment at the hands of the Nazis (Greene & Newport, 2018). On 9 November 1938, the Nazis, in an event known as Kristallnacht, arrested 30,000 Jews and sent them to Nazi concentration camps. That month, the Opinion Research Organization found that 94% of polled Americans claimed to “disapprove of the Nazi treatment of Jews in Germany,” yet 71% of them opposed permitting any more than a trickle of German Jews to enter the United States (Roper Center, n.d.; Stember, 1966, p. 148). Concerns about the economy, a reluctance to get entangled in another European war, and prejudiced attitudes about race appeared to have contributed to Americans' hesitancy to allow more European Jews into the country.

Further compounding the issue for Jews fleeing Nazi occupation was that the United States had immigration rules but no refugee policy. Therefore, those trying to escape persecution had to qualify under the same strict immigration policies as everyone else, with limited desire by the American people to change those rules. Ambivalence (or outright hostility) to refugees was so prevalent that just two months after Kristallnacht, 66% of Americans surveyed in a Gallup poll opposed a bill in the U.S. Congress intended to admit child refugees from Germany (Stemper, 1966, p. 149), with the bill never making it to the floor of Congress for a vote (Greene & Newport, 2018). An April 1939 Fortune poll found that 83% of Americans opposed any legislation “to open the doors of the United States to a larger number of refugees than now admitted under our immigration quotas” (Stemper, 1966, p. 149).

The advent of war only created additional resistance to assisting refugees. War in Europe began in September 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland; in response, both Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. When France fell to the Germans, Erbelding (2018, p. 16) found that most Americans believed that “France must have been brought down from within – a fifth column of spies and saboteurs secretly working to ensure Nazi victory. Many made the connection between refugees seeking haven in the United States and spies wishing to do the country harm.” Again, Jews especially stood out in American minds. Six Opinion Research Organization surveys taken between March 1938 and April 1940 found that between 25% and 32% of Americans believed that “Jews tend to be more radical than other people” (Stemper, 1966, p. 157-158).

The perceived threat to national identity now included a fear of collective ethnic subversion (Carr, 2001, p. 37), which contributed to the internment of about 120,000 Japanese Americans during the war (War Relocation Authority, 1946, p. 8). At the same time, the prevailing discourse among “white Americans” about Jews was that they were “clearly racial outsiders” (Goldstein, 2019, p. 2), who had “objectionable traits” and whose problems were self-inflicted (Shapiro, 1990, p. 69).

In order to overcome public resistance to helping European Jews in distress, prominent Jews such as Peter Bergson [Hillel Kook], leader of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, and Fowler Harper, a solicitor general for the Interior Department, petitioned congressional leaders to create a U.S. government agency to rescue refugees (Medoff, 2019). In November 1943, the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs held

hearings on a resolution that called on the president to appoint a commission to liberate European Jews. Assistant Secretary of State Breckinridge Long testified that the State Department had undertaken extensive work to assist refugees and provide humanitarian relief. When Long leaked his testimony to the news media, it received widespread coverage and prompted denunciations from prominent Jews who argued that the State department had hindered, not helped, European Jews escape persecution (Medoff, 2017).

Meanwhile, U.S. Department of Treasury officials had also found evidence that Long and other State department staffers had been fighting any attempts to make immigration easier for Jews fleeing Europe (Blum, 1967, p. 221). On 16 January 1944, U.S. Treasury Director Henry Morgenthau told FDR that he was deeply disturbed by what was occurring in the State department. FDR instructed Morgenthau to bring his concerns to Under Secretary of State Edward Stettinius, who told the Treasury director that Long was inefficient and not necessarily racist (Blum, 1967, pp. 221-222). Nevertheless, Stettinius agreed with Morgenthau's plan to create an agency outside the State department to rescue European Jews.

With Stettinius' endorsement, and mounting public and congressional pressure, FDR signed Executive Order 9417 on 22 January 1944, which established the WRB. The board was comprised of the secretaries of State, War and Treasury, and a small staff, which never exceeded 30 employees (WRB, 1945, p. 14). The first executive director was John W. Pehle, an assistant secretary of the Treasury. FDR sent an accompanying order to the U.S. Bureau of the Budget to set aside \$1 million for initial administrative expenses for the new agency (Early, 1944); the relatively small budget made public relations especially important for the new agency (Leff, 2017).

4. Method

To understand how the new agency used public relations, the author employed a discourse analysis informed by theoretical principles from Hall (1992, 1997) and Foucault (1980, 1989, 1995) (see Curtin, 2011, 2016). From that perspective, discourse defines and creates objects of knowledge. Gathering a mass of those objects, in this viewpoint, requires an examination of a large number and variety of texts to understand the historical context that provide impetus to particular discourses. In this study, the author reviewed more than 20 books on the WRB, uncovering the following discourses surrounding refugees, specifically European Jews, that appeared across a broad range of texts:

- Americans saw no difference between an immigrant and a refugee.
- Immigrants/refugees were those people who were coming to our country to take our jobs.
- Immigrants/refugees might be saboteurs.
- Jews were racial outsiders to the white American mainstream.
- The problems of European Jews were self-inflicted.

