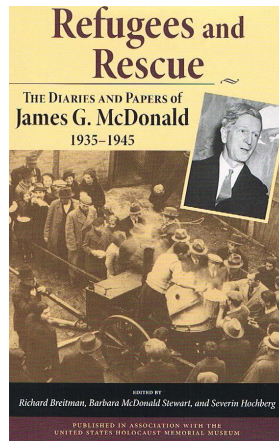




America and the Third Reich

Roosevelt did not alter the U.S. immigration quota for Jews

The papers of James Grover McDonald represent a major resource for the research of one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the twentieth century. Born in Coldwater, Ohio, in 1886, McDonald studied history and political science at Indiana and Harvard universities. Among his key posts were League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees from Germany and head of President Roosevelt's Consultative Committee for Political Refugees until the world war's end. McDonald also served as Washington's first envoy to Israel until 1950. He died in 1964.



His unique career gave McDonald privileged insights into dramatic developments on the global stage, not least the evolution of the Holocaust. This book reveals many of McDonald's thoughts regarding the persistent question: could Western leaders, and Americans in general, have done more to mitigate or prevent the persecution and mass murder of Jews in Nazi Europe beginning in the mid-1930s?

The editors published McDonald's reflections from the early 1930s in a first volume of this series, *Advocate for the Doomed*,¹ and the third volume will cover the period after the world war. The editors, who dedicated this book to the field's pioneer, Walter Laqueur, are well known: Richard Breitman of American University, Barbara McDonald Stewart, daughter of McDonald, and Severin Hochberg of George Washington University.

Although McDonald's habit was to record his daily main activities in a diary, he did not do so consistently. Accordingly, the editors filled a ten-year gap by making use of diverse documents from a wide range of sources and adding helpful background comments. The first six chapters contain McDonald's prewar diary while chapters six to twelve offer documents written by or about him. In the final chapter Richard Breitman gives his summation. But Middle East historians and others will have to wait for the third volume to learn how McDonald dealt with Palestine as a member of the postwar Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry that advised policymakers in London and Washington.

The present volume focuses mainly on the U.S. government's response to Nazi persecution and mass murder in the years 1938-1945. Thus, President Franklin D. Roosevelt takes center stage. The editors, pointing out that scholars have described this president as everything from the savior of Jews to one of the villains of the Holocaust, see the truth as lying in between. They also provide new information on why U.S. policy unfolded as unevenly and inconsistently as it did; the McDonald papers add the perspective of the White House where some of McDonald's main associates, including the president, acted.

Three points are striking. First, on the one hand, McDonald made unwavering humanitarian efforts to rescue as many persecuted Jews as possible. On the other, the process of building a consensus in Washington was painfully slow, with outcomes often determined by tangential matters. Steps were obstructed, and others were hindered by open or hidden Jew-hatred. The rest of the damage was caused by interdepartmental conflicts. Nothing moved quickly on behalf of a people in severe plight. Even after reading the relevant documents, it is still hard to assess Roosevelt's approach and activities.

McDonald, for his part, had no illusions about the nature of the Nazi regime. Although his efforts to compel the bureaucracies into action often proved futile, he was not deterred. In resigning at the end of 1935 from the League of Nations, which was weak because the United States was not a member, he showed courage and integrity, managing to create the first large wave of publicity in America about the Nazi persecution of Jews.

Indeed, the *New York Times* gave McDonald's letter of resignation full coverage, and its front-page stories highlighted his demand that Nazi persecution be stopped. Other papers followed suit. The *Washington Post* called the resignation letter a powerful indictment of Nazi terror. The *San Francisco Chronicle* asked rhetorically whether, once a leading nation had descended to an uncivilized course, it was not the moral concern of the civilized world. The *New York Sun* emphasized the unimaginable nature of the terror in Germany, which had issued racist laws against "non-Aryans." Yet all the efforts to organize effective and coordinated help came too late.

Second, McDonald helped shed light on the fact that Nazism was an enemy of democracy. Indeed, at the same time that McDonald was waging his struggle within the U.S. administration, chief Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels was bragging in his diary that Germany was superior to the Anglo-Saxon democracies, and that a New York "Jewish" newspaper had called Hitler the greatest military genius of all time for succeeding to conquer most of Europe in just a year. The Nazis' greatest cultural accomplishment, Goebbels asserted, would be to defeat the democracies. In other words, the dictator in Berlin wasted no efforts on the usual time-consuming democratic rules. The Nazis knew it and banked on this advantage.

Although Goebbels, fortunately, was wrong, the editors of this volume note that it proved easier for the Nazis to slaughter the Jews than for outside powers, including democratic ones, to rescue them. Indeed, finding no effective means within democracies to overcome either domestic political foes or external enemies, as McDonald tried to do; giving comfort to the enemy; and failing to grasp the nature of tyrannies so that instead dictators are appeased – all of these continue to be problems today. The political geography has shifted somewhat to the Middle East but the basic contours of conflicts have not changed much.

Third, in the case of McDonald, who met Hitler on the eve of a Nazi boycott against the Left and the Jews in March 1933, the reader can glean his conclusions after twenty-five years of rescue work. His four main insights are:

- (1) when aggressive plans exist against racial and religious minorities, act promptly;
- (2) the usual approaches of global organizations are inadequate to deal with extreme challenges;
- (3) leaders need to demonstrate that they are seriously implementing a joint policy against any persecution; and
- (4) Palestine offered the only haven for Jewish refugees on a mass scale.

Indeed, in this period the Roosevelt administration did not alter the U.S. immigration quota for Jews. The editors estimate that about two hundred thousand European refugees were taken in by the United States, of whom perhaps 140,000 were Jews.

Finally, while McDonald was fighting to rescue five hundred children here or two thousand individuals there, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Hajj Amin al-Husaini, who was allied with the Nazi cause, was working diligently to prevent such rescues. Researchers may eventually find that al-Husaini worked directly against some of McDonald's efforts, although there are no such indications in this book. One can only hope that the next volume of McDonald's papers will contain his Palestine- and, perhaps, Grand Mufti-related reflections as well.

The editors of the present volume have, however, considerably illuminated, both for the scholarly community and the public, how Americans and their leaders coped with the Third Reich. This could well lead to revisions of commonly held views of Western rescue efforts during the Holocaust, and in the world's current situation is once again highly topical.

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Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, Severin Hochberg, eds.: *Refugees and Rescue: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1935-1945*, Indiana University Press, 2009, 359 pp.

¹ *Advocate for the Doomed: The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald, 1932-1935*, edited by Richard Breitman, Barbara McDonald Stewart, and Severin Hochberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

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