

Opinion: Syrian Refugee Advocates Are Using the Wrong Holocaust Analogy

Examining America's response to the Holocaust can help us avoid repeating the mistakes of that era, so applying the lessons of the Nazi years to contemporary concerns—including the plight of the Syrian refugees—certainly is appropriate.

But those who are invoking the memory of the Jewish refugees are choosing the wrong analogy for today's Syrian refugees.

One problem with the analogy is that it distorts the nature of what happened—and what is happening now—to the victims. The Jews fleeing Hitler were the targets of religious and racial persecution; most of the Syrian refugees are not. Even when Jews escaped to neighboring countries, they were hunted down by the Nazis; by contrast, Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad is not hunting down Syrians who have left Syria.

Comparisons between the current wave of anti-immigration sentiment and that of the 1930s are also inexact. Of course, anti-foreigner sentiment among the American public, then or now, is ugly and deplorable. But that sentiment was not the immediate obstacle to Jewish refugees coming to America in the 1930s and 1940s. The Franklin D. Roosevelt administration piled on extra requirements to disqualify refugees and suppress immigration far below the legal levels. The quota for immigrants from Germany was filled in only one year of FDR's 12 years as president, and in most of those years it was less than 25 percent filled. More than 190,000 quota places from Germany and Axis-occupied countries sat unused during the Holocaust.

In other words, FDR could have quietly and legally admitted more than 190,000 European Jews to America, regardless of

public opinion—if he had simply instructed the State Department to let the quotas be filled.

Today's calls for strict security screening of refugees are hardly surprising in the wake of recent terrorist attacks, just as concerns about Nazi spies were not surprising during 1940-41, when war was raging in Europe and most Americans were hoping to stay out of it. But the Roosevelt administration went to absurd and indefensible extremes in guarding against such espionage. For example, in 1941 it adopted a regulation barring the admission of any refugee who had relatives in Europe, based on the theory that the Germans might take the relatives hostage and force the Jewish refugee to become a Nazi spy. Any reasonable person should have been able to recognize how cruel and irrational that rule was.

Today's U.S. immigration rules already enable our government to extend a helping hand to refugees, whether they are victims of persecution or fleeing a civil war. Refugees can be granted what is called "Temporary Protected Status" to let them stay here for a period, due to temporarily unsafe conditions in their native countries.

And this is where the most important "Holocaust analogy" comes in, which everyone seems to be forgetting. In the 1940s, Jewish organizations urged the Roosevelt administration to set up what they called "Free Ports for Refugees," based on the practice of allowing goods to be stored temporarily in U.S. ports without having to pay fees. They proposed setting up shelters on American soil where Jewish refugees could stay until the end of the war. A Gallup poll commissioned by the White House in April 1944 found that 70 percent of the American public favored the idea of creating such temporary havens in the United States.

Sadly, Roosevelt agreed to set up just one shelter, in upstate New York, for 982 refugees from Europe. That was a drop in the bucket. The proposal to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees today

likewise does very little to address the plight of the approximately 4 million Syrians who have fled from Syria.

In the 1940s, it would have made more sense to set up the shelters closer to Europe. But the British refused to set them up in Mandatory Palestine, and FDR personally turned down a proposal to set up shelters in Allied-liberated North Africa, on the grounds that local Arabs would be angered.

Today, by contrast, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq already have set up temporary shelters—the equivalent of “Free Ports”—and some 4 million Syrians now live there. Thus, they are out of the danger zone. Instead of continuing the harsh and divisive public debate over admitting a relative handful of Syrians to America, the Obama administration could make a more effective contribution to alleviating their plight by leading an international effort to raise funds to improve conditions in the temporary sites where they are presently living. That would be a meaningful way to relieve the human misery caused by the Assad regime.

If the Free World had acted against Hitler in the 1930s, there might never have been a Jewish refugee crisis. And if the Free World had acted to oust Assad, we would not have a Syrian refugee crisis. At a minimum, then, the international community has a moral responsibility to extend humanitarian assistance to ensure appropriate living conditions and medical care in the “Free Ports” of the Middle East.

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