To compile data related to how WRB officials responded to those discourses, the author consulted two sources of primary data identified in the secondary materials: the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum in Hyde Park, NY ("FDR Library"), and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. ("USHMM"). The following sources from the FDR Library were reviewed: the diaries of U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, which included correspondence, memoranda, and meeting notes, as well as the records of the War Refugee Board, which included correspondence, memoranda, telegrams, reports, petitions, press clippings, and related papers pertaining to policies, programs, and operations of the board. Reviewed data from the USHMM included reports and correspondence by WRB officials or related to the WRB.

Both archives offer online collections of data. The FDR Library has PDFs of its collection organized by date. For instance, volume 707 of the Morgenthau Diaries includes all records from 7 March to 8 March 1944. That required the author to open each PDF from January 1944 (the creation of the agency) to September 1945 (when the agency was abolished) and then conduct a search of the PDF's contents. Search terms included Jews, immigration, and evacuation. The secondary research indicated that Auschwitz, free ports, and safe havens were important concepts for the WRB, so those terms were also searched. Combined, those searches resulted in a total of 220 records from that archive. The USHMM offers an online search function of the 293,772 records in its collection. A search of "War Refugee Board" of that collection with filters for English language only and document or publication (as opposed to filters such as personal stories or films) returned 74 results; of those, 22 were relevant to this study. Those excluded were either already obtained through the FDR Library or mentioned the WRB without offering any insight into the agency's public relations campaign.

Only a portion of the primary sources were included in this paper to maintain a word count suitable for an academic journal, but all records were essential to the analysis because they offered insights into the rationale for the agency's public relations practices, providing some of the necessary context for the discourse analysis. The materials included in the paper represented a unique perspective (that is, not already captured in a document found in another archive) and were data-rich in that they offered insights into a public relations activity, so they served as proxies for the records not cited that contained similar discourses.

Analysis of the data included examining discourses as processes of negotiated meaning and not solely content. Foucault's methodological approach of problematization was used to ask a series of questions: how the discourses arose, what the discourses promoted, what were the accompanying cultural values of those discourses, how the discourses characterized a group or groups of people, and what actions did those subject positions make possible (Hall, 1997). Foucault's approach, while not a rigid methodology, offered a guide in identifying and comprehending how WRB officials attempted to produce a different social reality. Pehle and his team at the WRB quickly learned that the various constructed meanings that emerged around identities such as immigrant/refugee (synonymous in the minds of many Americans) and Jew had political implications, and that they would have to re-articulate the meanings associated with those identities, which included the following discourses:

- European Jews were blameless victims of Nazi brutality.
- The U.S. government should protect refugees. Specifically:
 - o The U.S. government would punish those who helped Nazis persecute the Jews.
 - o The U.S. government should take the lead in securing temporary havens for refugees, with temporary indicating that refugees differed from immigrants in the proposed length of their stay.

To provide structure to the analysis of the WRB's discourses, three moments that best illustrated how the socio-political environment informed the public relations campaign were examined: the public introduction of the WRB, the promotion of the WRB's free ports proposal, and the publication of eyewitness accounts of the Auschwitz and Birkenau concentration camps. The findings section of this paper includes an analysis of each of these three moments.

5. Findings

5.1 Announcement of WRB: Initiating the conversation

As part of FDR's announcement about the creation of the WRB, Pehle wanted the president to add a declaration that the U.S. government would punish anyone who persecuted European Jews. When WRB representatives sent a draft of a statement to the White House, Samuel Rosenman found the declaration "too much for the Jews" (Department of Treasury, 1944a). Rosenman, senior advisor to and speechwriter for FDR – and a Jew, feared that expressions of concern for European Jews would inflame anti-Semitism in the United States (Medoff, 2017). He had some justification for his belief. Goldstein (2019, p. 191) noted that many conservative politicians tapped into the prevailing belief that Jews were a race of people that put their interests over those of America by pushing the Roosevelt Administration toward war in Europe. In 1941, Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana cautioned Americans about the pro-war propaganda emanating from the Jews he called "Hollywood Hitlers" (Cong. Rec, 1941, pp. 1513-14). Rosenman had also repeatedly advised FDR – as did many members of the State Department and Joint Chiefs of Staff – that any overt U.S. action to help Jews would substantiate Nazi claims that international Jewry controlled American leaders (Breitman & Lichtman, 2013). Rosenman revised the WRB-written declaration, adding a paragraph about the slaughter of civilians by Nazis and Japanese with no mention of a specific nationality or race. Rosenman's version concluded with a vow to rescue the "victims of brutality of the Nazis and the Japs ... regardless of race or religion or color" (Department of Treasury, 1944b).

When Morgenthau told WRB staffers about Rosenman's edits, Pehle said, "The thing we were trying to bring home [in the declaration] is that this country is opposed to the Hitler plan to exterminate the Jews. That is buried in this statement" (Department of Treasury, 1944c, p. 1). Pehle walked to Rosenman's office to explain "carefully why I felt that it was a mistake to weaken the declaration in the way that it had been weakened" (Pehle, 1944a). Pehle argued that the WRB's statement singled out Jews for special attention to show that the U.S. government, unlike the Nazis, regarded the Jews as "human beings" (Pehle, 1944a). After some debate, Rosenman finally blurted, "I don't agree with you. Do you want me to say I agree with you when I don't?" (Pehle, 1944a).

When Pehle updated Morgenthau on his meeting with Rosenman and expressed again his concerns about the

revised declaration, Morgenthau told Pehle that he would be “delighted to see the President give this thing [the declaration] out. It’s so much better than nothing... I would let it go. I don’t think we can stop it” (Department of Treasury, 1944d, p. 2). By late afternoon, Pehle and Rosenman agreed to work together to revise the president’s statement (Erbelding, 2018, p. 108). The final text included a discourse that repositioned European Jews as blameless victims of Nazi brutality:

“[H]undreds of thousands of Jews ... are now threatened with annihilation as Hitler’s forces descend more heavily upon these lands. That these innocent people, who have already survived a decade of Hitler’s fury, should perish on the very eve of triumph over the barbarism which their persecution symbolizes, would be a major tragedy” (Roosevelt, 1944).

At his press conference on 24 March 1944, FDR read the Rosenman- and WRB-edited statement, noting that both Russian leader Joseph Stalin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had the text. The front page of the *New York Times* read: “Roosevelt warns Germans on Jews: Says all guilty must pay for atrocities and asks people to assist refugees,” and the paper called FDR’s statement an “unusual step” and reprinted the entire text of the declaration on page 4, next to a photograph of Pehle (Crider, 1944).

That anecdote illustrated the machinations behind the development of FDR’s declaration. Curtin and Gaither (2005, p. 100) argued that the production of public relations materials entails logistical as well as ideological controls. The argument over the exact wording of the declaration showed how possible internal debates within the production phase can affect the meaning embedded in the texts of a public relations campaign. Although WRB officials wanted a stronger focus on European Jews, they had to settle for a muted version that at least initiated a narrative that the problems of Nazi victims were not self-inflicted.

5.2 Emergency Refugee Shelters: Repositioning the refugees

After the declaration, WRB officials created a plan to house refugees rescued from Europe. They proposed that the U.S. government offer temporary protection to European refugees by housing them in camps in the United States and in neutral countries for the duration of the war. The expectation was that when the war was over, the refugees would all be returned to their native lands. WRB officials engaged in a campaign to generate public support for what they called free ports in the United States. Pehle gave a speech where he drew the audience’s attention to the phrase “temporary refuge”

(Pehle, 1944c). Pehle positioned “free ports” as temporary to satisfy conservatives who might balk at letting any refugee bypass immigration laws to stay in the country on a permanent basis and as safe places for those escaping tyranny to tie into America’s own history of rebelling against oppression (Pehle, 1944c).

To begin generating support for the idea, WRB officials floated the proposal in the media. At an 18 April 1944 press conference, Pehle told reports that the “free port” plan was under consideration (“Free ports,” 1944, p. 1). Major print media outlets such as *Boston Globe*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *The New Republic*, *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *New York Post*, and *Washington Post* endorsed the idea (Leff, 2017, p. 112) as did certain radio broadcasters. Pehle asked several radio commentators to promote a discourse that explained the temporary nature of the refugee’s stay and that positioned the European Jews as human beings who were being unjustly persecuted (Pehle, 1944b; Pehle, 1944d; Pehle, 1944g). Radio commentator Raymond Gram Swing argued that the U.S. government should “bring some of these refugees into the United States, not as immigrants, but as fugitives from Hitlerism” (WMAL, 1944, p. 6). Radio commentator Samuel Grafton (1944, p. 2) concluded, “we would be conferring no rights whatever on these refugees, except the right to sit down; but to a family which has been hounded by the Gestapo and pursued by the Nazi murderers, that is a very precious right, indeed.”

Despite select members of the news media reinforcing Pehle’s version of European Jews as fugitives from tyranny instead of as immigrants, WRB officials still needed to persuade the president that their free ports plan had public support. So, they commissioned the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton University to ask Americans: “Would you approve or disapprove of this [free ports] plan?” Seventy percent of respondents supported the proposal, while 23 percent opposed it, and 7 percent had no opinion (Department of Treasury, 1944e).

On 16 May 1944, Pehle formally presented a proposal to the president in which the WRB would provide havens for European Jews on U.S. soil. In reporting to FDR, Pehle cited the poll results, editorial endorsements in 29 newspapers, and the support of prominent individuals such as U.S. Supreme Court Justice (and FDR friend) Felix Frankfurter and *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger. “It is significant that although there has been considerable publicity with respect to the ‘free port’ proposal,” Pehle told FDR, “no opposition to the proposal has been voiced by members of Congress or by the public” (Leff,

2017, p. 112). FDR liked the plan but wanted a different name besides “free ports” (Pehle, 1944e).

On 1 June 1944, Morgenthau and Pehle returned to FDR’s office to discuss alternate names. Pehle again reiterated to the president that “since the ‘free port’ proposal had been first broached the support that it had gained had become very widespread. I referred specifically to the ‘private’ Gallup Poll, and the support of labor groups, farm groups, church organizations and newspapers” (Pehle, 1944f, p. 39). The president agreed to allow about 1,000 refugees into the United States and liked the suggested name of “Emergency Refugee Shelter” because “it connoted the temporary character of the refugee’s stay in the United States” (Pehle, 1944f, p. 40). At a press conference the next day, FDR revealed “that consideration is being given to the possible use of an army camp area no longer needed by the military [Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York] as a temporary haven in this country for refugees” (Morgenthau, 1944). FDR’s press conference emphasized a discourse focused on the temporary stay of Nazi victims that countered the argument that refugees were synonymous with immigrants. The use of words such as shelter and haven also sought to appeal to an innate sense of justice among Americans, prompting them to see themselves and national leaders as helping the less fortunate.

Those discourses seemed to have had some success. WRB officials noted that after FDR’s press conference their office “received a number of telegrams of congratulation. News coverage and editorial comment have likewise been encouraging. Editorials endorsing the president’s move promptly appeared in the New York Times, the New York Herald Tribune, the New York Post, the Baltimore Sun, the Washington Post, and the Washington Evening Star, among others” (WRB, 1944a).

As WRB officials created messaging that positioned free ports as temporary safe havens, they had to work within the constraints of public opinion about immigration and refugees. That example showed that encoding messages during the process of developing public relations materials must include an understanding of the public’s socio-political-cultural context, as well as knowing how to navigate organizational bureaucracy and leadership personalities to obtain approval for the dissemination of the desired messages. It seems as if Pehle and his team had learned the ways to entice the president to express their point of view. To garner support for their desired outcome, they generated media coverage and commissioned a poll to determine public opinion before approaching the president for his support. Then, when he wanted to

adjust the wording of the proposal, Pehle and his team swiftly found a suitable alternative. The next example demonstrated an even further advancement in the willingness and ability of WRB officials to manage governmental bureaucracy to disseminate new discourses.

5.3 Auschwitz and Birkenau Reports: Generating sympathy

Americans had heard about Nazi extermination camps as early as 1942. In December 1942, Edward R. Murrow broadcast on CBS: “What is happening is this: millions of human beings, most of them Jews, are being gathered up with ruthless efficiency and murdered.” The phrase “concentration camp,” he continued, “is obsolete ... It is now possible to speak only of “extermination camps” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.).

Yet most Americans said that reports of mass killings of Jews did not cause any change in their own attitudes (Stember, 1966, p. 143). In fact, Welch (2014, p. 630) argued that the increased news coverage about European Jews led to a belief by some Americans that American Jews were powerful. A public opinion poll in January of 1943 showed that almost 50 percent of the Americans polled concluded that Jews had too much influence in the business world (Cantril, 1951, p. 383).

Still, Pehle wanted to publicize Nazi atrocities to advance his cause. The WRB representative in Switzerland provided Pehle with two eyewitness reports, totaling more than 150 pages, of how Jews had been selected for cattle car trips to Nazi prison/slave labor/extermination camps in Auschwitz and in Birkenau, how typhus and dysentery outbreaks decimated the prisoners of those camps, how the gas chambers at the camps worked, and how the corpses were burned. Pehle asked WRB assistant executive director Florence Hodel to compile a list of ways in which the board might broadcast the reports. The WRB team brainstormed that they could simply release the reports to the press, publish them in some form, add the information to the army manual for soldiers entering Germany, or the board could drop the reports in pamphlet form over enemy lines (Hodel, 1944).

In addition to those ideas, Pehle suggested that they try to generate publicity through books and magazines. Pehle sent the reports to the Book-of-the-Month Club editor to gauge his interest (Hodel, 1944). The editor passed on the story because the club had just published *Story of a Secret State*, the Polish resistance officer Jan Karski’s book about wartime Poland and the Warsaw ghetto, and wanted to avoid overloading readers with atrocity stories (Scherman, 1944). In another failed

attempt at media coverage, Pehle gave the reports to Sergeant Richard Paul of *Yank* magazine, a U.S. Army publication for soldiers and agreed to be interviewed for the story. In the interview, Pehle told Paul: "We on the War Refugee Board have been very skeptical. We remembered too well the atrocity stories of the last war, many of which apparently were untrue." Pehle then explained that the board was making the reports public "in the firm conviction that they should be read and understood by all Americans" (Paul, 1944). Paul's draft for *Yank* was rejected by his editors. WRB's press officer Virginia Mannon wrote in an internal memo: "Our reports were too Semitic and they [the magazine editors] had asked him [Paul] to get a story from other sources ... I told him ... that inasmuch as the whole Nazi extermination program was more than 90 percent Jewish, it was most unlikely that he could get any stories that did not deal principally with Jews" (Mannon, 1944a). It seemed that not every media outlet was ready to support the discourses espoused by the WRB.

Pehle also faced internal resistance to the release of the eyewitness accounts. Elmer Davis, the head of U.S. Office of War Information (OWI) – the government agency charged with promoting America's point of view at home and abroad, called Pehle to his office to discuss the release of the reports for public consumption. In a meeting between WRB and OWI officials, one OWI staffer called the reports overdramatic, "concerned with a multiplicity of 'mean little things.'" Another OWI staffer worried that the timing coincided with the sixth war bond drive. Other OWI staffers expressed concern that Pehle's cover note, like all official WRB correspondence, had "Executive Office of the President" at the top of the letterhead (Mannon, 1944b). Mannon (1944b) scoffed at the absurdity of the meeting, writing the "whole meeting was pretty futile, since the release was a fait accompli." Davis and his agency resisted focusing on Jewish victimhood because one OWI executive argued, "according to [our] experience, the impression on the average American is much stronger if the question is not exclusively Jewish" (Novick, 2000, p. 27). So, after the meeting, Davis (1944) asked Pehle to send a note to the press alerting them that the reports came from unnamed men, thus the reports had questionable credibility. Pehle refused to reply because he had no intention of throwing any doubts on the reports (Erbelding, 2018, pp. 218-9).

Instead, Pehle moved forward with his plan to release the reports to the newspapers. On 18 November 1944, the WRB sent copies of the reports under the title "German Extermination Camps – Auschwitz and Birkenau" to dozens of journalists nationwide (Pehle, 1944h). The copies sent to journalists included a letter

signed by Pehle: "It is a fact beyond denial that the Germans have deliberately and systemically murdered millions of innocent civilians – Jews and Christians alike – all over Europe." Pehle concluded: the "Board has every reason to believe that these reports present a true picture of the frightful happenings in these camps" (Pehle, 1944i). Pehle's innocent civilians phrasing reminded journalists that Jews interned in the camps did not deserve the treatment they had received from the Nazis. They also combined Jews and Christians in the same sentence, signifying that Nazi tyranny affected all human beings.

The journalists responded as Pehle had wanted. While larger newspapers carried original reporting on the story, nearly 70 other newspapers carried the Associated Press or International News Service dispatches (WRB, 1944b). The Philadelphia Inquirer headline proclaimed, "1,765,000 Jews Killed with Gas at German camp" (1944, p. 1), and the article writer called the report "the most incredibly shocking story of the war." One editorial cartoon titled "The Weight of Evidence" in the Minneapolis Star-Journal showed a Nazi holding a sign reading "Soft Peace for Germany" being crushed under the weight of bricks labeled "Atrocity Stories" ("The weight of evidence," 1944).

WRB officials were pleased with the media coverage and almost gleeful in anticipating the OWI reaction to their success. Mannon (1944c) wrote in an internal memo: "Do you think we should heap coals of fire on OWI and offer them copies of the editorials to use overseas?" In the margin, someone had scribbled, "Yes." For even more validation, Mannon (1944c) noted that OWI staffers admitted the report was receiving excellent press coverage in Great Britain and Poland, and the army requested copies of the reports for its magazines – vindication after the rejection of the story by *Yank* magazine editors.

The American public reaction was also in line with what WRB officials had hoped (WRB, 1945, p. 50). Thousands of American citizens requested copies of the reports, and the WRB staffers encouraged recipients to reprint and distribute the reports to others (Mannon, 1944c). One week after the report's release, a Gallup poll found that 76 percent of Americans believed Germans had murdered people in concentration camps, compared with 12 percent who did not believe it and 12 percent who had no opinion ("Gallup finds most...", 1944, p. B2). On the other hand, most Americans were unaware of the extent of Nazi cruelty toward the Jews. In the aforementioned Gallup poll, 27% percent surmised that the murder total was only 100,000 and only 4% believed that five

million Jews had been eliminated (“Gallup finds most...,” 1944, p. B2).

Part of WRB’s media relations success can be attributed to the growing awareness of Nazi brutalities, making it harder for Americans to ignore the plight of European Jews. Still, the WRB had to overcome internal resistance and, in some cases, media fatigue with atrocity stories to disseminate their messages. By promoting the eyewitness accounts, WRB officials reinforced the narrative that European Jews were being unjustly persecuted by Nazis, repositioning those refugees as sympathetic figures instead of being reduced to archetypes or being somehow responsible for their torment.

6. Discussion

While much of World War II government public relations tapped into wartime patriotism to entice citizens to do their part for the war effort, WRB officials used public relations in an attempt to adjust the perceptions of European Jews – leading to a safe haven for refugees at a U.S. military camp and some change in opinion regarding those refugees. The WRB public relations campaign showed how discursive practices can make claims for recognition and acceptance of a group of people, with the acknowledgement that a public is imagined and discursively formed rather than a fixed entity. Although some U.S. politicians and commentators alleged immigrants were the source of America’s social and economic problems, this study demonstrated how public relations efforts fostered public conversations on the situation of immigrants/refugees in order to shift perceptions. That is not to naïvely suggest that public relations cured all societal misconceptions of Jews. Goldstein (2019, p. 193) argued that the thorough integration of Jews into the American military was the primary factor that helped cement the public’s view of these groups as “unambiguously white.” But WRB officials did, and perhaps public relations practitioners still can, introduce and maintain discussions about the qualities of a public, initiate meaningful action, and negotiate the meanings of different publics and the people within them – showing the possibilities of government public relations beyond advocacy for policies.

References

- 1,765,000 Jews killed with gas at German camp. (1944, November 26). *Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. 1.
- 77 Cong. Rec. 926 (1941) (statement of Sen. Burton K. Wheeler).

To further explore the repercussions of this study and the intersection between public relations, immigration, and race/ethnicity during World War II America, future scholars could research the discourses related to other marginalized ethnic groups such as those of Irish and Italian descent that led to them becoming (more) accepted into white America following the war.

Distasteful as it might be, scholars could also explore the race-based narratives used by the U.S. government to justify the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Even within the realm of the WRB, only three moments were examined in this paper. In its 18 months of existence, that government agency engaged in a flurry of activities that could be further mined for data on discourses related to immigration and race.

Exploring this case from a non-government public relations point of view also has merit. While this paper examined the narratives and resultant identities that the WRB fashioned for European Jews, future studies could investigate how various non-governmental organizations representing Jews used public relations to advance their interests during World War II. For instance, Peter Bergson organized marches on Washington, D.C., staged a theatrical pageant called *We Will Never Die*, and sponsored more than 200 newspaper advertisements in an attempt to sway American public opinion in favor of helping European Jews. Competition for control over the narrative about what Americans should do for European Jews raged between Bergson and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise’s American Zionist Emergency Council. Examining how each group positioned not only their organizations but Jews in general might provide additional insights into the relationship between public relations and race.

More work is needed to examine the implications of this paper as it was limited by the boundaries of one case, which should not be generalized beyond the scope of the activities and time period studied. Still, the ongoing struggle of various groups for access to the public realm – and how they used public relations to create discourses to do so – appears to be a fruitful area of additional study.

- Berger, C. (1976). *Broadsides and bayonets: The propaganda war of the American Revolution*. San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press.
- Blum, J.M. (1967). *From the Morgenthau Diaries: Years of War 1941-1945*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Breitman, R., & Lichtman, A.J. (2013). *FDR and the Jews*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cantril, H. (1951). *Public opinion 1935-1946*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Carr, S.A. (2001). *Hollywood and anti-Semitism: A cultural history up to World War II*. New York, NY: Cambridge University.
- Creel, G. (1920). *How we advertised America*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers Publishers.
- Crider, J. (1944, March, 25). Roosevelt warns Germans on Jews: Says all guilty must pay for atrocities and asks people to assist refugees. *New York Times*, p. A1.
- Curtin, P.A., & Gaither, T.K. (2005). Privileging identity, difference, and power: The circuit of culture as a basis for public relations theory. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17, 91-115.
- Curtin, P. (2011). Discourses of American Indian racial identity in the public relations materials of the Fred Harvey Company: 1902-1936. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 23, 368-396.
- Curtin, P.A. (2016). Exploring articulation in internal activism and public relations theory: A case study. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 28, 19-34.
- Cutlip, S.M. (1976). Public relations and the American Revolution. *Public Relations Review*, 2, 11-24.
- Davis, E. (1944). [Letter dated 23 November]. Records of The War Refugee Board [hereafter referred to as "WRB"] - Correspondence and Reports Files, Reel 5, pp. 407-8. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. [hereafter referred to as "USHMM"].
- Department of Treasury. (1944a). *Jewish evacuation meeting* [Notes dated 8 March]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 707, pp. 219-234). Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum, Hyde Park, NY [hereafter referred to as "FDR Library"].
- Department of Treasury. (1944b). [Draft dated 9 March]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 708, pp. 5-7). FDR Library.
- Department of Treasury. (1944c). *Jews evacuation meeting* [Notes dated 9 March]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 708, pp. 42-47). FDR Library.
- Department of Treasury. (1944d). *Meeting* [Notes dated 9 March]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 708, pp. 1-3). FDR Library.
- Department of Treasury. (1944e). *Jewish evacuation meeting* [Notes dated 2 May]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 733, pp. 10-17). FDR Library.
- Dinnerstein, L. (1994). *Anti-Semitism in America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

- Early, S. (1944). [Press release dated 22 January]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 696, p. 7). FDR Library.
- Endres, F.F. (1976). Public relations in the Jackson White House. *Public Relations Review*, 2, 5-12.
- Erbelding, R. (2018). *Rescue board: The untold story of America's efforts to save the Jews of Europe*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1989). *The archaeology of knowledge* (Tavistock Publications Limited, Trans.). London, UK: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline & punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1975).
- "Free ports" to admit refugees may be set up under U.S. plan. (1944, April 19). *New York Times*, p. 1.
- Gallup finds most believe atrocity tales. (1944, December 3). *Washington Post*, p. B2.
- Gibson, C., & Jung K. (2006). *Historical census statistics on the foreign-born population of the United States: 1850-2000. Working paper no. 81*. Washington, D.C.: Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- Goldstein, E.L. (2019). *The price of whiteness: Jews, race, and American identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.
- Gower, K.K. (2007). *Public relations and the press: The troubled embrace*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Grafton, S. (1944). *Radio commentary* [Script dated 23 April]. WRB, 1944-1945 (Box 25, Folder: Samuel Grafton, pp. 2-7). FDR Library.
- Greene, D., & Newport, F. (2018). *American public opinion and the Holocaust*. Gallup. <https://News.Gallup.Com/Opinion/Polling-Matters/232949/American-Public-Opinion-Holocaust.aspx>.
- Hall, S. (1992). The west and the rest. In S. Hall, & B. Gieben (Eds.), *Formations of modernity: Understanding modern societies* (pp. 275-332). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). The work of representation. In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 13-64). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Higham, J. (1988). *Strangers in the land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University.
- Hodel, F. (1944). [Memo dated 2 November]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 5, pp. 380-81). USHMM.
- Honey, M. (1984). *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, gender, and propaganda During World War II*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts.
- Lamme, M.O., & Russell, K.M. (2010). Removing the spin: Toward a new theory of public relations history. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 11, 281-362.
- Lattimore, D., Baskin, O., Heiman, S.T., Toth, E.L., & Van Leuven, J. (2004). *Public relations: The profession and the practice* (rev. 4th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

- Laughlin, H. H. (1913). *Eugenics record office report, no. 1* [flyleaf]. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Eugenics Record Office.
- Lee, M. (2014). Government is different: A history of public relations in American public administration. In St. John, B., Lamme, M.O., & L'Etang, J. (Eds.). *Pathways to public relations: Histories of practice and profession* (pp. 108-127). London and New York: Routledge.
- Leff, L. (2017). Wielding a mightier sword: Progress and resistance in the War Refugee Board's information campaigns. In R. Medoff (Ed.), *Too little, and almost too late: The War Refugee Board and America's response to the Holocaust* (pp. 89-135). Washington, DC: David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.
- L'Etang, J. (2004). *Public relations in Britain: A history of professional practice in the 20th Century*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Maihafer, H.J. (2001). *War of words: Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War press*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc.
- Mannon, V. (1944a). [Memo dated 16 November]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 5, pp. 396-7). USHMM.
- Mannon, V. (1944b). [Memo dated 22 November]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 5, pp. 405-6). USHMM.
- Mannon, V. (1944c). [Memo dated 27 November]. WRB, 1944-1945 (Box 25, pp. 567-72). FDR Library.
- Medoff, R., & Zucker, B. (2017). A presidential adviser's clash with The War Refugee Board. In R. Medoff (Ed.), *Too little, and almost too late: The War Refugee Board and America's response to the Holocaust* (pp. 181-204). Washington, DC: David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.
- Medoff, R. (2019). *The Jew should keep quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska.
- Morgenthau, H. (1944). *Phone conversation with McCloy* [Transcript dated 2 June]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 738, pp. 225-231). FDR Library.
- Nevins, A. (1962). *The constitution makers and the public 1785-1790*. New York, NY: Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education.
- Novick, P. (2000). *The Holocaust in American life*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Paul, R. (1944). [Draft article dated 7 November]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 5, pp. 398-99). USHMM.
- Pehle, J. (1944a). [Memo dated 8 March]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 707, pp. 242-3). FDR Library.
- Pehle, J. (1944b). [Memo dated 14 March]. Records of The War Refugee Board, 1944-1945 (Box 25, Folder: Radio: Raymond Gram Swing). FDR Library.
- Pehle, J. (1944c). *We, too, are impatient* [Speech dated 2 April]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 2, pp. 252-56). USHMM.
- Pehle, J. (1944d). [Memo to Green dated 7 April]. Records of The War Refugee Board, 1944-1945 (Box 25, Folder: Radio: Abel Green, Variety, p. 2). FDR Library.

- Pehle, J. (1944e). [Memo dated 20 May]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 4, pp. 24-25). USHMM.
- Pehle, J. (1944f). [Memo dated 1 June]. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 738, pp. 39-51). FDR Library.
- Pehle, J. (1944g). [Letter to Samuel Grafton dated 9 June]. Records of The War Refugee Board, 1944-1945 (Box 25, Folder: Radio: Samuel Grafton). FDR Library.
- Pehle, J. (1944h). [Letters dated 20 November]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 5, pp. 480-503). USHMM.
- Pehle, J. (1944i). *German extermination camps* [Report dated 26 November]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 5, pp. 413-75). USHMM.
- Pinsdorf, M.K. (1999). Woodrow Wilson's public relations: Wag the Hun. *Public Relations Review*, 25, 309-330.
- Pinkleton, B. (1994). The campaign of the Committee on Public Information: Its contributions to the history and evolution of public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 6, 229-240.
- Ponder, S. (1994). The president makes news: William McKinley and the first presidential press corps, 1897-1901. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 24, 823-836.
- Ponder, S. (1999). *Managing the press: Origins of the media presidency, 1897-1933*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Roosevelt, F.D. (1944). [Statement dated 24 March]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 17, pp. 1001-2). USHMM.
- Roper Center. (n.d.). *Public understanding of the Holocaust, from WWII to today*. Author. <https://Ropercenter.Cornell.Edu/Public-Understanding-Holocaust-Wwii-Today>.
- Scherman, H. (1944). [Letter to John Pehle dated 13 December]. WRB - Correspondence and Reports Files (Reel 5, pp. 532-33). USHMM.
- Shapiro, E.S. (1990). World War II and American Jewish identity. *Modern Judaism*, 10, 65-84.
- Smith, R.W. (1976). The Boston Massacre: A study in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 2, 25-33.
- Stember, C.H. (1966). *Jews in the mind of America*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Tebbel, J. & Watts, S.M. (1985). *The press and the presidency: From George Washington to Ronald Reagan*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- The weight of evidence. (1944, December 1). *Minneapolis Star-Journal*.
- Tucker, R.W. (2019). *Immigration and U.S. foreign policy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- United States Bureau of the Census. (1976). *The statistical history of the United States from colonial times to the present*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.). Edward R. Murrow. Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/edward-r-murrow>.
- Vaughn, S. (1980). *Holding fast the inner lines: Democracy, nationalism, and the Committee of Public Information*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

- Ward, B.M. (1994). *Produce and conserve, share and play square: The grocer and the consumer on the home-front battlefield during World War II*. Portsmouth, NH: Strawberry Banke Museum.
- War Refugee Board. (1944a). *Report of the War Refugee Board for the week of June 5-10, 1944*. WRB, 1944-1945 (Box 34, Folder: Weekly Reports(1), 1944, pp. 171-2). FDR Library.
- War Refugee Board. (1944b). *List of newspaper and press coverage dated 28 November*. Diaries of Henry Morgenthau, Jr., April 27, 1933-July 27, 1945 (Vol. 799, pp. 231-6). FDR Library.
- War Refugee Board. (1945). *Final summary report of the executive director War Refugee Board*. WRB, 1944-1945 (Box 33, Folder: War Refugee Board Vol. 3(1), pp. 7-82). FDR Library.
- War Relocation Authority. (1946). *The evacuated people: A quantitative study*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of the Interior.
- Welch, S. (2014). American opinion toward Jews during the Nazi era: results from quota sample polling during the 1930s and 1940s. *Social Science Quarterly*, 95, 615-635.
- WMAL: Blue Network. (1944). [Radio transcript dated 19 April]. WRB, 1944-1945 (Box 25, Folder: Radio: Raymond Gram Swing, pp. 2-7). FDR Library.